

The Spiers Family - Oh, Gin I Were There... (Millseat 002)

www.spiersfamilygroup.co.uk

Although The Spiers Family group is a relatively new teaming, Tom Spiers has been active on the Aberdeen folk scene since the 1960s, whether as a solo performer in his own right or in the subsequent decades as a member of The Gaugers (with the late Peter Hall) then Shephard, Spiers & Watson (the most recent CD release from the latter group having been reviewed a short while back on these pages).

Oh, Gin I Were There is the second CD to be released by The Spiers Family, and follows fast on the heels of the excellent Plenty Brass And A Bonny Lass, with which it shares a number of key qualities. Here again we encounter exceptionally well sung, genuinely alive interpretations of Scottish, predominantly traditional material, enterprisingly chosen and with thoughtful and truly supportive instrumental accompaniment where needed. It adheres to the trusty format, once again presenting a well-balanced collection of songs that naturally and unassumingly display the talents of the Family members (Tom, wife Maggie and daughter Emma), each of whom shows abundant confidence in taking the lead on a fair share of the disc's 15 selections. And at the risk of sounding partisan, I'd single Emma out for special praise this time round, making audible strides in her singing development and here turning in several of the disc's highlights. The actual choice of songs for the new record arguably encompasses slightly more well-known repertoire than on the earlier release, but the family's performances more than hold their own against any competition. Having said that, several of the choices will appear more familiar than they actually turn out to be due to their similarity to other versions or variants, but this matters not of course when the performances are as sparkling and companionable as these. Maggie's cheerful song of courtship The Bonnie Wee Trampin Lass and her bright (if brief) ditty The Dusty Miller may bring a great contrast with Emma's charismatic account of The Braes O' Broo and Tom's delicately phrased The Knock And The Bin (which concerns the Clearances), but all of these prove especially irresistible in their own ways.

As regards sources, Tom's booklet notes are succinctly informative without needing to be over-detailed (texts will be available on the website shortly). Virtually all of the choices have been sourced from the tradition of the family's native Aberdeenshire, all but four of the songs having their basic origins in the Greig-Duncan Collection; but Tom, Maggie and Emma always choose their variants with care and to suit their personal song-carrying preferences. For instance, for It's Braw Sailin On The Sea Emma goes back to the original version instead of adopting the popular, and most-usually-sung, revised version by Tony Cuffe, whereas others come in more complete versions (e.g I'm A Workin Chap, found in Ord's Bothy Songs & Ballads – by the way, I was interested to read that Tom learnt this song after hearing it sung by the ISB's Robin Williamson – presumably in the Robin & Clive era). The CD's opener A Fair Maid In Her Garden Walking may be thought a little untypical of the collection, being more obviously of English rather than Scottish roots, but it makes an arresting introduction to the disc.

The four items not found in the aforementioned Greig-Duncan Collection include the disc's undoubted standout (for me), Maggie's supremely fine account of the poignant anti-war song The King's Shilling (thought by many to be traditional but actually composed in the 1970s by Ian Sinclair of the group Mirk). There's also Tom's modified version of the Child Ballad The Wee Wee Man (done to his own tune and minstrel-like tenor guitar accompaniment), and Emma's jaunty take on The Rovin Ploughboy (a gem from John MacDonald, the "Singing Molecatcher" of Elgin), and finally the animated (if a touch exaggerated) music-hall number The Stoutest Man In The Forty-Twa. Vocal arrangements are much as expected without being predictable, the majority of the songs following the leader with chorus vocals from the remaining two singers, but this approach consistently works well for this blend of voices. As I've already hinted, the (admirably limited) instrumental accompaniments are a model of taste and restraint, unobtrusive yet retaining their individual character: Tom brings his distinctive, rich-toned fiddle playing to nine tracks and plays tenor guitar on three, while Vic Gammon guests on concertina for just three of the songs. And as with the group's previous disc, the recording is truthful and credibly balanced, with a presence as warm as a fireside session.

The words "oh, gin I were there..." can't fail to be on your lips while listening to the music of The Spiers Family, who once again prove magnificent and vibrant ambassadors for the traditional music of north-east Scotland.

David Kidman

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