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On In My Prime, Niamh Parsons delivers a gift of a dozen ballads, including old ones such as "Lakes of Coolfin," "Bold Doherty," and "Black Is the Colour" and new ones written in the old style by Andy Stewart, Alan Bell, and Sean McCarthy. Parsons, who was the singer with the traditional Celtic bands

Arcady and Loose Connections, has opted for a simple, unadorned backup for these songs, all of which are sung in English. She remembers ballads are sung stories and that too many instruments can get in the way of telling the tale. Parsons's dusky alto sounds particularly fine on "In My Prime," an a cappella duet with her sister Anne Parsons-Dunne, and "Annan Waters," which she performs as a solo without accompaniment. In the past, songs like these were sung without backup, and because there are no instruments to offer support or to cover mistakes, they are the ultimate test of the traditional singer's craft. The singing of Niamh Parsons passes the test with full marks.

--Michael Simmons