



**APOLLO ARTVARK: TWO SAXOPHONE QUARTETS  
COLLIDE AND MERGE**

Apollo and Artvark Saxophone Quartets  
Oink Records

It is hugely inspiring to see one of the country's leading chamber ensembles, the Apollo Saxophone Quartet, embark on a fantastic new collaboration with the Netherlands-based Artvark Saxophone Quartet. Flying in the face of Brexit-related chaos, the quartets made the bold move of launching the album with a concert on Brexit Day (the first one... back in March...) in Rotterdam. This album really is a triumph of global collaboration, with the two groups having first met in South Africa, brought together by Dr Matthew Lombard and Professor Karen Devroop who invited both quartets to perform at the South African Saxophone Symposium in 2014.

This album describes the two quartets as 'colliding and merging', and certainly a lot of this goes on throughout the disc. While both quartets are formed of fantastic players confident in various genres, the Apollo Quartet are probably seen as having more of a 'classical' slant to their playing, with Artvark coming from more of a 'jazz' background (although improvising duties are shared between both quartets here). It is fascinating to hear how the two groups combine, and the end result is very satisfying.

Not only are the musicians on this disc world-class performers, but they are all accomplished composers, with every musician on the album offering up at least one composition. Giving eight creative musicians the chance to compose original works for a newly formed line-up is certainly a good way to create a large variety of interesting new music. While each composer undeniably has their own style, the pieces work well together

to form a coherent album. The disc is consistently excellent throughout; because of this it is hard to single out any tracks, but I did particularly enjoy 'Rather Me' by Rolf Delfos, a laid-back feature for the two baritone saxophonists, Jim Fieldhouse and Peter Broekhuizen.

It's hard to place a genre on this album, but I suppose it would be best filed under contemporary jazz. That said, the music is very accessible and largely groove-based – nothing to scare anyone off. 'Gadd', by Carl Raven, is probably the most contemporary sounding work – a somewhat quirky piece based around a transcription of a drum solo by Steve Gadd. It's nice to have liner notes by the composers to put the pieces in context. 'Gadd' really benefits from this.

If I had to criticise the album, there are moments where the accompanying parts could be tighter, and there is the odd blemish in intonation here and there; but you wouldn't notice unless you really listened with a fine toothcomb, and it's actually nice to hear that the album hasn't been aggressively edited as so many recordings are now. While you might expect that two quartets with different backgrounds would struggle to blend due to their naturally different sounds, the ensemble sound is actually very coherent. If you didn't know this octet was formed of two distinct quartets, you might never realise.

Overall this is a fantastic new album, presenting 10 new works for saxophone octet. I hope there is more to come from this exciting line-up.

*Alastair Penman*

Via Spotify I was recently very pleased to listen to a quite remarkable new CD combining the skills of 'our' Apollo and the (Dutch) Artvark Saxophone Quartets. In my opinion this disc contains composition, arrangement, performance and recording standards of the highest quality I have come across in some 70 years of amateur/semi-pro saxophone endeavour. Not all of the 10 tracks make easy-listening – 'Dark, Disturbing and Utterly Beautiful' and 'Deux Cents Francs' are, for me, hard work – but there can be no doubting the incredible levels of technical proficiency in every single track.

Opening with a glorious soundscape, 'The Sea Between', the disc continues with 'Rather Me', a ballad reminiscent of a between-the-wars Berlin nightclub act. Further tracks make tasteful use of carillon effects, jazzy improvisation and, in 'Gadd', the use of staccato tonguing, which is just phenomenal. But the whole exposes a major weakness of streaming – I possess no liner note or insert to provide a guide to who's playing, soloing, composing or arranging. I can, however provide a three-word summary: A + A = Awesome.

*Kenneth Morris*

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