

Masters of the Concertina, Gordon Cutty, Tommy Williams, Free Reed Records FRRR-12 .

The Whirligig of Time, Steve Turner, The Living Tradition, LTCD1103.

Out of the Box, Will Duke, Country Branch, CBCD 235.

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Had Gordon Cutty been included on English International, he would have been classified by Allan Atlas as 'MH-V-CE = Music Hall, Vaudeville, and Commercial Entertainment', where he might have been overshadowed by the sparkling performances of his contemporaries who were recorded in their prime. Had Cutty been recorded in his prime, we would have been able to hear the unique presence of an English Concertina leading a conventional small dance band.

Born in County Durham in the North of England where the English Concertina appears to have enjoyed a more robust life than in the South, Cutty had a surface job in the mines and led a band in the evenings; he is photographed here in a typical line-up with trumpet, banjo, piano and drums.

Solo recordings of Cutty made quite late in his life were issued on vinyl as *A Grand Old Fashioned Dance* by Free Reed in 1976 and reappear now as part of the complete republication of the Free Reed catalogue. Cutty plays dance tunes and popular tunes from the repertory of Concertina and Brass Bands, while some more modern tunes reflect a player who kept adding to his material. The playing is highly accomplished with a full use of chords and a wide dynamic range and, like the archive recordings on English International, it reflects a time when the level of virtuosity was much higher than generally found today.

The Free Reed re-issues are sometimes the original LP with extra tracks, and sometimes two LPs combined to make a single CD; *Masters of the Concertina* also contains '*Springtime in Battersea*' featuring Tommy Williams playing his large 64-button McCann Duet, also originally released in 1976. Tommy's repertory reflected the same background as Gordon Cutty's, and they both play Felix Burns's *Woodland Flowers* in its original form of a three-part schottische (see the *ICA Music Supplement*, 436). Neither are flawless performances, but they provide an interesting example of the different potentials of the two systems. As well as opening a fascinating window onto a vanishing musical world, Tommy was also very important as a source of oral concertina history, having worked in the business all his life. The CD offers two mp3s of Tommy talking about his working life, which replace the extracts on the LP. The mp3 format may be incongruous, but the CD already holds 75 minutes of music.

This re-release, together with the Irish recordings now presented as *The Clare Set* and reviewed elsewhere in this issue, is a reminder of the valuable and altruistic programme that started Free Reed records and made available players and musics which were never likely to be commercially viable and thus very unlikely to be released elsewhere. The concertina enthusiast owes a huge debt to this initiative. However, there is a serious problem. Gearóid, in his review of *The Clare Set*, is rightly critical of the accompanying documentation; I found many similar errors when I reviewed the compilation CDs *This Label Is Not Removable* in an earlier *PICA*, 2 (2005). This trademark ineptitude is here again. In the Cutty listings, Reisdorff's *Luxembourg Polka* is attributed to 'trad', as is an untitled polka which, if 'trad', will see me eating my bellows. In contrast not one of the Williams tunes is attributed at all, not even *Springtime In Battersea*, which he claimed (controversially) to have written. The main documentation is taken from the LPs where there is a section of three paragraphs on Williams's music. This begins on page 13 of the booklet, but instead of continuing on the next page, page 14 is a complete reprint of page 2, repeating the introduction and the opening lines on Gordon Cutty. This careless, indeed witless, editing is inexcusable. Its implication is, however, much more serious than merely a source of annoyance and despair. We spot what we know to be wrong; we don't spot what we don't know to be wrong. We are left able to trust nothing. Unless Free Reed rectifies this chapter of disasters, the place of these historic, priceless and irreplaceable recordings will be for ever undermined.

Allan Atlas has suggested that *English International* contains too large a slice of 'Folk and Folk-influenced' material, but this reflects the main contemporary use of the instrument. Nevertheless it makes it hard for me to argue for another, yet *The Whirligig of Time* clearly indicates that Steve Turner should be in there even at the expense of some who do receive their international laurels (I've got a list).

Steve Turner is a folk-singer who accompanies himself on English Concertina, and after a period of absence club organisers and audiences have welcomed the return of this accomplished performer. He has a good, sure voice which he also uses well and his accompaniments are considered and well-played (and with Ollie Knight on the sound desk the recording quality is guaranteed 100% perfect). Other musicians join Steve on certain tracks to add texture and colour to a studio performance, but the solo performances make it quite clear that he needs no extra help. His 64-key instrument (with four Anglo buttons!) has all the richness of tone that goes with old pitch.

Steve's CD is released on a label entitled 'The Tradition Bearers', and while I am sympathetic to their aim some of their mission statement sounds like special pleading. Steve Turner is not a 'tradition bearer'. He

is a folk-singer and one of the very best. He should not be judged by the tenets of the tradition.

Will Duke, on the other hand, is certainly a tradition bearer, and his solo CD *Out Of The Box* is simply magnificent. There is something delightfully old-fashioned about Will; one can easily imagine him in a time when children were instructed to be 'seen but not heard'. Unfortunately this is too often also true of Will's performances as he frequently appears in the company of other, louder musicians. Here, in splendid isolation, his huge talent is able to shine throughout. Will is inevitably associated with Scan Tester, and nine tracks here are from Scan's playing. Will's playing, like Scan's, is bright, crisp and rhythmically compulsive; however, he is no copyist. He has a lighter touch, a fuller left hand, and uses much more ornamentation than Scan. Scan didn't accompany his own singing and neither does Will, and there is a further similarity in their light singing style. Both have gentle voices, and in performance Will seems to stand specially straight, reminding himself of the need to throw his voice to the back of the room. Here in the studio there is no such need and the result is the best singing I have heard from someone whom I've had the pleasure of hearing many times.

Of course, I am begging the question of why I consider one singer/concertina player to be a bearer of the tradition and one not, and this is a question that deserves more than the glib answer that resurrecting old songs and setting them to the concertina is a product of the Folk Revival while playing dance tunes and unaccompanied singing has no similarly definable genesis. Traditional Music is alive and well in England, but if you insist that the transmission must also be traditional (mother's knee, neighbour's kitchen, village pub) then you won't need the fingers of your second hand to count those who qualify. The links have changed in the chain of transmission and recordings; specialist gatherings, even the internet, now play a role. Some of the important links in this new chain, like Will Duke, are people who have spent years and years listening, intelligently and sensitively, to traditional music and have come to understand not just its sound, but also its context and its attitude. They make developments but not changes; they introduce the new without ever weakening the old; and if the new were suddenly stripped away from their performance, there would be the original, strong and unsullied, the pearl safe within the oyster.

The word 'tradition' (*trado, tradere*, I hand over) is used outside the small world of ethnomusicology. The archive recordings on *English International* and those of Gordon Cutty make it clear that there was once a tradition of the English concertina in mainstream, popular entertainment. Where are the bearers of *that* tradition today?