

KITKA**Evening Star** Diaphonica CD2018

This album is enchantment. It opens with *Colage Of Koleda Carols*, ancient pre-Christian pieces from Bulgaria in which an impressionistic sense of wild beasts carousing through the hillsides underpins an evocation of light and wilderness and sparse, scurrying humanity, pure voices arranged into narrative and movement and silence. Ostensibly a women's choir based in Oakland, this is more a world of collapsing borders and seasons built on crystalline voices and a perfectly innate understanding of tradition, rite and season. A cross-cultural yet intricately detailed performance of harmony singing. Archetypes are thoroughly explored but lightly worn. The old is rearranged into the new, vocal techniques from all points focused into relevant ritual and belief.

Aside from the briefest of percussion patinas and an accordion serenade at its conclusion, this is unaccompanied voice, a world of extreme being, of harsh realities and unusual rhythmic changes, of unity and dissonance being constantly worked through and picked at until beguiling new stories and vistas open up. Pastoral duets morph into full choral panoplies, stories emerge into prayer, and individual desire builds into chorused religious need.

There are twenty-two tracks, but they cling together into one constantly rearranging tapestry of ethereal sound. A pantheistic array of wintry canticles and anthropomorphic interrogations of weather and gods old and new. A record and a performance of almost perfect storm and rapture. *Zvezda Večernica*, for example, examines and reclaims the Slavic recognition of the evening star as the divine feminine, in an initially loose and unaffected performance that gradually becomes a veneration through enveloping warmth.

There's an unadorned, unflinching quality to the performances on this record, a trust in the choir's own tenacity. "Truly this is the most wonderful singing I have ever heard," said that David Crosby. And he is not wrong.

kitka.org

John Pheby

**SOPHIE & FIACHRA +
ANDRÉ MARCHAND****Portraits** SLFOR003**BRASS LASSIE****Brass Lassie** Brass Lassie BL01

There are times in this reviewing lark when the serendipity-to-dross ratio is so low that one wonders why one bothers. And then there are times when it all seems worthwhile...

The rather clumsily titled Sophie & Fiachra + André Marchand (apparently aka The Sophie & Fiachra Trio) comprise Québec fiddler and singer Sophie Lavoie, Irish émigré and uilleann piper Fiachra O'Regan, and André Marchand (a founder member of La Bottine Souriante) on guitar, feet and vocals. Together with a few other musicians (notably John Carty on tenor banjo) they have produced one of the most downright enjoyable albums to come this way for some considerable time.

Seamlessly blending traditional tunes from Ireland, Québec and elsewhere (did I hear *The Keel Row* in there somewhere?) one is continually reminded of the emotional combination of fiddle and pipes. To my ignorant ears, Fiachra's piping is particularly impressive, sometimes wild like Paddy Keenan, sometimes more delicately restrained like Liam O'Flynn could be, and



Brass Lassie

always spot on. If you're an old fogey like me, imagine one of your favourite Irish bands (maybe Planxty or The Bothy Band), crossed with infectious Québécois percussive rhythms, and you get somewhere near: *Les Filles de Campagne / Le Reel de ma Grand-Mère Odile Boudreault* is a fine example. Guaranteed to keep those feet toe-tappingly restless from start to finish, this album of genre blending has hardly been off the player since it arrived, and it will take something absolutely mighty to push it from my 'album of the year' slot, even though it's only February. With plenty of bilingual sleeve notes, and photos of some of their sources and influences, you really can't ask for more. Absolutely wonderful.

sophieandfiachra.com

Meanwhile, from not so far away in global terms, Brass Lassie clearly don't take prisoners either. Putting the slightly unprepossessing cover to one side and pressing the play button, my ears were immediately assailed by what sounded like La Bottine Souriante crossed with a big band. And having got over the surprise, their wonderful laid-back version of Salsa Celtica's *Cuando Me Vaya* was the perfect contrast. And there's loads more innovation to come.

Brass Lassie, from Minneapolis/St. Paul, are a ten-piece mini-orchestra of superb musicians led by Laura MacKenzie, comprising flutes, whistles, fiddles, pipes, and keyboards, with a seriously hot brass back-line and rhythm section, plus step-dancing and multi-lingual vocals. Their extraordinary takes on Cape Breton dance tunes, Celtic jigs and reels, traditional ballads and waulking songs are not so much genre-crossing as genre-smashing. Swinging like there was no tomorrow, with jazz-inspired brass arrangements, Latin-flavoured Scottish dance tunes and a big band sound, their music is bold, joyous, highly infectious and probably unique. Reckon they'd be a gas on stage if anyone needs a large festival band.

brasslassie.com

Bob Walton

MIRANDA SYKES**Behind The Wall** Miranda Sykes

Taking a break from *Show Of Hands*, Miranda reverts to solo mode. Building on 2017's *Borrowed Places*, which opened a window into her personal (physical and spiritual) past, *Behind The Wall* widens the focus into an exploration of where humankind's actions will (inexorably) lead.

The eleven songs comprising this new collection are thoughtfully chosen from contemporary songwriting. The most recent, forming a kind of bridge from *Borrowed Places*, is her mother Penny's *Lincolnshire Changes*. The earliest is Billy Taylor's *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free*, whose passionate 1967 rendition by Nina Simone gave it the status of Civil Rights anthem. The CD's title track is Tracy Chapman's desperate cri-de-cœur highlighting domestic violence, every bit as relevant today as when it was written (1987). From a short few years later come Nanci Griffith's *Time Of Inconvenience* and Richard Shindell's *Fishing*, following which we leap some way past the millennium for Karine Polwart's *Better Things* and Nancy Kerr's *Sweet Peace* (written for Pete Seeger's 90th birthday). Hard-hitting commentaries by Julie Matthews (*Are We Human?*) and Steve Tilston bring us firmly up to date.

But it's not just the percipient choice of songs that makes Miranda's new album so special – it's also her bravely pared-down performances, which allow the listener to hone in closely on her vision and consequently enable deeper and keener reflection on the issues raised by the songs. Three songs feature double bass and five guitar, while three (including Frank Purcell's cutting *Double Or Quits*) are sung simply and authoritatively a cappella.

Behind The Wall is a thoughtful and intelligently sequenced project.

mirandasykes.com

David Kidman