

Music at St Andrew's Concert Review

The Old Dance school with Jack McNeill and Charlie Heys Saturday 4 April 2009



During the afternoon all 8 musicians performing in the evening had given a workshop. This had been attended and enjoyed by some 30 members of the audience ranging between the ages of 8 and 70 and formed a good platform for the evening's concert.

All the musicians have studied or are still studying at the Birmingham Conservatoire of Music and are already very accomplished young musicians of the highest quality. So I was looking forward to seeing how things would progress and what novel twists would be brought to this very wide and varied genre of music.

First on were Jack McNeill and Charlie Heys. For the sake of clarity Charlie is a young lady. They have already been finalists in the BBC Young Folk Musicians' competition last year and are both in their final year at the Conservatoire. So they are mixing study with gigging when time allows, apparently composing and rehearsing in their shared bathroom so as not to disturb their non-folky house mates! Jack plays acoustic guitar and sings whilst Charlie plays violin.

They opened their set with a very sweet warm up jig. The second piece began

with a more modern guitar style and contemporary vocal with angst. This was contrasted by the beautiful, melodic violin on top. After a fairly lengthy introduction the next song was a real eye opener starting with what at first seemed to be a Scottish lament which led into an upmarket jig followed by a well finger-picked guitar and all of this in the context of one song. This was a really good and original piece without the 'tweeness' of some of the previous songs. Then another violin tune introduced by Charlie with a furious guitar ending. By this time I am really enjoying the music.

A few tuning problems with the guitar only adding to the performance, there was another shock in store for us as Charlie started singing in a beautiful light voice over Jack's slight raspy growl which again added a new dimension to the sound which was changing from song to song. The set was finished with another strong song called *Northern Road* with a real mix of guitar styles where I'm sure I identified some Davy Graham and Richard Thompson. I think we should really look out for these two and if you are interested they have a couple of songs on their My Space website.

After the interval The Old Dance School started their set. They are a 6 piece group with Samantha on violin, Helen on viola/violin, Robin on acoustic guitar and vocals, Aaron on bass guitar/trumpet, Laura on flute/various recorders and vocals and Tom, who originally comes from Bedford, playing the cajón which is a sit on drum box which looks like a single hi-fi speaker. The technique is to hit with your hands and use your foot to damp. There was



also the addition of a high hat on the side. All members of the band are under 25 and came together out of the Birmingham Folk Ensemble which visits Bedford once a year. As this is one of the Conservatoire's projects, their roots are in classical music, jazz and early music and they have recently released their first album *Based on a true story*, from which most of the evening's songs came.

Having looked at their website prior to the gig I was looking forward to hearing the group live. The first song was a full on jig starting with the violin and viola playing together with the other instruments all joining. This was followed by another jig written by Sam. The only difference between the songs was a change from flute to recorder and by this time I had noticed that you unfortunately could not really hear the acoustic guitar or flute or recorder to add an extra dimension to the music. The third song was by Dick Gaughan and was not a jig! Although a contrasting pace, the strings still held sway and the vocals were even a bit hidden which was a shame as both Robin and Laura have good voices. The next song *Frost* had some haunting sustained violin notes, some wobbly trumpet rather than bass and high hat in place of the cajón. I think this was probably the best and most original song of the set. *Bridge in Montana* was sandwiched between 2 more jigs and had more guitar although this was slightly drowned by the strings again towards the end.

It is good to have jigs, especially in a festival atmosphere, although it would have been difficult to dance to all of these. However all the jigs this evening were the same style, format and rhythm which is a shame when you have all the other instruments which could add variety.



It was relief when Jack and Charlie were asked back to the stage for what turned out to be the last four numbers all of which turned out to be different to what had gone on before. The first was *John Ball* with three ethereal violins, Jack and Robin on vocals and the guitars edging their way back in. Next, screechy violins and more guitar. Now the gig is getting edgy again and is going places. This was followed by a third song and towards the end Jack's vocal and guitar are flying brilliantly. The encore was violins alternating with unaccompanied singing which again was a very good contrast and maybe should have been used in the middle of the set to change the pace and add interest.

The musicianship throughout the whole evening could not be criticised but The Old Dance School, in my opinion, just need to sort out the pacing of their set and balance of sound. Their on-stage banter is good and they perhaps need to find a harder edge. I was delighted, however, to have been at the concert and it is pleasing to see what good musicians are coming onto the folk scene.

Graham Inskip

