

Europe REVIEWS

Bellanöva

Filmay (49 mins)

★★★★★

Good news: the Italian shawm tradition is still kicking



The Four Provinces is an area pertaining to four distinct administrative subdivisions located in four different Italian regions (Lombardy, Piedmont, Liguria, Emilia). It's an impervious mountainous area not far from Genoa where traditional music was based on the pairing of *piffero* (folk shawm) and accordion. Revived in the 70s, local bands updated its sound and songs: Baraban, Tre Martelli, Suonatori delle Quattro Province. The latter was founded by one of the key musicians of this tradition, piffero player and singer Stefano Valla, who joins forces on this album with accordionist Daniele Scurati and two classical players, Nicola Segatta on cello and Marcello Fera on violin.

Here, a wide repertoire of traditional songs and dances receives a variety of rearranging and improvising in a dialogue with the strings. The reedy quality and intonation of the voice echoes the shawm, which is set in sharp contrast with the soft classical sound. It is a dramatic and fascinating effect, wonderfully apparent in the virtuosic 'Levar di Tavola' (Clearing the Table), a suite of dances to end the meal. The good news (Bellanöva) is that this tradition is still alive, vibrant and evolving in new forms.

FRANCESCO MARTINELLI

TRACK TO TRY *Levar di Tavola*

Helene Blum & Harald Haugaard

Galileo (46 mins)

★★★★★

Rich re-imaginings of traditional Danish folk music



Helene Blum has already achieved phenomenal success in her native Denmark, including a No 1 hit as a folk singer and composer. Alongside the irrepressibly talented composer, fiddle player and fellow Dane, Harald Haugaard, comes a first jointly collaborative album, *Strømmen* (The Stream). Rich re-imaginings of traditional Danish folk music and poetry from Denmark's most notable

literary talents feature among Blum and Haugaard's own work. An expressive journey of lyrical poetry and music, reflecting our own very personal relationships with water, this is an album of sweeping lyricism. 'Over Havet', the first track, is tinged with wistful nostalgia before the fourth cut, 'Boy Under Lime Tree', enters into a brooding, introverted affair. The purely instrumental 'Angst' takes a darker journey before we begin a steady ascent back into brightness, culminating in the penultimate track, 'En Yndig og Frydefuld Sommertid' (Summer Beauty and Delight). Lifting Nordic folk melodies surrounded by warm harmonies of Blum and Haugaard's own band create a satisfyingly rewarding textural soundscape. Alongside the surprising harmonic twists that delight and engage in the third track 'Så Mange Forskellige Hænder', *Strømmen* is a subtly progressive and inventive artistic offering. Immersive, poignant and continuously rewarding, this is a must try Nordic folk album for 2021.

JAMES RORISTON

TRACK TO TRY *Danseviser*

Stef Conner

Riddle Songs

Delphian Records (63 mins)

★★★★★

Enigmas variations: medieval riddles taken for a spin



We know from poems such as *Beowulf*, which mentions warriors singing praise songs, and Caedmon's 'Hymn', a divine inspired song, that music was central to Anglo-Saxon culture. But, despite clues – metrical, alliterative – we cannot know precisely how the music of the mead-hall sounded. This enigma intrigues singer and composer Stef Conner. She has a deep knowledge of the riddles in *The Exeter Book* and of the Venerable Bede and the music manuscript of St Godric of Finchale. Connor really can read the runes.

Riddle Songs is an album of texts from these, which Connor has set as solos for herself with strummed lyre, duets with early music singer and harpist Hannah Martil and choral arrangements for the ensemble Everlasting Voices, conducted by Jonathan Brigg. While she draws on folk song and medieval music she is not bound by these, bringing her own spirit as a composer to create music that pivots between the familiar though



TOP OF THE WORLD



BUY NOW

Edgelarks

Henry Martin

Dragonfly Roots (39 mins)

★★★★★

A traditional set from the duo that is anything but traditional



Some voices just hit you right in the guts. One of those is that of Hannah Martin – the Devon singer and fiddler who is one half of the duo Edgelarks with lap steel guitarist and general instrumental whizz, Phillip Henry. This is their sixth studio album, their first of entirely traditional material, and a beautiful rendering of the power of folk music. It takes as its title-track a folk ballad collected in their native Dartmoor, which rather neatly incorporates the duo's surnames.

Martin not only has one of the most arresting voices of her generation, but she also produces a fiddle sound with the same resonant bass notes and hypnotic drone as

her voice. In combination with Henry's blues-infused slide guitar and harmonica, it gives even the most pure traditional set the flavour of the late 60s folk-rock revival. But there is nothing time-warped about Edgelarks. The experimental beatbox harmonica and loop effects subtly echo modern dance music, bringing ancient ballads into contact with our lives today. It means the mesmerising melody of 'Queen Amongst the Heather' grows as you listen. Elsewhere, earthy, energised classics like 'Greenwood Laddie' and 'The Deluded Lover' slide along like quicksilver. A finely-paced, elegant and timeless response to the lives we live now.

NATHANIEL HANDY

TRACK TO TRY *Queen Amongst the Heather*