

## **mwe3.com presents an interview with:**

**Carl Baldassarre of SYZYG**

**mwe3:** Where are you from originally and where do you live now and what do you like best about it?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

I was born and raised in Euclid, Ohio - an eastern suburb of Cleveland, Ohio (the home of the Cleveland Orchestra, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, etc.). It's a great region of the country (the Midwest). I currently live in Kirtland, Ohio about 30 minutes east of Cleveland. I stayed in the area because I love the people, the culture, the landscape (borders on Lake Erie - one of the 5 Great Lakes) and it's where I've raised my family as well. I also went to school in the region (private music conservatory and John Carroll University for business).

**mwe3:** The 2013 Syzygy triple disc set *A Glorious Disturbance* is an excellent look at your band in action. Can you give a little background as to how you and the band decided to release such an extensive project, perhaps giving us a little background as to how *A Glorious Disturbance* came together?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

The short answer is we've always been prone to "project creep"! The germ of an idea begins to spread until it's out of control. When we started touring as a quintet with Mark Boals on vocals in 2009 the band felt complete for the first time since its inception nearly 35 years ago.

During 2009, we started capturing audio and video from various performances just to have it. When we sat down and watched the performances we decided to get serious about putting a DVD together. We started to add a few more cameras and became more deliberate about content. By the time 2010 came around, our live set list contained 2 plus hours of the best repertoire from our entire career.

With the retrospective feel of the repertoire and the resulting concert DVD, it was only natural to add a bonus DVD of special features to complete the package. Once we got going, we wanted to provide a finished and complete product of incredible depth and value. Not only do I think we accomplished that goal, but the release also closes a long chapter in our lives and cleans the slate for the momentous step forward we are taking artistically from here as composers.

**mwe3:** How would you describe the sound of early Syzygy compared to the current band sound? Didn't the band start off as an instrumental rock-fusion band? And how did the addition of Mark Boals as lead vocalist add to and or change the Syzygy sound?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

Great question! The sound and writing have definitely matured. But the ensemble approach (vs. soloists) and the Romantic Period inflections found in the writing have always been there. There is no question, that today we are more capable with our abilities as it relates to compositions, arrangements and orchestration.

Early in our career we were more instrumental simply because we didn't have the proper vocalist in the band. Some of those earlier pieces were indeed conceived as vocal music but were initially recorded as instrumentals as is the case with "Strange Loop II" and "Mount

Ethereal" from *Cosmos & Chaos* (1993). On *A Glorious Disturbance*, however, you can finally hear those pieces as they were originally intended with vocals. Interestingly, they work well both ways.

With Mark Boals on vocals we have the luxury of being deliberate about what is vocal music vs. instrumental music. As a composer, it's nice to have the flexibility to write for either voice or instrument and follow the leading of the music and muse. We don't get hung up on how long or how much the voices appear - our only concern is "Is it right for the music?" We don't feel compelled to have modern rock form (verse/chorus) imposed upon us - we love the artistic freedom to make the best music possible and some moments are vocal and some are not.

**mwe3:** Where do you get the inspiration for the lyrics you feature on *A Glorious Disturbance*? For instance on "Mount Ethereal" the lyrics are very dreamlike. What's the lyrical train of thought that pervades that track? Wasn't that track an instrumental at some point?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

The concept for the lyric and libretto on "Mount Ethereal" goes back to the 1980's - but again, without the proper voice we opted to deliver it as an instrumental track back on *Cosmos & Chaos* (1993).

This lyric is a bit unusual for us in the sense that it's a pure fantasy lyric. It tells the story of conquering a challenge, in this case the fictional "Mount Ethereal" located on "The Eastside of Mirkwood". The libretto chronicles the ascent, the perseverance over hardships and claiming final victory by "Planting a flag on your summit's site..."

Apart from "Mount Ethereal", my lyrics have generally been a mix of science and theology - the two great pillars of thought and the human condition. Going forward, I am interested in putting to music some of

the words from of the greatest pens - much like the composers of the Romantic Era who used Schiller, Goethe, Ponte, etc.

**mwe3:** How about the lead off track on *A Glorious Disturbance* "Vanitas", which is a very proggy sounding instrumental with lightning fast time signatures. Where does instrumental music find yours and the band's song writing these days? And please tell me you're going to do more instrumentals in the future! The vocals do sound great but the instrumentals set you guys up as one of the great jazz-rock bands of the decade too.

**Carl Baldassarre:**

"Vanitas" is a really great piece because it effectively illustrates the form and content amalgam that we are about. We're blending periods which we love to do. In the case of Vanitas, we're blending centuries: we take the compositional intellect of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and express it in a 20<sup>th</sup> century dialect (rock) for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. The dynamics, arrangements, orchestration and blending of periods and styles defines our sound - it's a very wide amalgam.

Indeed, "Vanitas" is an instrumental piece, but that's because it's what the piece needed. We love writing both instrumental and vocal music - and we'll continue to follow the needs of the music. Rest assured, there will be plenty of instrumental adventures to come!

**mwe3:** What inspired the Syzygy track "Circadian Rhythm"? It seems a very unusual subject matter for a rock track but the song works and also features some excellent pop vocal harmonies. You share the lead vocals with Mark on the track too.

**Carl Baldassarre:**

That was a rare and inspired little piece which just "popped out" one spring morning in the early 1990's. For the most part, our writing is laborious and marked by ceaseless revisions and permutations.

In contrast, "Circadian Rhythm", top-to-bottom, was a one hour affair! I remember feeling under the weather, brewing a pot of coffee ("the coffee is brewing a trickling song..."), sitting on the floor of my front room with the sun shining through the window. A waltz pulse started on the guitar and the words spilled out. The lyric for that blends scientific and spiritual themes. It seems to have "purpose" so it worked.

The most enduring music usually excels along three parameters: Pitch, Pulse and Purpose. On the point about "purpose", Walt Disney used to ask his graphic artists as they were storyboarding a cartoon, "What's the want of the character?" I think good composers do the same thing by asking, "What's the want of the piece?" On that spring day, the pulse of the waltz yearned for a discussion about the rhythm of life and "Circadian Rhythm" was born!

**mwe3:** While watching the two DVD discs, included with the CD on the triple disc, one is really struck by the sonic bond of Syzygy. You were remarking in the DVD how the band almost came together in a fortuitous turn of events, including how you met Sam Giunta back in high school which was really funny in a way. What's the ESP in the band and could you describe the synergy of Syzygy?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

I'm not sure it's ESP, but it sure seems like it sometimes. We've been together for so long, we pretty much know what the other guy is thinking! I try to keep challenging convention and the urban myths which often creep into long-term collaborations; that keeps everyone on their toes!

There is a definitely a chemistry and dynamic force (a Syzygy) which occurs on several levels. For one, Sam and I are incredibly compatible as composers - although we have different aesthetics, we have opposite temperaments which allows us to co-exist and is the key when you work so intimately with someone. With Paul Mihacevich and Al Rolik you get two additional dynamics coming from their own unique vectors. As a whole, the architecture of the group is very solid and enduring. We're very fortunate that our tastes, talents and personalities are different, but our purpose is so united. We're really uncommonly blessed with each other.

**mwe3:** You mentioned that some of the tracks on *A Glorious Disturbance* were originally instrumentals. How were the songs on the live album changed or modified to work as vocal tracks on the new CD/DVD set?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

For "Strange Loop II" and "Mount Ethereal" the melodies and lyrics bolted pretty much right on top of the pre-existing structures because they were fully-conceived as vocal pieces as I said a moment ago.

"The Coronation", on the other hand, is a very interesting story. It first appeared as an instrumental track on the *Allegory of Light* (2003) as the first movement of a track entitled "The Journey of Myrrdin". The piece was actually written over 25 years ago - so it was already a "golden oldie" by the time it appeared on the *Allegory of Light*. We

conceived it as a vocal track, but I was stuck on how to develop it. I had just one line: "Sincere was he, sincere indeed..."

Fast forward to 2010 and we wanted to bring the piece back and add vocals for Mark Boals. Having gotten familiar with Mark's voice and range, I felt we could have another go at the lyrics and melody. I remember sitting on the lakefront one day and the melody lines started to flow. At nearly the same time, the concept of overlaying the biblical story of the "Prodigal Son" from the Gospel of Luke occurred to me. What unfolded was a near miraculous melding of melody, lyric and arrangement which took 25 years to find, but concluded in an instant.

The story rides perfectly with the music (as if the music and lyrics were written simultaneously) and the pacing and mouth feel of the words are very good. It's my favorite vocal performance from Mark Boals as well. Ironically, not only did the original instrumental structure work, the original lyric "Sincere was he, sincere indeed..." worked into the story perfectly. Talk about "purpose" again!

**mwe3:** How long have you been playing guitars and who were some of your major guitar influences that helped shape your own sound? What's your practice schedule like these days both as a musician and also as a band?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

I've been playing guitar and composing for 35 years. I don't really think of myself as a guitar player. I view myself as a composer who plays guitar. When I was young, I did emulate all the guitarists you could imagine from rock, jazz, classical, country, etc.. The list is endless and includes, Jimmy Page, Ritchie Blackmore, Joe Pass, Wes

Montgomery, Django Reinhardt, Andres Segovia, Narciso Yepes, Chet Atkins, Roy Clark.

At the moment, my "practice" is concentrated more in conservatory study methods rather than guitar methods: I am developing my site singing, site reading, composing, score studies, orchestration, etc. It's a daily regimen and ties into the other 2-3 days a week we set aside for writing. The guitar is always in my hands which keeps my facility with the instrument adequate.

When we're performing live, the schedule flips to 100% instrument focus. I will practice 4-6 hours a day to get these pieces under my fingers. We are currently on a performance sabbatical to focus on writing. The goal is to create imperishable masterpieces going forward or die trying!

**mwe3:** Being that progressive rock is a pretty established genre, how challenging is it to establish Syzygy as a band with an all original sound and style? It seems there's a whole new generation of prog bands from all over the world now who weren't even born when YES and King Crimson released their first album! Are you finding the wide age differential between your fans? It seems prog-rock is a very cross generational genre!

**Carl Baldassarre:**

Our sound identity is a work in progress. The one constant is that it's always been characterized by the amalgams I mentioned before: Blending centuries, styles, forms, timbres and moods is who we are. Our "sound" is the sum of all sounds. It is becoming more distinctive as we write more and that's why we are on our writing sabbatical. One's true musical voice only comes from emptying yourself of music. That's

finally happening behind closed doors and will be revealed as we begin to record the next couple of albums.

I think some younger fans are catching on through their generation's variants of "prog" (Umphry's *McGee*, *Everything Everything*, etc.). We still have some way to go to bend the curve back toward long-form, formidable composing, but we can always hope!

**mwe3:** For the gear heads and fellow musicians out there, what is your guitar set up like these days? And what guitars are you primarily featuring on *A Glorious Disturbance* including amps strings and other sonic effect you use to flavor the Syzygy sound? Has there been any changes in the guitar world for you and how big a role do computers play in your writing and recording and even on stage these days?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

I offer a complete list of my live rig to anybody who wants it. Just email me at our website [www.syzygymusic.com](http://www.syzygymusic.com). In essence, it's a three head rig loading a modified stereo speaker cabinet with two outboard processors. The sound palette is broad and the key is in the switching equipment between the tube and solid state heads. As far as technology goes, I have picked up a couple of Line 6 Variax JT-89 modeling guitars and hope to incorporate those into my live rig to simplify things and increase flexibility especially when it comes to using acoustic guitars - not having to switch guitars to go from electric to acoustic sounds would great for us.

The other big technology addition has been a simple one which has been around quite some time: Finale scoring software. It's been huge for us. It allows us to score complete sections of music and experiment with changes in keys and tempi with the click of a mouse. This way you

never commit to recording something and wondering if you should have modulated a key or tempo. It's perfect for the way we write.

**mwe3:** Do you find it challenging to reach across continents these days to help establish the Syzygy sound? How has the internet changed your approach to building the Syzygy name throughout the world? Can you imagine having all this technology 30 years ago? Wow...what will it be like 30 years from now?? What new technology would you most like to see happen?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

Obviously the internet has made the world smaller, but access has increased and so too has the clutter. Everybody is publishing something these days. Cutting through the noise to be discovered and heard is the challenge. Fortunately for progressive artists, there is a defined niche with certain go-to social networks and periodicals which help to make the progressive genre a smaller pond by comparison.

I certainly couldn't have imagined all of this 30 years ago. Nor can I imagine what it will be 30 years from now! For me, the technology is one thing, but the composer is something else. Technology can aid, but not replace the composer. The media floods us with mediocrity and it's largely an echo chamber of mediocrity. The apprenticeship method of teaching composing is challenged by the relative scarcity of great content in relation to the volume of clutter.

Where are the modern day Bach's, Beethoven's, Brahms' [insert any master composers] creating imperishable masterpieces? That's a very big question and one I'll leave open for now, but I am personally working on that issue both directly and indirectly.

**mwe3:** What have you planned for 2014? I know you were talking about the next Syzygy studio album and you and Sam Giunta said you almost have enough music for two new CDs. Where do you see yourself and Syzygy in the future?

**Carl Baldassarre:**

Actually we now have more than two albums of new material. We're trying to finish the second one as we speak. It's a summa opus tentatively entitled, *The Picciotti Variations*. It's quite the journey for us and one that has been bearing fruit. We hope to start recording it in 2014.

I am also very excited to announce a new project. In February 2014, we will be releasing a 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Cosmos & Chaos Compendium CD. It has the original tracks re-mastered, a couple of them re-performed and four bonus tracks. Two of the bonus tracks are from our Witsend Quartet days and are two of our first rehearsals. Very cool stuff. It sounds absolutely fantastic. I'm really excited about it.

We'll also be launching a new website after the New Year as well. There will be a lot more content on it so you can follow us better. For example we just wrote a fugue and shot a fun video of it in our "writing hut" where we camp out. I'll also be posting some thoughts on the question "Where are the master composers?" as well as other thoughts and snippets from our journey to create the next repertoire.

Thanks so much for your time, interest and support. It's been fun and I appreciate your thoughtful questions!

Peace and blessings, Carl