

## ATALYJA

**Atalyja + 4** Kuku SMF 0078

To celebrate their twenty-year existence, here's a re-release, plus four extra tracks, of the 2000 debut album by pioneering ten-piece Lithuanian roots band Atalyja. I could just flag this up in 'And The Rest', but it's a strong, unusual and present-day-sounding album that deserves a new and wider audience. What I wrote back then still holds true, so here's the essence.

As with the older aspects of the traditional musics of other parts of the region of the Baltic and eastwards – Finno-Ugrian runo-song and Latvian vocal music, for example – Atalyja's traditional song melodies, mainly seasonal songs and the hypnotic polyphonic songs of interlocking overlaid lines known as *sutartines*, are very narrow in compass, virtually never straying outside a repeated short sequence made from the first five notes of a diatonic minor scale, and they often use fewer, frequently just four, sometimes only two.

The band has the task of enveloping these tunes, so minimal they're almost akin to the patterns of Western once-avant-garde systems music, in an instrumental, arranging and production garb that communicates with a present-day audience.

They do it by suspending the song, delivered variously by five singers, female and male, in a kind of weary moderate yell (I don't mean that badly) over a bass guitar pattern, and adding in the other instruments – *kankles* (the Lithuanian equivalent of Finnish *kantele*), bagpipes, fiddle, viola, flute, *skuduciai* (unassembled panpipes), guitar, tabla and drums – in overlapping figures or suggestions of canon. The warm, looping basslines have a crucial role somewhat akin to Hughes de Courson's in early *Malicorne*. Indeed, the grainy instrumental textures strike parallels with those of the French band, which like Atalyja created a modern but not jollifying or simplistically syncopating expression for a body of traditional material.

The four extra tracks, recorded in 2002, 2011 and 2015, fit well on the end of an already very varied, colourful set of approaches. They include a hefty fuzzed folk-rock treatment of a call-and-response youths' Christmas visiting song, and funky wah-wah set against grainy viola in the winding, slithering treatment of the closer *Two Doves*.

atalyja.com

Andrew Cronshaw

Fran & Flora



## GWILYM BOWEN RHYS

**Detholiad O Hen Faledi – A Selection Of Old Welsh Ballads** Recordiau Erwydd, ER001

Brought up in Welsh-speaking Snowdonia, singing at Eisteddfodau, Gwilym is well-known for his previous work with Welsh-language rock band Y Bandana and alt-folk trio, Plu. This album of forgotten pearls of Welsh-language balladry from the 18th and 19th centuries is the fruit of Gwilym's research in the National Library of Wales. The album includes songs in praise of sex and whisky, and ballads composed by professional ballad-singers who travelled Wales attending country fairs and markets, singing their ballads and selling them as printed ballad sheets.

These songs provide a correction to the Methodist-Calvinist self-image of Wales. Several ballads depict a lusty, bucolic Welsh traditional culture that has been somewhat air-brushed out of Welsh social history. The bright tone of Gwilym's singing, with an occasional pop-rock inflection, reveals his relish at reclaiming these traditional Welsh songs of wit and ribaldry.

Gwilym expresses a sharper criticism of the puritanism of Wales's past, when he sings unaccompanied the one well-known song on the album: *Yr Eneth Gadd Ei Gwrthod* (The Rejected Maiden). It tells the true story of Jane Williams, who became pregnant after being raped and subsequently became the object of shame and discrimination by the community. She drowned herself in the river Dee at the age of 23.

Gwilym has a fine voice, with crystal-clear diction, and he performs here either unaccompanied or with just an acoustic guitar, which makes it easy to learn these songs. I have no doubt that this album will increase the Welsh folk repertoire among today's singers.

sbrigynymborth.com

Paul Matheson

## FRAN & FLORA

**Unfurl** Fran & Flora

Any act citing the great Manouche violinist Tcha Limberger as a mentor and inspiration is worthy of further investigation. And the debut release from violinist Flora Curzon and cellist Francesca Ter-Berg does not disappoint. "London's best-kept secret" really should be

more widely known, and even revered for its captivating, quasi-mystical, meditative summoning of landscape, tradition and beauty. This is a lost, often Eastern European, other world, of fragile and filigreed klezmer, Roma music and much else besides. And the whole is perfectly wrapped in a spectrally pencilled cover of bare trees by Oscar-garlanded *Lord of the Rings* artist, Alan Lee.

The album's most significant achievement is its convolution of personal story and influence. *Talking Trees* is an appropriately organic excavation, from "a dark Thracian tune" that the duo learned and connected with in Crete. Strings are washed in subtle electronica to create a low ebb and hum, above which gentle soloing and beseeching vocals recreate a warm darkness out of time. Listen to the trees talking with your eyes closed, the duo suggest.

In late-night experimentation and resignation, riffs and motifs rapidly circle out of the darkness and into an uneasy electronica calm of elemental weather and desperate melancholy. This approach unearths new and telling details in laments from Transylvania and in Jewish music recorded onto wax cylinder by lost violin and cimbalom maestros in early twentieth-century Russia. *Romanian Fantasies* is an example of the latter, two fragile excerpts from a larger suite played with a sweep of detail and invention, startling and percussive cello replacing cimbalom in a lyrical, emotionally broken and timeless reinterpretation.

A compressed and arresting vision of love and death and nature and time.

franandflora.com

John Pheby

## ANDREW CADIE

**Half-Witted, Merry & Mad** Steeplejack SJCD022

In the front of the 18th-century book of manuscript tunes of William Vickers is a poem from which this extract is taken (original spelling): *Musicians are half witted mery and mad / And those are the same that admire them / They'r Fools if they Play unless their Well Paid / And the Others are Blockheads to Hire them.*

Pausing only to reflect on how well these words describe all my friends and associates, we return to the tunes from the Vickers manuscript and the majestic way they are treated here. Newcastle was the presumed home of the man who put together nearly 600 tunes and the collection reflects the good sea and land connections of the city, as tunes of Scots and Irish origin mingle with the local Northumbrian pieces. Andrew's selection reflects the wide variety of rhythms, styles keys and modes that the collection offers.

Apart from one track where he offers a fiddle song, the only sound we hear is the totally isolated sound of the solo fiddle. Everything about his approach and playing tells us that it can stand up to this level of exposure. Clearly, he has examined the possibilities of each tune and then given it the sort of treatment that it calls for.

As well as being an exceptional fiddler, Andrew also is a very experienced record producer with his own studio in his base in Germany, and it was there that he produced his own album. He was also responsible for the album's art design; every aspect is of the highest quality. It will be surprising if this album does not become a classic of English fiddle playing.

andrewcadie.de

Vic Smith