

FOXTEL

World/Folk

Womad festival

3 stars Charlton Park, Wiltshire

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English folk music has been given yet another makeover. The man responsible is Simon Emmerson, best known for his work with the Afro Celt Sound System, and his new project sets out to reinterpret traditional songs for a multicultural, 21st-century society with the help of a wide variety of performers, from folk world celebrities Martin and Eliza Carthy and Billy Bragg, to the reggae artist and poet Benjamin Zephaniah and the British Asian singer Sheila Chandra. There is to be an album and tour in the autumn, but first came this world premiere, held in a large tent in a muddy Wiltshire field.

The Imagined Village was surely the most experimental concert at this year's Womad, but seemed like a work in progress, with intriguing set pieces mixed in with more conventional performances. It started as a multimedia event, with the story of those celebrated Sussex singers the Copper Family told through overlong clips on a screen behind the stage, and matched against an overly lush backing involving sitar, cello, electric bass and percussion. Then came a far more rousing section, in which Martin Carthy was joined by Bragg for a stirring treatment of the traditional song John Barleycorn, transformed by Bragg's lyrics on contemporary English identity. The next song was even better, with a gloriously theatrical Zephaniah appearing on the screen to update the story of Tam Lyn, while perfectly in sync with an adventurous musical setting, dominated by the fiddle work of Eliza Carthy.

After that, it all became more ordinary. There were no more multi-media experiments, but some entertaining chat from Bragg, explaining how first hearing Simon and Garfunkel's version of Scarborough Fair "made me feel English". It was unfortunate that the song was not performed by Martin Carthy, who taught it to Paul Simon, but by Chandra, whose sitar-backed treatment brought it an Indian-sounding edge but little more. The finale involved appearances by the Young Coppers (the newcomers in the family dynasty) and a ceilidh knees-up. It was entertaining, but more village planning is required.

Elsewhere, the festival mix ranged from rock (Peter Gabriel) to more folk (Seth Lakeman), and from the cool, sad-edged ballads of Cesaria Evora to the widescreen trumpet and slide guitar ballads of Arizona's Calexico, joined by Spanish singer Amparo Sánchez. Every good Womad has to have a great African newcomer, and Bassekou Kouyate proved once again that his extraordinary n'goni playing echoes anything from blues to jazz improvisation.

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