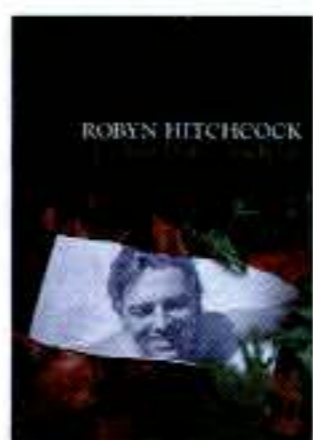


era—satirizing a fictional American sin city devoted to the almighty dollar—accessible to contemporary American audiences. The strategies include using an English-language libretto (via Michael Feingold's translation), employing a kitschy pop cultural set design (including retro Vegas signs and a jumbotron television screen), choreographing stage movements that are closer to Bob Fosse razzle-dazzle than Brechtian theater, and featuring star power from Broadway divas Patti Lupone and Audra McDonald. However, these distractions fail to hide the basic problems inherent to *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which suffers from an uncommonly cumbersome Weill score wrapped around a story that collapses beneath its lethal Marxist cynicism. It also creates an unfortunate circumstance where shtick is used to camouflage a lack of substance. John Doyle's stage direction unwisely allows the actors' costumes to do the performing—Lupone's 1930s gangster moll get-up and McDonald's erotically provocative attire are elaborate, but neither performer conveys the unapologetic venality that drives their respective characters' actions, and their inertia throws the show off-balance, putting a greater burden on Anthony Dean Griffey's broad shoulders in his role as the doomed lumberjack Jimmy. Mercifully, Griffey rises to the occasion, and his transformation from the happy-go-lucky seeker of good times to the friendless condemned prisoner of Mahagonny's climate of greed is a *tour de force* of vibrant acting and rich singing. Presented in DTS, Dolby Digital 5.1, and PCM stereo, DVD extras include an interview with conductor James Conlon, who talks about the opera's significance. An optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (P. Hall)

### Robyn Hitchcock: Sex, Food, Death...and Insects ★★★

(2007) 59 min. DVD: \$24.95. A&E Home Video (avail. from most distributors). ISBN: 1-4229-0649-3.

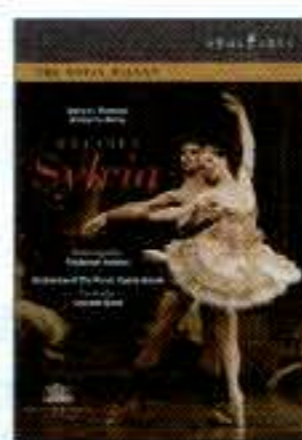


According to the alternative rock icon Robyn Hitchcock, people often say that he "writes about food, sex, and death...with a side order of fish and insects," but Hitchcock himself maintains that "most of my songs, if they're about anything, are about the shock of existence." Fittingly, this Sundance Channel documentary presents a portrait of the artist as a middle-aged man, and while there may be little "shocking" here about this 53-year-old, the film offers an amiable look at a consistently creative artist (Hitchcock has been recording since 1976) with a truckload of talented friends. More like an update or an introduction than a definitive biography, *Robyn Hitchcock: Sex, Food, Death...and Insects* focuses on the making of *Olé! Tarantula* with the Venus 3: Peter Buck (R.E.M.), Scott McCaughey (Minus 5),

and Bill Rieflin (Ministry). Guest musicians include Chris Ballew (Presidents of the United States of America), John Paul Jones (Led Zepelin), Morris Windsor (the Soft Boys), and, briefly, Nick Lowe. Aside from rehearsals in Seattle and West London and live footage from Hoboken, the film also includes archival photos, video clips, and a glimpse of the Nashville sessions for 2004's *Spooked* (with vocalist Gillian Welch). Altogether, the documentary features eight previously unreleased tracks and includes material from Hitchcock's days with the Egyptians, such as "My Wife and My Dead Wife" and "Uncorrected Personality Traits." DVD extras consist of rough solo versions of four songs, unedited interview clips, a rooftop band performance of "Olé! Tarantula," and the video for the rollicking "Adventure Rocket Ship." Recommended. Aud: P. (K. Fennessy)

### Sylvia ★★★★★

(2005) 117 min. DVD: \$32.98 (booklet included). Opus Arte (dist. by Naxos of America).



This 1876 ballet from Léo Delibes (1836-1891)—featuring a plot grounded in classical myth about a shepherd's love for one of Diana's nymphs and the divine forces opposed to their union that are overcome by the power of Eros—may indeed be the stepchild to the composer's more popular *Coppélia* (1870). But *Sylvia* is filled with absolutely delectable music, played here in the full three-act version with verve and affection by the Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden under the sensitive baton of Graham Bond, and superbly presented in DTS and LCPM stereo. Yet, the real glory of this sumptuous 2005 production, a recreation by Christopher Newton of renowned choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton's 1952 staging mounted for the 75th anniversary of the Royal Ballet, is the exquisite dancing of Darcey Bussell in the title role and Roberto Bolle as Aminta, the enamored shepherd. All of the other solo parts are equally well cast, and the corps de ballet does itself proud, while the lovely sets and costumes are nicely captured by the fine BBC camerawork. In fact, it's hard to imagine this wonderful (and unjustly neglected) piece being more persuasively presented. DVD extras include an illustrated synopsis and cast gallery, as well as introductions by Bussell—complete with backstage and rehearsal footage—preceding each act. Highly recommended. **Editor's Choice.** Aud: C, P. (F. Swietek)

### Tony Palmer's Film of Fairport Convention & Matthews' Southern Comfort ★★1/2

(1970) 46 min. DVD: \$19.95. Music Video Distributors (avail. from most distributors).

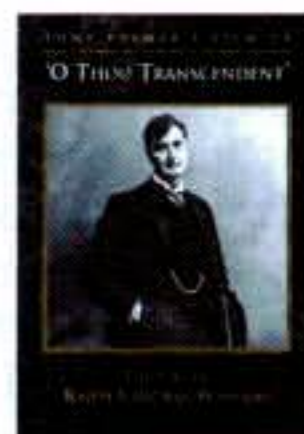
Many would contend that Fairport Convention, the first and foremost English band

to combine rock 'n' roll with traditional folk elements, did its best work with singer Sandy Denny (including 1969's *Liege & Lief*, considered a genre landmark). Others, however, might argue that the Fairport lineup following Denny's departure, with guitarists Richard Thompson and Simon Nicol, violinist Dave Swarbrick, drummer Dave Mattacks, and bassist Dave Pegg, was their finest, at least from an instrumental standpoint. This concert from the 1970 Maidstone Fiesta festival, captured by noted British filmmaker Tony Palmer, is billed as the only film record of that quintet, which helps overcome some quite considerable shortcomings—namely, bad sound (poorly mixed, shrill, and grating) and worse visuals (the camera's almost constant tendency to focus on the wrong guy during solo spots is only one of the problems). The performances themselves, however, are good, with much of the material drawn from 1970's *Full House*, the lineup's sole album together. Swarbrick and Thompson play swift unison lines on a couple of jigs and reels, while "Jenny's Chickens & The Mason's Apron" starts out at a breakneck pace and only gets faster, and "Sir Patrick Spens" and "Now Be Thankful" find the band doing its best to make up for the absence of Denny's voice. The film also features two appealing offerings from Matthews' Southern Comfort, fronted by singer Ian Matthews, himself a former Fairporter. DVD extras include an interview with Palmer. Despite the technical limitations, this is a strong optional purchase. Aud: C, P. (S. Graham)



### Tony Palmer's Film of 'O Thou Transcendent': The Life of Ralph Vaughan Williams ★★1/2

(2007) 148 min. DVD: \$25.98. Isolde Films (dist. by Naxos of America).



Tony Palmer continues his series of exemplary musical documentaries with this portrait of Ralph Vaughan Williams, a 20th-century British composer who's often thought of as a romantic reactionary, an avuncular throwback known for his sweet-sounding versions of folk songs and magisterial church works. On the contrary, Palmer argues—Vaughan Williams was a highly complex and troubled individual whose music reflected not only unorthodox religious views but also a dark, pessimistic vision of humankind rooted in his own experience of war and marital discord. As usual with Palmer's films, the sheer amount of material (nearly two-and-a-half hours' worth) is remarkable. In addition to archival photos and footage, the film features a well-chosen collection of old (presumably radio) voiceovers from the composer himself, together with substantial