

Celtic Woman Returns To Van Andel Arena

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GRAND RAPIDS -- When Celtic Woman returns to Van Andel Arena next week, amid the soaring voices of the four singers will be a petite fiddler, Máiréad Nesbitt, flitting around the stage like a like a fairy, alighting here and there, her bow whipping across her instrument like the flutter of wings.

"Any of the movements I do make sense to me with the music," Máiréad said from a recent tour stop in Madison, Wisc. "It wouldn't be as easy to do if it didn't make sense. I grew up in a musical family so playing music is second nature, like breathing or walking."

Founding member who's been touring and recording with Celtic Woman since 2004, Máiréad said she started playing piano at age 4, added the violin at age 6, and then other stringed instruments.

"My mother is an amazing fiddle player, and I wanted to communicate with her on that level," she said. "When I play with my family, it's almost telepathy. You know what they are thinking, what song they will play next. I gravitated to the violin because I wanted to play with my mother."

Máiréad uses the terms fiddle and violin almost interchangeably. She says the instrument is the same, but the technique is different.

"In classical music, it's called a violin. A fiddle is faster, more bright. But I play lots of different styles. Musicality is not something you learn, it's something you have or you don't have. But you can learn technique. Technique propels the musicality. Technique is important to me."

Tuesday's performance will feature the same cast as last year -- original members Chloë Agnew and Lisa Kelly as well as newer members Lynn Hilary and Alex Sharpe. The current tour, "Songs of the Heart," is named for the group's fifth album that debuted at No. 9 on the Billboard 200 and No. 1 on the Billboard World Music chart. The ladies' ethereal singing style has sold more than 5 million albums.

"We love to be doing what we love," Máiréad said, adding the group is on tour about six months a year. "When we're home, we love that. When we're in America, we love that. We have the best of both worlds."

The current show includes crowd favorites such as "You Raise Me Up," "Orinoco Flow" and the group's haunting a cappella "Oh, Danny Boy." The song list also features some from the new album, including "Galway Bay," "My Lagan Love" and "The Moon's Harsh Mistress." The show also will feature a new arrangement of "Amazing Grace" that opens with bagpiper Anthony Byrne.

"It's such a powerful instrument," Máiréad said. "It's a great addition to Celtic Woman."

Máiréad has several fiddle solos, including "Granuailes Dance," an arrangement by music director David Downes, a former music director for the Irish show "Riverdance." She also plays solo on "The Coast of Galicia," celebrating Celtic people all over the world.

"We always want to make the show better and better, because we know people are spending their hard-earned money to come. We want them leaving really happy," Máiréad said.

It's not easy living out of a suitcase, she said, but she loves interacting with the audience. "It's great to be an inspiration to a youngster who is taking up the violin or fiddle," she said.

Children sometimes call her Tinker Bell for her fairy-like qualities, Máiréad said. It is oddly appropriate since Máiréad plays the Joel McNeely score on two "Tinker Bell" videos, including the new release,

"Tinker Bell and the Lost Treasure."

"It's a dream come true," she said. "The score uses all my different ways of playing."

Máiréad debuted McNeeley's "Tinker Bell Suite" on New Year's Eve with the Bernie Symphony in Switzerland. She said she hopes to do more work with symphonies.

"I want to keep doing different things. It makes you practice and keeps you fresh. You never stop learning." Celtic Woman has been called "'Riverdance' for the voice," which isn't too surprising since many current Celtic entertainment acts are related to the immensely popular Irish dance show that burst onto the scene in 1994. Here are a few of the connections:

Riverdance

Originally presented at the Eurovision Dance Contest, the show featured dance champions Michael Flatley and Jean Butler. It soon became an international phenomenon. David Downes, who formed Celtic Woman, was music director for Riverdance when it appeared on Broadway. Celtic Woman singers Lisa Kelly and Lynn Hilary also were vocalists with Riverdance tours.

Lord of the Dance

The first show to flow out of "Riverdance" was created by Michael Flatley in 1996. Celtic Woman violinist Máiréad Nesbitt was violinist for the original "Lord of the Dance" productions and moved with Flatley in 1998 to "Feet of Flames." "Lord of the Dance" continues to be his most famous creation. A tour stops May 4 in DeVos Performance Hall.

Celtic Woman

Created by David Downes, Sharon Browne and David Kavanagh in 2004 as a celtic/pop crossover group, the original lineup included Chloë Agnew, Lisa Kelly, Orla Fallon, Méav Ni Mhaolchata and fiddler Máiréad Nesbitt. Alex Sharpe and Lynn Hillary have replaced Fallon and Mhaolchata.

Celtic Thunder

Sharon Browne, who no longer is associated with Celtic Woman, joined forces with composer Phil Coulter to produce a more theatrical male singing group, with Paul Byrom, George Donaldson, Keith Harkin, Ryan Kelly and Damian McGinty, which debuted in 2007.

High Kings

In 2008, Downes formed an Irish ballad group with the descendants of popular ballad groups of the '60s -- Finbar Clancy, Brian Dunphy, Martin Furey and Darren Holden.