

SOUNDS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND ALL OVER THE WORLD



# Dirty Liner

#123 ~ APRIL/MAY 2006

Folk World Music

Dirty Liner Issue #123 ~ April / May 2006



## GERMAN FOLK-ROCK GETS MEDIEVAL

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PETER LANG • THE WAILIN' JENNY'S

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## EINE KLEINE MITTELALTERLICHE MUSIK

Adaro



German Medieval folk-rock is a genre relatively unknown outside Germany, Austria, and central Europe, but it has the potential to excite folk-rock audiences worldwide. Influences range from Arthurian romances, Minnesingers, and the 13th-century German song collection known as the *Carmina Burana* to Steeleye Span, Malicorne, and the Bothy Band, so there's a lot to this genre for lovers of old songs in interesting settings and new songs with Medieval themes. With instrumentation that includes hurdy-gurdies and bagpipes next to crunchy guitars and electronic keyboards, the sound can be as thrilling as the songs. This column can offer only a brief introduction to a diverse and fascinating scene.

One question that often comes up is, "If other countries have folk-rock, why do Germans call the genre Medieval rock?" The answer is partly political and partly cultural. Politically, many German folksongs were incorporated by the Nazis into the militant nationalist movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Because of this, according to German journalist Michael Moll of [www.FolkWorld.de](http://www.FolkWorld.de), "for young people these songs were and still are highly unattractive." Culturally, Germany has a thriving scene of what are called "mittelaltermärkten," or "Medieval markets," roughly equivalent to American Renaissance faires, but with more emphasis on the authentic Medieval culture of the local area. This encour-

ages a lot of young people with an interest in old ballads and songs to take them up in a Medieval context rather than the folk scene. Many people playing in the Medieval rock genre got their start playing Medieval markets, and progressed from there to national touring.

Out of the nationally known Medieval rock groups, by far the best and most interesting recordings I've heard come from the quintet **Adaro**. The group's latest albums, *Minnespiel* [SPV 085-74142 (2002)] and *Schlaraffenland* [SPV 085-60672 (2004)], contain the most fully realized Medieval-rock crossover music I've heard. *Minnespiel*, as the title suggests, takes most of its songs from the German Minnesingers, Medieval minstrels who composed an important body of Middle High German lyrics from the 12th to the 14th centuries. Medieval allegory abounds in these texts; in one song, a woman speaks of training a falcon, only to have it fly away...then closes with a line about lovers, making it clear that her falcon was really a man who left her for another woman. Another song deals with the common Medieval theme of the approaching dawn that threatens to separate true lovers, while a third describes the secluded glade in which two lovers meet, observed only by the nightingale. Although the booklet contains lyrics only in the Medieval German, many of these poems are well known and available in translation for interested listeners. As for the music, the



Corvus Corax

secret to my fascination lies partly in the band's arrangements, in which the drums, bass, guitars, and keyboards of pop music are evenly matched with the buzzy richness of the hurdy-gurdy and the pipes. The track "Winnenden" is an example: From a static one-chord pop opening, there emerges one of the most joyous folk-rock bridges you'll ever hear, in which Konstanze Kulinsky's soaring vocals add counterpoint to Christoph Pelgen's boisterous piping, and the syncopated rhythms are accented by chunky percussion. The work of the producers is equally important; it ties the elements together, places them before your ears in transparent layers, and makes them occupy the available sonic space much more fully than on most folk-rock recordings. Vocals, instruments, and samples pop out of lush backgrounds beautifully in Adaro's work, and your ears can spend hours exploring the textures created.

The same can be said for *Schlaraffenland*, which continues the trend of authentically Medieval songs (from the 13th to 16th centuries) in up-to-date arrangements. Heartfelt vocals by Pelgen and the bell-pure, ethereal voice of Kulinsky continue to be the central focus, while the arrangements continue to be masterminded principally by guitar and keyboard player Jürgen Treyz. The songs have gotten a little faster, and the textures a little more varied, but the near-perfect balance of Medieval and modern elements is still there. In the middle of the title song, which is about the mythical land of Cockaigne, a raucous and energetic bagpipe tune breaks out, and it's reprised as an electric guitar solo at the end. "Lieg Still" sounds like a high-quality pop song, with shimmering guitars and a clean, crisp rhythm section...until, little by little, the hurdy-gurdy makes itself known. Hard, ripping guitar chords take tracks like "Komm her zu mir" and "Herr, wer hat sie begossen" in the direction of heavy metal. On the other hand, "Wol dem liebe," seems to

take inspiration from Celtic music: Whistle, fiddle, and hurdy-gurdy create a sound reminiscent of the classic Andy Irvine/Paul Brady album. Although *Schlaraffenland* is stylistically more diverse and quirky than its predecessor, Adaro still uses meticulous research, artful composition, tasteful and adventurous arranging, and sterling production to remake each song for today's listeners.

Among the founding fathers of this genre are the members of **Corvus Corax**, an all-male Medieval big band that recently released a best-of CD covering its 12-year recording career. Corvus

Corax takes its name from the Latin for "raven." The members explain that ravens usually make a grating, strident noise but are also able to produce a wide variety of communicative sounds (who knew?). Similarly, Corvus Corax uses mostly bagpipes and drums, but the eight members are also capable of playing over 50 instruments among them, rarely using any that are not authentically Medieval. For them, it's the drama, attitude, and energy of rock 'n' roll that they've imported into their Medieval music, not electric guitars and samples. In addition to the pipes and drums, they use shawms, strings, ancient and Medieval brass instruments, percussion, and very unusual axes like the organistrum, a giant string drone in the hurdy-gurdy family. *Best of Corvus Corax* [Noir DFD-20425 (2005)] contains 13 music tracks and a CD-ROM video track, highlighting their high-energy



Faun



**Sigrid Hausen of Estampie**

it has a lot of energy and will appeal especially strongly to bagpipe buffs.

Corvus Corax is one of four German Medieval groups currently releasing albums in the United States on Philadelphia's Noir label. Of the others, Faun and Estampie go for a primarily acoustic sound, while Qntal opts for a more keyboard-driven, electronic feel. I'll begin with **Faun**, the band with probably the least pop-influenced and most folksy of all the albums here, and one of my favorites in the genre. While the title of the album is *Renaissance* [Noir DFD-21125 (2005)], the cover bears four words: "Pagan Medieval Renaissance Folk," and the group shows its love of all these genres. The album begins with a song from the *Carmina Burana*, arranged with a driving percussive attack obviously influenced by its labelmates Corvus Corax, and featuring fiddle, whistle, and subtle electronics. Similarly, on the instrumental "Rhiannon," it shows its roots in the German Medieval rock scene, using bagpipe, hurdy-gurdy, and insistent, pounding drums to work up a nice frenzy. Otherwise, Faun is more eclectic than most bands in this genre, proceeding through a Medieval Spanish pilgrim song, a German Minnelied, a Sephardic folksong, an adaptation of a Brazilian Condomblé song, and several originals. The layered acoustic arrangements and clear production values are reminiscent of Dónal Lunny, and several tracks have quite a Celtic feel, including the album's standout track, "Tagelied," which is a new song on the common Medieval theme of the approaching dawn that threatens to separate two lovers. Penned by band member Oliver Sa Tyr, the song includes a catchy chorus that even non-German speakers can learn and an arrangement reminiscent of Planxty, Dervish, and other Irish bands.

Also largely acoustic but less folk-influenced than Faun, the veteran ensemble **Estampie** achieves a more authentically Medieval sound on its eighth CD, *Signum* [Noir DFD-20525 (2005)]. The group comprises classically trained musicians, and that background shows in its ability to play intricate arrangements with delicacy and control. It also opts for some world-music touches, incorporating Middle Eastern instruments like oud and saz, along with Scandinavian nyckelharpa. These are added to an instrumentarium that includes harp, harmonium, portative organ, crumhorn, flute, violin, trombone, and percussion, in addition to the bagpipes and hurdy-gurdies so common in this genre. Most impressive of all the instruments in its arsenal is the voice of lead singer Sigrid Hausen; her warm, rich, yet clear voice has served as Estampie's trademark for almost 20 years. On *Signum*, the band members use their instruments and voices to present a set of songs focusing on death and the apocalypse, two matters that were always on the Medieval mind. The

instrumentals. They specialize in putting a lush wall of pipes over a heavy, syncopated beat to create an undulating, almost hypnotic, trance-dance feeling, so prepare to move your feet. Oh, and brush up on your languages, too: Of the five songs on the CD, three are in Medieval Latin, one in Medieval German, and one in Medieval French. Mostly, they go for thick vocal harmonies and quick drumbeats, making the songs sound much like the tunes. While this CD may not be the most varied of the discs here,

Eastern influences are most apparent on tracks like "Non e Gran Cousa," a pilgrim song from the site at Santiago de Compostela that features fast and furious percussion under its chorus and a full arrangement with harp and various woodwinds. At times, the members go for a very straight Medieval approach, incorporating elements of plainchant in their two versions of "Al Jorn." But they don't shy away from mixing things up. On "Sine Nomine," for example, the percussion lays down an easy dancehall groove, the bagpipes carry the melody, and the strings add subtle North African harmonies: It's the kind of thing that's difficult to get right, but Estampie does an excellent job.

Hausen and multi-instrumentalist Michael Popp, both members of Estampie, are also two-thirds of **Qntal**, who meld Medieval and world music influences with electronica. The programming and keyboard work, plus guitar, are added by third member Fil. I have three recordings by this trio, all of them worthy of a brief mention. *Qntal III* [Noir DFD-20614 (2004)], is subtitled "Tristan und Isolde," and is based on the Medieval romance by Gottfried von Strassburg. Several songs are taken directly from Gottfried's text, but Qntal also performs Medieval lyrics from Spain, France, Germany, and England. The Middle English song "Maiden in the Mor" is a beautifully cryptic Medieval lyric about a maiden all alone in the wilderness, eating flowers and drinking from a spring; why she is there is the poem's mysterious charm. It's given an arrangement in which gentle electronics give way to harsh and heavy guitar chords, suggesting the girl's in some trouble. The electronics range from atmospheric fills and swooshes (as on the album's opener, "Ówí, Tristan") to pounding grooves (as on the very catchy version of "Ecce Gratum"). All are done with taste and style.

The same generally goes for *Qntal IV: Ozymandias* [Noir DFD-20515 (2005)]. This is a dark and moody album, with stately but spooky organ and a whole lot of haunted house sounds coming from Fil. It should appeal to the goth set as well as to Medieval enthusiasts. There is more English material on this CD, its first U.S. release. Qntal has found two sad, mysterious Middle English lyrics: "Blac," extolling the virtues of the color black; and "All for One," about a person who is betrayed and made a fugitive. The performance of Shelley's classic poem "Ozymandias" uses ominous electronic screeches to back a young child's heavily accented voice reading the words of the ancient tyrant. It's extremely creepy, almost too much so. Qntal also performs songs in Spanish, German, and Latin on this disc, using the *Carmina Burana* as a major source of passionate, feverish love songs. I'm particularly happy about the inclusion of two "hidden tracks": a more gently





orchestrated version of “Maiden in the Mor” and a remix of one of the French songs from *Qntal III*. Qntal’s other recent CD, *Illuminate* [Noir DFD-21124 (2004)], is a project of remixed and re-arranged materials from its previous albums. As on Estampie’s work, it’s worth it just to hear Hausen’s singing...but a lot of the musical settings are truly interesting and reward repeated listenings. As with many such projects, it works best if you know and love the previous versions, so I’d recommend starting with *III* or *IV*.

This brings us at last to two of the most popular groups on this scene: Saltatio Mortis and Schandmaul. To get a sense of the Medieval market scene, I would definitely recommend *Manufactum* [SPV CD 085-34462 (2005)], one of the latest from **Saltatio Mortis**. Subtitled “Live Auf Dem Mittelaltermarkt,” or “Live at the Medieval Market,” it showcases one side of the band’s repertoire: traditional and Medieval music. The selections have clearly been influenced by the Celtic scene, and several of the tunes in the live set presented here are Breton in origin. With five pipers and two drummers, the band uses massed bagpipes as a big part of its sound, and the set consists mainly of pipe tunes. While the situation doesn’t leave much room for subtlety in the arranging or production, band members make up for it in energy and enthusiasm. The drummers can create some vicious grooves, and several members have impressive chops on the various pipes and shawms they play. Most of all, this CD makes you wish you were there, at the market, getting Medieval.

Saltatio Mortis shows another side on its latest studio production, *Des Königs Henker* [Napalm Records NPR 166 (2005)]. This CD is only the latest production from the band, which has three previous rock albums, two unplugged Medieval albums, and *Manufactum* under its belt. There’s plenty of subtlety in both arrangement and production, but the musical style is radically different from that of the other disc: This is a metal album with folk flourishes, in the vein of English hard-rockers Skyclad. Vocals are sometimes delivered in that “demon from the pit of Hell” rasp, and razor guitars blast out tough power chords on almost every song. When the band does get to a Medieval song, a version of the *Carmina Burana*’s “Ecce Gratum,” members pull out the pipes and shawms and ethnic percussion and put away the metal guitars, driving bass lines, and bombastic drumming. This was a little disappointing to me; Saltatio Mortis is like one band with two slightly overlapping styles and repertoires, and I’d like to see more blend between the two. Still, on some numbers, such as “Die Hoffnung stirbt zuletzt,” the acoustic folk instruments do contribute to an organic whole, with a good powerful

rhythm section, blistering chords, and strong vocals. I suspect this album will appeal to metal fans more than the folk-rock crowd, but the band clearly shows it can do both quite well; I’d just like to see it combine them more fully.

Finally, we get to the young hot babes of the Medieval rock scene, **Schandmaul**. Some of my criticism of Saltatio Mortis also applies to these artists: They could stand to blend more Medieval music into their rock. (This is not surprising, as the two groups used the same producer, Thomas Heimann-Trosien, for their latest CDs.) As it is, Schandmaul’s Medieval instruments seem to be used mostly for riffs in its self-composed songs. This is a pity, as one gets the sense that Birgit Muggenthaler (flutes, shawms, bagpipes) and Anna Kränzlein (violin, hurdy-gurdy) could be doing more than they are. Still, each of the most recent studio CDs, *Narrenkönig* [Fame 0159708FAM (2002)] and *Wie Pech & Schwefel* [Fame 0159711 FAM (2004)], has some very good tracks, and each does very well as a rock album with some Medieval touches. Standout tracks on *Narrenkönig* include “Walpurgisnacht” (presumably about the traditional witches’ holiday of April 30-May 1) and “Der Kurier,” which is a story about a shocking discovery made by the Queen’s messenger with one of the more appealing folk-rock arrangements on the album. The best track for early music enthusiasts, meanwhile, is the instrumental “Waldgefluster,” an original dance tune using recorder and fiddle over the rhythm section. But like Saltatio Mortis, the members of Schandmaul tone down the rock elements when playing their most Medieval-sounding tune, and I wish they’d let the electric guitars rip and the bass and drums cut loose on this track. The same is true on *Wie Pech & Schwefel*: The one instrumental is quite a folky tune, on which they tone down the drums, leave out the electric guitars, and oom-pah the bass; it’s a pretty nice track, but to folk-rock fans, it’s also a missed opportunity. The album does have some standouts, including “Verbotener Kuss” (“Forbidden Kiss”) and “Drachentöter” (“Dragonslayer”), both of which tell tales set in the Middle Ages with recorders and violins adding an early music touch to what are otherwise clean, pop-metal arrangements.

This doesn’t nearly exhaust the genre of Medieval rock in Germany; there are still bands to explore with such unlikely names as In Extremo and Subway to Sally. But they’ll have to wait for another time; I’m off to the mittelaltermarkt, myself!

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Birgit Muggenthaler (center), the piper for Schandmaul, is joined onstage by members of Corvus Corax.