



Symmetry is an essential aspect of any aesthetic. Homo Sapiens have evolved to resonate deeply with perceived patterns. Perhaps they evoke in us some primordial recognition of our origins: DNA swirling in mirrored pairs, male mirrored in female, our mothers' eyes, hands, breasts.

Musicians take advantage of this basic predilection in countless ways. Pop culture has arguably begun to over-exploit this human aesthetic weakness – establishing symmetry with the simplistic regularities of digitally aligned sonic components. A kind of self-replication within the genre ensures that the latest pop release is new without being novel – that it pulls on the heartstrings of familiarity rather than demand the engagement of deeper perception.

Natural symmetries are, of course, always imperfect. Our appreciation of beauty is in part an act of volition, a purposeful desire to fall into the cracks.

Ancient Agents' first album is an object lesson applying symmetry while embracing all that is odd, mysterious and new. The configuration of two string players with two percussionists creates space for a kaleidoscopic array of interactive patterns – the solid grooviness of Joubert's bass as counterpoint for Khota's textural and rhythmic excursions. Skillen's deeply eclectic rhythmic ideas finger-folded into the virtuosic purity of Gille's frame drumming. A time symmetry is also evident. These aptly named agents of a truly modern sound are clearly moored in a visceral understanding of the roots that they are referencing – be it the traditions of India, West Africa, Ethiopia, the Middle East and Latin America or the

harmonic and melodic concepts of more recently emergent musical ideologies like jazz fusion, funk and even modern classical music.

Like sonic origami, the album unfolds to reveal the richness of its content. From the hypnotic 5 / 4 of the opening “Clousseau’s Dream” through the playful lightness of “Bokmakierie”. Traversing the deeply moving resonance of “Sutri’s Bells”, the archeological layering of the title track and the beautifully disconcerting textural palette of “Misir Wot”, there is always a wonderful sense of intention and inventiveness that this author found to deepen with each listening.

It isn’t sufficient to bring four great musicians together to ensure a satisfying and coherent musical result. The evidence of individual brilliance is certainly there in Ancient Agents’ debut recording - what stands out, however, is the sense of a musical meta-purpose that binds the individuals in a space of joyful super-symmetry that combines nourishing complexity with egalitarian accessibility.

Martin Wolfaardt - November 2017 <http://www.offshorejazz.co.za/>

