

Winter With Mandolins

Simon Mayor - CD review

BBC World Service

Recording of the Week

Living Tradition

The first thing that struck me about this CD was the tone of the mandolins. I don't know whether to attribute it to the recording engineer, the musician, or his instruments (probably all of the above) but what comes out of the speakers is the most beautiful bell-like mandolin sound I've heard, live or recorded (I'm terribly jealous). Actually, all the instruments are well recorded: the sound simply sparkles.

The subtitle of this recording is "Seasonal instrumentals from around Europe featuring the mandolin, mandola and mandocello". That doesn't give quite the whole picture, as the lineup also includes guitar, fiddle, whistle, percussion, organ pedals (Mayor), harmonica (Brendan Power), soprano saxophone (Alan Whetton), bass and voice (Hilary James). Mayor is a nimble player, seemingly at home on all the instruments he plays, but especially agile on mandolins. Power and Whetton add aural variety, rounding out the string sound quite nicely, and James holds her own on the bass line and sings the only vocal in the C.D. ("Un Flambeau, Jeanette Isabelle").

The selection features traditional tunes, both familiar ("I Saw Three Ships") and unfamiliar (A couple of Spanish carols). There is an arrangement of a Handel piece that sounds as if it were written for the mandolin (though knowing Handel it was probably written for oboes). A couple of originals by Mayor round out the collection. There are diverse styles here ranging from baroque to 'down home'. Mayor's tune "Toss The Pancake" has a great bluegrass feel to it, complete with steel guitar. He also does a swinging take on "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" ably abetted by Whetton and Power. The C.D. closes with a Russian melody which starts out quietly and rolls in with a fiery finish, picking up speed and changing keys along the way. Mayor and his associates do a marvellous job of sounding like a Russian balalaika orchestra (with a quirky diversion into bluegrass territory in the middle). As odd as some of these arrangements look in print, they work! This recording isn't overwhelmingly seasonal at all, I find it suitable listening for any time of the year.

Elaine Bradtke

Rambles.net

What is it about the mandolin that allows it to make that magical music? It is old, it is up to date and it is timeless all at once. Add Simon Mayor to the mix and you get magic as well.

This self-taught musician could be an inspiration to us all. He started with guitar when 11 years old and then was seduced by the mandolin and violin. His love of music that inspired this voyage of musical discovery is obvious on all his recordings, and never more so than on this release. He is not afraid to experiment and to alter tunes but he always retains the respect due to the composition.

Be warned of two things when you pick up this album. Firstly, there are a number of Christmas-themed tracks. Secondly, and most importantly, Christmas tunes are not just for Christmas. Music is music. Great music is universal in all senses, and that includes time, so give a listen to "I Saw Three Ships" in July. It sounds just as good and may even cool you down in a heat wave.

Mayor takes us on a world trip with tunes from France on "Ballades" and from Spain with "Song of the Birds." He takes us through time with a beautiful rendition of a piece from Handel's "Music for the Royal Fireworks" on the track "La Rejouissance." He follows a "German Cradle Song" with a Yorkshire piece called "Past 3 O'clock." He then powers into "God Rest Ye Swinging Gentlemen." This is swing-meets-Christmas for any time of year.

The album closes with a track that must be heard to be believed. "Christmas Candle" is a Russian melody played on three mandolins, two mandolas, four mandocellos and a "few other things." The only thing missing is the partridge in a pear tree.

I cannot emphasize too much that, despite the titles on offer here, this is an album for all year round. Go on, be bold and play a carol in August. The world will not stop spinning but you will enjoy good music.

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Simon Mayor - CD review

Netrhythms

Just like this year's Christmas cards, the seasonal CDs seem to be late in arriving - which may explain the otherwise mysterious appearance in my mailbag of this scintillating offering from mando supremo Simon.

But it's not the afterthought it might seem, but more likely a straight re-promotion exercise for one of the most scintillating seasonal albums of recent years; I find to my astonishment that it bears a 1992 date - I'd certainly not realised it was that old, and it hasn't dated one iota! (OK, some of Simon's hardcore fans might notice by directly comparing minute nuances of his playing over the intervening 15 years, but let's face it, Simon seems to have been a brilliant player since the cradle!)

The Mandolin Album was Simon's ultra-accomplished recording debut, the start of his mission to "give the mandolin a uniquely British voice", one which he's single-mindedly (and successfully) pursued ever since: *Winter With Mandolins* finds Simon a little further down the road of experience, but with commitment and enthusiasm proudly undiminished.

Each of his albums tends to contain an intelligent and perennially exhilarating mix of original compositions, traditional tunes and showstoppers/lollipops from the worlds of classical, light music and even jazz, yet it's far from predictable and this listener's reaction is always broadly one of surprise, delight, enchantment and amazement in roughly equal measure.

Here, then, the "traditional" contingent of the menu has a sparkling *I Saw Three Ships*, an unsurpassable *God Rest Ye Swinging Gentlemen*, and inventive arrangements of carols from Spain and the Provençale, as well as the South Yorkshire glee *Hail Smiling Morn*, topped up with four of Simon's own pieces and, as a grand finale, a Russian melody played with infinite panache by a multitracked Mayorian ensemble of at least nine mando-family instruments and a number of others - one of those tunes that gets faster before it stops and along the way even finds room for a bluegrass mandolin solo!

Simon's not completely on his own for the record, he does allow Hilary James, Brendan Power and Alan Whetton in for cameos. But to sum up, this is serious musicianship leavened with lashings of good-humour: timeless music, timeless performances, timeless arrangements - no wonder it all sounds so fresh 15 years on, and ready indeed for a whole new audience to discover.

David Kidman

Folking.com

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