

Treacherous Orchestra, who were a massive hit at Celtic Connections festival in Glasgow



Treacherous Orchestra Origins

Navigator Records

56 mins

★★★★★

Despite their name, this band delivers

The debut album from Treacherous Orchestra is a blistering, swaggering and infectious affair. Consisting predominantly of pipes, fiddle, guitar, bass and *bodhrán* (along with a banjo and accordion section renamed the 'instruments of hell' by the band) the pedigree of TO illustrates the wide range of experience and musicianship involved. Both Ali Hutton and Ross Ainslie were taught by the much missed piping legend Gordon Duncan and the band's members have been involved with Salsa Celtica, Old Blind Dogs, Croft No 5, Peatbog Faeries and Session A9 amongst many others.

As the band state, their name 'strongly reflects our character and the music we play': although inherently soaked in tradition, it is liberally coated in rock, funk, techno and the flavours of Eastern Europe. TO are confident enough to take it slow and easy on quieter tracks such as the soothing 'Sea of Clouds' and the anthemic 'Easter Island', but their energy is at its most contagious in the heavy pulsating rhythms of the Led Zeppelin-esque 'March of the Troutmen', the exotic funk of 'Look East', the synth-inspired 'Sea of Okhotsk' or the feverish mix of strathspey and dance that is 'Sausages'. Comparisons will be made to the Peatbogs and Martyn Bennett but the band are gifted enough to wear these influences on their sleeves whilst flaunting their own cross-European/multi-genre musical identity. *Origins* is a pounding, sweaty, meaty debut which promises much and delivers even more: miss out at your peril.



Billy Rough

heavy doses of mid-Euro oompah and the klezmer and Gypsy sounds of further east.

One caveat would be that this is clearly a band best experienced live; the reputation of Karthaus's stage presence and theatrics precedes her. Their gigs are often full-blown big-top extravaganzas, complete with clowns, acrobats and fire-eaters, intent on bewitching their audience and transporting them to other realms. On disc, the songs and the music feel light and self-consciously quirky. The lyrics mix a bewildering array of characters with situations both everyday (Chinese restaurants, roadworks and online blogs), and surreal (chatty cats and prizewinning cockerels). The result is – for this reviewer – unrewarding. It feels too forced, too weird-on-purpose, and you don't feel you are getting anything straight from the jugular. No guts, no glory.

Nathaniel Handy

Yale Strom & Hot Pstromi The Devil's Brides

ARC Music

64 mins

★★★★

Great music gets a Jackanory treatment



Yale Strom is both a researcher into the history of Jewish klezmer music and an excellent violinist. This CD features music he's arranged and composed for a 2011 radio play called *The Witches of Lublin*, concerning female klezmer musicians in the Polish city in the 1790s. The music is exquisitely played by his group Hot Pstromi, including Strom on violin, the Ukrainian Alexander Fedoriouk on cimbalom, Peter Stan on accordion and

Simon Broughton

Roger Sprocket on bass. Some of the music comes from early collections of Yiddish music made in Poland and Lithuania in the early 20th century. The delicacy and sensitivity of the instrumental playing is perfectly judged in tunes like 'Dobrushin's Sher' and 'Lubliner Tish Nign'. Yiddish vocals are sung by Elizabeth Schwartz, sounding rather too self-conscious for my taste. But this is nothing compared to the primary-schoolteacher-style introductions to the music read by Miriam Margolyes. I guess this is some crazy American idea that the disc will be more appealing with a 'host' (especially one who has appearances in *Harry Potter* films) and occasional bits of interview with Strom. Interesting though these are, you don't really want to hear them over and over again.

The Woodbine & Ivy Band The Woodbine & Ivy Band

Folk Police Recordings

52 mins

★★★★★


Folk-rock ain't dead, it just smells funny



This Manchester collective create spirited folk-rock of a distinctly 1969 vintage. The rapid-fire drums, guttural guitar, throbbing bass and backing harmonies pay the highest form of flattery to Fairport Convention's seminal *Liege & Lief*, and the cast of guest singers they have assembled to sing a host of classic traditional songs is impressive. Said guests include Jim Causley, Jackie Oates, Fay Hield and Nancy Wallace, among others, and each song is sung by a different singer, making for a singularly distinctive project. Standout tracks with the smouldering majesty of vintage Fairport include a sexually electric 'Gently Johnny' sung by Jenny McCormick, the dirge-like 'Derry Gaol' sung by Jackie Oates and the rollicking 'Out With My Gun in the Morning' sung by Jim Causley.

Though not all the musicians behind the Woodbine & Ivy Band come from a folk music background, they have caught a timeless, traditional English atmosphere on this exciting new collection. They even venture to mix contemporary electronica with the folk tradition on the final track 'The Roaming Journeyman', though they are at their most sublime when they keep it classic, such as on the record's highlight, 'Poor Murdered Woman'. In a world caught up with the thrill of the new, this collective show that doing it the old way is often the best.

Nathaniel Handy

 Songlines Digital subscribers can download a free track from this album. See p67

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Folk Awards 2012

Proper Records

3 CDs, 129 mins

★★★★★

What's what in BBC Awards land this year



Proper Records have been putting out these compilations, based on the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards nominations, since 2005 and they're an utterly invaluable way of keeping abreast of what's happening on the British folk scene. The 22 tracks on the double-set boast all the nominees in the Best Traditional Track and Original Song

sections. So you've got splendid tracks from the likes of Bella Hardy, The Unthanks, Christy Moore, Steve Tilston (nominated for the first time in a 40-year career), June Tabor & Oysterband, Martin Simpson, Lucy Ward and Emily Smith even before you get around to the representatives of other categories such as Best Group, Live Act, Duo, Album, Instrumentalist and Folk Singer of the Year. Amongst these worthies can be found the inevitable Bellowhead (not to mention Spiers & Boden as a duo), plus John Tams' revived folk-rockers Home Service, with Andy Cutting and June Tabor as solo acts. No offence to such venerable folk, but the most striking thing about this collection, reflecting the awards themselves, is not just the impressive number of fresh young voices to be heard but their sheer quality. From the Horizon awards section you'll find Megan Henwood, Lady Maisery and Pilgrims' Way, as well as the aforementioned Lucy Ward. But there are also strong showings from the duos Jonny Kearney & Lucy Farrell and Marry Waterson & Oliver Knight, with Jackie Oates making her mark once again after winning two awards in 2009. Emphasising the point that the folk scene is still capable of attracting and nurturing exciting new talent is an inspirational bonus CD of ten tracks recorded live at last October's Young Folk Awards audition concert in Kendal, from which this year's four contenders emerged. Several of these young talents will almost certainly be impressing the judges, and audiences, in years to come.

Kevin Bourke

Stepping It Out Again!

Veteran Records

60 mins

★★★★★

More voices of more people



Taken from recordings made by song collector and field-recorder John Howson between 1975 and 2000, this set of 24 songs and stories ranges across the board, from ancient traditional ballads through to music-hall era singalongs to stories and dance tunes – hornpipes, reels and step dances. It's the latest in a series of six compilations of traditional songs and music from Veteran that's similar to Topic's *Voice of the People* series. For listeners with a passion for old songs, singular diction, and an authentic, silvery articulacy of playing, this is a must-have set.

Howson's complete field recordings run to some 300 CDs, and this selects from recordings that have not, until now, seen the light of day. The liner notes are excellent about the context and circumstances of how these performers were encountered and recorded. There are brief portraits of each artist and song – the likes of Jimmy Lynch from Wigan with his dancing dolls and concertina, who prefaces 'The King of the Fairies' with a vivid recollection of the crossroads dancing, an Irish traveller tradition. Or the 90-something Jack Stannard of Suffolk with his song of seduction, 'Knife in the Window'. There's John Campbell, epic storyteller of 'The Iron Frost', a tale from the deep freeze in the winter of 1709; and men with names like



Miroslav Minks' band who feature on the Indies Scope disc

great flourishing signatures – Septimus Fawcett, master English concertina player, or Eli Frankham, a Romany activist and singer who shouts out the old Harvest Supper toast, 'The Barley Mow'. The variety and quality of these field recordings from the last quarter of the 20th century makes this a high-on essential purchase for lovers of traditional songs.

Tim Cumming

Czech Republic: Music from Walachia, Hornácko and Kopanice

Ocora

54 mins

★★★★

Traditional Folk Music in
Moravia: Hornácko

Indies Scope

79 mins

★★★★★

Traditional Folk Music in
Moravia: Dolňácko

Indies Scope

76 mins

★★★★★

Fertile folk from the Czech
countryside



Compared to neighbouring Hungary, whose traditional music has an international profile, the folk music of the Czech Republic is little known. There was nothing like the Hungarian dance-house movement in Czechoslovakia to give the music a contemporary credibility, and under the Communist regime it was rather kitschified. But something of a grassroots scene does exist in south-east Moravia in the hilly region where Moravia, Slovakia and Austria meet. I visited some of the *fašank* (carnival) celebrations a few years ago and was hugely impressed by the subtle shifting dance rhythms and powerful fiddle playing. The music on these discs all

comes from this musically fertile region. The region of Walachia (Valašsko in Czech) shouldn't be confused with Wallachia in Romania, the home of Taraf de Haidouks. The Ocora album features recordings made by Czech Radio in March 2010. It is interspersed with demonstrations of various shepherd's flutes played by Vít Kašpařík and between them are a couple of choirs and local *cimbalom* bands. I particularly like the energy in Petr Mička's Hornácko Cimbalom Band and this is the music that is most typical of the region, with fiddles, *kontr* fiddles, bass and cimbalom, an influence from Hungary in the 1930s. But although these are recent recordings, it comes over like a folkloric display lacking in genuine vigour.

It's the life and vivacity of the Hornácko disc that makes it the best of these three. It's a small mountainous region on the Slovak border famed for its music, with an unbroken tradition going back hundreds of years. The opening track by the band of fiddler Martin Hrbáč shows the infectious power of this music, with its irregular pulsing *sedlácká* dance rhythm and decorative fiddle lines. Other highlights include the veteran singer František Okénka and the young fiddler Miroslav Minks whose band was the one that most impressed me when I was in the region. My only reservation is the overblown vocals of some of the singers, but that seems to be part of the style.

The Dolňácko disc features music from the neighbouring lowland region where sometimes a bagpipe is added to the line-up – and brass instruments in the case of the Radošov band on the final track. The music doesn't have the same quirky mountain quality as that from Hornácko, but there's still plenty of dance-like spring. The Olšava band with fiddler Lubomir Málek and the Huslíčky band with female vocalist Vlasta Grycová are excellent. These Indies discs have good notes by Helena Bretfeldová on the music and musicians. There are two more volumes planned covering other South Moravian regions. They will provide an excellent overview – although all the CDs would benefit from better maps: the Ocora one has no map at all, a distinct drawback.

Simon Broughton