

PLENTY BRASS AND A BONNY LASS – The Spiers Family (Millseat 001)

The Spiers Family group is a relatively new teaming, although Tom himself 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. Tom last released a solo record (Allan Water) close on ten years ago, so any new offerings from him are eagerly received! Tom's own distinction, as one of Scotland's very finest singers with a skill for accompanying himself on the fiddle that's second to none, is legendary; but his wife Maggie and daughter Emma, who complete the Spiers Family lineup, are both really good singers too and keen exponents of the traditional songs of their native north-east Scotland. So much so, in fact, that I was surprised to discover that Emma has only been singing traditional song in public for little over a year, and Maggie only since 2008 (although both have won prestigious singing competitions since!). The three of them only actually started singing together at the beginning of last year, and Plenty Brass And A Bonny Lass may only have been recorded shortly thereafter but it doesn't betray any sense of tentativeness or uncertainty either in approach or execution. No – the feel is very much one of performers who are completely at ease with their art and with each other's singing, and able to bring a frisson of natural connection to anything they sing. The template the trio uses for its vocal arrangement doesn't vary (a designated solo-lead with the other two voices coming in to harmonise on the chorus or refrain), but then again it doesn't need to, and the result is both companionable and listener-friendly and I often found myself joining in with what feels like their informal little homegrown song session. The recording is straightforward, honest and truthful, accurate and lifelike, clear and close with plenty of natural warmth and immediacy. The programme of songs is sensibly balanced, both in terms of mood and arrangement, and its 57 minutes fairly fly by. Just six of the fifteen selections are sung acappella, and these include a couple of wonderful solo performances: a characteristically well-turned distillation of the popular ballad of Tifty's Annie from Tom, and a knowing take on The Flower Of Northumberland from Emma – while I also really liked Maggie's account of O Bit I'm Weary and Emma's take on the Bothy Ballad Johnnie Sangster. And the very last item on the disc – the only one not of Scottish origin – Maggie's measured and heartfelt rendition of My Flower My Companion (from the singing of Helen Schneyer, which sports an achingly beautiful fiddle backdrop. Tom's exceptional, sternly moulded yet perennially fluid fiddle accompaniment graces four further tracks, including fine accounts of the whaling song Greenland and the spirited Wee Toon Clerk, while on five items he exchanges the fiddle for tenor guitar, use of which instrument imparts a kind of courtly-troubadour quality to the interpretations (especially in the case of Emma's haunting take on the ballad Fine Flowers In The Valley, a Cruel Mother variant, and Tom's own tender account of the Dundee love song Magdalen Green). The disc's only studio enhancement comes where both instruments are played in tandem to accompany Maggie on Green Grows The Laurel. As I've hinted, virtually every song chosen for inclusion has been sourced from within the family's own region – two thirds can be found in the Greig-Duncan Collection, as the brief but relevant booklet notes point out, and a number of them have been learnt directly from traditional singers of our time (Jeannie Robertson in the case of the delightful Yowie Wi' The Crookit Horn, Jimmy Macbeath in the case of Marnan Fair) or family friends (Emma learnt Time Wears Awa' from Elsa Lemaître). So, from the standpoint of the performances, choice of material and quality of the music alone, this can be judged an excellent record and a singularly fine example of the singing tradition of the north-east of Scotland. Aberdonians fare ye weel, indeed...! The disc's only minor letdown is its unduly modest presentation – and then only arguably so by present-day standards; although it's only fair to point out that the song texts and a glossary are available on the related website www.spiersfamilygroup.co.uk.

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