

Accompanying this two-CD package is a lavish booklet of more than 100 pages, containing the full libretto, period photographs, biographies of the performers, and excellent, well-written essays presenting original research and interpretations. Benjamin's positions are generally well argued and supported by intriguing research. Clearly, Benjamin is a formidable scholar.

We don't know how Joplin orchestrated his opera. Benjamin's recording give us a second, intriguing speculation, starkly different from Schuller's. We welcome this enlarged choice.

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The Asphalt Orchestra. *The Asphalt Orchestra*. Cantaloupe Music CD 21066, 2010.

The Asphalt Orchestra's debut album features an eclectic mix of jazz, techno-pop, folk and heavy metal, all arranged for twelve-piece marching band. A project of Bang on a Can, The Asphalt Orchestra was formed in 2009 and debuted at the Lincoln Center's Out of Doors Festival. The intent was to provide "ambitious processional music to the mobile masses" by bringing together "some of the most exciting rock, jazz and classical players in New York City."¹ Following their debut, The Asphalt Orchestra has been touring to critical acclaim, performing both their original outdoor show and one designed for indoors, "Unpack the Elephant." This acclaim is certainly deserved, based on the virtuosity of the players and their integration of movement, audience interaction, and new interpretations of familiar genres into the traditional marching band format.

The album contains seven tracks and runs just over a half-hour in length. It opens with an arrangement by Peter Hess of the 1973 Frank Zappa tune, "Zomby Woof," conforming closely to the jazz-inspired sound of the original.² The arrangement uses solos by sax, trombone, and trumpet as a substitution for the lyrics, which nicely captures the essence of the gritty, flexible voice of Zappa himself. Between each verse are tautly focused interludes that burst out in tight unison. The overall effect gives the piece more intensity and momentum than the original, providing a high-energy reinterpretation.

Following "Zomby Woof" is a commission by Balkan composer Goran Bregović titled "Champagne." Like Bregović's other wedding band-inspired pieces, "Champagne" has a jittery, almost manic, energy. It has a simple ABA form, punctuated by rapid, shouted interjections by the band and instrumental flourishes. The style and orchestration suit the group well and they execute the piece with flawless precision.

¹ "About Us," The Asphalt Orchestra, <http://asphaltorchestra.com/>.

² Max Paddison, "Zappa, Frank," in *Grove Music Online*, ed. Deane L. Root, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/46286>.

The third track is an excellent arrangement by Jose Davila of Charles Mingus's "The Shoes of the Fisherman's Wife are Some Jive-ass Slippers," originally recorded in 1972 for the album *Let My Children Hear Music*. The arrangement captures the tightly syncopated and dense sound of the original, interspersed with slower sections exploiting the different capabilities of the instruments such as long tones and wide dynamic ranges that are less evident in "Zomby Woof" and "Champagne." Here, the band adopts the sound of a small jazz combo, slipping easily through the transitions between sections and executing some of the difficult solos from the original with ease.

Following "The Shoes of the Fisherman's Wife" are arrangements of "Electric Red" by the Swedish metal band Meshuggah and Björk's "Hyperballad"—choices that are as far away from standard marching band fare as one could conceivably get. Although the group's technical execution of "Electric Red" and "Hyperballad" is exceptional, these two selections are the weakest on the CD. Both arrangements, by Derek Johnson and Alan Ferber, respectively, capture some of the character of the originals, but don't adequately reflect the songs' textual complexities, nor do they completely succeed in finding a new voice. The result is an uneasy compromise. In the other pieces, the listener nearly forgets that what they are hearing is, in fact, a marching band; however, in "Electric Red" and "Hyperballad," the band's sound is too homogeneous to fully render or re-contextualize the originals.

"Electric Red" is from Meshuggah's 2008 album *obZen*. It is an interesting choice, as *obZen* reflects a return to more "traditional" metal than exhibited on Meshuggah's previous, experimental albums. In Johnson's arrangement of "Electric Red," the song's driving polyrhythms and screaming lyrics are translated into a relentless pulse in the bass, overlaid by modulating rhythmic motifs in the treble instruments which in turn transition through different instrumental ranges and textures. The most prevalent sonorities are staccato patterns in the trumpets, with sax and flute providing an anxious counterpoint to the under-beats that alternate with staggered, rising overlays of major and minor seconds. This effect is interesting for the first few minutes, but with the exception of a few interjections of new rhythmic or modal statements, eventually becomes a little tedious.

Similarly, the playfulness and complex layering within Björk's "Hyperballad" is lost in the homogeneity of the band's sound. "Hyperballad" was first released on Björk's second solo album, *Post* (1995). Known for its sussurrating opening rhythms, shivery melody and controversial lyrics, "Hyperballad" is one of Björk's more popular songs, making it a bold choice for reinterpretation. Again, the group's technical execution is stellar; however, the arrangement does not do the group justice. From the opening, the main melody is buried within the accompanying material and only becomes apparent at odd intervals. In addition, the heavy dance beat that underpins the chorus is left out, so the only contrasts are in the instrumentation. The result makes the group sound like an excellent marching band playing a dreamy yet vaguely familiar piece. Given the high level of technical and improvisational skill in the group, an arrangement could have been created to match the complexity of the original or better exploit the improvisational talent of the group itself.

The last two pieces of the CD, "Carlton" by Stew and Heidi Rodewald and "Pulse March" by Tyondai Braxton, were commissioned for the group. Stew, best

known for being the founder of the band The Negro Problem and, more recently, writing the 2008 Tony Award winning musical *Passing Strange*, has been partnered with composer Heidi Rodewald since the late 1990s.³ “Carlton” is upbeat, simple and funky; evoking at times a Dixieland band and others, P-Funk. The treble instruments provide the feel of the lyric, with periodic interjections of a plaintive yet jaunty theme in the clarinet. As with “Champagne,” the musicians are called upon to vocalize—spelling the name “Carlton” aloud—although this takes place only toward the end of the piece.

Tyondai Braxton’s “Pulse March” reflects his interest in layers of sound and rhythm and offers a creative use of the group’s sound. Braxton, son of the composer and improviser Anthony Braxton, is best known as the guitarist and founding member of the experimental rock band Battles. “Pulse March” employs thematic and rhythmic motifs that evolve throughout the piece, creating a more successful juxtaposition of sound colors than “Electric Red.” Using march time as well as the inherent “band” sound of the ensemble, Braxton manipulates its palette by moving groups of sound in and out of the densely orchestrated central rhythmic theme.

Overall, the CD is well produced, if somewhat sparsely packaged; it lacks any liner notes or information about the musicians. It seems intended for those listeners who have experienced the group’s live performance and therefore have an understanding of their performance style. This CD is not only for the cognoscenti, however. The skill of the musicians, coupled with the creative genre choices, not only makes it fun listening, but it has great potential for educators. The Asphalt Orchestra is a terrific example of how to make a marching band sound “cool” as well as providing a model for expanding the repertoire for wind and brass groups of all ages.

Lisa Nielson

³ Stew & The Negro Problem, <http://www.stewsongs.com/>.