

I've sung praises for Martin Brandlmayr recently on these pages. He's 1/3 of Tropic, a band whose first album flirted with numerous genres. Tropic's real star, though, is Vienna-based guitarist, Martin Siewert. From what I can tell, he is the guide through these rough musical landscapes. From folk to electronic to ambient to jazz, it was an excellent, original record that blurred the lines of each style. "Ballroom," Tropic's second album, is an organic masterpiece. It leads the listener down narrow corridors and back alleys of Siewert's native Vienna. I feel like I'm taking a tour of all the places time and tourism forgot.

"Observations Took Place" is the underground. It's the place all the old remnants of a past era have been buried and forgotten. As you begin to wipe the dust off, you get the feeling you're being watched. Siewert weaves air-raid siren sounds in and out of Brandlmayr's industrial-tinged drumbeat. When the high-pitched, chime-y guitars fade in, it's like you've just rounded the corner and gotten a first glimpse of a bright light at the end of a long hallway. Once the drums fade into a minimal thump, a bright synthesizer takes control of the song. The subtle electronics hint at the water table being close, but the air is getting thick and you can only think of the surface. It's no use, though; the synths suck up all the oxygen in the room. Close your eyes and don't fight it. It's easier this way.

The two-part "Time Axis Manipulation" reminds me of many physics books I've read. I find physics fascinating. It's intricate and complex, but often explains simple things. The first part of this track is similar in this way. It aims at relaxing, and it does just that. Tropic lays acoustic guitar and upright bass over a jazz-laced drum beat. Ambient sounds (one might be a constant alarm clock) texture the song and make it seem more alive. Subtle horns beckon the dawn of a new day. The sun rising and setting is a pretty simple idea on one level, but the physics involved in explaining it are not. Once it degenerates into a noisy soundscape, it's as if your brain is giving up on understanding how it works, and just wants to appreciate that it actually does. Sometimes, I don't need to know the inner workings; sometimes I just want to appreciate things for what they are.

However, everything comes to a head on the final track, "For All the Time Spent in This Room." It's eighteen minutes long and never gets boring. The subtle cymbal work in the beginning sounds like a light spring rain. Joe Williamson's soggy bass is like all the dormant plant life sucking up the rainwater. Eventually the rain stops and day becomes night. Snare scraping and '50s-style reverb-laden guitars suggest tonight will be cold. It's time to hide under the blankets and prepare for snow. Spring is the biggest tease of all seasons. Just when you think the cold is gone and green grass is on its way back, winter hits you again. Synthesizers build-up and echo the guitars; there's a funk twist added here and I love it. The song loses momentum, though. This is not a bad thing, as it's a calculated move. As it slows down, it signifies that it's time to leave the room; it's time for sleep.

I used to think scotch was disgusting, but now it's my drink of choice. Scotch is a good accompaniment to "Ballroom." It's an album you need to spend time with to fully appreciate. Like a glass of Lagavulin 16 year, it's not for everyone, but those who appreciate it will be militantly in love with it. Tropic is not immediately accessible and takes time to grow on you, but once they do, if they do, there's no denying how brilliant they really are.

- Brad Rose, Foxy Digitalis