

***Elephants Stairs – Interpretations of Late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Country Dances by Andrew Shaw.***

**Music arranged and performed by Rebecca King, Jon Berger and Jim Oakden –  
*Persons of Quality.***

In his introduction to this new collection Andrew disarmingly suggests that there may have been no great 'clamour' for another volume of his interpretations. Be that as it may the new volume and its accompanying CD are hugely welcome and will provide as much pleasure and resource as their predecessors.

As ever the book is beautifully presented with extremely clear typeface; the dance instructions are models of clarity and the accompanying descriptions and notes are absorbing, instructive and entertaining. As when he is speaking Andrew wears his authoritative knowledge lightly and humorously:

A topical political song.....has the following resonant chorus: "Fie, Tories fie, you soar so high, Y'have all quite lost your senses".

In this new volume Andrew again presents his material, with all its supporting background information and facsimile reproductions, as 'interpretations'. He is aware of the needs of today's dancers so makes no claim to authenticity; rather he presents 'interpretations' which will satisfy those dancers' needs. What is abundantly clear in both the book and the recording is that all concerned have a deep love and respect for the original material.

In general the level of difficulty in this collection is less challenging than previously and several dances are relatively simple. This has the enormous benefit that dancers can relax into the dance and enjoy the music, certainly when it is played as on the CD and, one would hope, when played live by equally accomplished and imaginative musicians. *Young Phillis of Wakefield* is a good example of a sequence of simple movements to a good, lively tune which, after a restrained and modest first time on piano and recorder is gradually treated to increasingly jazzy modifications leading up to the swinging arrival of the clarinet in the fourth repetition. Great fun! In contrast the eponymous *Elephants Stairs* with its triple time tune is elegant and stately and receives a performance fully suited to the needs of the leadings, castings and turnings of which the dance is composed.

The opening track of the CD is, appropriately, *The Jolly Company*, and the performance sets the pattern for what is to follow. In this case the dance, again reasonably simple, is busy and beautifully phrased to fit the tune. The playing is brisk and businesslike. As with most of the tracks the piano, played musically and sensitively by Rebecca King, is the staple instrument and begins solo. Thereafter, with each repetition other instruments, notably Jon Berger's violin or viola, join in, changing the timbre and adding further harmonies and counter melodies. This is particularly effective in *Pall-Mall* where the brisk but very English tune is made to sound positively 'Klezmer-ish' when Jim Oakden's clarinet takes over! The piano's central role is further enhanced in *Harlequin in the Mud* when the fourth time through takes us through an exciting and unexpected modulation. The additional subtleties of movement in the first 16 bars of this dance are also typical of Andrew's interpretative 'tweaks' and amply demonstrate his great love for this material and his concern for detail in the way it is performed.

One regret I have is that Andrew has not given notes to all of the titles of the dances. How fascinating it would be to know where to find the *Beautiful Grove*, who were *The Happy Couple*, who was the dedicatee of *Sam's Maggot* and what led to the outburst of mirth felt by *The Laughing Vicar*! For me, indeed, *Sam's Maggot*, which has been circulating for some time, is a most beautiful interpretation and a thoroughly satisfying dance. I would prefer it slightly slower than on the CD thus allowing the arching melodic phrases a little more time to register. Also I must confess to being less than convinced by the organ rendition of *Apollo and Daphne*. The dance needs reasonable drive off the back foot and I don't find the organ gives the necessary support.

These minor – and very subjective – caveats apart this book and CD are a wonderful addition to the repertoire and Andrew and his team are hugely to be thanked for giving us further insights into the music and dance of this period along with the accompanying glimpses of social history with which Andrew always enlivens his presentations.

Book and CD are available from Andrew at: s-a-shaw@hotmail.co.uk  
or from Folksales at: Derek-Ann@Folksales.co.uk.

In the USA contact Rebecca at: <http://www.rebeccakingmusic.com>

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