

Jon Lusk presents our occasional look at some must-hear world music releases

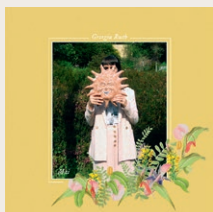
WORLD CHOICE

In the garden of song

Welsh singer and harpist Georgia Ruth goes back to her roots for a sublime new album



Homecoming: Ruth muses on life and nature



Mai

Georgia Ruth

Bubblewrap Collective BWR051CD

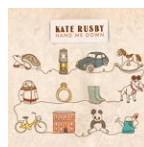
Mai is an exquisite third album by Welsh singer/harpist Georgia Ruth – and it could be the sound of an artist really hitting her stride.

Having won a Welsh Music Prize for her 2013 debut album *Week of Pines*, and praise for the album *Fossil Scale* in 2016, *Mai* was her artistic response to moving back to her hometown after the birth of her son. It is rich in musings on the natural world and life cycles, percolating with a quiet joy; it's very likely to appeal to classical music fans who also love country music, gardening and gently optimistic 'indie' rock. As well as singing delicately in Welsh and English, Ruth plays a huge range of instruments on what is largely original material, except for the title track by Eifion Wyn – a Welsh May song of sorts.

Since it's so lovingly embellished with richly-floral imagery, listening to *Mai* is like getting agreeably lost in a beautiful garden of flowers, some nodding gently in soft summer breeze, others bobbing brightly. A highlight of the year? Check it out, and decide whether you agree. ★★★★★

November round-up

Folk singer **Kate Rusby** has made 19 albums since 1997, interpreting traditional material, songs by others and writing her own gems. She concluded 2019 with *Holly Head*, a fondly-wrought album of Christmas-themed songs from her native Yorkshire. **Hand Me Down** is a novel collection of pop and rock covers, including hits for The Bangles, Oasis, The Cure, The



Kinks and even Bob Marley. Although Rusby is renowned for acoustic arrangements,

Damien O'Kane's electric guitars shimmer throughout, and Duncan Lyall's Moogs and synths often lend appealing pneumatic grooves. The overall feel is of well-spent time off, and Rusby never deserts her trademark brogue for cod Americanisms. (Pure Records PRCD64 ★★★★★)

Probably best known for two superb albums in the early '90s, **Black Umfolosi** are an Ndebele-speaking choir from Bulawayo, sometimes dubbed 'Zimbabwe's vocal newspaper'. The title track of their 15th internationally-released album **Washabala Umhlaba** (Earth



Song), is their comment on climate change and they've voiced support for the Black Lives Matter campaign. 'Ihoso' reprises their hugely important message of Zimbabwe's pressing need for unity – the title of their debut. Old fans might be surprised to hear two female voices in this previously all-male gospel group, while crisp hand-claps, shekere (shaker), whistles and hooting indigenous horns will also raise smiles on this welcome, satisfying return. (Arc Music EUCD 2913 ★★★★★)

We don't hear much music from beleaguered Yemen, so it's unsurprising that **Glsah Sanaaea with Shiran** was recorded in the singer's home in Tel Aviv, where she lives in exile. Thankfully, she's ditched the electronics and synths

used on her eponymous 2018 debut in favour of a stripped-back acoustic arrangement featuring oud, strings, kawala flute and kanun (Middle-



Eastern plucked box zither), plus backing vocals and thumping hand drums.

These revamped traditional Yemeni songs make for a truly delightful labour of love. (Batou Records BTR037 ★★★★★)

Much the same goes for **Ultimo Trem**, a 1980 ballet soundtrack made by Afro-Brazilian singer **Milton Nascimento**. He did so in protest at the then military government, having shut down the train line connecting certain towns in his home state of Minas Gerais, which his angelic voice – made more ethereal by a frequent preference for falsetto – has long been virtually synonymous with. The album was reissued on luminous red double



vinyl to mark this year's pandemic-delayed 'Record Store Day', and the expansive sound is lit up by

piano, rhythmically-strummed acoustic guitar, guest singers, a choir and vintage steam train sound effects. (Far Out Recordings FAR0217 ★★★★★)

With China/US relations at such an all-time low, it's heartening that an extraordinary collaboration between a Chinese *guzheng* zither player/singer and an adventurous singer/clawhammer banjo player works so uncannily well. **Wu Fei & Abigail Washburn** is basically a fusion of American old-time music and Chinese folksong. Thus, 'The Water Is Wide' and 'Wusuli Boat Song' sit well together, intertwined like vines. 'Who says women aren't as good as men?' is a pointed choice,



and once 35 minutes have passed you may well be wondering what sort of world we'd be living in

if the leaders of both their nations were female. (Smithsonian Folkways CD40236 ★★★★★)