

VRi Reviews

From The Margins

VRi : Tŷ Ein Tadau

1.10.2018 : Recordiau Erwydd

VRi are a folk trio that formed in 2016, intent on combining "...the energy of a rowdy pub session with the style and finesse of the Viennese string quartet." With Tŷ Ein Tadau, their debut album, they have realised this singular aim emphatically.

All three musicians already had established form before VRi – Jordan Price Williams (cello), Patrick Rimes (violin, viola) and Aneirin Jones (violin) can be otherwise respectively found in Elfen, Calan and NoGood Boyo. VRi is a vehicle for them to experiment, looking for a Welsh chamber-folk sound properly rooted in tradition. After a bit of trial and error learning they have found a successful formula – with a definite impact on live stages, and now, following a well-received first EP, capturing a rare energy on this self-recorded album.

The new recordings have been framed by the band as 'a revitalising, rediscovering and remembering of our musical heritage'. They have drawn inspiration from a range of traditional sources, most notably the cherished hymns of Welsh Chapels, with two tracks emphasising this declared link. Dewch i'r Frwydr, discovered in an 1859 collection, '250 Welsh Airs for a Shilling', has a melodic structure almost certainly conscripted for church use. It is joined on the album by Crug y Bar, a well used chapel tune. The mood of several others acknowledges the heritage explicit in these two.

Dewch i'r Frwydr opens the set – suitably hymnal and elegant. The music then sparks through Breow Kernow, it's first half an old English tune (Mount Hills), before the first song – Ffoles Llantrisant – with vocal duties impressively shared between the players to plaintive effect.

The mournful Crug y Bar then sets the stage for the first standout, Cob Malltraeth, an Anglesey folk song popular at the start of the twentieth century and discovered by the trio at St Fagan's. VRi have breathed real life into its resurrection. Beth Celyn's guest vocal has huge resonance and colour, the dark, fluid double bass line feels like it has been taken from a lost piece of sixties' psych folk, and the track is full of subdued gothic majesty; the middle instrumental section underpinning a wordless vocal is especially emotive.

By immediate contrast Cyw Bach is a set of vivacious tunes (the first composed by the Jordan Price Williams) that have not a hint of darkness and which lead to the album's second highlight, Aros Mae'r Mynyddau Mawr. The song's words are from the bard Ceiriog, and celebrate the eternity of Welsh culture sustained through its music and language – they are matched beautifully to an Irish-style melody by singer Lynne Denman. It is as moving a piece of folk music as you will find this year.

There is less intensity to the playful Clychau Aberdyfi, which is a mix of all the 'bell' songs the band know – sung in Welsh and English, the collage of verses answer each other as clear as church bells would across a Sunday morning valley. Which leaves a set of ebullient tunes (Taflu Rwdins), the stateliness of Tŷn Fechan Meifod and Gŵr a'i Farch, the latter gathering pace to reach fast, full heights before pausing the tempo for a long stilling moment of reflection to close the album.

As you might expect from this collective of musicians this is a hugely accomplished debut – earthy, rooted folk played on chamber instruments – but it also has an immediacy and spirit to it that can animate the coldest of winter bones. The trio have achieved exactly what they set out to do – Tŷ Ein Tadau is a record that compellingly presents music that may be founded on VRi's already known virtuosity, but that has a profound, innate sense of life to it as well. In the simplest of terms Tŷ Ein Tadau is a marvel – an album of extraordinarily good, often beautiful, folk music.

Folk Wales

Tŷ Ein Tadau
Vri Ty Ein Tadau

*****FIVE-STAR CHOICE!*****

Cyhoeddiadau Sbrigyn Ymborth ER002

The fledgling Recordiau Erwydd – an offshoot of Sbrigyn Ymborth, based in the Llyn village of Llithfaen – has pulled off a brace of truly remarkable albums, both of which have been awarded the accolade of Five Stars in FolkWales Online Magazine. You have got to see and hear the truly wonderful chamber-folk trio Vri; violinist and Calan member Patrick Rimes, Aneirin Jones (violin) and 'cellist Jordan Price Williams (Elfen) are incorporated in the incredible 15-musician juggernaut Pendevig, who wowed a packed and delighted Pavilion at the Cardiff Eisteddfod, having conquered the gigantic Interceltique festival in the Breton port of Lorient in August this year. Aneirin and Jordan both perform in the NoGood Boyo band, with Calan conspirators Bethan Rhiannon and Sam Humphries; guitarist Sam expertly engineered and mixed Vri's exceedingly spectacular debut album. The self-produced Tŷ Ein Tadau translates as Our Fathers' House; the theme is centred on the traditional and historical music, dances and harmony singing of Wales, which flourished for a thousand years but were being stifled and choked by stern 18th-century Methodism. The old folk tunes and dances were discouraged by the Methodists, which looked upon hymn singing as a vital tool in attracting congregation members; during this process, many traditional airs survived as sedate and solemn hymn tunes.

At the height of the Methodist reformation, folk dancing, singing and playing in almost all of their forms were being shunned by the mighty chapel as instruments of sin – meanwhile many popular tunes were being harvested, reworked as hymns and sung by the masses in order to extol the virtues of God. This selective amnesia for huge swathes of Welsh culture meant that Patrick, Jordan and Aneirin inherited a tradition broken in many places, forced into submission then resurrected and kept alive only by the brave efforts of a tireless few.

Tŷ Ein Tadau can be seen in some ways as a reclamation exercise, and an opportunity to bring some of these old tunes and songs back full circle. As well as offering a nod to the importance of the Welsh chapels, which are still the cornerstone of society in the small village communities where all three members were brought up, Vri wanted to bring some of the more obscure hymn tunes back into the folk domain.

They say in the sleeve notes that two of the tracks are good examples: "We discovered 'Dewch I'r Frwydr' (Come To The Battle) in a collection of old Welsh airs, but it is distinctly hymn-like in its construction. Almost certainly, this melody was used to sing hymns'. Likewise, 'Crug y Bar' was known to Jordan, Aneurin and Patrick as a popular hymn tune: "Although its exact origin is dubious, this is undoubtedly an old air reworked for use in the chapel." Congregations may be certainly dwindling, but Vri state that this album's intention is to celebrate the national music of Wales, while acknowledging the impact that religion has had on the people: "In the wake of the decline of the village chapel, we celebrate the revitalising, rediscovering and remembering of our musical heritage."

'Dewch I'r Frwydr' is the first track, and Vri treat this beautiful tune with the respect it deserves; however, 'Breow Kernow' is a glittering brace of dance tunes, ancient and new. 'Mount Hills' was collected by John Playford in his 1701 volume The Dancing Master, and 'The Hills Of Tren crom' was written by the great Cornishman, Neil Davey; and Jordan's high tenor completely transforms the well-known and well-loved 'Ffoles Llantrisant'. Vri's friend, Beth Celyn, summons her stunning soaring voice so that it blends blissfully with the band's inspiring arrangement in the forgotten Anglesey folk song 'Cob Malltraeth', bringing together a crescendo of absolutely breathtaking sound.

With Vri's considerable musical abilities, 'Crug y Bar' sits comfortably in this appetising collection. 'Jig Cyw Bach' (Jordan's composition for his lively little spaniel) clears the way into two more jigs, 'Carlam' and 'Tom Jones', in this storming set; Aneirin brilliantly moulds a crazy scale to finish off the track perfectly. In 'Aros Mae Mynyddau Mawr', Jordan pays a tribute to the words of the bard Ceiriog and a melody by the singer Lynne Denman, arranged in Sean-nós style: seasons change, but the old language is in the land, and the old melodies live. 'Clychau Aberdyfi' melds snatches of Welsh and English nursery rhymes in a mysterious, compelling and hypnotic style; and the first polska in the set 'Taflu Rwdins' (Throwing Swedes) was learned from Eva Johansson, a fine player of the träskefiol, a traditional Swedish fiddle made from a wooden clog. The second tune, 'Taflïad Carreg', was composed by the great Welsh fiddler and tradition bearer Mike Lease.

The tune 'Tôn Fechan Meifod' comes from Nicholas Bennett's collection, *Alawon Fy Ngwlad*, and Vri discovered it in the online collection of the late Dr Chris Grooms; however, they rise triumphantly to the occasion with their last set, which gathers the three-two hornpipe 'Gŵr A'i Farch', the red-hot march 'Ymdaith Yr Hen Gymru' (which Aneirin learned from the playing of Huw Dylan) and the popular session jig 'Gwyngalch Morgannwg' to bring the album to a roaring climax.

Vri are not just three stunning musicians; they summon up a magic chemistry that is absolutely bewildering, mesmerising and thoroughly addictive. Wales' creative pool is bubbling many times over; for God's sake, please dive in!