

Celtic Woman Brings Songs From The Heart

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The Celtic Woman Live In Concert ads sure don't tell the whole story.

They show five beautiful women, four of them vocalists, one a dynamic fiddler. Like me, you may have assumed that was it: the five essentials on tour, with maybe a little accompaniment. I wasn't expecting the thrilling male and female chorus as on their PBS television specials, the vast tempo-setting orchestra or the Broadway-esque stage settings.

Well, I spoke with fiddler Máiréad Nesbitt this week, and I was wrong. They are bringing the whole shebang to Saint John's Harbour Station on Monday and to the Moncton Coliseum on Wednesday. The performance includes the choir, which moves as if choreographed by a young Busby Berkeley, and the band, with its rows of drums, big and small. Attendees will also hear the sound of bodhrans, a grand piano, guitars, mandolins, percussion, bagpipes and their Florenz Ziegfeld-like staging.

"Oh, yes, we bring our custom-built stage on the road," said Máiréad, who seems to glide on invisible wings, feet scarcely touching the stage when she performs. "But if there's one that's adequate at venues we use them. It saves hours of set up and take down."

Songs From the Heart is a show with all the overwhelming grandeur of Riverdance or Lord Of The Dance but focused on dynamic voices, not fast-stepping feet. Although, Máiréad will supply a lot of that Irish concert staple along with her fantastic fiddling.

As one ardent fan twittered: "They should study Máiréad for an alternative source of energy. What she generates in a concert would light New York City! Whether it's her dazzling solos as in The Coast Of Galicia or her moving The Lost Rose Of Fantasia or her funny motions during The Mason's Apron, there is no way you can't be astounded and amazed by her."

He's so right.

"I grew up in a house literally surrounded by music," Máiréad said. "My father John is a musician, my mother Kathleen fiddles and both teach music. And my mother now is the adjudicator of the All-Ireland Fleadh fiddling competitions. I won the over-15 class in it when I was only 15."

I told her about Fredericton's Kathleen Gorey-McSorley, 15, whose win in a New York competition recently gave her entry into this year's all-Ireland over-15 class at County Cavan.

"Oh," she said, with genuine interest, "I'll ask my mother to post me how she makes out."

I inquired how the concept for Celtic Woman came about.

"That's all it was," she said, "a concept. The five of us ... none of us had ever met before ... we were invited to do a one-night concert being filmed in a Dublin theatre. That was it, we thought. But a few months later, after the show aired on PBS Television, we got phone calls. How would we like to work together, do TV specials, tour the world, make recordings? Now it's like we're a family, like sisters, even though a couple of the originals have dropped out for various reasons and been replaced."

"We're all relatively young but there's some age difference. Chloë Agnew was only 15 then, but was already an acclaimed vocal talent. I was just a few years older. Lisa Kelly was about 27, she had trained in classical voice, piano and drama. She starred in a musical version of Bugsy Malone when she was only seven and had won drama and singing awards. She was with Riverdance for four years. The other two are replacements in the last couple of years. Lynn Hilary, our featured soprano, is also a guitarist and songwriter, and Alex Sharpe is a wonderful lead with acting experience."

She said each of them has a say when it comes to repertoire and their musical director David Downes puts it all in perspective. She said he is a big part of Celtic Woman's success.

"I guess our greatest thrill so far came late last year when we were asked to perform for President Obama," she said. "It was for the national tree-lighting ceremony just before Christmas, in front of the White House in Washington. It was such an honour for us to realize that the president and his family had heard our music and wanted us to perform for them."

Máiréad just returned to Ireland last Saturday from Australia, where she and the others were making TV and radio appearances and setting up advertising for a fall tour Down Under. This year's tour schedule is an extended one in support of its new release, *Songs From The Heart*, the group's fifth CD and DVD which debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard World Music Chart, No. 9 on Billboard's Top 200 Chart and No. 16 on the Top Current Album Chart in Canada, according to Nielsen SoundScan. In addition, the companion live concert DVD hit No. 1 on both the Canadian and U.S. DVD charts. Their new DVD is already certified gold in Canada and the CD is not far behind.

Breathtaking describes any of the many videos on their website. That's what fans can expect next week at the Celtic Woman's Saint John and Moncton concerts. Although the name suggests an all-Irish songfest, Celtic Woman has found success in both Irish and popular genres. If anything, they have steadily been carving out a unique niche in adult contemporary world music with their signature style.

But with those five women onstage, no matter how diverse the repertoire, a breath of Ireland pervades it all.

Their success can be measured by the number of their recordings that have climbed both Billboard and World Music Charts. No other all-female ensemble of this rare genre twinning can claim five million albums sold, two top-10 album debuts on Billboard's Top-200, including three gold and platinum albums, four top-five releases on Billboard's Top Video chart and over a million concert tickets sold. All this has been accomplished by connecting directly to fans via Public Television specials and with almost no commercial radio or TV airplay.

This 2010 tour is Celtic Woman's most dazzling production yet. The song choices move seamlessly between such contemporary covers and originals as Jimmy Webb's *The Moon's A Harsh Mistress*, Billy Joel's *Goodnight My Angel*, a gospel song *Amazing Grace* with world-champion bagpiper Anthony Byrne, and such Irish classics as *My Lagan Love*, *Galway Bay*, and a new favourite *Níl Sé'n Lá*. *Included* is an original composition, *Songs From The Heart*, written as the theme for this tour.