



It's never too late for early music

Lucie Skeaping is fascinated by stage jigs, the pop music of 16th century, where libels were spread and miscreants outed

LOOKING at the statue of the so-called Golders Hill Girl worshipping the sun in perpetuity beside the pond in Golders Hill Park, you wouldn't link this languorous, laidback figure with the vigorous, arousing world of early music.

• But the Girl was given to the park in 1990 by its sculptor Patricia Finch. And apart from being the wife of a well-known Golders Green doctor, Finch was the mother of Lucie Skeaping who presents the Early Music show on Radio 3 and fronts a whole period-performance industry, including two notoriously arousing bands, The City Waites and The Burning Bush, from her home in Kentish Town.

If you listen to Radio 3, and some do, you'll know her voice because it's been a feature of the station for some 12 years, rendering the mysteries of crumhorns, neumes and rebecs listener-friendly.

But The Burning Bush has been around for 18 years, and the City Waites for 35, with an impressive list of records and CDs to show for it, not least, an exploration of the 16th century English stage jig, out this month.

Nosing around her house, I came across a poignant proof of this longevity: a faded LP from the 70s that showed the Waites looking moustached and shaggy

like a Jimi Hendrix tribute band.

"It's a collector's piece," said Skeaping, who discovered it on eBay. "It was stupidly expensive. Antique value."

Not that Skeaping is herself in any way antique. To meet her is to be incredulous that such a fresh, funny and youthful personality was making records in the 1970s. But then, she was straight out of college.

"I'd been studying violin at the Royal College of Music but really liked singing, theatre, anything to do with putting on a show. I got drawn into early music because it seemed to have possibilities – there were people just getting up and doing it, having a go. And then along came the Waites, who'd only been together for a few months but already had an EMI contract and were looking for a singer."

Then as now, the idea of the City Waites was to bridge the gap between breezy, knockabout folk-music and scholarly period performance. It specialises in historic street songs, raw and earthy. And its repertory homes

in on things like Broadside Ballads which were turned out in great number through the 17th century.

Skeaping calls them the "pop music of an old world. They're crude, topical ditties that people sang on the streets and sold in printed copies – although the music was never printed alongside. It was just the words, with instructions to sing them 'to the tune of...'. As everyone knew these tunes, you didn't need to have them notated – though it causes problems now when I turn up to recreate them.

"I spend my life trying to track these things down, but sometimes the tune has changed its name, or only survives in a different form. Sometimes it's just disappeared

without trace, in which case I trawl through my mental store of old tunes and see if I can pull something out that scans."

With the English stage jigs on her new CD there hasn't been quite so much guesswork, but it's still a process of applying scholarship to material that started life as anything but scholarly.

We think of jigs these days as dances, but a stage jig was a rough and ready play with music that was tacked on to the end of some more serious piece of theatre. Not excluding Shakespeare.

"Everyone knows about Shakespeare and the Globe and that whole world," says Skeaping. "But bizarrely, no-one seems to know about this repertoire that went with it and was an integral part of the 16th/17th century theatre experience."

"The jig was like a satyr play in ancient Greece, a comic add-on. And satire is really what they were – in fact, they were also known as 'libels' because they were sometimes written with the intention to ridicule or take revenge on someone the writer didn't like. It was the 16th century equivalent of being exposed in the tabloids."

Having heard the new Hyperion disc, I can't pretend that items like *The Cheaters Cheated* and *The Bloody Battle* at Billingsgate left me weak with mirth. And Skeaping readily admits that 16th century humour doesn't travel well.

"I know they're not that funny – and it's why they don't get staged these days: I've only once dared to do a full live performance. But I've workshopped them at the RSC and Dartington, and from a historical point of view they're fascinating. I just hope they fascinate people enough to buy

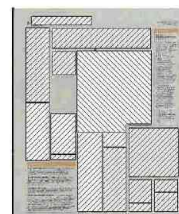
the CD."

If she's wrong there, Skeaping always has another genre of entertainment up her sleeve. Her second band, The Burning Bush, plays Jewish music, worlds away from jigs and Broadside Ballads, but approached on comparable terms. Raucous but scholarly.

"Coming from early music, the kind of repertory we gravitate towards is Sephardic, music of the Jews who were ethnically cleansed from Spain in 1492 and ended up in the old Ottoman world around the eastern Mediterranean. It has an Arabic feel though the words tend to be Castilleian Spanish.

"But on top of that we do Klezmer, which is basically Russian folk music with augmented seconds and an Oi Vey factor – though we do try to give it more serious attention than it usually gets. The trouble with Klezmer is that it got romanticised by Fiddler on the Roof: that 'let's jump in the haycart and play double bass routine that I don't say never happened but was largely the fantasy of Jewish film-makers in the 1940s. We try to get away from that and take it back to its 18th century Ashkenazy origins, which are extremely interesting."

An interesting thing about The Burning Bush is that its wonderfully mixed membership (embracing everything from a jazz clarinettist to an Oxford DPhil who plays accordion and medieval harp) is now, as Skeaping says, "down to no more than 50 per cent Jews. Which is fine. You don't have to be Italian to sing Monteverdi. We've been thinking of changing our name to



Yentil and the Gentiles.”

As a child of Golders Green, though, Skeaping is quite settled in her own Jewish identity.

“It’s why I like this music, why I want to know about it. Golders Green runs deep in my family psyche: my mother lived there for 81 years and loved it, which is why she gave the park that sculpture. But the funny thing is that when my parents downsized

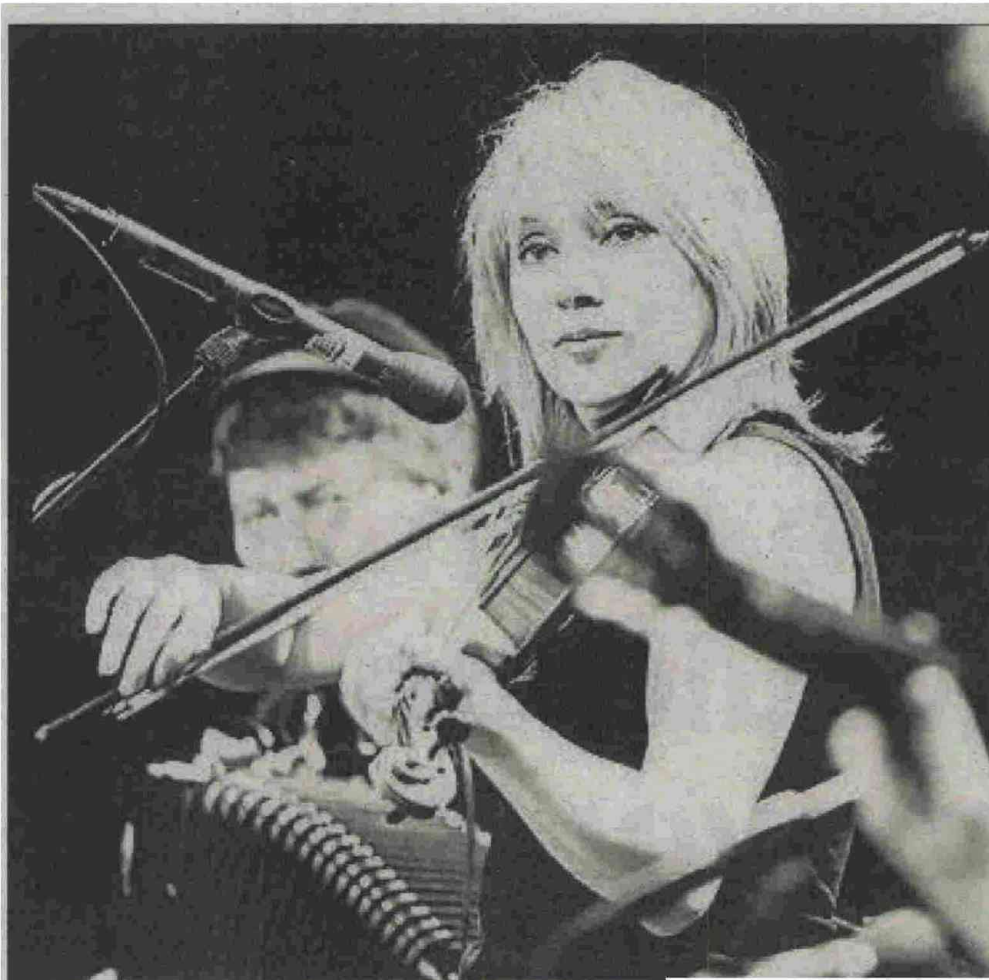
and sold their unnecessarily large house on the Finchley Road, it became a Hindu Cultural Centre.”

Not an obvious venue for a Klezmer evening with The Burning Bush then?

“Maybe not.”

☐ *Lucie Skeaping's new CD, The English Stage Jig, is released this month on Hyperion.*





Lucie Skeaping performing with Burning Bushes, and (right) the painting from the new CD cover. Main picture by the BBC