

# Role Models: Máiréad Nesbitt

## Goddess of Fiery Hope

by Suzann Kale

You're watching a live performance of Celtic Woman's, A New Journey, and your heart is already in your throat. It's trying to leap out of your mouth and dance with the angelic sopranos from Ireland. Suddenly, your heart simply stops - Máiréad has landed.

Standing in the spotlight upstage center, wearing a gown woven from stardust, the wispy little seraph raises her violin bow up to the sky in a gesture of strength and determination.

The breathtaking sight lasts only a moment. Máiréad does not stand still. Before you're able to take in your next breath, she is off, floating around the stage and playing her fiddle, with her luminous golden hair flowing behind her. She may be barefoot, she may be dancing in 4-inch sandals. And as she plays her fiddle, her smile warms not only the musicians around her, but also the audience all the way to the top mezzanine's back row.

It's not the old "men love her and women want to be her" thing. It's instant and non-negotiable: Everybody simply loves her.

If you can't get to a live Celtic Woman show, PBS often carries their performances. And now there are DVDs to rent or buy. But be prepared. The five singers and their fiddle player - Chloë Agnew, Lynn Hilary, Lisa Kelly, Órla Fallon, Alex Sharpe, and Máiréad - will take you on a journey from which you will never return. Out of choice.

The Celtic Woman journey is one of hope; respect for the past and hope for the future; a journey of lives weaving together in song-story, and people bonding together in love. And the radical optimism of this possibility happening all over the world.

This love-journey, I must add, includes the awesome hunk of a drummer who tours with them, another percussionist (probably a hunk too, but I couldn't see him from where I was sitting), guitarists, pianists, John O'Brien playing Uilleann Pipes and whistles, background singers, and the audience. We're all in this together.

When Celtic Woman performs Sing Out , it's as if there is a new, powerful voice in this world; a voice of hope - no, a voice confident about hope. The Celtic Woman voice is a strong, spine-tingling antidote to all the darkness in the world.

"Sing a new song to the world!

Let your voice be heard, go and bring the word!

This whole world was meant to be, for you as well as me...  
For humanity..." \*

Sometimes on stage Máiréad raises her bow to announce her presence, to begin a new song, or to signal the other musicians. To me, she's raising her bow to tell the world that she is the goddess of hope, and that her powers are strong. I can almost see rays of supernatural light emanating from the top of her bow out to the sky and circling the world.

**Who is this woman?**

Actually, you may have seen her in other venues. She played her fiddle in three world tours of Lord of the

Dance, Feet of Flames, and had toured with the Afro-Celt Sound System. She played on the original soundtrack of Riverdance, and has her own band as well.

Máiréad is proficient at both classical violin and traditional Irish fiddle. And, of course, she dances, laughs, flirts with the drummer, and leaps into the air, all while playing. And she composes. But she worked hard to be able to do all this and make it look easy!

Born into a large family of musicians in Loughmore, County Tipperary in Ireland, Máiréad began playing violin when she was 6. She won the All-Ireland fiddle championship, and studied music at the Ursuline Convent in Thurles, The Waterford Institute of Technology, and the Cork School of Music. But she wasn't finished perfecting her art. She completed post graduate work at the Royal Academy of Music in London, and at London Trinity College. Her teachers told her not to try to learn both classical and traditional violin, but Máiréad went with her heart, and mastered both. Highly unusual in the world of violin.

### **Factoids**

Máiréad's first professional gig was with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra in 1991.

She won Irish Music Magazine's Best Traditional Female player in 2003.

She made a secret visit to Dublin in 2004 to play privately for HRH Princess Anne.

2004 was also the year she first played for Celtic Woman. This was at the Helix Theatre in Dublin. She's been with Celtic Woman ever since - but somehow her energy level is so high she manages to play with other groups and shows.

Her first solo album is called "Raining Up," in which she displays her wide range of playing styles and composing techniques.

On her website, Máiréad says of her performances, "I like things to be very exciting and fiery but I like it to be ... controlled as well. ... It could be spontaneous but it has to be delivered in a certain way, to make it sound easy to other people."

On the front page of the program is a silhouette of Máiréad against a huge full moon. Her fiddle is under her chin and her bow is raised, as if she's about to start playing. Or perhaps she's about to begin orchestrating the stars and planets - it could go either way. She defines a strength that can only come from femininity: It's strength combined with beauty, confidence, compassion, determination, hard work...and the knowledge that hope exists. That's what Máiréad's silhouette against the moon says to me.