

15 Questions to Asteria

Asteria seem to be full of tension and contradictions: On the one hand, there's Eric Radlinger, who studied 20th Century composing techniques and listens to his music almost exclusively in digital file format. And on the other, there's his musical partner Sylvia Rhyne, who already spent her baby years listening to Classical Music. On the one hand, their ensemble specialises on old, medieval compositions and on the other, they released their first album on Magnatune, an Internet-only label. Meanwhile, Eric loves the "polyphonics" just as much as current noise-rock bands and Sylvia feels both happy with "serious music" and Andrew-Lloyd Webber. The solution to this "dilemma" is easy: It's all in the mind! When listening to their sweeping live performances or their magnificent album, all contradictions disappear instantaneously: This is modern medieval music for fans of Classical and current sounds.



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Hi! How are you? Where are you?

Great! Exciting things are happening. Asteria is taking off, with concert series, a best-selling album and a new recording coming soon!

We are based in New York, with Vermont as our retreat for periods of intense musical work. We are looking forward to a sabbatical in France in 2007-2008, for research and concerts and to work on our third album.

What's on your schedule right now?

We will be performing a program entitled "a rose of such virtue" at the Cloisters Museum in NYC in December. We are exploring sacred and secular love in the middle ages and the close symbolic relationship between "the lady" of courtly love and "Our Lady" of the church.

You're one of the artists on the newly-formed Magnatune label.

What attracted you to their basic premises?

Eric: flexibility and positioning. I listen to my music exclusively in digital file format, whether on my home computer, laptop, or MP3

player so it only makes sense for us to distribute our music that way as well. I think niche markets are well served by this approach. Also, Magnatune provides absolute creative freedom - there is no producer telling us what to do at any level of the creative process.

One of the ideas of Magnatune seems to be that you can sometimes only truly assess the value of music AFTER you have bought it. Is that something you can relate to?

Eric: Absolutely – Magnatune’s approach that you listen to music for a while and get to know it before you buy it is very intuitive. I’ve probably checked out 50% of what’s on Magnatune, and purchased 10 or so albums. And that’s before we were a Magnatune artist ourselves. The majority of those purchased albums I would never have purchased based on a mere written review or by having seen it in a store... or even by having heard 30 seconds of the tracks on iTunes... I also think their shoutcast radio station approach is great – that’s how I found them in the first place.

What or who was your biggest influence as an artist?

Sylvia: There are so many musical influences that I have loved: My crib was placed over the loud-speaker of my parent’s stereo system, and I listened all day to Mozart, Brahms, Prokofiev, Shostakovich (particular favourites) and many other great classical composers. I have always been thrilled by the expansiveness, the expressiveness and movement in classical music. I think most telling in my performing career was the influence of Julie Andrews. She has a wonderful clarity when she sings a song – pure sound, simplicity and perfect diction – combined with a great ability to communicate the emotional life of the character singing it. This has actually been the focus of my work in every field - musical theatre, opera or early music. It is expressing the emotional journey of a song that I teach in my masterclasses.

Eric: I’ve sort of always had a bug for early music – especially Bach and Dowland. I was playing that stuff on classical guitar when I was a wee-lad. When I went to college I got exposed to early 20th century music (Viennese school: Webern, Schoenberg, etc) and experimental indie rock (Sonic Youth, Fugazi, etc), people that played with dynamics, sound textures and narrative elements in their music. One thing I can’t relate to very well is classical era music. It just doesn’t inspire me much. From Debussy and Chopin onwards I can start listening again.

What's the hardest part about being a musician and what's the best?

Sylvia: Hardest is finding time to do everything! Best is the wonderful flow of expression and emotion as one performs. Knowing that you and the audience can experience something extraordinary together and come away richer for it – this is what I live for.

Eric: I second Sylvia on all those points!

What's your view on the classical music scene at present? Is there a crisis?

I'm not aware of one. The quality of performers has never been better, and the fringes, such as early music, keep getting richer. If you mean where is 'classical' music headed in the future, that is a different story, but even then you can point to post-modern composers such as Arvo Pärt to see that there are many ways in which classical music can embrace and expand.

Some feel there is no need to record classical music any more, that it's all been done before. What do you tell them?

Sylvia: Each artist is unique, and often, just when you least expect it, someone will approach a familiar piece of music so differently that you are lifted up in an entirely new way. What a shame if that opportunity were lost!

Eric: I used to think that after Glenn Gould, for instance, the Goldberg Variations were more or less wrapped up. Then I heard them being played on American Public Radio (can't remember the artist but it was a modern recording) and I loved it all over again! There will always be a fresh interpretation that will offer something new. At the very least, a new recording revives interest in a work or works, and gives new life to older recordings as well. We would love for a bunch of high profile artists to start recording 15th century repertoire, for instance, as Asteria would get a ton of residual publicity since we also do that material... and we'd like to think that we have a unique and passionate take on it that holds up against anyone else's interpretation.

What constitutes a good live performance in your opinion? What's your approach to performing on stage?

Sylvia: A really good performance combines two elements: technique and expression. I have studied voice all my life, so that I have

the best tools available to me to express what I want to say in a song. It is my belief that those tools should be so familiar to you that no one notices that you are using them – without knowing why, they are simply able to hear what you are trying to say with your music. For me, in performing music, the ultimate goal is to express the emotion in the piece. What does it say? Who wrote it? Why might they have written it just this way? What are they trying to say? What are you trying to say? When I have found my way to the emotional heart of a piece, I know that the audience and I will share a genuine and meaningful experience that will leave us both changed and hopefully inspired.

What does the word “interpretation” mean to you?

Sylvia: Interpretation is what happens when a performer takes the work of a composer and adds their own heart to it.

Eric: since I also do a lot of work with digital media and sampling, interpretation frequently involves recomposing as well, or at the very least re-editing. There is of course a big debate on this in the early music world – between purists who advocate playing the music as written and those who allow for more personal touches and treatments. Asteria is sort of in the middle, I would say, and sometimes we make tough calls to not include some interpretive element that Sylvia and I both like because it would clearly not have been in the performance traditions of the time. It is a very fine line you have to walk when you are playing historical music for modern audiences. Nevertheless, I think we manage to put in a great deal of our own sound and feel into Asteria, particularly in our live performances where we have a bit more leeway.

True or false: It is the duty of an artist to put his personal emotions into the music he plays.

Sylvia: Their duty? – Goodness no, everyone will approach music differently – but I know that for me, this is what brings out the soul of a piece and makes it meaningful for those who share it with you. I look for the combination of my emotional life with that of the composer as I encounter it in their music.

Eric: I play it as I feel it – it is very bottom up. Then at the very end I put on my historian’s hat and look at what I have come up with and edit the approach as needed.

True or false: People need to be educated about classical music, before they can really appreciate it.

Sylvia: False. This music speaks for itself. I didn't have an education as I lay in my crib listening to Mozart, but I was swept away by the joy, the melodies, the freedom of the music, and there is no doubt in my mind that this is why music became the voice of my soul.

Eric: the ability to parse music is cultural. There is still enough information in developed nations for its members to relate to their own heritage. That may change at some date, at which point classical music, like any stranded art form, may become irrelevant. The kind of music Asteria plays is very far from the common notion of classical music, however, and includes many modern elements: choruses, repeated sections, actual sung lyrics, and tonalities that share an idiom with certain contemporary pop forms (dark wave, goth, ambient, new age, etc). I think we have more of a chance to continue to inspire the current and next generations than a Mozart quartet, which is ironic considering that our music is much older.

You are given the position of artistic director of a concert hall. What would be on your program for this season?

Hah! That's a loaded question – do you want the potentially-career-killing-highly-personal-taste version or the professionally correct version?

Egal, for early music I want to have: Mala Punica, Gothic Voices, Shira Kamen, Hopkinson Smith, Rose Ensemble and L'Arpeggiata but to mix things up a bit I would probably also program in Kronos Quartet playing Kraftwerk ;-)

What's your favourite classical CD at the moment?

E: Right now I am listening a lot to Stravaganza by the King's Noyse and Hopkinson Smith's incredibly moving lute recordings of the music of Sylvius Leopold Weiss

S: John Fleagle's "World's Bliss" album on Magnatune

Have you ever tried playing a different instrument? If yes, how good were you at it?

Sylvia: I am about to find out! I have ordered a medieval harp from a marvellous crafter of historical instruments, Lynne Lewandowski, and I am eager to lay hands on it and see if I can find expression there as I do with my voice. Having tried my hand with some of her

personal instruments, I believe it is going to be a lovely adventure.

Eric: Of course – but my limited technical ability on other instruments gets frustrating very quickly. I'm so glad that when I pick up my lute I can think with the instrument again – ie channel a musical idea directly through the instrument without first thinking about how to solve the technical issues...

Discography:

Le Souvenir de Vous me Tue (2005) Magnatune

Homepage:

[Asteria \(http://asteriamusica.com\)](http://asteriamusica.com)

[Asteria at Magnatune \(http://www.magnatune.com/artists/asteria\)](http://www.magnatune.com/artists/asteria)

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