

## Fran & Flora

A new London-based string duo look set for great things. **Tim Romain** chats to them on the release of their debut album

For a couple of years now, the London-based folk duo Fran & Flora have been pricking up ears on the UK scene for their innovative take on the traditional music of Eastern Europe. Through reinterpretation and experimentation they have developed a sound that is distinctively contemporary yet fiercely reverent, and which they perform with indisputable virtuosity and a down-to-earth gleefulness that is a pleasure to witness.

Individually, violinist Flora Curzon and cellist Francesca Ter-Berg have been highly sought-after musicians and have played with an impressively diverse range of acts including Sam Lee, Talvin Singh, Floating Points, and Portico Quartet; meanwhile, praise for their own compositions and arrangements has been flowing from the likes of DJs Max Reinhardt and

Tom Robinson. Their debut album *Unfurl*, which interweaves musical threads from Transylvanian, klezmer, Romanian, Greek and Armenian traditions was released amid palpable excitement in February this year, and is just the latest stage of an epic “Eastern European musical journey” that the two Londoners embarked upon before they had even met.

Was it this that first drew them together? “We had a shared passion, but it’s not just about liking the music,” Fran explains. “We liked how each other played the music – that’s really important. I think it’s got to do with the openness we both have, musically and in our personalities. We are quite empathic, so it’s easy for us to immerse ourselves in other people’s world views, to get away from sounds we grew up with.”

Though both classically trained, they each credit learning by ear as a key part of their musical formation, something which proved crucial when delving into different folk traditions later on. This they undertook through musical pilgrimages to southern and eastern Europe to seek intensive instruction from a number of guru-like musicians (“all men with beards,” giggles Fran) including Tcha Limberger, Ross Daly and Alan Bern, who are the first to be thanked in the notes accompanying *Unfurl*. From them they learned to play the tricky *doinas* (“arrhythmic modal shepherd’s laments,” explains Fran, “a great brain work-out”) that appear on the album, as well as new stylistic and improvisational techniques that have shaped the way they play together.

While eager to learn from different traditions, they retain a certain mindfulness of their own positionalities when it comes to the music they play, but they don’t let it hold them back. “Why are we playing this music? Do we have a right to do this, as neither of us come from those traditions? What does it mean to be playing this music as people from London today?” These are unanswerable questions, but no less important, according to Flora: “Actually that keeps it alive. Rather than shutting it down and being like ‘it’s OK’ or ‘it’s not OK,’ you have to live in the grey area of ‘how are we doing this? Can we be more sensitive towards the tradition?’” As ‘grey areas’ go, they have managed to make theirs a fruitful one. ♦

- + **ALBUM** *Unfurl* is a Top of the World in this issue, see p55
- + **DATES** Fran & Flora will be playing at Songlines Encounters Festival on May 30, see p21 for details

**WIN**  
We have three copies of *Unfurl* to give away. To enter, answer: Which Songlines cover star have Fran & Flora performed with? See p19 for competition rules

