



Latvian Voices album of Christmas music – with a touch of melancholy

Egils Kaljo | December 27, 2018

The female vocal ensemble Latvian Voices have enjoyed much international success, achieving renown not just for their singing ability, but also for their varied, interesting repertoire and arrangements. Christmas music has also long been a part of their repertoire, but, up until recently, they usually performed outside of Latvia (mainly in Germany) in the Advent and Christmas seasons.

However, in 2016, the group performed its first Advent concerts in Latvia, and also recorded their performance in the Rīga Torņakalns Lutheran Church, and released a CD of this event, entitled *Mazie, skumjje ziemas svētki* at the end of 2017, a collection of Christmas and winter solstice songs, with both traditional songs and original compositions. This is actually their third album of Christmas music, the first being *Seventh Heaven* (2010), and the second was *Zeit der Wunder*, a collaboration with German vocal ensemble *Viva Voce*, which was released in 2014.

The members of the ensemble for this performance are group leader Laura Jēkabsone, as well as Zane Stafecka, Beāte Locika, Dita Belicka, Andra Zvejniece and Marta Lortkipanidze.

The group explains the meaning of the title of the album – *Mazie, skumjje ziemas svētki* (or – A Little Christmas Melancholia) – by saying ‘during the time before Christmas, many of us experience a kind of melancholia; we hear our inner voice a bit clearer and spend more time thinking about things that really and genuinely matter.’ That describes much of what is on the album – beautiful, deep, but with a touch of melancholy.

The atmosphere is set at the beginning with the concert, with a brief introduction that is a quiet, mystical interpretation of the Christmas song ‘Kas ir šis bērns’ (the Latvian version of ‘What Child is This?’, itself set to the famous English folk song melody of ‘Greensleeves’). This brief introduction then leads into the lively original work ‘Saticšanās’ by Jēkabsone.

Though there are certainly many elements of melancholy on the album, that is not to say there are no happier and more uplifting moments. For example, the joyous 'Totari', inspired by Latvian folklore, but with a new melody by Jēkabsone, is brought to vivid life by the soaring voices of the singers and percussion.

Alongside traditional Christmas songs like 'O Come, O Come Emmanuel' and 'See, Amid the Winter's Snow' are also performances of Latvian folk songs with a winter solstice theme, such as 'Sidrabiņa lietiņš lija' and 'Pūtiet guni', as well as the Liv song 'Zingi pringi'.

One of composer Raimonds Pauls' most beloved melodies is his music for the song 'Circenīša Ziemassvētki', with lyrics by Aspazija. The song is about a poor mother and son who do not have enough money for bread, but she tells him a magical story of traveling to the moon and all the amazing things he will find there. Though a sad song, the mother's tale provides for hope, and the singers present a truly tender and beautiful version of this song (arranged by Jēkabsone) as a fitting and memorable end to this slightly melancholic concert and season.

Often reserved and introspective, other times vivacious and rousing, *Mazie, skumjie ziemas svētki* is an ideal accompaniment for the Christmas and winter seasons. Combining interpretations of traditional Christmas songs, Latvian folk songs, as well as original works, Latvian Voices display again their many talents in singing and arranging. Tranquil and peaceful, *Mazie skumjie ziemas svētki* and the rich and sonorous voices of all the singers, with a small touch of melancholy, makes for wonderful listening for a calm Christmas evening.

For further information, please visit the [Latvian voices website.\(http://www.latvianvoices.lv\)](http://www.latvianvoices.lv)

Mazie, skumjie ziemas svētki

Latvian Voices

2017

Track listing:

- Intro – Kas ir šis bērns?
- Satikšanās
- Coventry Carol
- O Come, O Come Emmanuel
- See, amid the Winter's Snow
- Pūtiet guni
- Zingi pringi
- Sidrabiņa lietiņš lija
- Totari
- Ave Maris Stella / Zvaigzne spožākā
- Ziemas miers
- Ziemas stāsts
- Mazie, skumjie ziemas svētki
- Circenīša Ziemassvētki

Egils Kaljo is an American-born Latvian from the New York area who lives in Rīga, Latvia. When not working in the information technology field, he sings in the Latvian Academy of Culture mixed choir Sōla, does occasional translation work, and has been known to sing and play guitar at the Folkklubs Ala Pagrabs in Old Rīga. Kaljo began listening to Latvian music as soon as he was able to put a record on a record player, and still has old Bellacord 78 rpm records lying around somewhere.

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