

Canadian ambient composer Stephen Bacchus is one of the leading figures of the genre. With a career spanning 4 decades, dozens of releases, both solo and in collaboration, he has gained a faithful following among lovers of ambient music. *The Keep* is a retrospective of Stephen's work from 1979 to 2009, featuring unreleased tracks from various epochs. The collection opens with "Arrival", a three-minute piece recorded in 1997. The track is surprisingly rhythmic and melodic, has a relaxed, sunny mood and is imbued in the spirit of discovery and adventure.

The album continues with "Heiwa", an ambient track recorded in 1987. Seagull sounds are combined with a nice melodic motif for a relaxing experience. With a length of 2 minutes, the track sounds more like a musical sketch. "Pleiadian Plié" (1997) introduces a spacier note, although at the same time features harpsichord leads with something of a medieval vibe to them. Overall, this is a richly orchestrated, classically-inspired piece of music. "Universal Heartbeat" from the same year is much more rhythmic, using marching percussion / drums and a similar type of classical arrangement. "Over the Khyber Pass" (1987) uses a similar type of rhythm, although the arrangements are much brighter, or, one could say, "thinner". However, there's that oriental vibe that was largely absent on the previous track. "Quiet In Motion" from 1986 is more synthetic but also spatial, approximating the territory of classic Space Music. A fine piece. "Three Dee" from 1983 is much spookier, with cathedral organs and a moody synth / piano combination. Another attraction are the sudden bursts of synth bleeps.

Another fine piece but sadly very short. The album gets better still with "Echo Shadows" from 1986, which is a rich Space Music pastiche, with phased pads and a reflective melody. "Solid Atmospheres" (1987) is a deep, meditative piece and is much more in the classic Ambient tradition, a bit similar to some works of Steve Roach from around the same time. "Journey To Otherworld" is a short (2 minutes) interlude from 2000, combining a melodic motif with background spacey effects. "Heart of Mystery" is another piece from 1987. On this one, oriental melodies return with a vengeance, backed by lots of thick synth pads and drones. "Primeval Forest" (1994), on the other hand, is full of mysterious forest ambiances, tribal percussion and very effective synth pads. Excellent piece. "The Lost Highway" from 2000 starts with the sound of dogs barking.

An electronic soundscape appears, backed by twittering effects in what is probably the darkest piece of the entire collection. "The Keep" is the oldest piece (1979) and it is quite experimental - metallic sheets of sound are combined with flute playing for a strange electro-acoustic experience. The flute then disappears and we are left with a strange electronic soundscape. It is the longest, one of the darkest and definitely one of the better pieces. "Island of Apples" (2000) is a return to more melodic realms, with lots of silky pads and flute-like leads. "Highland Hymn" (1998) takes things a bit too far in the new age direction for me - simple keyboard notes and a flute-like lead, then a classical pastiche with oboe and string orchestra simulation - all in a decidedly positive and sweet key. "Abide With Me" (1999) continues in the same vein, although being an arrangement of a traditional Christian hymn, it has more depth to it. The disc closes with "Gratitude" from 1999 - a simple, yet quite enjoyable piano piece.

Being a collection of pieces composed over a period of 30 years, "The Keep" lack cohesion of a single disc, but, on the other hand, features all basic styles that Stephen is known for and as such can serve a good introduction for those willing to discover his musical world. There is a more experimental facet to his work (which I prefer) and the more classical / melodic one. Best tracks: "Quiet In Motion", "Three Dee", "Echo Shadows", "Primeval Forest" and "The Keep" (especially this last one).