

Dirty Linen

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Ensemble Galilei

Alta

EG Music (2005)

By Susan Hartman (Baltimore, MD)

Ensemble Galilei is a group of five women who play music at the crossroads. Not the infamous blues crossroads of Robert Johnson, but the crossroads of traditional, folk, early/Baroque, and classical music. Employing Celtic harp, fiddle, shawms, recorders, viola da gamba, and small pipes, the members are accomplished with music of varying regions and time periods. The music is Austenesque – that’s with an “e,” not an “i.” It is well-mannered and thoughtful, but not without spark and a certain droll humor. The women of Ensemble Galilei play with sensibility informed by both brain and heart, which then flows out through the very able hands. Pieces from Turlough O’Carolan and Neil Gow sit alongside 15th-century Italian dances and newly composed tunes by members of the ensemble. The tunes are built on a wave of support from the viola da gamba, given wing by Celtic harp, and the pipes and fiddle sing together in close harmonies that, if they were human, would be worthy of the phrase, “The way only siblings can.”

Highlights of this enchanting album include the energetic closing set, “The Labyrinth/Black Magic/Alexa Mason,” composed by group member Deborah Nuse, with percussion by guest Laura Jordan. Also noteworthy is the second track: It starts with “The Exile,” which shares that same sense of musical adventuresomeness that inhabits Grieg’s “Hall of the Mountain King,” then leads the listener directly into “The Rolling Wave,” with pipes added by guest artist Kieran O’Hare. “Taimse in Choladh/Planxty Drew/Morgan Magan” starts out with solemn, solid, and resonant Celtic harp and viola da gamba, adds a liquid fiddle part for the second tune, and then gets even lighter, dancing in the air like leaves on a breeze for the third instrumental song. “Wat zal men op den Avond doen” is a collection of improvisations recorded (on paper, not disc!) by Jacob van Eyck in the 17th century, and EG charmingly brings them to life again four centuries later.

Beyond enchanting, entrancing, or appealing – all three of which could apply – this recording has a magnetic pull, attracting careful attention that rewards close listening with a hearty satisfaction for one’s aural fixation.