

5.0 out of 5 stars

A fantastic album of English progressive rock!

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(TOP 500 REVIEWER)

Manning have produced an excellent album of English progressive rock music that not only befits the great legacy of classic English bands such as Jethro Tull, Procol Harum and others but also, with its superb title track "Charlestown", is a credit to English music making in general, whatever the genre. It deserves great plaudits: more than that, it deserves a large audience; it deserves to be heard.

When you release an album in which one of the compositions is 35 minutes long, over half the duration of the 6 in total, then that composition had better be good. Well, it's not only good, it is nothing short of perfect! "Charlestown", the opening composition of the album, tells a story about the perilous cargo ship transport between Cornwall and Bristol in the 18th century. The composition is constructed in several seamless sections, as the stages of the journey to Bristol develop: the ship meets both wreckers - attempting to run the ship aground and steal the cargo - and storms before, having suffered significant loss of life, it finally arrives in Bristol. The story is told as much through the music as through the lyrics and Guy Manning's (the leader of the band and composer of "Charlestown") composition is first class. The orchestration, and I can call it that because the composition is truly symphonic, is rich and the musical textures that it brings are an absolute joy. There are the usual rock instruments of course, and whilst this is not a "heavy" piece, they certainly "rock out" during the requisite phases of the story, but the beauty of the music is enhanced by the use of a wide array of keyboards and keyboard sounds, as well as through violin, cello, flute and saxophone. These latter textures are immense in evoking various images of the sea, continuing a great tradition in English music making through the ages. They also enhance the symphonic feel of the piece. Of course, such a sea-faring theme treated at such length really demands that there will be elements of folk music within the composition and they are there, well integrated. I would say the folk elements are from the English tradition, rather than Scottish or Welsh, hence the reason I'm calling this "English" as opposed to "British" music - it comes from its heritage.

Throughout, Manning's ear for melody is sharp and he delivers some great ones, none more so than the beautiful melody at the denouement of the story, releasing the dramatic tension in classic musical fashion. It makes your hairs stand on end, it is so beautiful.

"Charlestown" is the most perfect amalgamation of classical and rock/folk music I have ever heard - on its own, it is worth the price of this CD several times over. It will grow on you as you listen to it again and again: a truly wonderful piece of music. It's a shame that radio stations such as Classic FM won't look at music such as this.

So how does the band deliver on the difficult task of maintaining the momentum on the album after such a terrific opening?

The answer is: very well indeed, certainly for the next three tracks which,

compositionally and arrangement wise, follow on well from "Charlestown". Similar instrumentation is used: the keys are there, as is the cello, violin, flute and sax and compositionally the elements of folk continue to influence the music, keeping the cohesion with "Charlestown" going.

"Caliban and Ariel" has a light feel to it and delivers a wonderfully melodic chorus that captivates the listener every time. "The Man in the Mirror" keeps a similar feel going and again delivers a very catchy chorus, as well as a folky Fairport Convention-like break towards the end. The Hammond playing on this is delightful. It's the catchiest song on the album, in days gone by it an edited version may well have been a hit single. "Clocks", with its beautiful flute, maintains the musical cohesion and, once more, Manning delivers a very catchy melody for the chorus. (You will have these playing over in your head long after the CD stops, I can assure you!).

Up to here the music, and the album itself, are perfect and, given that these four tracks are nearly 50 minutes duration, perhaps ending here might have been the right decision, on the basis of album "feel" and dynamics.

However, perhaps Manning felt that he needed a little more "punch" to close the album out. The last two tracks do deliver more "punch" but, whilst very good in themselves, depart from that cohesive album "feel" that has been established so far, almost as they belong to a different work. "T.I.C" is rockier and is infused with a touch of blues and the final track, "Finale", is an instrumental that comes with a jazzy vibe.

This is a piffling, minor quibble and is far from sufficient to dock a rating star from what remains an exceptional album of modern progressive music.

Highly recommended!