

'Wild & Whimsical' a delight

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Serious music needn't be serious. Sometimes, it shouldn't be serious. Frankly, I wish more of it weren't serious. In fact, so much baggage is attached to the whole idea of serious music — or classical music, or concert music, or whatever other weighty label we affix to music composed in the European tradition — that too many people associate it with headaches and naptime.

I'll never forget the "Carnival of the Animals" performance that I attended long ago — the Schenectady Symphony at Proctors. It was so wonderfully impish that I laughed out loud, earning a couple of dirty looks in the process. I remember thinking: But wait, isn't this what Camille Saint-Saens intended? Why else would he have composed a segment for two braying violins called "People with Long Ears"?

Then again, Saint-Saens refused to publish "Carnival" during his lifetime, worried that it might hurt his rep as a serious composer. Because, you know, serious composers aren't ever supposed to laugh. Especially at themselves.

So I listened to the Dogs of Desire's maiden CD, "The Wild & Whimsical Worlds of David Mallamud," in a state of relief approaching bliss. It's cheeky and catchy and kitschy and showy and playful, frolicking through assorted theatrical-musical genres without ever crossing the line into irony or camp. Even the composer's three-track tribute to '60s lounge music, "Chrome-Plated-Gut-Waddin' Mondorofico," somehow comes off as both brilliant spoof and gobsmacked fanboy homage.

Mallamud is creating from a place of love, not snark. "I believe music should be an escape," he writes in the album's liner notes. "So I always strive to write works that are grounded in a time and place other than the here and now."

And so the music on "Wild & Whimsical" bounces the globe, traveling from fin de siècle parlors to the Celtic mists of Ireland, the teletonelas of Latin America, the cheesy psychedelia of "Mondorifico" and the imaginary metal realm of "Lizardman," a superheroic glam opera about a boy who morphs into a reptile to exact revenge on his bullies.

At each stop on the way, he nails the genre — and the culture surrounding it — with such perfect joy and precision that you'll swear you've heard it before. "Frump on Your Lapel," one of the "Parlor Songs," sounds like some long-lost Gilbert and Sullivan, while "Itsy Bitsy Baby" is pure, vampy vaudeville. The Celtic world of "Immram" runs from poignant folksong and droning pipes all the way to full-blast pop-Irish gaudiness, evoking the step-dance glitz of [Michael Flatley's](#) "Riverdance."

"El Dilema de Chuco" is a duet from a fanciful Latin soap that features two women — one of them sung by male soprano [Brian Charles Rooney](#) — in the grips of mourning the same man. It's dishy and bubbling with brio and passion, and like everything else on the album, it's a total kick. There is no apology in Mallamud's music, no distancing with a protective layer of satire. It's as sincere as it is outrageous.

The largest collection of tunes on the album is "Last Call at the Folies Bergere," imagined as a glorious one-night revue peopled by the ghosts of the great performers — the likes of [Jacques Brel](#), [Edith Piaf](#) and [Josephine Baker](#). The result is irresistible, packed with "faux French" lyrics and veering from mid-tempo waltzes to upbeat romps ("Chez Moi," sung by [Amick Byram](#) and [Christiane Noll](#)) and a yummy, gutsy, killer ballad called "Jeu de Pleurais" (Noll again) that pays tribute to Brel.

Just released by Broadway Records, "The Wild & Whimsical Worlds of David Mallamud" is the 23rd album from the Albany Symphony under [David Alan Miller](#) and the first from its classical-rock crossover outfit, the Dogs. They're in spry form here, addressing each genre with delectable pluck but never overstating it, either.

Having written multiple pieces for the ensemble over the years, Mallamud worked closely with them to compose more for the album — and wound up writing less for the instruments, he says, than "the people who played them."

The sum is an album of music conceived for imaginary stages in imaginary worlds, but rendered like old hands, with all the relaxed brio of a Broadway cast album. Whether aching or upbeat, whether evoking Disney or Bernstein or Tin Pan Alley or "Tommy," the music is delightful. It's also insane. There's a nuttiness to the whole thing, a kind of crazed enthusiasm in its many and omnivorous references, that cannot be underemphasized.

But there's a beauty to it, too — and with all of that time-traveling, a timelessness. Cathie Ryan's opening a cappella on "Immram" is wistful and lovely, and she might be singing on some distant Irish hills in centuries past. Does that sound corny? Maybe it is.

And maybe I'm corny for loving it. But in an age of postmodern cynicism, there ought to be room for corniness. And goofiness. And glam-rock Lizard boys. And waltzing French circus ditties with animal sounds.

There ought to be room for fun. Plain, serious fun.