

REVIEW

**THE GREAT CANADIAN
FIDDLE Springwater #56**

LE VIOLON

Rounder #7002

**CLASSICS OF IRISH,
SCOTTISH, & FRENCH
CANADIAN FIDDLE**

Rounder #7007

Who is to say which fiddlers are better than others? Whenever a discussion begins about Canadian fiddlers, the name of Graham Townsend always comes up, as he seems to exemplify a distinct Canadian style of fiddling. Yet when you listen closely to his records you can hear influences from such diverse sources as Quebec and Ireland. The familiarity of his name is due, in part, to the simple fact that he has produced well over twenty-five albums since his debut on Banff Records in the early 1960's. It is also due to the fact that Graham has established himself as a strong fiddler by winning the Canadian National contest at Shelburne four years in a

row and being one of the youngest fiddlers to place in the top ranks of that contest, placing third in 1953 at the age of eleven! Graham is one of the few fiddlers I know who can rely on fiddling as a sole source of income. And, appropriately, to top all that, Graham is married to the former Eleanor Moorehead, who established herself as the champion woman fiddler of Canada, having won that title at Shelburne in 1967, 1969, 1970, and 1974. In 1975 she became the first woman ever to break into the top three fiddlers in the "Open Class". I once asked Graham what he does in his spare time. His reply was, "Listen to fiddle music." "And besides that?", I enquired further. "Play fiddle music!", he replied. The Townsends are totally devoted to fiddle music!

Of all the records that Graham has put out, the best seem to be the more recent: "The Great Canadian Fiddle" (Springwater #S6) features both Graham and Eleanor as well as Graham's father, Fred; "Le Violon" (Rounder #7002); and, just released, "Classics of Irish, Scottish and French Canadian Fiddling" (Rounder #7007). I would suggest any or all of these later recordings for the person interested in learning more about the regional styles of Canadian fiddling. "The Great Canadian Fiddle" is an attempt at defining these differences with selections that reflect regional as well as ethnic styles (a theme which is repeated from some of Graham's earlier recordings. He cut two records for London's Banff/Rodeo label in the late 'sixties, which consisted of tunes he wrote for each province, and for all of Canada's Prime Ministers, trying to reflect musically the ethnic and



photo: Springwater Productions

geographical proximities of each). Graham admits that his style is a combination of the early influence of Irish music (his first teachers, Tommy McQuestion and Billy Crawford, were both from Ireland) and his early playing experiences with his father for the French Canadian communities' dances and parties. This is evident from the recordings which come across best, I think, on the album, "Green Fields", which reflects the Irish settlement of the Ottawa valley, is peppered with stunning bowing and a real feeling for the Irish style. The addition of the skilled chord-work of Bobby Brown on piano and Maurice Bolyer on tenor banjo give the cut a definite Canadian feel. "Le Reel du Pendu" (The Hangman's Reel) is an obvious tour-de-force, and is used to open side two. Graham plays it slower than

I am used to hearing it played, but the slower tempo accents the strength of his staccato bow-work, and the unique accents and irregular bar groupings of the Quebecois fiddler. "Saint Ann's Reel" is probably one of the most popular of all Canadian fiddle tunes, and here Graham has called it "The Canadian Breakdown", to represent a 'nationwide' selection. It really has the feel of an old-time dance with twin fiddling, banjo and drums, and Fred Townsend calling. It is exactly what you would hear in any small town in Canada. That's what I like about the record in general — its lack of pretentiousness and the fact that it does attempt to define Canadian fiddling, without being lured by the influences of American bluegrass or southern mountain styles.

The album includes: Bowin' the Strings, Red River Jig, Zaporozhets, Green Fields, Lady of the Lake, The Mouth of the Tobique, The Rock Valley Jig, Le Reel du Pendu, The Old Man and the Old Woman, Homeward Bound, The Lonesome Scenes of Winter, Fisher's Hornpipe, Saint Anne's Reel, and a vocal selection with Dorothy Hogan, Country Canada.

The two Rounder releases are similar only in their representation of diverse styles. "Le Violon" was recorded at RCA studios in Toronto with a full back-up of piano, accordion, bass, drums, guitar and pedal steel. The sound quality of the record is excellent and very consistent. The second album is solo fiddle and piano back-up, and was recorded in Boston. My only criticism of "le Violon" is the

attempt to scatter fire, so to speak. The record includes not only Quebec, Irish and down-east styles, but also cuts of southern and Cajun tunes, which are done quite well, but I would rather hear the Balfa Brothers of Louisiana play Cajun music, and hear Graham stick to what I feel he does so well, which is the strong French-Irish influenced fiddling. The Irish, Scottish and French Canadian medleys are dazzling examples of Graham's control and skill on the fiddle. The second album is a much better reflection of what Graham does best, in the grand tradition of the greats like Coleman, Skinner, Allard, Bouchard, and Carignan. These recordings are a complete departure from the twenty-some-odd records he has made previously, which, I feel, are a good testament to the growth of Graham's style, but seem to be more tailored to what he, or perhaps a producer, felt would sell to the general public.

These latest recordings seem to reflect more of a personal commitment to the music, and I would highly recommend any of the three for both the novice or serious collector of fiddle music.

Frank H. Ferrel

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