



SOUND ADVICE

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Special to the Catholic Voice

Overview:

Abba, Pater 11 cuts, 49 minutes

The first of its kind, a CD featuring homilies and addresses of Pope John Paul II overlaid on original contemporary music compositions. Audio (and, for the title track, Music Video) proof that the Holy Father got his start in public life as a member of an experimental theatre troupe.

REVIEW

Remember “Classics Illustrated,” that Reader’s-Digest-Condensed Books-meets-Marvel-comics hybrid that let you r 10-year old brain understand and get turned on to the beauty of real literature?

You might say that this CD of the Holy Father delivering short, multi-lingual biblical and homiletic snapshots overlaid on eclectic-styled music tracks is like Papal Messages Illustrated.

You’ve got your great literary themes. Indeed, the 11 cuts strategically lay out the very core of Catholic belief: The overwhelming love of an immanent God, a God we don’t just call Father, (*Pater*), but Daddy (*Abba*,) Incarnation, inspiration, the dualistic frailty and strength of the human condition, forgiveness, redemption, hope, social responsibility, the law of love.

The spoken texts (studio recordings and live addresses archived by Vatican Radio and) reveal both the passion and obvious compassion of Pope John Paul II. Especially in the studio recordings (and all the more so in his native Italian), the voice has an undeniably warm, authentic, and yes, fatherly, appeal. Delivered in five languages, the messages reflect the inclusive and all-embracing nature of the Pope’s invitation to welcome the Millenium in the spirit of Christ, as a time of hope, encouragement and peace. The Pope’s

words (and the well-written liner notes and translations of all the foreign language texts) make *Abba, Pater* a good read.

It’s the “illustrated” part, the music, that can pose problems for listeners.

If, as would be logical, you’re expecting music prim and proper, in the vein of Verdi, Brahms and Palestrina, you’re in for quite a surprise. To like this CD, you’ve got to give up your expectations of what “Inspirational” and “Pope-appropriate” look and sound like. You’re going to hear the pope’s words in musical contexts that could likely jar you.

The eclectic compositional and instrumental tone of the CD runs the gamut from lush contemporary classical (the original works of noted Italian arranger/producer Leonardo De Amicis and compelling performances of the Nuova Sinfonietta Roma and Soprano Catharina Scharp on several of the cuts) all the way to the rap-influenced chant (yes, I said *rap*) of many of the tracks.

Between the extremes, you get the lush feel of Hollywood sound track, the pulsing drive of techno-pop, the exotic melodic and rhythmic influences of Celtic, African, and Arabic music, and the simple, unadorned power of traditional chant. You hear the undulating pulse of polyphonic choirs being pushed by synthetic rhythms

straight out of the ambient techno genre so popular among today's Generation X twenty-somethings.

If you're moved by experimental music, at first listen you might find the Pope's speaking over the atypical and exotic sounds of the Middle Eastern tabla drum, primitive woodwinds and world beat choruses, innovative, exciting, engaging. But there's the strong possibility that you'll be irritated by the intrusion of random synthetic pings, boings and croonings that scream: "aren't we modern!" If you've heard other "crossover" music blending chant and techno-beat, you might find this iconoclastic combo less exciting now than it was at its debut five years ago.

Perhaps most illustrative of the experimental nature of the work is the title cut. *Abba, Pater*. It begins sweetly with the classic chant of *Attende, Domine* (Listen, O Lord), moves through some *Cinema Paradiso*-like pop sounds, coming back to chant, with the Holy Father singing the familiar Gregorian Mode VIII *Pater Noster, qui es in coelis* (*Our Father*) accompanied by a clearly rock-influenced drum and bass line. Typically, a CD's title cut is the strongest piece. In this case, SONY and Vatican Radio took a chance that just quite didn't pay off.

Another clearly experimental track, *Father of Light* (#8), crosses the irritation border. Its heavy-handed homage to techno beat is the classic illustration of the tail wagging the dog. The beat and synthetic effects are so self-conscious, so begging attention that they

distract from, even distort, the text of the Pope and the chant that underlies the track.

It is obvious that the intention of the widely divergent musical genres is to underscore the welcoming, timeless, nature of creation's relationship with this God who is called *Abba, Pater*. Beyond the variety in genres, even the choice of instrumentation and choral languages shows an intended reflection of the breadth and depth of the Father's embrace.

Final analysis? Should you buy this CD?

Go ahead.

Maybe you, or someone you know, could use a *Papal Messages Illustrated* before tackling the latest encyclical or Vatican Council document. Especially for a young person for whom non-traditional musical genres are appealing, armed with the liner notes as crib sheet, this is a good primer in Catholic belief. If you're a teacher, this is great stuff for class discussion.

For the older listener, this CD will get conversations going. The Pope's messages remind us that Catholicism is so much richer than the mere sum of its rules and regulations. These texts speak to the heart, offering a foundation of purpose and relationship that are at the root of our faith.

For the baby boomer generation of Catholics who might have the misimpression that this elderly Pope (who has traveled, spoken and been more in the public eye than any church

leader since Pope John XXIII) should get out more, it will show that, indeed, he does get out.

And if it gets a kid (or aunt or grandparent) to hear that the leader of the Catholic Church cares deeply about issues more fundamental, more embracing (if not press-worthy) than birth control and the non-ordination of women, that's a good thing. A very good thing.

Abba, Pater: Released by SONY Classical, March 23, 1999. Widely available in Classical Music sections.