

How I got here: Playing it cool

Name: Máiréad Nesbitt

Education: Waterford Institute of Technology and Cork School of Music initially; London Royal Academy and Trinity College Dublin for postgraduate work

Occupation: Musician

In the news for: A former All-Ireland fiddle champion, Nesbitt plays fiddle with Celtic Woman alongside four young Irish female vocalists. They perform traditional Irish songs, works by contemporary artists and new compositions by musical director David Downes. Their latest CD A New Journey has just entered the US billboard charts at number four and their DVD A New Journey: Live At Slane Castle has entered the music video charts at number two (second only to Madonna). They are currently on their fifth US tour.

Where did you grow up?

I was born in Loughmore, Co Tipperary and went to a tiny primary school where there were only eight or nine of us in the classes. It meant we got almost individual attention. Then I went on to the Ursuline Convent in Thurles.

Did you enjoy school?

My favourite subject was English — I was a good enough student but I was a bit of a tomboy in those days.

What was your first paying job?

When I was 12 I started 'warming up' fiddles for a dealer called Tommy Robinson. I'd take them for two months or so before he could sell them. I used to get very attached to them and hated having to hand them back.

When did you start playing music?

I started playing the fiddle when I was six. My parents, sister and brothers all played — it was like walking and breathing to us.

What did you do after school?

I went to Waterford Institute of Technology and then Cork School of Music. From there, I went on to study violin and piano in London. I'd been in the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland and when I came back from London I joined the RTÉ Concert Orchestra for a while.

When did you get your break?

When I started solo performing. I worked with many high-profile artists such as Van Morrison and I was the original fiddle player for Lord of the Dance. Celtic Woman began about a year and a half ago for me and it has snowballed. What's unusual is that we all get to do solos — the instrumentalist is equal to the singer. This means I get to perform solo but be part of a group. It's the best of both worlds.

Who would you say influenced the course of your career most?

My parents — I wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't for them. I was never pushed into a career in music. In fact, they advised me to think long and hard about it before committing. But one of my first memories is of playing fiddle with my mum and thinking I'd never be as good as her. I loved playing with her — it's a form of communication when you play with someone you are close to. It becomes almost telepathic.

What was the best career advice you've ever received?

That there is no substitute for doing the thing you love doing most. The trick is to find out what that is.

What was your most embarrassing moment?

I like to move around a lot on stage and there tends to be a few costume malfunctions. The other night I jumped a bit too energetically and ripped a seam in my corset!

What has been the highlight of your career so far?

Playing Carnegie Hall in New York and Red Rocks in Colorado.

If you were to change career, what would you do?

I'd probably have studied law or maybe I'd have been an athlete.

Interview by Hilary Fennell

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