The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill: A Timely Appreciation

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Abstract
A remarkable project to record the *Complete Songs* of Robert Tannahill, the Paisley weaver-poet, has concluded with the 2024 release of a fifth and final disc, a fitting tribute marking the 250th anniversary of Tannahill's birth. This review article discusses why Tannahill is an important and distinctive voice in the Scottish traditional song repertoire, and assesses the achievements of the recording project.

Fred Freeman, *The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill*, volumes 1–4, Brechin All Records, 2006–2017; *Robert Tannahill Songs Volume CCL: A 250th Anniversary Tribute,* Duende Records, 2024.

Robert Tannahill (1774–1810), the weaver-poet of Paisley, deserves to be better known and more widely celebrated as a distinctive contributor to Scotland's lyrical tradition. It is therefore welcome that Fred Freeman's *Complete Songs* project has come to fruition, ensuring that as many of Tannahill's songs as could be recorded have now been published in audible form. Freeman's first Tannahill CD appeared in 2006; the fifth and last in 2024 – the 250th anniversary of Tannahill's birth. 'Complete' may need some clarification, as some songs needed significant reassembly from fragments, and others required the composition of new melodies where the original tunes have either been lost or are intractable. What has been achieved is remarkable, if occasionally puzzling, and should inspire both musicians and academics to take a fresh look at Tannahill's contribution to Scottish lyrical verse.

Reappraising Robert Tannahill: A timely intervention
A few of Tannahill's songs are well-known, although the best-known of them, 'Wild Mountain Thyme', is a significantly-adapted version of 'The Braes o Balquihidder', made in the 1950s by Belfast singer Francis McPeake, that sits at some distance from what Tannahill actually wrote. While the emergence of Paisley folk group the Tannahill Weavers in 1968 made the poet's name more widely recognised in Scotland and beyond, the more academic end of Scottish literary studies has – if mentioning Tannahill at all – classified him as simply a lesser Robert Burns, one of many provincial writers who sought to emulate the Bard's shooting star without quite measuring up.[1] The sole modern book-length study of Tannahill, Jim Ferguson's 2011 doctoral thesis, remains unpublished.[2] Clearly, Fred Freeman is right: systematic attention to Tannahill is overdue. The *Complete Songs* project points the way towards future publications that could give the poet's life and work more sustained critical attention.

Unlike his great contemporary, Tannahill was not upwardly socially mobile. He is known to have written on a board positioned beside his loom, breaking off to write as lyrics occurred to him.[3] Both poets, however, wrote their best verse while moving. Burns legendarily went walking, or rocked in his chair, until the rhythms clarified; the walks Tannahill took in the countryside after work – exercise

[1] Christopher A. Whatley, '"It is said that Burns was a radical": Contest, concession, and the political legacy of Robert Burns, ca.1796–1859.' *The Journal of British Studies* 50, no.2 (2011): 639–666.
[2] Jim Ferguson, 'A Weaver in Wartime: a biographical study and the letters of Paisley weaver poet Robert Tannahill (1774–1810).' (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2011). http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2395/.
[3] Robert Tannahill, *Complete Songs and Poems of Robert Tannahill, with Life and Notes* (Paisley: William Wilson, 1877): iii–iv.

that no doubt boosted his creativity – can mostly still be experienced today. Like Burns, Tannahill had a social conscience, and Tannahill's was firmly rooted in the social realities of his hometown, Paisley. Bringing Tannahill's songs together allows a more systematic consideration of his working-class contribution to Scottish song tradition, while decisions made by the project, particularly in the later CDs, to perform songs using international musical styles and instruments imply that these topics of wider human interest are still relevant today.

Robert Tannahill remained a local hero in Paisley, where his poetry was steeped in references to local landscape and social history. The tragic circumstances of his death – he drowned himself in 1810 when a second volume of poetry failed to find a publisher – may have obscured his memory for a time, but his songs gradually found a wider popular audience in chapbooks and anthologies targeting the popular end of the domestic song market. From the middle of the nineteenth century, press reports in Paisley helped build support for proposals for a statue in his memory.[4] One was finally erected in 1883, not quite in time for his centenary,[5] thanks to public contributions raised by large crowds which would gather in the woods on the edge of Paisley to sing his songs.[6]

Owing to the lack of modern scholarly attention to the poet, the Tannahill recording project has needed to overcome a lack of authoritative sources for both lyrics and tunes. Robert Burns was an able social networker whose partnerships with music publishers ensured his songs were quickly associated with a large repertoire of published melodies after his death. Tannahill, on the other hand, was a much quieter man. He only published one book in his own lifetime: a dramatic interlude flanked by poems and song lyrics.[7] Limited runs of further editions appeared, particularly one in 1815 that fed forward into anthologies by other authors, but no further volume of new poems.[8] While some of his songs have survived with headnotes naming suitable pre-existing tunes, many lack such information. Others were set to new tunes, as Tannahill had several musical acquaintances who arranged his lyrics for piano – principally, Robert Archibald Smith, who published a multi-volume anthology of piano arrangements some years after Tannahill's death.[9] As the nineteenth century progressed, Tannahill's songs travelled beyond Paisley in a range of printed formats, including cheaply-produced chapbooks which neither named the poet nor included tunes, and anthologies of national song with piano accompaniments, in which Tannahill's compositions may have been altered to suit the fashion of the day.[10] The first attempt at systematic curation of the poet's work was that of David Semple in 1876, and it also may have some errors in attribution.[11]

Understandably, Freeman needed to make many editorial decisions in the course of this project, not least of which was to identify which songs were composed by Tannahill and which were not. Liner notes do provide some information about where verses have been edited to make them more singable, where stanzas have been deleted, and where stanzas authored by people other than Tannahill have been left in. Nonetheless, I found myself wishing that the critical apparatus included a stronger sense of which sources had been tapped for both lyrics and tunes. It would have been easy to insert the names of known tunes into the liner notes (as Tannahill did in his book) rather than just to say,

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[4] 'The Anniversary of Robert Tannahill', *The Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, Saturday 5 June 1858: 3.

[5] 'The Tannahill Statue at Paisley', *The Illustrated London News*, Saturday 17 November 1883: 24.

[6] Ferguson, 'A Weaver in Wartime', 1.

[7] Robert Tannahill, *The Soldier's Return: A Scottish Interlude in Two Acts, with other Poems and Songs Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect'* (Paisley, 1807).

[8] Robert Tannahill, *Poems and Songs Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect.* 3rd edition. (Paisley: Crighton, 1815).

[9] Robert Archibald Smith, *The Scotish Minstrel: a selection from the vocal melodies of Scotland, ancient and modern, arranged for the pianoforte.* 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Robert Purdie, 1820–24).

[10] Iain Beavan, 'Chapbooks, Cheap Print, Burns and Tannahill in the Nineteenth Century.' *Scottish Literary Review* 11, no. 2: 2019: 59.

[11] Robert Tannahill, *The Poems and Songs and Correspondence of Robert Tannahill, with Life and Notes by David Semple* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1876).

'traditional tune'. Where a melody was either not named in the sources or has been lost, Freeman has seized an opportunity to innovate within the tradition by composing a new tune, which may have been altered in rehearsal by participating musicians (although Freeman does not say as much).

In Japan, there is a tradition, called Kintsugi, of mending broken vessels by building up new lacquer and infilling the joins with precious metal – a process that highlights the once-broken areas and acknowledges the role of the craftsperson who recovers the artifact. The aesthetic respects the discontinuities, accepting that change, loss, and renewal all contribute to a living tradition. In the case of the Tannahill project, it could be argued that those moments when the join between old and new may seem particularly idiosyncratic represent a musical equivalent of Kintsugi: the recordings show the joints between the contemporary musicians' imaginations and Tannahill's, rather than trying to reproduce the songs as they might have been heard in 1810.

Freeman describes this approach in his liner notes as 'doing justice' to Tannahill, making his songs feel fresh to modern ears. We might, however, wish that Freeman had written in greater detail about the techniques, materials and tools used in the repair shed. His project would have benefited greatly from a critical apparatus that a) identified the sources of the lyrics, including variants and songs with multiple authors; b) named the original tunes, as well as any printed sources that may have been in circulation before Tannahill's time; and c) reflected upon the process involved in the composition of new tunes, explaining what inspired them, and describing how creative decisions were made. Further detail would also have given singers wishing to develop their own performances of this repertoire a more robust understanding of the sources. Tannahill's lyrics work better in the ears than on the page, and the same may be said of Freeman's notes, which often feel like a lecture accompanying a performance, guiding the listener to the distinctive aural features in Tannahill's verse that, as Freeman argues, reflect not only the dance rhythms of Scotland's jigs, reels and strathspeys but also the poet's embodied knowledge of daily life in Scotland.[12]

While not all traditional musicians, scholars, or enthusiasts will agree with Freeman's approach to traditional music, his project does respond to what many in the target audience want. Since the 1980s, it has become increasingly common to hear traditional music fused with jazz, rock, classical, and other musical genres. Musician-academic Lori Watson has described this as a 'New Traditional School' of composition and performance, one that intentionally seeks to use repertoire that has had 'a significant life in oral tradition' as a basis for new material.[13] Reviews of Freeman's early Tannahill CDs in *The Living Tradition* encouraged the fusion of the traditional with the contemporary. One reviewer, David Kidman, characterised volume 2 as 'modern scholarship at its best, but there's not a whiff of undue academe about the exercise'.[14] Jim McCourt praised volume 3 as having struck 'a balance…between authenticity and a contemporary presentation'.[15] Matthew Shaw, writing more critically of volume 3, suggested that 'there is sometimes the problem of too much being respect paid to the original work'.[16] Freeman's awareness of such comments may explain why volumes 4 and 5 include more radical musical re-packaging, some of which, to my conservative ears, is not entirely successful. While the later CDs include more material that survives in fragmentary form and where

[12] Freeman has made similar arguments for Burns' distinctively Scottish aural imagination; see his extraordinary 13-CD marathon, *Robert Burns: The Complete Songs, Volumes 1–12*, Linn Records, 1996–2002.
[13] Lori Watson, 'The New Traditional School in Scotland: Innovation, beyond-tune composition and a traditional musician's creative practice.' (PhD diss., Royal Conservatoire of Scotland / University of St Andrews, 2012), 36.
[14] David Kidman, review of 'The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill Volume 2.' *The Living Tradition* 85 2010. https://www.livingtradition.co.uk/webrevs/cdbar010.htm, accessed 16 May 2024.
[15] Jim McCourt, review of 'The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill, Volume III', *The Living Tradition* 96, 2013: 49. https://www.livingtradition.co.uk/webrevs/cdbar017.htm, accessed 16 May 2024.
[16] Matthew Shaw, review of 'The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill Volume 3', *Is this Music? Independent Sounds from Scotland*, 21 March 2013. https://www.isthismusic.com/the-complete-songs-of-robert-tannahill, accessed 16 May 2024.

more radical reconstruction has been inevitable, musical recordings also need to meet their audience's expectations, and a project spanning eighteen years has had to deal with how those expectations may have changed over that time.

Listening to Tannahill's *Complete Songs:* Minding the gaps

The *Complete Songs* project sensibly avoids bundling the material in chronological order. Altogether, the project delivers ninety-five songs across the five albums, with each volume containing a variety of themes so that any one on its own could provide a listener with an overview of Tannahill's themes and styles. All the CDs except the last include a recitation of one of Tannahill's poems by Freeman. While it is hard not to hear in all the discs a movement towards sorrow and disillusionment that to an extent reflects the sadness that haunted the end of Tannahill's life, there are also moments of joy, not least in the quality of the musical performances.

The first four CDs take their titles from the name of a well-known pastoral love song. In sequence, these are: 'The Braes O Balquhidder' – the song that inspired Francis McPeake's 1950s variant 'Wild Mountain Thyme' (CD 1, track 4); 'Gloomy Winter's Noo Awa', the song that memorably featured in the 1993 film *The Piano* in Michael Nymen's minimalist arrangement of the tune 'Lord Balgonie's Favourite' (CD 2, track 2); 'The Braes O Gleniffer', a lament sung by a woman whose lover has gone to war (CD 3, track 2); and 'The Bonnie Wood O Craigielea' (CD 4, track 1). Volume five, recorded by a different studio, also leads with a song of rural romance: 'The Kebbuckston Weddin'' (CD 5, track 1), a rollicking jig. Each of these five songs may be taken as an illustration of Freeman's method in combining the old with the new.

'The Braes O Balquhidder' (CD 1) is performed with unabashedly modern instruments, including conga drums, in a fusion style that combines tradition with jazz harmonies and a soft-rock driven beat. The accompaniment quotes from Francis McPeake's melody before settling on a vocal delivered fluently by John Croall. I think what I heard was an arrangement of the tune 'The Braes of Balwhither', a slow strathspey that appears in several printed collections roughly contemporary with Tannahill, including Robert Petrie's *Third Collection of Strathspey Reels*.[17] In the first volume of his *Scotish Minstrel*, R. A. Smith set Tannahill's text to this strathspey, which he renamed 'The Braes o' Balquhidder'.[18] However, several editions of Tannahill's poetry show that the melody he originally imagined for this song was called 'The Three Carles o' Buchanan'.[19] What we hear, therefore, is a received tradition of performance mediated by the interaction of both printed anthology and oral practice, rather than Tannahill's initial choice of 'The Three Carles o' Buchanan'.

'Gloomy Winter's Noo Awa' (CD 2) is sung exquisitely by Emily Smith, accompanied on the piano by Angus Lyon, to the tune 'Lord Balgonie's Favourite'. The focus on the piano may well be a nod to the 1993 film. This is traditional music fused with a classical piano tradition, updated with an awareness of spare modern minimalism. The arrangement opens with what sounds like a pianist improvising in a 'romantic drawing room' style, the performers allowing us to hear an improvisation that takes us into the space. In acknowledging both the song's nineteenth-century roots and its contemporary resonance, this performance creates a good balance between past and present.

'The Braes O Gleniffer' (CD3) also has a female vocal, beautifully sung by Fiona Hunter, ably accompanied by Chris Agnew on acoustic bass, Marc Duff on recorder and bouzouki, Angus Lyon on melodeon, and Chris Wright on guitar. Various nineteenth-century anthologies and chapbooks give Tannahill's song with a headnote reference to the tune 'Bonnie Dundee'.[20] This is not – wisely – the tune sung on the recording. While 'Bonnie Dundee' might reflect the back-story of battle (the song is

[17] Robert Petrie, *Third Collection of Strathspey Reels* (London, 1802), 9.
[18] Smith, *The Scotish Minstrel*, vol. 1, 49.
[19] E.g., Tannahill, *The Poems and Songs and Correspondence,* 237.
[20] E.g., the chapbook *Mary's Dream, to which are added, Mine ain dear Somebody, The Braes o' Gleniffer, The Braes of Balquhither, Loudon's bonny Woods and Braes, The Disguised Squire*. Paisley: J Neilson, 1812, 3.

about a woman whose lover has marched off to war), its upbeat martial character does not suit the plangent meaning of the lyric. Alexander Whitelaw's *Book of Scottish Song* (1834) suggests that John Ross of Aberdeen composed a different tune to Tannahill's poem.[21] Tapping the notes into various online apps suggested that the slow jig I was hearing sounded a bit like the Irish tune 'The Blarney Pilgrim', which may be well wide of the mark, but does pick up on a strand of Scots-Irish engagement that runs through the *Complete Songs* project, about which we shall more to say presently.[22] It may be that proper folkies will find the source tune obvious, but since this project is an exercise in historical recovery, helping the less expert listener catch up would be very much appreciated.

'The Bonnie Wood of Cragielea' (CD 4) appeared in the centenary anthology of Tannahill's book with a fully notated tune.[23] This is not, however, the tune used for the recording. In his liner note, Freeman explains that the instrumental music on this track uses a new tune, 'adapted and composed' by himself, that was inspired by a Russian folk tune previously adapted by Stravinsky. Why this tune was used, and where it appears in Stravinsky's work (his 1918 *Histoire du Soldat*, perhaps?), is not explained. The tune used for the vocal, however, is adapted from a tune called 'Thou Bonnie Wood of Craigie-lea', attributed in G. F. Graham's 1848 anthology, the *Songs of Scotland,* to Tannahill's friend James Barr, who afterwards emigrated to America.[24] The poetic voice expresses anguish at needing to leave the idyllic landscape of youth, being 'dragged' overseas for obscure reasons – if not necessarily Barr's autobiography, then plausibly a reference to the Highland Clearances. As in volumes 2 and 3, this key-note song is sung by a female singer, Claire Hastings, lightly accompanied by Aaron Jones on cittern and Chris Agnew on acoustic bass. It may be that the interaction of Barr's tune with a Russian folk tune is meant to suggest common ground between Scottish emigration and emigration from Russia. Live performance might allow a spoken introduction that could make that connection more present than it was from the recording alone.

The fifth and final CD opens cheerily with 'The Kebbuckston Weddin' – a lively jig played in a distinctly Irish style with whistle and bodhrán. While Tannahill's published centenary anthology tells us that his lyric was composed to 'an ancient Highland Air', the liner notes to this CD say nothing about the tune at all, leaving the listener in the dark about its origins. Despite the liveliness of this opening track, the unfolding of tracks on this disc speak to a melancholia that haunts both this CD and the project as a whole.

Many of the songs in this fifth volume are built upon fragmentary lyrics, some of which are too short or incomplete for a satisfactory song. For these, Freeman has adopted the interesting approach of creating composite settings. Track 6, for example, combines 'Contentment', 'Away Gloomy Care', and 'Sing on thou Sweet Warbler' into a medley, pleasantly sung by Claire Hastings, that initially sounds like a conventional pastoral love song. In the final verse, however, the mood darkens with a reference to drowning, raising questions about what seemed to be benign references to 'streamlets' in previous lines, and reminding listeners of the poet's unhappy death. Other tracks in this volume include a concentration of military songs, drinking songs both cheerful ('The Coggie', track 11) and cheerless (the final song), and a bleak lament (track 13) that oddly combines 'The Negro Girl', a song about an enslaved African girl, with 'The Poor Maniac's Song'. This final CD contains nineteen tracks in all, one fewer than each of the others; Fred Freeman's normal pattern of reciting a poem is also broken in this last volume. Should we infer a legacy 'to be continued', or something prematurely ended?

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[21] Alexander Whitelaw, ed., *The Book of Scottish Song, Collected and Illustrated with Historical and Critical Notices* (London: Blackie and Son, 1843), 156.
[22] Fred Freeman, 'The Tannahill Irish Songs.', *Béaloideas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society* 86 (2018), 75–97.
[23] Tannahill, *The Complete Songs and Poems,* 49.
[24] George Farquhar Graham, *The Songs of Scotland Adapted to their Appropriate Melodies,* Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Wood and Co, 1854), 126–7.

Whatever the subtexts, the *Complete Songs* ends with a fine performance. Cameron Nixon, the last voice we hear, is an emerging new star. Nixon's voice carries this final CD, leading the vocals in 'The Harper of Mull' (track 3), in two songs about soldiering (track 7, 'The Defeat of the French', and track 10, 'The Soldier's Funeral'), and in the paired songs about slavery and madness (track 13). There is a graininess in his voice that conveys tremendous expressive tension in these contexts. He sings the final song, 'Why Unite to Banish Care', unaccompanied, with harrowing bleakness, to the battle tune 'Hey Tuttie Tatie', Freeman's choice of melody. This is a grimly nihilistic counterblast to the optimism of Robert Burns, who set the same tune to the rallying cry of Bruce on the eve of Bannockburn. For Tannahill, there is no promise of final victory:

> Come, thou proud though needy bard
> Starving midst a world's regard
> Double blest our cup shall flow
> It sooths a brother's woe.

These are the last words sung on the *Complete Songs* project. The point about underappreciated genius is clear. I found myself wishing for a happier ending. But then again, so did Tannahill. May future singers of Tannahill grasp the flashes of joy, briefly flaring like a leaping salmon upstream against the currents of deep sadness.

Hearing Tannahill's *Complete Songs:* Radical themes

If Tannahill were simply the poet of his own disappointment, there would be little reputation to revive. However, his vision is wider than his own sorrows. Freeman's notes draw our attention to songs about itinerant labourers from Ireland and the Highlands, the traumatic impact of the Napoleonic wars on both soldiers and their families; and although I have doubts whether the experiment of combining songs of enslavement and madness into one (CD 5, track 13) is entirely successful, there is empathy there, too. While Tannahill's nineteenth century reputation as a 'pastoral' poet is legitimate, this was rough pastoral, attentive to working class realities. Tannahill's experience as a weaver both in Paisley and, for a brief period, in Lancashire, gave him a distinctive working-class insight into the imbalances of power and capital that the industrial revolution was making so evident. Freeman rightly suggests that Tannahill would have had much to say to twentieth-century internationalist folk scholar, singer and poet Hamish Henderson.

The fifth and final volume demonstrates Tannahill's radical realism particularly strongly. The realities of revolutionary war are explored from a variety of angles: 'The Defeat of the French' (track 7) is grimly patriotic (Tannahill knew local men who had willingly served in the British army fighting Napoleon); 'The Disabled Seaman' (track 8) and 'The Soldier's Funeral' (track 10) show the cost of victory.

Other songs connect with the realities of working life. Freeman encourages us to listen for the alliterative w's in 'The Flower of Levern Side' (CD5, track 2) which suggest, he says, 'the heavy breathing of a totally knackered farm worker'.[25] A research article might compare the impact of Tannahill's realist lyrics with the approach to similar subjects taken by some of his wealthier contemporaries. His 'Caller Herrin' girl, for example, is a good bit less winsome than Lady Nairne's similarly titled representation of Newhaven fisher women. In this song, vigorously sung by John Moran (CD 5, track 16), Tannahill instead imagines a rather abusive and dismissive male client rejecting whatever wares are on offer down a gut-strewn alley.

A feature of the *Complete Songs* project is that many of the tunes are not simply 'Scottish' but reflect melodies shared across the Irish sea – an appropriate choice, given the poet's sustained interest in the plight of itinerant Irish Catholic labourers. Emigrating to western Scotland in large numbers following the 1798 rebellion and the 1801 Act of Union in Ireland, these men endured bitter racist and sectarian discrimination. Despite his Presbyterianism and the potential impact of immigrant

[25] Fred Freeman, Liner Note, *Volume CCL: A 250th Anniversary Tribute* (Duende Records, 2024), 8.

labour on a weaver's wages, Tannahill recognised the human pain of homesickness and loss in these people's experiences. It is entirely fitting that songs touching on the plight of these immigrant Irishmen are well represented in the *Collected Songs*, particularly so in volumes 2–4.

In volume 2, songs such as 'One Night in My Youth' and 'Peggy O'Rafferty (CD 2, tracks 3 and 13) demonstrate Tannahill's empathy with wandering Irishmen far from home, missing the girls left behind in the old country. In volume 3, 'Ye Friendly Stars that Rule the Night' (CD 3, track 3) and 'Adieu! Ye Cheerful Native Plains' (CD 3, track 4) also express their sense of exile and lost loves, while 'Irish Teaching' (CD 3, track 13) imagines a father hoping that his children will be literate, and 'The Dirge of Carolan' (CD 3, track 16) connects with the stories of Ossian shared between Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. Volume 4 returns to the theme of lost loves with 'Shelah, My Darling' (CD 4, track 4); 'The Irish Farmer' (CD 4, track 16) imagines an Irishman discussing the joys of a small-holding with his wife, Judy; 'Green Inismore' (CD 4, track 18) imagines an Irish soldier returning home; and 'Awake my harp' (CD 4, track 13) is virtually an Irish anthem. The extent of this Irish material is remarkable. Although Tannahill also wrote songs reflecting Scottish Jacobite histories of exile, he successfully managed to update and apply the trope to the Irish reality. Freeman's exploration of these songs particularly benefits from his choosing musicians with experience of the Irish folk idiom, notably singer Brian Ó hEadhra on volumes 2–4, and instrumentalist Marc Duff, who appears on all five volumes.

Freeman's thesis is that Tannahill's relevance is not simply local, limited to Paisley, but is to an extent universal. Reflecting this argument, the *Complete Songs* project uses musically eclectic styles that go beyond the identifiably Scots-Irish in an effort to make the claim for the poet's universality audible. Volume 1, for example, includes 'Fly We to Some Desert Isle', sung in a recognisably modern international Celtic idiom by Emily Smith, accompanied by harps and recorders – a performance that evokes what has become a familiar folkish fantasia using haunting, minimalist chords. In this first CD, however, melodies obviously based on the traditional repertoire also undergo cross-fertilisation from less likely idioms. As we noted earlier, the accompaniment to 'The Braes O Balquhidder' (CD 1, track 4) creates a jazzy effect with its use of congas and diminished chords. In many cases, such experimentation results in a convincing fusion of older and newer influences. I particularly enjoyed the moments of creative wit that enlivened some of these earlier-recorded songs, like 'The Simmer Gloamin'' (a lyric about midges), set to a tune called 'Anya's Dance', composed by Freeman for Angus Lyon's daughter Anya, which allows the box player to make midge noises (CD 2, track 6).

By the time we reach volumes 4 and 5, however, the eclecticism at times seems more eccentric, and without the storytelling in live performance that might prepare the listener for what's to come, not all of the songs entirely work. I found the recurrent use of Klezmer style in, for example, 'Killoch Burn' (CD 4, track 8), 'O Laddie Can Ye Lea Me' (CD 4, track 12), and 'The Harper o' Mull' (CD 5, track 3) particularly questionable, given that these songs are disparate in content: the woes of a neglected country poet, of an abandoned woman, and of a lovelorn bard. Had the technique been used to suggest a common experience of emigration shared by Jewish people and Highland Scots, it might have had bite. However, applied as a top-level skim of 'sadness' it is less persuasive, striking this listener as little more than a nod to a contemporary fashionable sound.

A few tracks with new music sounded slightly dated or directionless, and one was just plain peculiar. 'Marjorie Miller' (CD 5, track 9), links a lyric about a stentorian female millworker with the polite drawing room sounds of recorder, mandolin and guitar performing newly-composed melodic material that had a nursery simplicity. A set of studio albums, ultimately, is not quite the same as a live performance, in which a bit of explanatory banter might bridge the performer-audience gap. In this particular bit of mended vase, the metal in the joins felt more like lead than gold.

Building Community in *The Complete Songs of Robert Tannahill*

Despite his final depression and tragic death, Tannahill was a sociable man amongst friends. As various biographical notes about him attest, he was instrumental in setting up Paisley's first Burns

Club, contributed regularly to meetings of local working-men's literary associations, and was a founding member of a Paisley working men's lending library.[26] Fittingly, the most impressive thing about the *Complete Songs* project is the project management involved in building a community of musicians with a shared experience of performing these songs, combining both experienced performers with talented newcomers. Many of those named previously contributed to the *Complete Songs of Robert Burns* recordings, which is also fitting, as Robert Burns' legacy helped to inspire Tannahill's early writing career.

To understand the scale of this achievement, details matter. Some forty-three musicians receive credit in the liner notes, including the sound engineers who must be counted as full partners in the creative process. Long service medals go to percussionist Marc Duff and guitarist Frank McLaughlin, both of whom ran the entire course alongside Fred Freeman. Beyond them, the list reveals a network with wide and deep roots in the contemporary Scottish traditional music scene. Singers include John Croall, Claire Hastings, Fiona Hunter, Nick Keir, Ross Kennedy, Marieke McBean, Gillian McDonald, Cameron Nixon, Brian Ó hEadra, Rod Paterson, Lucy Pringle, Jim Reid, and Emily Smith (whose contributions to discs 1 and 2 are a personal favourite). Instrumentalists include Chris Agnew, Phil Alexander, Ian Anderson and Jim Malcolm (both also singers), Sandy Brechin, Adam Bulley, Mark Black, Steve Byrne (another singer-guitarist), Marc Duff, Mark Dunlop, Stewart Hardy, Corrina Hewat, Aaron Jones, Stevie Lawrence, Angus Lyon (a marvellously sensitive accompanist of solo voice), Alasdair MacLeod, Chas MacKenzie, John Martin, Anna Massie, Pat McGarvey, Euan McLaughlin, Frank McLaughlin, John Morran (yet another singer-guitarist), Rod Paul, cellist-singer Wendy Weatherby, Chris Wright, and Mike Vass. The contribution of sound engineers Richard Werner (CDs 1–4, also player of unusual percussion) and Marty Haily (CD 5) is also creatively important, and all liner notes thank a range of others who have supported and given advice along the way. Two – Jim Reid and Nick Keir – died before the project was concluded, and are commemorated in dedications to discs 2 and 4. The change of record labels suggests that the journey has at times been hard, but Freeman and his musicians can be proud of what has been achieved.

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