

Songs of the Season
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OLIVOR'S HOLIDAY DISC
ABOUNDS WITH BEAUTY AND
GRACE

In "The Spirit of Christmas," one of the numbers on her newly released disc, *Songs of the Season*, Jane Olivor proposes the idea that the feelings of love and goodwill engendered during the holiday season are worth preserving all year long. Such is the timeless quality of this recording that it should not be trotted out only in December and then put away like some keepsake ornament. Olivor has invested this collection with such heartfelt, emotionally charged, and beautifully expressed performances that it should be savored well beyond the season.



Olivor produced eight of the disc's 11 tracks (the rest were produced by long-time associate Jason Darrow), and she has done an admirable job in presenting these songs in mostly sparse, low-key settings. Though a few of the numbers feature synthesized instrumentation, most of the songs have simple acoustic arrangements. Whether accompanied by Wade Tonken on guitar or Ken Bichel on piano, Olivor's vocal is up front throughout, and it has never sounded richer or more stirring.

Recognizing that her jewel of a voice often shines most brilliantly when it is unadorned, Olivor offers an *a cappella* rendition of "The Little Drummer Boy" that is stunning in its immediacy. The almost tangible way that she trills her *pah-rum-pa-pa-pum*'s shows that Olivor's full-throated delivery is all that is needed to convey the majesty of a song without needless embellishment.

Songs of the Season contains its share of familiar Christmas songs. The disc opens with a version of "Angels We Have Heard on High" that finds Olivor's harmony vocal interwoven with her lead vocal to produce a beautifully layered effect. "Christmas Potpourri" is a medley of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," "Winter Wonderland," Amy Grant's "Breath of

Heaven,” “Deck the Halls,” and “A Soalin” that only leaves one wishing for complete versions of those songs.

But as the disc’s title implies, Olivor reaches beyond traditional Christmas fare to present other material as well. Stephen Schwartz’s “We Are Lights” is a Chanukah song that celebrates the divine spark within every person who carries on the tradition of lighting the Menorah. “You Don’t Know How Beautiful You Are,” which at first sounds like a song heralding the arrival of the Christ Child, is actually based on a poem by 14th century Sufi poet Hafiz. Another surprise is “Quando Amor i Belli Occhi,” a 16th century Italian madrigal by Phillippe Verdelot, fashioned after the works of Petrarch.

And if “Elusive Butterfly,” an international folk rock hit from the mid-‘60s seems totally out of place on this disc, think again. On music columnist Jerry Osborne’s website (www.jerryosborne.com), composer Bob Lind is quoted as saying that the words “are about the magic of the quest, the thrill and passion of searching, even when the thing sought remains distant and hard to see.” Could the song’s inclusion here represent Olivor’s less than traditional consideration of faith, a concept far more elusive and less tangible than Lind’s butterfly? In any case, one must applaud Olivor’s unerring ability to weave material from diverse sources into a richly eclectic musical tapestry.

This rich tapestry shows Olivor’s interpretive range off to marvelous effect, with the singer shifting effortlessly from the giddy joy of carols like “Deck the Halls” to the solemn reverence of Schubert’s “Ave Maria.” And contrast her relaxed, playful, jazzy phrasing on “Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow” with the austere beauty of her rendering of Verdelot’s madrigal, sung as though Italian were her native language. Olivor’s greatest strength continues to be her ability to make lyrics that are rich in imagery resonate for the listener, and here she excels on “You Don’t Know How Beautiful You Are.” Set against a strongly syncopated percussion, Olivor’s fervent singing conjures vivid musical pictures of “great parades with playing bands,” “saints bowing in the mountains,” and “wondrous sounds that break into light.”

The challenge with any collection of holiday songs, of course, is whether they can be presented in a way that makes them fresh and meaningful. Olivor is up to the challenge: her phrasing continues to be dynamic and idiosyncratic, showing the same gift of rediscovering timeworn songs that

first won her critical acclaim over 25 years ago with her revisionist take on Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Some Enchanted Evening."

To tackle "The Christmas Song," immortalized by Nat King Cole, is a daunting task, but Olivor employs her trademark vibrato, here as silvery and feathery as new fallen snow, to personalize it and make it uniquely her own.

And for those who would question the idea of a person of the Jewish faith releasing a disc celebrating this most Christian of holidays, let the record show that Olivor makes a point of singing the word "*Christmas*" with the first syllable ending with a very discernable "t," respecting its etymological origins—a lesson to be heeded by so-called practitioners of the Christian faith who have secularized the word as "Chriss-miss," which is just one step above the deplorable, written shorthand of "Xmas." Olivor never once pronounces the word without paying homage to its most holy meaning.

When you hear Olivor sing of "this holy tide of Christmas, of beauty and of grace," from "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen," be assured of its heartfelt sincerity. This disc abounds with beauty and grace, for these are qualities that exemplify the best of her singing.

Songs of the Season confirms Olivor's well-earned reputation as music's ambassador of love and goodwill. The very feelings that she rallies to keep throughout the year in "The Spirit of Christmas" are attainable, she asserts, only "if we put aside our differences, and rise above our fear." Christianity, Judaism, even Sufism, a Persian sect of Islamic mysticism—all are represented here. But the deeply felt spirituality in Jane Olivor's singing bypasses ideological divisiveness and shows us once again the universal power of music to bring together people from all walks of life.