

CD Reviews

By SEAN SMITH

Noctambule, “A Sweetish Tune” • Noctambule (French for “night owl”), the West Coast wife-husband duo of Marla Fibish and Bruce Victor, has been a quiet but steady presence in Irish traditional music the past several years, not least for championing fretted-string instruments: mandolin, mandola, bouzouki, cittern, guitar and tenor guitar; Fibish in particular has drawn accolades for her mandolin playing.



This album is somewhat of a departure in that it focuses more on the Irish part of their repertoire, which typically encompasses settings of poetry and original instrumental pieces: Seven of the nine tracks feature renditions of tunes from or in the tradition, including com-

positions by Fibish. It's a veritable showcase for her mandolin style, which rather than emphasizing speed involves a more holistic approach that gives attention to fine details such as the mandolin's tone and sustain (and the importance of what pick you use).

So what you hear when you listen to her play reels (“The Tempest,” “The Broken Pledge,” “The Abbey,” jigs (“Bold Doherty,” “Bill Harte’s”), O’Carolan pieces (“Blind Mary,” “Mister O’Connor”), or other kinds of tunes, are crystal-clear ornaments and triplets, and a solid rhythmic feel. Victor’s subtle and restrained accompaniment, meanwhile, meshes so well with Fibish that at times it sounds like a single instrument.

Something of an outlier is the title track, which closes out the album, a charming Fibish-Victor waltz that – as its name implies – does indeed have a Scandinavian tint to it, and Aryeh Frankfurter’s nyckelharpa adds a hauntingly winsome touch.

There are three songs: Fibish’s take on “The Creel,” a night-visiting song whose modal key belies its slapstick nature, and Victor’s rendition of “Cold Missouri Waters,” James Keelaghan’s vivid elegy for firefighters killed in a 1949 forest fire; the pair also offer a setting of Khalil Gibran’s “Song of the Wave.”

“A Sweetish Tune” has an unhurried, low-key quality to it, but also an understated intensity and purposefulness – a different sort of listening experience for many Irish music aficionados, perhaps, but a worthwhile one. [noctambulemusic.com]