

REVIEW-ESSAYS

2005—The Year of the Anglo: Some Reflections

ROGER DIGBY

Anglo International, various artists. Folksounds Records, FSCD 70.
Your Good Self, Dooley Chapman. Australian Folk Masters, CS-AFM 001.
Anglophilia, Brian Peters. Pugwash Music, PUGCD 006.
Floating Verses, Mary Humphreys and Anahata. Wild Goose Records, WGS322CD.(all issued in 2005)

One of the great advantages of an annual review-essay is that I can avoid the track-by-track approach ('I liked *Nutting Girl* on the musical saw, but was less happy with *Princess Royal* arranged for sousaphone and swannie whistle') and take a wider view. Also, in the opinion of our esteemed editor, I am not disqualified from musing on items where I had some slight involvement. Thank goodness for that, or a few tracks and a couple of suggestions would rule *Anglo International* out of bounds, and I would be unable to extol this extraordinary collection of music and musicians. It is tempting to jump straight into the superlatives: the most extensive ... the most comprehensive ... the most ... but superlatives require comparison and there is nothing available with which to compare this 3-CD set. It goes beyond a compilation of Anglo players and stands as a definitive and encyclopaedic statement of what can be and is being achieved on the Anglo system. I make no apologies for a lengthy analysis of four themes which this collection suggests.

The idea began back in the 1980s when Alan Day approached a few musicians with the idea of a compilation showing the range of the Anglo. During the long time that the idea sat on the shelf a lot of changes took place: more players came to prominence, the new world of electronic communications established a network of international links and friendships, and the rarity of a double album became the commonplace of the boxed CD set. And how the playing came on!

Anglo International consists of seventy tracks by twenty-five players and one band and is a few minutes short of four hours in duration. Nearly all of the recordings are specially commissioned, appearing here for the first time. All the archive material is previously unissued. There is an extensive illustrated booklet. Yet it is not just quantity—it is the range and quality of the music that is remarkable.

Much is traditional, largely, but not exclusively, Irish and English. The Anglo is a mainstream instrument in Irish music, and no player is more renowned than Noel Hill. An original choice for the vinyl album, Hill continues to play with emotion and sincerity, and such is his current stature that his recent CD *Irish Concertina Two* was greeted by a full-page feature in the *Irish Times* under the headline 'King of the Concertina', an article that

was sensitive to Hill's deep emotional involvement in and respect for his traditional culture. His three tracks here show precisely this, with *The Lament for Limerick* draining the emotions as surely as his set of reels fires them back up.

Very many Irish players would have fitted easily into this collection, and it is pleasing that there are some included who are not amongst the household names and whose presence emphasises the depth and strength of the music. Chris Sherburn, writing in the notes to his tracks, states, 'If you play Irish music too fast, it can end up being incomprehensible. . .Nine times out of ten it's not the note but the gap either side of it that counts'. Wise words, though Chris still gets a bit frenetic at times! Mary McNamara, however, is the perfect embodiment of what Chris means. She plays her pure, rolling Clare tunes with a string of paradoxes, being both relaxed and assertive, gentle and authoritative. Her three sets here are consummate musicianship.

The English tradition is represented by archive recordings of Scan Tester through to contemporary recordings of morris tunes—via Playford and old manuscripts—and some well-known jigs and polkas. John Watcham's morris medley is an object lesson in how to use the left hand to support, underpin, and power a tune along. He is a bit of a recluse these days, so don't miss a chance to see the Brighton Morris, where there'll be another object lesson, this time in uniting music and dance into a single unit.

Like John Watcham, Roger Edwards is less active these days and like John he is another example of the correlation between good Anglo playing and the dance. Roger led Garstang Morris, who, during the time in which they flourished, shone out with their accurate, vigorous dancing and colourful presentation. Together with fellow-dancer and melodeon player Martin Ellison, Roger was a stalwart of the sessions in The Ship at Sidmouth and The Eagle at Bampton, to name but two. The music of clog morris differs from that of Cotswold morris, driving rather than lifting the dancing, and this can be clearly heard in Roger's forceful and powerful playing of *Double Lead Through*. Roger also accompanies the Threlfall sisters, leading me happily to the next theme of *Anglo International*: the Anglo as song accompaniment, of which there are five examples.

Roger shows a decorated approach which contrasts with the 'squeeze it and see' method which is where I tend to start (and usually finish), but the guv'nor here as in all else is John Kirkpatrick. More than any other player, John is the absolute master of cross-rowing, not just for the tune (many of the Irish players here can be heard doing that), but for all aspects of both hands and in keys outside the home rows. This means that he is never constrained by push-pull mechanics and can do what he wants whenever he wants. His two songs here, though lightweight choices, show this to perfection, and it is also this complete technical dominance of the instrument that allows the staggering accomplishment of Mattheson's *Gigue*, revisited from his first album a mere thirty-three years ago! And

there's more: John's fourth set is *Hen's March to the Midden*. This is a fiddle piece in which raucous bowing imitates the clucking of chickens. John matches this on the Anglo and adds in some pecking and scratching for good measure; this is a remarkable performance, typical of the inventive, intelligent humour and pure skill which, even in this company, maintains John Kirkpatrick as the Anglo players' standard bearer.

These two high points now lead me smoothly to those tracks where the Anglo boldly goes into repertoires way outside the usual orbit. The working title for this collection was 'The Versatility of the Anglo', and this is remarkably displayed: from Mozart to Monk (Thelonius) via Handel, Scott Joplin, Fats Waller, and much more. The long gestation period of the project saw the extension of the Anglo into previously unknown territory, but it is not an entirely recent phenomenon. John K's first recording of the *Gigue* was in 1972, Andrew Blakeney-Edwards was playing Scott Joplin in the early 80s, and Fred Kilroy, recorded here in 1976, had always played a wide range of material, taking an approach which amazed all who heard it. This is the first time that any of Fred's music has been commercially available. Alan Ward, editor of the magazine *Traditional Music*, wrote about Fred in the very first issue in 1975. Ward is a recognised authority, and I have no doubt he is the reason that there are many recordings of Kilroy in the National Sound Archive of the British Library. In 1975, Ward was playing with Webbs Wonders, whose Anglo player (Tony Engle) and fiddle player (Peta Webb) had been members of Oak, one of the first bands determined to play English Music in an English style. Engle was an admirer of Tester, and Ward well knew the method of playing that Kilroy dismisses as 'under-developed (*sic!*)'. In the interviews that form the foundation of Ward's article, Kilroy suggests that his way of playing (which recalls the Duet system) was once much more common, but sadly there is no evidence beyond these reminiscences. Nevertheless the basic point is correct: the Anglo is still normally played along the rows with a traditional repertory, and anything else is still unusual. But for how much longer? Players who listen to the virtuosity on these CDs will surely strive to stretch their proficiency to enable this variety of music.

These ambitious tracks (Andrew Blakeney-Edwards' *Maple Leaf Rag* defies belief!) are more than just party pieces or novelty items. They are presented with the same honesty and integrity as everything else. There is a tendency in Folk Clubs for performers to have a 'naughty number', something which shows what jolly chaps they are and how they can let their hair down. I can scarcely spend a few minutes in a club these days without recalling the oft-misquoted and even plagiarised words of Gully Jimson in Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth*. (A wonderful book! How's this for opening lines: 'I was walking by the Thames. Half-past morning on an autumn day. Sun in a mist. Like an orange in a fried fish shop'.) In response to a critic's analysis of his artistic work, Jimson replies that 'Well, it's like farting Annie Laurie through a keyhole. It's clever, but is it worth the trouble?'. From a different cultural background comes the story, doubtless apocryphal, of Leonardo da Vinci. Asked by a patron to create a masterpiece, Leonardo took a pencil and drew a perfect freehand circle. The point here is that

technique, cleverness, and skill are not enough in themselves. They have to serve the music, as exemplified by John Kirkpatrick. These less-than-customary Anglo performances do just that; they don't simply show that it *can* be done, but that it can be done without mocking or undermining the material. They are more than just clever technical exercises. They are genuine performances of real music.

The final theme that *Anglo International* brings into the spotlight concerns the use of the Anglo with other instruments. It can be argued that the Anglo is perfect for solo performance, having its own built-in accompaniment and rhythm section. The solo performances here certainly don't lack anything! The Anglo also presents its player with a range of choices, particularly in chords. These can be constructed and inverted at will, emphasising fifths, creating bass patterns on the bottom, all things unavailable to the one-button/one-chord mechanisms of the melodeon and most accordions. This can be lost if the other musicians choose to put in what you have chosen to leave out! Accompaniment can also take away the Anglo's briskness, and Scan Tester is presented here in the company of a piano accordion. Piano accordions can be vibrant and exciting (listen to Jason Price of Dartmoor), but too often they are bland and slushy. Scan's playing is smothered by musical syrup when the accordion joins in. This is an observation rather than a criticism of two friends having a tune together in an informal setting. Sessions are for enjoyment and sharing—and best not recorded!

And while I'm on the subject of sessions and other instruments, let's demolish the guitar! Pausing only to observe that those who play it well do not use conventional tuning and avoiding the question of authenticity (where the *reductio ad absurdum* would have us all damning the modern introduction of the pipe and tabor), we must all nevertheless know the cloth-eared guitarist. Most traditional tunes have a very simple chord structure, so our guitar-playing friend is bored stiff by the end of the first A part and begins to introduce an exciting new range of interesting chords. By the beginning of the B part he is also bored by the simplicity of the rhythm (he's not listening to its subtleties), so he livens it up with some snappy syncopation and cross-rhythms. By the second time through, while those in charge of the melody are desperately trying to restore Jenny Lind to the manner in which she is accustomed, our guitarist friend is abducting her off to a gypsy encampment somewhere east of the Russian Steppes. As the evening proceeds ever more noisily, he makes off for his car and sighs of relief are heard, but these are premature as he returns with his small portable amplifier because he 'can't hear himself play'. If only the rest of us were as fortunate! Perhaps one day someone will come with his or her rope-tensioned military drum, and the two will go off and play amongst themselves. Harsh? Unfair? Yes, of course; and sessions are remarkably tolerant places. On record, however, there are serious questions that need to be asked of the strummed stringed instrument whether it has four or six or even eight. Just what is it adding? Is it actually helping the concertina or is it detracting? There are a few tracks here where the question must be put.

The absolute opposite is the formalised, rehearsed arrangement where the concertina is leading a group. This may be a bit too contrived for some tastes, but I defy anybody not to be energised by the tracks led by Jody Kruskal and Bertram Levy. Interestingly, both these players are American, and this approach is better suited to the smoother, more flowing dance music of that country. In Ireland where a similar approach has often been taken by concert bands the result is invariably dull and lifeless with more than a touch of the *Annie Lauries*.

The change of title to *Anglo International* (further justified by players from South Africa and Spain and tunes from France) does raise the inexplicable omission of Australia. Fortunately, 2005 also saw the release of recordings by Dooley Chapman made in 1981-1982, and they are wonderful. Australian rural music is similar in style to that of England, and it is no surprise that tunes from such as Sally Sloane, Harry Cotter, and Sam Holland have been taken up by English players. I expect that some of Chapman's tunes will be similarly received. This CD is, however, much more than a collection of tunes; Dooley Chapman is another highly competent Anglo-playing dance musician, and in one of the spoken passages he is politely critical of players who can't play to the dancers: 'Even many players. . .you put them out to play for the dance and see where they are, see if they're onto the step or what are they doing'. This observation, like that of Chris Sherburn, should be repeated as often as possible!

Chapman's approach is similar to that of Scan Tester, though Chapman crosses rows more often. Both play brightly and crisply, use octaves and occasional bass notes, and bring up the end of a phrase with a little more bellows pressure. Both are also willing to take a popular song, strip it down to its bare bones, and recreate it as a dance tune; and there lies the real similarity: even when not intended for dancing, this functional purpose is the bedrock of their music.

I expect everyone has at one time sat with friends and chosen the world's greatest sports side, eight records for a desert island, or (my favourite) the 'Table from Hell' at the staff Christmas Dinner! *Anglo International* immediately starts a discussion of who should be there but isn't and who should go to make room for them. This is more evidence for the current strength of Anglo playing, and two names that have been mentioned in this context are Anahata and Brian Peters, both of whom issued CDs in 2005. When other musicians talk of Anahata, someone invariably says something like, 'I've never heard him make a mistake.' A great accolade. Musicians live with mistakes; they are a constant presence, lurking in every bar of every tune, and unless they are strident wrong notes they generally pass unnoticed by everyone except the player. Yet audiences are quick to notice a bland, timid performance. Mistakes are most likely to occur when you are pushing yourself to the edge of your ability; this is when the music is exciting, and it's what audiences want. It is the tight-rope that we walk. 'To be afraid to make a mistake is the worst mistake you can make', as your Maths teacher should have taught you! I recently received some private recordings of The Rakes in one of their extended line-ups

made from the mixing desk at a ceilidh. It is fantastic, driving, invigorating music, but it is full of 'mistakes'. The fiddles take off on glorious flights of fancy that crash land or disappear in mid-air, but for every one that goes wrong two others go right and the result is compelling listening. It must have been fantastic to dance to, and I'll wager few if any dancers spotted the errors. What they will have been aware of is the pure excitement and that is much more important.

If Anahata is sometimes guilty of excessive caution, he and Mary Humphreys have one great quality: they listen. When Anahata plays melodeon tunes from Suffolk, it is clear that he has listened to a lot of playing by the very best in this field. It is a studied performance. Similarly Mary Humphreys' singing style is firmly embedded in a knowledge of traditional singers, and this makes her a lot better singer than many of the more fashionable and lauded divas, though it won't get her much airplay on Radio 2. They have done their homework, and this is a sure foundation, though my earlier comments on accompaniment apply here as well. Mary and Anahata are gifted multi-instrumentalists, but how does this serve the music? Their best tracks are those most simply presented, and when the cello comes in there is a distinct suggestion of a well-known Scottish tune wafting through from the next room.

Brian Peters' many followers will be pleased with *Anglophilia*, a nicely balanced and wide-ranging selection of material presented with panache and vitality. Most competent Anglo players can achieve the strongly rhythmic way of playing utilising the bellows direction, but the reverse, achieving total smoothness despite the double action, is much much harder and only successfully achieved by a hard-working few of whom Peters is a fine representative. Indeed, this CD's many instances of very accomplished bellows control is its outstanding feature. (Different names for the same tune and different tunes to the same name are common enough instances, but I am staggered to find that Brian has a tune other than the usual one under the title *The Black Cat Piddled in the White Cat's Eye*. I know this as one of the many names for *Brighton Camp*, which Dooley Chapman calls *The Billygoat!* There's a Ph.D. dissertation here somewhere.)

Of course, putting together a compilation or issuing old recordings of a veteran player is very different from releasing your own CD. Brian, Anahata and Mary represent the small number of survivors struggling to make a crust in the dwindling and often moribund world of the 'Folk Club'. At the end of the gig you hope for two things: that enough people will ask the organiser to book you again and that you'll sell enough product to stay alive. Given the fact that a lot of audiences rightly want a relaxed evening out and not a lecture on the transmission of Bothy Ballads, this can lead to 'popularising' the music, forcing in variety, playing a 'naughty number' and very soon you're farting *Annie Laurie* through a keyhole. Yet another tight-rope for the poor struggling guest artist! Dan Quinn and Will Duke are therefore quite remarkable, though their two excellent CDs, *Wild Boys* and *Scanned* are outside the time frame of this review. They present their traditional music without any compromise or concession in the way they

think it should be performed, and they are tremendous musicians and singers. Between songs they wallow in anarchic chaos reminiscent of Laurel and Hardy; they seem to have nothing prepared and no idea of what to do next! The musical performance is, however, immaculate, and they break the set up with genuinely funny songs delivered in total deadpan seriousness, which in Dan Quinn's case is pure Billy Bennett via Freddie McKay. They prove that straight traditional material can provide a highly enjoyable evening's entertainment. Mind you, they won't make it onto Radio 2 either, though no one would deny Will Duke's rightful place on *Anglo International*, even if his tracks there are a trifle diffident, being a little short on his usual confident flow.

So was 2005 the year of the Anglo? I think so. I remember my first ICA meetings back in the 1970s when it was all English system, music stands, and formal arrangements. This was a glimpse of a vanishing world where this was the norm for concertinas and where a folk tune would only be played if it was in a book arranged for four players (and then it was probably *Annie Laurie*). I used to drive Ken Loveless to his annual performance—presiding over the AGM—and he never even took a concertina with him. On my first arrival I was greeted with a scene worthy of Edith Evans as Lady Bracknell: 'An Aaaaannnnnggllloooooow!!!!???' The attitude to Anglo-playing was that of Dr Johnson to women preachers and performing dogs: 'It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all.' The change in emphasis in recent years has been monumental. The rise of the Anglo, playing by ear, and the move away from formal arrangements have transformed the music, the playing, and the expectations. The Anglo now dominates; and while there are virtuoso players on other systems (some of their names begin A.A.), there are not enough of them to raise the sights of the many other players. This is the real strength of *Anglo International*. It raises the bar and shows the breadth and depth of what is being achieved. It is an inspiration to all players of all systems and all instruments.

**The Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments,
The Graduate Center of the City University of New
York**



Housed at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York, the Center for the Study of Free-Reed Instruments (Allan Atlas, Director) fosters research and discussion about all aspects of all free-reed instruments. To that end, the Center sponsors a concert/colloquium each Spring semester, maintains a library/archive of materials pertaining to free-reed instruments (the jewels of which are a large collection of Victorian music for the English concertina and the Deiro Archive, which preserves the documentary and recorded legacy of the legendary accordionists Guido and Pietro Deiro), has published four volumes of *The Free-Reed Journal* (1999-2002), and now co-publishes with the ICA *Papers of the International Concertina Association*. Among past events: 'Tango-Bandoneón-Piazzolla' (2000), 'The Accordion as an Icon of Italian-American Culture' (2001), 'The Incredible Concertina: A Concert in Honor of Sir Charles Wheatstone--A Bicentennial Celebration' (2002), 'Free Reeds of Asia' (2003), and 'Viva Regondi' (2006).