

World music

Sväng

Kings Place, N1

★★★★☆

A harmonica quartet must be one of the most recalcitrant beasts in the musical jungle. Jouko Kyhälä and his Finnish compatriots have, though, found a way of marrying astonishing dexterity with a droll stage presence. Sporting dowdy suits, deadpan expressions and occasionally bursting into jigs, they have the mischievous aura of a Nordic Gilbert and George. Fortunately, their work is rather more sophisticated.

Appearing on the final evening of *Songlines* magazine's imaginatively programmed Encounters Festival, the group scurried through a fetching assortment of arrangements. First up was the title tune from their new album *Schladtzshe!*, a swearword-cum-toast which, if the band is to be believed, roughly translates as "Brothers! Let us make our mistakes with pride, for life otherwise is a mere collection of irrational occurrences. Let us empty our abundant, if sometimes bitter drink with joy!" It certainly beats "Bottoms up!"

The hardware is no less impressive. While Eero Grundström and Eero Turkka switch between diatonic and chromatic harps, the avuncular Pasi Leino takes charge of the bass harp, which is roughly the size of a squirrel's coffin and emits a remorseless sousaphone-like pulse. Kyhälä, who holds a doctorate in harmonica arts, no less, plays diatonic and chromatic, but also adds texture on the harmonetta chord harp, a curious accordion-harmonica hybrid which resembles a miniature typewriter.

Intricate amplification and balancing is required to weave the tapestry. The results are often mesmerising. The harmonica is never going to be the most emollient of instruments — after an hour or so of those staccato rhythms, you do begin to feel as if your scalp is being scrubbed with wire wool — but the poise and ingenuity of the settings are hugely impressive. Balkan fanfares and two-beat folk dances blend with an audacious arrangement of Chopin's famous E minor Prelude that abruptly veered into a tango.

Even bolder, in its way, was the adaptation of a Gypsy dirge which, with the help of generous reverb, gave Turkka the chance to let rip with a wailing, Hendrix-style improvisation. Fortunately, he stopped short of playing it behind his back or starting a fire.

Clive Davis

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