

New Celtic Mandolin

Simon Mayor - CD review

The Living Tradition

And now for something completely different: a CD which owes a lot to traditional music but which is definitely on the edge of the tradition. Somehow it manages to keep one foot in the traditional camp while the other one is moving with the times - dangerous stuff.

Simon Mayor is a man who has probably done more for the mandolin than anyone else in the UK. He brings classical, country and contemporary influences to bear on traditional tunes from all the usual Celtic countries, plus a New England reel (uncannily like a well known Irish tune!) and a brace of his own compositions. As you'd expect on this label, the music is almost totally acoustic.

Simon is joined by Frank Kilkelly (guitars), Beryl Marriott (piano) and Hilary James (various basses and vocal). He himself plays half a dozen stringed instruments. The musicianship of all concerned is outstanding and the technique is so precise that most tracks have a definite classical feel. However, this is not just another Celtic moody mush CD. The material is quite unusual ("Huish The Cat", "Mrs Murray of Abercarney" and a little known Neil Gow lament represent the Scottish tradition), many of the tunes are up tempo and the arrangements are generally crisp and understated. What comes across here is the melody, and there are some lovely ones in the 53 minutes of this recording.

Alex Monaghan

Taplas

I used to have very little regard for the mandolin - a twangy little thing, struggling to make itself heard and with little potential for expression. All that has changed after hearing this album. In Mayor's hands, the mandolin sings, whether it be in the virtuosic uptempo numbers or the achingly beautiful slow airs.

Apart from a couple of self-penned pieces, the material is drawn from the Celtic nations. For his Welsh offering, it's great to hear refreshing new interpretations to tunes that, to some of us, may have become a bit jaded.

Also featured are mandola, mandocello, guitar and mandobass, the various instruments responding to each other in rhythmically and melodically inventive arrangements. I love the combination of piano and mandolin on The Teetoller's Fancy, with its uptempo, light, bouncy arrangement.

Most remarkable are the slow airs, as the mandolin has a naturally short sustain. With only sparing use of tremolo effect, Mayor makes his instrument sing with an extraordinary tenderness, as on Little Molly-O and Niel Gow's Lament for Abercarney.

A brilliant album! A real ear-opener!

Delyth Jenkins

Rock 'n' Reel

Before someone puts my back up and says "... isn't this a case of Celtic bandwaggoning?" I'd like to remind you that the gentleman turning his hand to yet another source of inspiration is unquestionably one of the finest exponents of this much maligned instrument in this country or, come to that any other! Now, I've said my piece so let's get on with the review. This is a stunning album on many counts but mostly because of the technique. The beauty of the slow airs along with the faster sets beggars belief at times and the listener cannot help but be won over by the sheer excellence of all the musicians involved. Anyone who hears this album (whether musicians or general listener) will gain in inspiration.

The Folk Diary

At first I thought "Oh no, not yet another album of Celtic music!" They're getting to be as numerous and as bad as Irish theme pubs, but this one's rather different. And so it should be, for Simon Mayor's recorded output has never been anything but of the highest quality. It's not all Irish, either. There are also tunes from Wales, Scotland and the USA - all played by Simon on mandolin, mandola and guitar with help from Beryl Marriott on piano, Hilary James on mandobass and Frank Kilkelly on guitar. A classy album.

Jim Marshall, editor

Dirty Linen - USA

While not exactly a household name on these shores, Simon Mayor is considered one of the foremost mandolin players in the British Isles. He has released a number of mandolin recordings featuring many different musical styles, and his latest spotlights tunes that are drawn from the Celtic world. Mayor uses the word "Celtic" in its widest meaning. Part of the charm of this recording lies in its diversity: tunes are drawn from Brittany, Wales, and Galicia, as well as the usual Scottish, Irish and English sources. There's also one by O'Carolan, one by Niel Gow and two of Mayor's own compositions.

Mayor's playing is very sensitive and reflective. With the exception of "The Teetollers Fancy", on which he lets go with some fast picking, most of the tunes are played with a subtlety and quiet pace that lets the tune's melody come to the forefront. Not content just to dazzle on mandolin, he also shows a nice touch on guitar and is a fine fiddler, as well. Hilary James plays mandobass on most of the tracks, as well as providing the vocals on "Mount and Go". Beryl Marriott plays piano on a number of tunes.

This is one of those recordings that sounds nice in the background, but also holds up under closer listening. A recommended recording that should help raise Mayor's profile in this country.

Jim Lee (Simi Valley, CA)