

# Female Irish Folk Band Stays Busy Year-Round

March 17, 2010

The whirling dervish of the group is Celtic Woman's fiddling Máiréad Nesbitt.

By Kevin Wingert

On this one day of days, everyone lays claim to Irish blood - if only in spirit.

But every day, millions embrace the most easily recognizable ambassadors of music hailing from the Emerald Isle: Celtic Woman.

"I think when you're very passionate - this music is the ultimate communicator - it doesn't matter what background you're from (this music will connect to you)," said Máiréad Nesbitt.

Máiréad Nesbitt and the other women of Celtic Woman recently released a CD and live DVD concert "Songs from the Heart."

They are touring through North America in support of the new album. The closest their show comes to Cheyenne is Salt Lake City. But after a stint abroad, they'll make another swing through the U.S. in the fall - leaving open the possibility of a stop in Colorado.

You may recognize Máiréad more for her stage presence than her name. She's the whirling dervish on stage who leaps and pirouettes as if possessed. And, somehow, she improbably keeps her fiddle on key amid the frenzied dancing.

"It's not something I've ever really thought about," said Máiréad, when asked about her coordination on stage. "It's something that comes very naturally to me. It makes sense with the music."

"Twirling or jumping through the air, I don't even put that much thought into it - it's just something I've always done."

She said certain chords make it easier than others to dance while playing. The key is for her to keep the twin, the bow and arm all on a constant playing level, no matter what the movement. She's had plenty of practice, first picking up the fiddle at age 6.

She's quick to point out that her grace on stage does not extend elsewhere, though.

"I keep bumping into things ... if there's something like a shelf, especially at head level, I always bang my head," she said. "But I don't bruise, thank God."

Asked whether she was the rare violinist who played fiddle or the equally rare fiddle player who learned the violin, Máiréad laughed.

"Both - I'm both. I've been both since I started," she said. "It's a great way to be - it's very important to be flexible in what you do and to be versatile."

She put in years of training to hone both skills.

"It's not easy, but I have a passionate love for music," Máiréad said. "(In my family), we were brought up living and breathing and walking in music."

She has developed her playing into a unique and seamless hybrid of the two styles. The end result is an

amalgamation of classical and traditional elements with, at times, unorthodox phrasing and improvisation.

Of course, Máiréad is just one ingredient in the recipe that makes up Celtic Woman. Five women take the stage backed by an impressive band, orchestra and choral group. The current lineup has Máiréad joined by Chloë Agnew, Lisa Kelly, Lynn Hilary and Alex Sharpe.

Each member has maintained a solo career in addition to their work with the group.

Máiréad Nesbitt has appeared on numerous albums and even played lead fiddle in Michael Flatley's "Lord of the Dance" prior to her work with Celtic Woman. Her first solo album, "Raining Up," was released in early 2006. She also was recorded as the featured soloist in Disney's "Tinker Bell" soundtrack and motion picture and its sequel "Tinker Bell: The Lost Treasure."

"We all have our own solo CDs and Web sites, but Celtic Woman, for each of us, is a huge priority and keeps us busy for six to seven months of our lives every year," Nesbitt said.

With "Songs From the Heart," Celtic Woman has brought together an eclectic mix of traditional Irish pieces, combined with music from further afield.

It even has a cover of "When You Believe" from the "Prince of Egypt" soundtrack and Sting's "Fields of Gold."

The common denominator of the music?

"They're given the Celtic Woman treatment with the arrangements and our sound and blend," Máiréad said. "They really are songs from the heart - they're songs that mean something important to all of us individually."