

RECORDINGS

***Wake the Vaulted Echoes: A Celebration of Peter Bellamy.*
Peter Bellamy. Free Reed, FRT CD 14 (1999).**

***Black Boxes.* Sarah Graves. Issued privately, MFCD 4 (2001).**

***A Touch of Clare.* Kitty Hayes. Clachán Music,
CM CD004 (2001).**

***Concertina Tutorial.* Niall Vallely. Mad for Trad,
MFT 011, CD Rom (2002).**

Reviewed by ROGER DIGBY

Peter Bellamy was the most flamboyant personality in the Folk World. About that there is no argument, though arguments and Peter went hand in hand. He held firm, clear views which he argued with passion, intelligence, and eloquence; and when he was not present, people argued *about* him: whether his singing style, based, as he claimed, on a close study of traditional singers, was in fact affected bleating, whether his confidence on stage was in fact arrogant pomposity, whether his style of dress was eccentricity or ostentation. Poor Peter.

I'll admit I liked him enormously from my first teenage exposure to the vocal fireworks of the Young Tradition through the years of what became a valued friendship. Most singers enjoy singing, but Peter's enjoyment was instantly infectious, and although he was acutely aware of the intrinsic beauty of much of the traditional repertoire which he sang, he never lost sight of the fact that traditional music, in its true context, was entertainment. Peter had very high standards but he always sought to entertain. He would often indicate with a small flourish or additional emphasis that a line or word particularly pleased him. He was an excellent singer and interpreter of traditional songs, accompanied and unaccompanied, solo or with others. He wrote songs thoughtfully and suitably in the traditional style, most famously his 'ballad opera', *The Transports*. His affection for Rudyard Kipling, acquired as a young boy, led him to set many of Kipling's poems to music based knowledgeably on the styles and sort of tunes that were very likely in Kipling's mind as well.

This three-CD set, which also includes a CDRom section, is the definitive retrospective, covering all aspects of the music and containing a detailed booklet of seventy-two pages, the excellent content of which deserves to have received better proof reading.

Peter was one of a small number of performers who accompanied themselves on the Anglo concertina. There is no traditional precedent for this; it is a blank sheet of paper, to use the current phrase. Of the fifty-seven songs on the CDs, twenty-seven are accompanied in this way, and although Peter would have been the first to admit he was not a great Anglo player and sometimes abandoned attempts to work out Anglo accompaniments because of his limitations, I think that, paradoxically, it was in his Anglo playing that he got closest to the traditional approach. Traditional musicians are often not great technicians; their quality lies in the fine-tuning of their music within the parameters of their technical ability, with a result that can be quite rudimentary, but polished to perfection. Peter's song accompaniments fall within this definition.

Peter's approach was to play chords, often in both hands, and to carry the tune—or snatches of it—over the top, with the occasional embellishment (e.g., 'Way Down Town'). One of his concertinas had two small levers on the left hand that could be brought across the thumb button and the far left button of the top row so that these notes permanently sounded. Another adaptation was a layer of baffling immediately below the fretwork to soften the sound. (The lady's garter round the end served no practical purpose!)

It is a feature of the Anglo that in the main keys a simple change of bellows direction is often all that it takes to provide the next note or chord. Beginners are always warned against such laziness, as it deprives the Anglo of the crispness that is its birthright. Peter, however, chose to do this, and like everything he did this was quite deliberate; it is the most distinctive feature of his concertina style and one which makes his playing instantly recognisable. His big, smooth chords laid a sure yet soft foundation for the razor edge of his voice and often the additional brightness of a fiddle, and he could supply the full range of expression, from the soft and wistful ('Trees they do Grow High') through the bouncy and rhythmic ('Back to the Army Again'), with every shade in between.

Over this versatile and thoughtful accompaniment there is the eccentric but controlled voice which repays listening over and over again. Peter walked the tightrope between the mask of the traditional singer and the necessity of working the song for a contemporary audience, and he walked it with surety and finesse.

This CD set, then, stands as a superb tribute and celebration of a musician and a scholar. Like his hero, Kipling, Peter was a man of

great compassion and humanity, and like Kipling he was too readily misunderstood.

Peter's natural venue was the Folk Club. In England, this odd creation of the second half of the twentieth century was the joint product of the reviving interest in traditional song and the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) movement with its singer-songwriters and 'protest songs'. This musical combination, which was so seamless in America in the persons of Guthrie, Seeger, and Dylan, produced an odd amalgam in England, and an evening in such a club can now provide a bizarre diet of anything from the most obscure traditional item to a song from Cole Porter. While in many clubs 'if it's acoustic, it's OK' holds sway, others apply much more rigid rules. Peter Bellamy was once offered a club booking on condition he didn't sing any Kipling! There is also a much more defined sense of performance, of artist, and of audience, than exists in the Traditional setting.

I mention this because it is the context for Sarah Graves's *Black Boxes* and an explanation for a CD which contains traditional and contemporary tunes and songs from writers in the contemporary folk style as well as from The Travelling Wilbury's. (Bellamy/Kipling's very early 'Oak, Ash and Thorn' is here too!)

Sarah plays the English system and plays it very, very well. Because of the context (explained above), it is a very multifaceted CD, and Sarah takes all the elements in her stride. The concert-based approach to the Morris tunes would be as much use to a dancer as a rubber stick, but the arrangements are fine and sensitive and highlight the tunes' subtle beauty; the driving attack of the session tunes proves Sarah's versatility and command of her instrument and should be compulsory listening for all those who want to get some real bounce into tunes on the English system; the Anglo's 'Concertina Reel' gets a thorough workout on Sarah's English. She's a very good singer too, as her 'Country Blue' shows (nice to hear local hero Adrian May's writing talents getting sound recognition!) One of the perks of reviewing is that sometimes something comes along that we might otherwise have missed. A small-issue CD like this could be a case in point; I would consider myself the poorer if I hadn't heard it. I recommend it.

It appears to be a phenomenon of English female concertina players that they favour the English system over the Anglo almost without exception. Katie Howson comes to mind as an exception, but she is foremost a female melodeon player (and there aren't many of those

either). By contrast, in Irish music where the whole tradition is hugely male dominant at home and abroad—particularly in the older generation—there are some blindingly good female Anglo players. Mrs Elizabeth Crotty, whose CD I reviewed a few years ago for the ICA's *Concertina World* (No. 417, December 1999, pp. 19-21), and Mrs Ellen O'Dwyer, who was a star of the Free Reed field trips in the 1970s (I've heard rumours of reissues—let's hope so!), were players who stood head and shoulders above many of their male counterparts. Clachán Music have now released recordings of Kitty Hayes, another mature exponent of the gentle, lilting, and beautifully paced style of County Clare. Too much Irish music is currently played too fast; reels are usually fairly fast, but the other rhythms do not have to be, and too often subtleties of phrasing and tempo are ironed out (or steamrollered over!) by taking tunes unnecessarily quickly. Kitty Hayes's sense of pace is superb throughout this recording session which apparently took place during one day in her home, a context which can only help the relaxed style of her playing. As if to make this point, the CD begins with two sets of reels taken very steadily so that the final notes of the phrases have the time to swell, rise, and hang on for just that split second before the next phrase comes in, creating a tension and excitement that faster playing cannot achieve. This continues throughout the recordings of jigs, hornpipes, more reels, and one song which make up the fifteen tracks. Throughout, the left hand works more than is usual with many players and there is a minimum of decoration on the right and only the slightly halting start of 'Cooleys Jigs' gives just a hint of the informality of the recording's venue.

I have only one small reservation about this otherwise superb release. The liner notes give no information about the concertina itself, and I am forced to conclude that it is not a very good one. Clicks and air-intakes are inevitable in a closely miked recording, but the reeds sound thin and a bit choked. Fortunately this doesn't detract from a masterful performance.

Teaching has always been a part of the Irish tradition, both formal lessons and the simple sharing of ideas and techniques by older players who have always been keen to encourage and help the next generations of players and dancers. (I have been present at Irish sessions in London pubs where the age range of the musicians has spanned over 50 years!) It was inevitable that the digital world of the CDRom would enter this, as all other forms of teaching.

Niall Vallely is a player of exceptional technical ability and comes from a family firmly rooted and active in Traditional Irish music and with a number of notable players. He is also an experienced teacher.

This CDRom falls into four sections, with navigation being very straightforward. There is a basic introduction to the instrument with a useful and clear section on basic music theory. I firmly believe that those who play by ear should have this knowledge if only because it is the language in which musicians communicate. What is here is sound and sufficient. Next there are two sections of tunes: 'Beginners' and 'Advanced'. The tunes are given in conventional musical notation with some opening remarks and then are available in a simple performance of the separate parts with both ends of the concertina clearly visible by the use of an inset. (I found this hard to assimilate; perhaps it takes time.) The more advanced tunes are also played in full at the appropriate speed. Vallely pays particular attention to the use of ornamentation. It is not possible to view the musical notation and the performance simultaneously (unless you use two screens and two browsers), but the printable version of the score is perfectly adequate if a viewable copy is required. The fourth section is about Niall Vallely himself and contains some brief personal comments on the music.

It is possible to teach technique; it is much harder to teach style and musical understanding, both of which are essential in good Irish music. Style and feel come by absorption and osmosis, and when the teacher is a machine this is far removed. Vallely himself says '...people have to learn the tune as well as the instrument...buy the Cds...absorb the feel...'.

Beginners and intermediate players of Irish music will find this well-made and carefully conceived CDRom very useful. Then play your Kitty Hayes CD!

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