

The SIMON MAYOR QUINTET

MANDOLINQUENTS

CD REVIEW

This debut album features everything from hot swing and ragtime instrumentals from the mandolin orchestras of the 1930s: Irving Berlin, Mozart, Ravel and Tchaikovsky to lively reels and beautiful traditional Irish airs to and Chinese and Brazilian folk tunes. All this played with infectious fun, off-beat humour and stunning virtuosity on mandolin, mandola, mandocello, mandobass and classical guitar, with the occasional burst of song or fiddle.

Featuring Simon Mayor, Gerald Garcia, Richard Collins, Hilary James, and (when this CD was made) Maartin Allcock.

Traditional Music Maker

I must confess to having a predilection for the mandolin which is experiencing something of a revival within the world of traditional music even if it does not figure prominently in mainstream music despite the efforts of Vivaldi and Mozart. Most of the playing I hear is usually in bluegrass bands where the instrument is often frantically picked and strummed for rhythm by players who seem little interested in exploiting the tremelo and its Neopolitan magic.

Imagine my surprise and delight then when I received an album by the Simon Mayor Quintet playing a selection of music from classical to Irish and American traditional music in a superbly accomplished style that is true mandolin, plus the delightfully pure voice of Hilary James.

The group is made up of Simon Mayor playing mandolin and mandola, Richard Collins playing the same instruments and voice, Gerald Garcia a fine classical guitar player, Martin Allcock on mandocello and, double bass and guitar and for topping there is Hilary James who plays mandobass and provides the vocals.

The group starts with a lively rendition of Dvorak's Slavonik Dance No 8, works it's way through Tchaikovsky; Mozart, Bizet and Ravel to Irving Berlin which includes a nice fiddle solo by Simon Mayor.

There are traditional tunes from America and Ireland not least a delicate and ethereal presentation of Salley Gardens by Hilary James which makes a change from some of the pub versions I've heard. The CD is a must for any

mandolin player and will appeal to all aficionados of fretted instruments for its sheer musical artistry, And if you can't stand the mandolin just listen to Hilary James.

Brian Healey

BBC Radio 3

A delightful disc.

Rob Cowan, 'Breakfast' programme

Steppin' Out

When I was a nipper I used to go to the Fairfield Halls in Croydon to experience the Alexeyev Balalaika Ensemble. The only reason I bring this subject up is the opening track 'Slavonic Dance' performed with such deftness by Simon's blinding quintet was also performed by the Alexeyev. I was astounded then by the beauty of all things stringed and in later years my thoughts haven't changed.

Put away any preconceived ideas you may have about the mandolin being too delicate an instrument, with an ever thoughtful choice of tunes ranging from 'Down by the Salley Gardens' to the 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy' I defy anyone not to find a track that will appeal to someone they know.

As I'm reviewing this album I can't help but be transfixed by the sheer brilliance of all the musicians and the exquisite vocals of Hilary James. If you hadn't guessed already (stop the superlatives from flooding through...) this is a more than worthy contender for album of the year!

Pete Fyfe

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Paulo Ganz (Italy)

"In the letter which accompanies his current CD, Simon confirms that he finally has at his disposal a permanent quintet composed of first-rate musicians - and that it would give him great pleasure if they were to be invited to play in Italy. That has seemed a good and a reasonable proposition to me from the moment that the group came into being and after the new record - even more so! Mr Mayor really has assembled an ensemble worthy of the greatest respect, comprising - besides the constant (and beautiful) Hilary James, his companion in numerous previous productions - the classical guitarist Gerald Garcia, the amazing boy prodigy Richard Collins (a performer of bluegrass extraction) on second mandolin and our beloved Martin Allcock, away from Fairport Convention for a moment, on the mandocello.

What comes out of this amalgam is definitely a good album, a tribute - at least that's what Simon says - to the great mandolin orchestras of the 20s 30s and 40s, but, as we can well see, yet again we find ourselves in the presence of a first-rate work, linked (and driven on) by the musical passions of its inspirer. Thus - once again - there are classical pieces, those passages which Simon Mayor has painstakingly unearthed from the layers of dust (please let the fans forgive me for this) with which, at least for the less alert, they have been covered.

So, once again, as on the previous four albums, Dvorak is alongside Tchaikovsky and Bizet next to Cobb, in the company of the traditional (among them a superb version of "Down by the Sally Gardens", magisterially led by the voice of Hilary James and the guitar of Martin Allcock) until we

come to the touching "Pavane pour une enfante défunte) by Ravel, moving because of its sad bearing [innate sadness? - Ed.] but never cloying. The CD is well worth more than one hearing, forgiving the good Simon the occasional slight lapse of style, maybe. For example I would, albeit approving of the variety on offer, have avoided a swing piece like "Cheek to Cheek" or "The Piccolino", inspired, as the performer himself (alas!) draws to our attention, by the days of Fred and Ginger.

Moreover - as we well know - it is not easy to tread that no-man's-land that lies between folk - the people's music, the real sort, as you'll agree - and pop music, this abbreviation standing for "popular" which, in the Anglo-Saxon countries actually means something which is destined for consumption - at the first level [superficially? - Ed.]. Because of this, elegance and a measured pace are often lacking in certain other, let us say, limited works. Simon Mayor, with his quintet, once again takes upon himself the responsibility for recording and taking on tour a show with the mandolin at its centre, using other instruments from the same family (among them the mandobass, perplexed to find itself ending up in Hilary's hands [sic - I think]), battling - as they used to say - with the difficulties of making a music happen [sic - recreating/resurrecting? - Ed.'s friend] which, in the albeit flourishing epoch of fusion, the majority of people won't at times manage to label and thus won't appreciate.

I wonder what sort of surprises Simon Mayor might have up his sleeve - the adventure continues!"

Paolo Ganz