

Jersey band arrives via Japan

POP/ROCK

Symphony X, October Thorns, Mastermind

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: Heavy Metal Sound, 350 Somerset St., North Plainfield

How much: \$15. E-mail jwjr@rci.rutgers.edu for reservations and more info. Or click onto (users.starpower.net/smh4/uofd/misc_cnj.html)

BY LISA ROSE
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

They've toured Japan, South America and Europe, but Symphony X has never gigged in their home state. Tomorrow, the Hazlet rock act will play the first Jersey show of their seven-year career.

The concert, which happens at the Heavy Metal Sound studio in North Plainfield, will be the band's third performance in the United States.

"We had interest from a Japanese label long before anything started happening here, so we decided to concentrate our efforts overseas," said guitarist Michael Romeo from his home in Hazlet. "It seems like in the States, when one style of music explodes, it's all you hear, like with grunge and now rap-metal. We're not doing either of those, and it seems like people in Europe and Japan are more recep-

tive to our style."

The show relaunches the Central New Jersey Progressive Music Series, a monthly concert program featuring local and global rock acts with avant-jazzy leanings. Created by local promoter Jim Robinson, the series began in 1999 at several bars around New Brunswick. It went on hiatus for a year as Robinson tried to locate a nonclub venue.

"I wanted to have shows at a place where we could start before 10 p.m.," said Robinson, a collection management assistant at the Alexander Library on Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus. "The crowd for these concerts is between 25 and 50 years old, and they have jobs to go to in the morning."

Robinson found his answer at Heavy Metal Sound, a North Plainfield video and sound studio housed in a former motorcycle dealership. The bands play in the old showroom, which is still lined with neon bike logos and Harley paraphernalia.

"I do these concerts because I'm a fan of the bands," said Robinson, 34. "And I'm a huge fan of Symphony X. I've gotten e-mails from people coming down from New Hampshire, Connecticut, Virginia for the show."

While Romeo dislikes the "progressive" label, Symphony X's music is laced with key elements of the genre: angular rhythms, acrobatic instrumentals and cryptic lyrics.

"We're not doing a show-offy type thing," said Romeo. "There's always going to be a good melody or a good chorus or something to remember and latch onto. I don't want to limit ourselves to an audience of musicians."

"V," their latest album and first domestic release, is a concept record, an orchestro-metal voyage to the bottom of Atlantis. The tale of the mythical lost city is retold as an allegory for the 21st century, warning against technology gone awry and knowledge without wisdom.

"We knew that we wanted to do a concept record, so we all got together and talked over what that concept should be," said Romeo. "It turns out we'd all watched this Discovery Channel show about Atlantis and ancient mysteries, so we did some research and molded a story from that idea. We had the story and the lyrics first and put the music to the lyrics afterwards, like we were writing a film score."

With both Eastern and Western classical textures, "V" is epic in story and sound, featuring violins,



"V," a concept album about a voyage to the mythical lost city of Atlantis, is Symphony X's first U.S. release after producing five albums in Japan.

brass and other symphonic instruments channeled through keyboards. Strings soar, guitars shred and cymbals crash. Vocalist Russell Allen spins chimerical yarns with a forceful vibrato. Imagine Mozart meets Megadeth with a mythic twist.

"There's so many different things that each of the guys in the band likes that goes into our music," said Romeo. "I grew up with metal and rock and classical. Our keyboard player is a classically trained piano player. Our drummer likes progressive jazz."

"V," released by California indie Metal Blade last fall, is Symphony X's first stateside release, but they have a five-album back catalog on the now-defunct Japanese label Zero Corporation.

The Japanese label contacted

Romeo in 1992, off a review of his demo tape in Guitar World magazine. They asked him to recreate the riffs with vocals. Romeo gathered some local players and Symphony X was born. They toured Japan in 1997, and have returned several times since.

"It was totally bizarre when we went there," said Romeo. "We'd be seeing nice things written about us in magazines. Our shows would be packed. We had no idea. It was a pleasant surprise."

Locked into a contract with Zero, the band was unable to seek a U.S. deal until last year. When Zero went bankrupt, the band signed with EMI/Toshiba in Japan and Metal Blade in America.

"It's a pretty new experience for us to see our album in stores over here," said Romeo.