

Folk review

Niamh Parsons

Purcell Room, London

Rating: ***

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Niamh Parsons is an Irish singer whose career has been transformed since she decided to go solo and concentrate on traditional songs. Her two folk albums have been praised everywhere from Ireland to the USA, where she appeared before President Clinton and the Irish Prime Minister last St Patrick's Day. Appearing on a wet night in the chilly Purcell Room as part of the Folk in the Fall series, Parsons may have been disappointed that the venue was not full, but she never showed it. And she certainly acted as if she were in a small folk venue, stopping before each song to discuss in great detail how and when she had learned it, and at times inviting the audience (unwisely) to join in.

It was not the best setting, and Parsons was clearly tired by the end, but her voice was exceptional, with clear diction and precise phrasing. Much of her repertoire was slow and sad, with Irish ballads mixed with the traditional-sounding The Briar and the Rose ("a Tom Waits song, but you'd never know it"). There were a few upbeat songs to compensate, from the cheerful title track from her first solo album, Blackbirds and Thrushes, to the gently rousing finale, Here's to You.

She's a fine singer, and one who deserves attention far beyond the confines of the folk circuit. But for all that, she's a singer who charms and impresses, but doesn't make the material her own. Her version of the June Tabor favourite, I Wonder What's Keeping My True Love Tonight?, was merely an exercise in exquisite singing. As sung by Tabor, it sounds personal and pained.