

STEPHEN DUFFY

Music In Colors

(Parlophone/All formats)

ONCE MORE, the man who could have been Simon Le Bon floats his kaleidoscopic array of fragile gossamer-pop kites out from a blustery English hillside in another well-meaning attempt to stir the hearts of an underwhelmed public. No Lilac Time behind him any more, so a certain 'Doctor' Nigel Kennedy steps in with string arrangements and instrumental bridges between songs.

But wait! Amazingly, this is no trip to Crossover Hell via Pretentious City but a mellifluous marriage of chamber music ambience and deft tunesmithery which never sounds forced or gimmicky. Kennedy's gliding strings are totally integrated and integral, giving body and momentum to wispy confections like former single 'Natalie' and even providing the one rock'n'roll moment in a sprawling tangle of noise called, ahem, 'Transitoire VI'.

The author, meanwhile, ambles into ever more wistful pastures where everything besides the title track's majestic melancholy seems oddly non-committal.

'Music In Colors' was composed in idyllic Malvern country and sounds like it: gently rolling terrain, no sharp edges or sudden surprises, all watercolour washes rather than bold expressionist strokes. Duffy's disconnected wordplay and aloof musing may yet be his undoing, but he drops enough gems here to scrape by ("*the passing years leave vapour trails*") and is doubtless a whizz at crosswords.

Elsewhere, we find echoes of Nick Drake, Prefab Sprout's Paddy McAloon and Syd Barrett, all of which makes the title's Americanised spelling somewhat bizarre. Nevertheless, Duffy has stuck his boil-free neck out and made another classy pop record which his minuscule public will quietly cherish. As the 'Doctor' himself would say: monster wicked geezer, mumsy. (7)

Stephen Dalton