



IT'S BEEN A LONG WAIT FOR STRAWBERRY TOWN

Mick Walsh talks to Rudy Velghe of Orion to discuss the release of their new album.

The secret of Orion's distinctive style is that our music is constantly evolving. Our new album *Strawberry Town* is very different to previous albums - we don't see the point in making a new album which is just like previous ones."

In this way Orion founder member Rudy Velghe explains the reason behind Belgian-Breton group Orion's longevity and continuing success after over 20 years on the road. "We like to incorporate something new in our style in order to surprise our audience. One track on this new album 'Wolfie's Waltz' is a Mozart Menuetto which we've arranged into a swing-style waltz. In particular French audiences often ask about this tune and many are convinced that it's a musette, but in fact it's a Mozart composition. We hope that Mozart doesn't mind, but even if he does, he's dead anyway!"

Orion is a group in constant evolution. "We were formed in 1987 so we're actually an old band. Over the years many different musicians have been members including Trad maestros like Thomas Keenan, Jamie McMenemy, Patrick Désaunay, Nicolas Quemener and Soig Siberil. While during these past 20 years the pillars of Orion have remained Rudy and his partner Raquel Gigot.

Flemish fiddle player Rudy started playing in 1978 and over the years, he has developed a keen interest in other musical styles such as Balkan music, bluegrass and swing. Rudy also plays the Nyckelharpa - a bowed instrument with a keyboard and twelve harmonic strings. This new CD sees Rudy's "outing" as a talented guitarist, particularly with some beautiful counter-melody playing on 'Le Belloy'. Raquel plays both diatonic and chromatic accordion and it is her nimble dynamic style which delivers the ensemble's emotional punch. Her mastery of the Parisian 'musette' style from the swing-jazz period is virtuosic.

John Faulkner is Orion's Irish connection, having joined the group in 2000 however *Strawberry Town* is his first appearance on an Orion album. The other two current members of Orion are Erwan Berenguer who joined in 2005 and Gwenaël Micault. Erwan is a young talented Breton guitarist who has guested with Breton giants Skolvan and Skeduz. In recent years his musical partnership with Yann-Fanch Perroches, one of the masters of Breton diatonic accordion has brought him musical acclaim. Fellow Breton Gwenaël has been aptly described as 'an amazing musical centipede' and although his first instrument was the accordion, he is also an accomplished guitarist, but plays keyboards and piano with Orion. Gwenaël originally joined Orion in the early 1990's and recorded *Blue Room* (1992) before leaving and re-joining in 2005.

Last month, Orion released their fourth album '*Strawberry Town*' on the Keltia Musique label; an album which has been a long time in the making. "It's been 11 years since our third album *Restless Home* (1998) so it's been a long silence! One reason for this has been that Raquel and I have had two children in the interim so we've been a little quieter on the music front. So while we kept on playing and recording tracks, we spent time with our young children. Another reason is that we have our own home recording studio in Bruxelles, Worm Studio, which makes life easier but as a result there has been no time pressure or financial incentive to get the tracks recorded quickly - as you would have in a commercial studio. We're also perfectionists and we tend to record a track and then go off on tour and when we come back after a few months, we may have a whole different idea about the arrangement of the tune and we try new things with the track. So we really took our time to record the perfect arrangement and set of tunes. In

fact the first notes were played in 2002 and the tracks have evolved over that time until this CD release in 2009".

Over the intervening 7 years of recording the band line-up has also changed. "When we started recording, the band included Patrick Désaunay (guitar) and Marc Keyaert on keyboards but by the end of the recording we'd brought in guitarist Erwan and our former keyboard player Gwenaél. So it's just John Faulkner, Raquel and I who have stayed through to the end".

The music of Orion is fittingly described as an eclectic blend of musical cultures, so what is the inspiration for their music? "On the previous three CD's, the tracks were mainly traditional tunes from many parts of Europe; Ireland, Brittany, Scotland, Sweden, Romania, Bulgaria complemented with a few of our own tunes. On 'Strawberry Town' it's mainly our own compositions which reflect the type of music we like to listen to and all those musical influences. The only tunes which are not self composed are the title track, a traditional song from John's collection, and Wolfie's Waltz. The new album also has a tendency towards a more acoustic recording. On previous albums we used more synthesiser and reverb, particularly on the slower airs and songs, whereas the pieces on *Strawberry Town* are more natural and acoustic and have more of a classical music influence in terms of their arrangement, more reminiscent of Baroque".

Since 1987, Orion have recorded 4 albums, each of them reflecting their unique approach to traditional music in a well balanced mix of magnificent slow airs, hard driving dance tunes, elegant melodies and beautiful arranged songs. In 1993

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Orion released their first studio album *Blue Room* which included contributions from Johnny McDonagh and received critical acclaim selling 32,000 copies. Confusingly in 1995, Orion released their second album '1990' – a re-release of an original demo album from the same year. "After concerts we would have lots of people asking to buy our original demo tape and the demand was so high that we re-recorded the demo and released it on Keltia to widespread acclaim". Restless Home was released in 1998 and features some excellent guest musicians including jazz guitarist Philip Catherine, Donal Lunny, Breton guitar maestros Soig Siberil, Nicolas Quemener and Alain Genty.

Previous to 2000, Orion have had a reputation as a hard-working touring band but less so in recent years. "With the launch of this new album we want to get back to more touring. We've played at the Festival de Cornouaille in Quimper for the past 3 years running and in Belgium we toured with a production called 'La Maison des Petites Musiques Cachées' which was a huge success. Recently we performed at the 'Nuit des Etoiles Celtiques', Keltia Musique's grand 30th anniversary show together with Loreena McKennit, Dan Ar Braz and a whole string of Breton artists. The spectacle was filmed by French television and released as a double DVD-box".

Orion's last Irish tour was in 1999 and included a sell-out concert at the Cork Folk festival. "We'd love to tour Ireland again. In 1999 we toured with Jamie McMenemy and we played wonderful concerts at Arts centres around Ireland including Nun's Island Galway, Whelan's Dublin and the Watergate Theatre in Kilkenny. We had first toured Ireland in 1996".

True to their name, the music of Orion is a prominent constellation of exquisite musicianship, performed in a conspicuous and recognisable style. *Strawberry Town* is an album 11 years in the making, a sophisticated album of virtuoso playing and a mélange of musical surprises. The long wait is over.

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