

Mp3 Stephen Van Handel - Chiaroscuro



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I've redesigned my vanhandelwebsite. There you'll find better MP3 samples to hear. You can even put me on your iPod. I'm now at the iTunes Store. 12 MP3 Songs CLASSICAL: Contemporary, WORLD: World Fusion Details: Progressive Soundscapes Radio, Stephen Van Handel featured February 22nd, 2004 2.5 hours of music. ----- Bill Binkelman Wind and Wire windandwire.com REVIEW FOLLOWS ***** STEPHEN VAN HANDEL Chiaroscuro (1992 - re-released in 2003) Stephen Van Handel, an electronic keyboard artist last heard from in the early '90s, has recently resurfaced and re-released his three albums from that period (while working on new material). This recording is one of them. Chiaroscuro is a term which (according to The American Heritage Dictionary) means "the technique of using light and shade in pictorial representation." You'll frequently see the term used in photography or cinematography critiques/analyses. Here, Van Handel's use of it indicates that this music has a certain duality to it, that of light and dark. Chiaroscuro is a remarkable musical achievement which doesn't show its age at all. If you didn't look at the year of release on the CD, you'd be hard-pressed to discern this as anything but a current era album. It's also a rather unique album, as it melds many classical music motifs, themes, and textures (and a few non-classical elements) into a one-of-a-kind musical statement. Instrumentation is frequently orchestral in nature, such as flutes, woodwinds, brass, strings, harp, percussion and piano. In fact, more than once, I thought to myself "Is that a real orchestra playing?" Listen to the tension-filled opening track, "The Calling" and tell me that, at times, you don't have the same reaction. As a result, fans of classical music will find a lot more here to their liking than, for example, EM lovers or ambient-philes. This is not a knock on the recording in the least, just a statement that Van Handel's music entertains sounds, instruments, and compositional similarities to classical miniatures, chamber music pieces, and even more dramatic

forms in that genre. That said, I enjoyed the album the more I played it, as it revealed the artist's depth of feeling, his broad composing talent as he juxtaposed high drama with subtlety and nuance, and his unique way of layering his keyboards and integrating traditional sounding instruments with non-traditional ones. Opening with the haunting "The Calling" (orchestral strings, solo flute, and exquisite tension in the refrain), the album moves on to "Only Orange Skies," a tender slice of melancholy, again dominated by a solo flute line, this time accompanied by a delicate plucked harp strings. Later, the flute dances playfully in the upper registers, almost as if it were taunting the strings, and the darker mood is lifted in concert with the emergence of a solo violin. "Chanson and Incidental" unites piano and violins, along with synth bells and a sampled concertina. The piece evokes the sensation of walking down a Parisian street. As the track picks up pace, Van Handel begins to demonstrate the ability to combine all sorts of sounds and textures - the concertina, hand claps, harp, bells - to craft a "whole" that is both dramatic and joyful. This piece is also superbly mixed. "Mystagogue" opens delicately but moves into more forceful terrain with rapid tempo percussion on assorted hand drums, along with vaguely Spanish-flavored modalities in the melodic elements. And that's barely the first third of the album, folks! There's an appropriately mournful and elegiac "Adagio" played on ultra-realistic strings samples. The title track, the longest one at eleven-plus minutes, begins amidst dark fanfare, march-like snare drum beats, pounding timpani, and powerful horn crescendos, but eventually moves into shadowy territory. Van Handel shows he can compose without the use of "traditional" instruments as well, here working with somber washes of keyboards and funeral church bell tones. "World Says,..." offers up dramatic world fusion soundscapes and rhythms, driven by pulsing African/Middle Eastern hand percussion and brief high speed melodic runs on assorted instruments, notably lower register piano (along with, I swear, the same instrument that was used in the soundtrack to *Altered States* which sounds like an eerie tribal wind instrument of some sort). 'nuff said. Chiaroscuro may not be to everyone's taste, although it's not in the least bit inaccessible, harsh, experimental or avant garde in any overt way. Yes, it is not traditional "pop music" in the use of verse/verse/chorus/bridge. And it is not merely electronic "traditional" classical music, a la the recording *Tristesse* from Paul Sauvanet, since it (i.e. Chiaroscuro) hews closer to 20th century neo-classical (you may hear echoes of Philip Glass on the closing song, "Prestissimo") as well as containing non-classical musical elements. However, the artist liberally uses refrain and theme throughout the CD. Tonalities are both major and minor, although I'd say it tends to the latter. By turns dramatic and sweeping, haunting

and beautiful, and sprightly and playful, what this album excels at is faultless engineering, incredible depth of feeling, remarkable use of realistic orchestral sounds, and enough variety to keep you interested through God only knows how many playings (I'm probably on my twentieth by now). Stephen Van Handel is, arguably, one of the most unique artists in any genre. Recommended.

----- NEW REVIEW: by Eric Meece aka Eric Mystic, KKUP Radio programmer, December 20, 2003 Created in 1989, Stephen Van Handel's "Pearls of the Soul" is truly a gem. This is mostly music for electronic orchestra in the tradition of Laurie Spiegel and Wendy Carlos. It is often gentle, wistful, somewhat humorous, bizarre and unpredictable in places, not always polished, but mostly engaging, beautiful, innovative, and impressionistic. There are nature sounds, and many pieces on the album evoke a connection to the elements and indigenous peoples. My favorite piece on the album is quite different from the others. It is called "The Triumph," and it has me reeling in a way few pieces have done in recent years. It is based around a repeating motif that is the most catchy and engaging I have ever heard, woven in counterpoint with other brilliant and bouncy themes, with a strange break in the middle. As the title suggests, it is optimistic, powerful, joyous and triumphal, but it has a light touch, and some dark shadows too. I think we need this kind of music sometimes, along with more easy-going or mysterious kinds of music; it uplifts us in a time when so much of our society and institutions are dysfunctional and leading us to ruin. "The Triumph" might help us believe that there are still artists out there who can express hope and optimism. Although positive, it goes way beyond the usual superficial, innocuous, nauseating, "happy and light" style of new age music. Stephen makes clear his intentions along this line in his description of "The Triumph": "All of us at some time go through some personal crisis. A rough start, loss of a loved one, losing in love, some major personal reassessment. And sometimes more than once. But for some reason, if the struggle doesn't kill us, we get through. A little more 'shining' inside. And I think, maybe just a little bit more compassionate.... I wanted to write something for us that celebrates that universal struggle which binds us all. That celebrates the evolution, and the 'life affirming' process of learning a life lesson well. A triumph over crisis that makes us better than before!" Although totally unique, I could compare this piece to others we all know to get the flavor. It's something like John Williams' theme music for the 1984 Olympics, and certain pieces by The Who like "The Rock" and "Overture to Tommy," to the famous Bach prelude, and even to Mozart's Jupiter Symphony finale. Like his other pieces, it lacks "perfection" in places, but this piece has

an awesome climax that is more inspiring perhaps than anything since Beethoven and Mozart. That may be stretching it; but certainly the artist's expressed theme reminds one of those of Beethoven and Peter Townshend. Another track I especially like is "The Winds from Nazca." This one takes its time warming up, but it blends some Peruvian and Andean influences with clever themes and natural wind sounds to make a brilliant and relaxing mix. The final piece on the CD, "Solace," is emotionally engaging and makes a reassuring and wistful finale. Stephen's piano playing here is quite sensitive. Throughout the album there are gentle "pearls" of experience, with ringing and crystal sounds that gradually penetrate their way into our souls. This is New Age Music of a unique and genuine kind. I highly recommend it.

----- MORE NEW REVIEWS: January 2004

HYPNAGOGUE, AMBIENT NEWS REVIEWS: Composer Stephen Van Handel is taking advantage of the do-it-yourself power of electronic music and the Internet to re-emerge with three of his CDs: his 1986 debut, *Les Pieces Pour Le Nouveau Monde* (remastered on CD 1993), and the follow-ups *Chiaroscuro* and *Pearls of the Soul*. *Les Pieces* and *Chiaroscuro* (1992) are well-crafted pieces that showcase Van Handel's bridging of classical sensibilities and New Age style. Considering, as the liner notes point out, "*Les Pieces*" was recorded on tape, "track at a time, sound at a time," it comes off with an astounding professionalism and excellent quality. The music here ranges from delicately contemplative songs to work that borders on bombastic in its intensity-pieces that almost seem to try too hard but can still hold a listener. In between the two is 1989's astounding *Pearls of the Soul*. Right from the start this CD is infused with a sense of release, playfulness, and a need to explore. Lighter by far than the other two works, *Pearls* combines Asian and Native American musical styles and blends them neatly with some experimental touches. Consider the tiny bits of electronic percussion that flit from side to side in the opening track, "Asha, Awake," sounding at first like a glitch but resolving themselves into a vital component of the piece. In places, *Pearls* carries echoes of Shadowfax, Mike Oldfield, or Ray Lynch, repainted with Van Handel's personal palette and overlaid with the constant sense that the composer is just having a damn fine time for himself. From the drum-driven world-groove feel of "Winds of Nazca" and the joyful "Ese Pequeno Sentimiento de Felicidad" to the softer, more ambient touches of "Thunder Dance" (which is too good to be so short!) and "Listening in Ancient Caves," this CD is a clear labor of love and a pleasure to listen to. The only mis-step here is the anthemic and bold "Le Triumph," which would have been more at home on either of the other albums. After that somewhat tangential piece Van

Handel gets back into the perfect slot he's created with two more New Age-tinged pieces and then closes the work with the blessedly lovely "Solace," a gentle piano piece that leaves the listener wanting more--not just of this album, but of Van Handel's increasing mastery of the genre. Fourth fifth albums are promised for 2004 and I look forward to their arrival.

----- MORE REVIEWS: (continued) Pearls Of The Soul - Stephen Van Handel As the "year of the glut" in self-produced new age and electronic albums draws to a close, it's become easy to discern the original voices because there are so few of them. Occasionally a truly individual artist miraculously invents himself and this gentleman is one of them. I will guarantee that you have never heard anything quite like this album. Both in overall scope and in the many unique details, this is one of the most promising debut albums around. The material ranges from elegantly playful through quasi-symphonic to tearingly beautiful, all with a unique sense of sound and texture.

HEARTS OF SPACE Pearls Of The Soul - Stephen Van Handel Stephen had made up an elaborate package of beautifully packaged cassette, lengthy notes, and original artwork (Stephen's a graphic designer by trade) to send around to a number of labels in late 1988. After what he calls "almost a year of hype from record people", he ended up funding the project himself anyway "in order", he writes, "to remain true to myself and to keep the music honest". Pearls Of The Soul is perhaps the paragon of what an independent release can be - voluminous notes (a little story to go with each of the eleven tracks), immaculate attention paid to the smallest details, and music which comes straight from Stephen's heart without concessions to commercialism. This kind of presentation just isn't possible under most corporate thinking. Stephen's music was all written on an Apple with MOTU Software and played back on Yamaha keyboards, using extensive digital samples. He uses percussion on only one track, lending a dreamy ethereal quality to his pieces, which are less tunes than they are musical atmospheres. Some startlingly original digital sounds make their debut, and overall the project has a sort of wide-eyed innocence which should not be taken for naivete. No, this is very deliberately uncommercial music, totally anomalous in the greedy '90s.

ELECTRONIC MUSICIAN MAGAZINE Pearls Of The Soul - Stephen Van Handel As you stroll along an uncharted byway through the woodsy hills of electronic home recording, you come upon a small shrine, obviously of great antiquity. And what are these sounds? Monks playing Andean flutes? The rattling of a large bamboo water wheel? No, it's Stephen Van Handel. Odd little phrases on synths and samplers come and go with an airy disregard for pop music's conventions of phrasing and structure, and

there's not a snare backbeat anywhere on the horizon. The eighth note ostinati aren't even quantized!

This is easily the most personal and courageous album of the month. Also the most charming.

KEYBOARD MAGAZINE Pearls Of The Soul - Stephen Van Handel Self-produced and marketed, this will likely be snatched up by New Age distributors in no time. Van Handel's 72-minute disc is full of effortless, lush, highly melodic synthesized and sampled sound, very complex in layering various timbres and themes within a track. While the package rates high on the sincerity meter (complete with stories of Van Handel's visionary experiences that describe many tunes), it does not borrow from commercial New Age idioms. Van Handel thankfully avoids adding a rhythm section, and is willing to allow chaos and the unexpected into these excursions. Only one tune (The Triumph) hints of mass appeal drivel, and then only indirectly. Elsewhere, the noises are varied and ear-catching as only digitized symphonic can be; sounds that evoke Andean folk music percolate in and out of haunting wind instrument samples, ethereal space excursions merge into distant thunder and gentle percussion, and a Schumannesque piano solo caps the album with a classical neatness. A balanced, healthy dose of relaxing, visionary music, with a good sense of both melodic invention and dramatic orchestration.

OPTION MAGAZINE Pearls Of The Soul - Stephen Van Handel Stephen Van Handel is a musical visionary. As he says in his liner notes, "My vision/goal was not to ideally write 'perfect' music, but has always been to write music that is expressive and human." And expressive it is, drawing on global musical styles, interpreted through cutting edge electronic technology to sketch these vignettes of the soul. Elements of Oriental, South American, and tribal musics come and go in fragments, jostling one another, rising and falling out of a silence that is so important to this music. This is a journey through some of the more exotic and bizarre areas of the human psyche, a neo-primitive initiation full of subtleties and nuances. Each piece is inspired by a different image: crossing a bamboo bridge suspended over a mist-filled gorge, a tribe celebrating the passing of a thunder storm, a foggy beach in the early hours before dawn. By turns jubilant and introspective, impressionistic and lyrical, this is experimental music at its strangest and most alluring, a music of paradoxes, perfect for the spiritual adventurer. And after journeying around the world and through the psyche for over 70 minutes, all is resolved in the poignant simplicity of the final piece, where wistful piano mingles with the sound of falling rain. For those daring enough to take it, this is quite a journey!

BACKROADS MAGAZINE Pearls Of The Soul (USA) - Stephen Van Handel Some may remember Van Handel for his striking first cassette release, Pieces for the New World. As a follow-up to that he has

produced a new CD that's even more beautiful. Pearls Of The Soul is a surreal/impressionist montage of symphonic melodies and delicate effectual embellishments, all interwoven by the most evocative of rhythmic movements. The high level of compositional sophistication and deeply emotional ambiances are completely integrated into a warm, seamless flow of electronic/natural sound that will enchant you anew with each listening. I can't rave enough about this one as the recording and art packaging are also excellent. EUROCK ----- Intro from an interview excerpt with Stephen Van Handel by Ms. Sonar: Hailing from the same hometown as Willem Dafoe, Greta Van Susteren (gasp!) and Houdini, Stephen Van Handel is a relative unknown. This is expected to change very soon with Stephen's upcoming new albums and his re-emergence onto the live performance stage. But the part about being a relative unknown seems out of place for a young man whose music has been compared to that of big name film composers, Thomas Newman (American Beauty) Maurice Jarre (not the son, Jean Michel Jarre, but the father), contemporary composer, Gyorgy Ligeti, the timeless J.S. Bach, Michael Oldfield and Cirque Du Soleil-incredibly diverse musical genres all. Must be his Nordic genes. When you first meet Stephen Van Handel you are immediately drawn to his outrageously beautiful blue eyes, that are at once striking and soothing...so weird. (Take a look at his web site photos if you don't believe me). A really fascinating conversationalist, this guy knows a lot. And it's refreshing that on even the most serious topics, his wit and humor bounce up to the top. Plus he's got this almost childlike, wide-eyed idealism that's, in a word, infectious. Yet Stephen sees himself as a gray cat, neither black nor white- complex and contradictory. That makes sense though when I think about his eyes... Early on, he envisioned himself as a concert pianist, taught himself many different instruments, and then settled in to study painting. I guess that's where the vivid cinematic quality in his work comes from and Stephen talks about his work mostly in a visual sense. He has strong design skills and his cover design for Pearls Of The Soul in particular, won a prestigious International Best Album Cover Award. Like any real artist who is truly intimate with his art and has a strong grasp of the process, Stephen stressed that for him music is the closer expression of the things that make us human-that closes gaps. Expect some gargantuan surprises to come your way soon from this 'relative unknown', Stephen Van Handel.

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