

Máiréad Nesbitt -- Fiddle Fusion

Cindy Reich interviews Celtic Woman's aesthetic barefoot fiddler
(published in September 2010 Celtic Connection)

Ethereal women in gossamer dresses float around the stage, singing beautiful songs. That is the quintessential definition of the Celtic Woman experience. That is, until a blond firecracker explodes onto the stage, fiddle in motion, scattering all in her wake. Máiréad Nesbitt is the match that ignites the Celtic Woman flame. She provides an astonishing visual picture, racing around the stage, stopping to jam with the back line of musicians, or dancing like a dervish while fiddling so furiously it's a wonder the fiddle doesn't burst into flames.

While one may be mesmerized with her combination of dancing and fiddling, it would be entirely understandable if her fiddle chops were simplistic—however, her fiddle playing is superb, and no wonder. Máiréad grew up in a very musical family—her sister, four brothers and both parents are musicians. Although classically trained, Máiréad also embraces traditional music just as fiercely.

Máiréad is currently on tour with Celtic Woman in the USA and will be performing with them at Red Rocks Amphitheater in Morrison on September 12. Máiréad “spoke” with me via email from the road: I asked her which she prefers more—playing classical music or playing trad. She first came onto my radar as a traditional musician when she was playing with Donal Lunny’s show “Sult—Spirit Of the Music” in 1996 or so..

“I love playing both styles”, Máiréad replied, “I started the violin and fiddle at 6 years of age, and split the two disciplines in my head.” (She even uses a different bow-hold for each style to keep them separate in her mind) “This was very important as I was determined to be as good as possible in both genres before using some elements of both in my style.”

Dancing and playing the fiddle simultaneously is a common style of playing in Cape Breton. For many, the fiddler Natalie Mac Master may come to mind when one thinks of that method of playing.. I asked Máiréad if she had to work at this style, which is not typical for Irish fiddle players, or did it come naturally?

“I never thought or think consciously about my movements when I play. I think and feel the music first and foremost. It is a natural thing for me to move, as I feel my most free when I play. I never do formal steps like what is the tradition for the fiddle players in Cape Breton. I just move when I want and change whatever I want to change.”

I was curious as to how Nesbitt kept it fresh and fun every night while on tour. Her energy is infectious and she truly projects joy in what she does each performance. So how does she keep it fresh?

“I am very passionate about my playing and music in general,” responded Nesbitt. “I absolutely love what I do and it never gets tired for me. The audience every night is different, therefore the energy and performance is different every night. This keeps it fresh and spontaneous!”

While Máiréad has many and varied influences in her musical history, from Andy McGann to Itzhak Perlman, I asked her if there are any young up and comers who have caught her eye?

“There are a lot of influences that have inspired me and lots of musicians, singer/songwriters and bands that have been very stimulating, for me as a musician. Of the established and famous players today, I’m a huge fan of David Garrett—I think he is a stunning player. Chris Thile is another amazing player and I find his talent astounding. There are also lots of really young players in Ireland making their mark as artists on a world stage. Karl Nesbitt, my brother has inspired me so much and composed the title track of my album, “Raining Up”. He is one of the most talented multi-instrumentalists in Ireland today.

Tell us a little bit about “Raining Up”.

“Raining Up” is my solo album”, Máiréad replied. “I had a great time preparing and recording it and really need to do another album! This will definitely happen soon! “Raining Up” is the title track, composed by Karl, as I said”. “The title was inspired by seeing the evaporation of the water from the Atlantic Ocean from the Cliffs of Moher in Clare, Ireland. This is like seeing droplets of water going up to the sky, hence the title, “Raining Up”.

“It was produced by Manus Lunny. I am very lucky to have some of the best musicians in Ireland and Scotland playing on it, counting also my mother, Kathleen, my sister Frances, and two of my brothers, Sean and Karl. Karl

and I wrote some of the music as did Colm O'Foghlu, a young composer from Ireland. I just wanted to touch off my favorite styles of playing and was really happy that it was recognized by the Billboard World Music Charts!"

Colorado's altitude and climate provide many daunting challenges to both performers and their instruments. I asked Máiréad if running around the stage at a mile high causes any difficulties for her? Also, how does her violin handle the dryness of our climate?

"Well, it is tough going!" admitted Máiréad. "But Red Rocks is such a beautiful place and it's really humbling to look out at such an awesome place while playing on stage. It is my favorite place to play and we will be ending our tour there".

"The dry climate for the fiddle is really damaging and that's combated with dampits which are snake-like sponges that go into the F-holes of the violin. This helps the wood of the violin not to dry out and prevents cracks that would be very damaging to the violin and to the sound". "Instruments in general have to deal with different challenges now compared to what they would have had to deal with 300 years ago when my violin was made. Air conditioning is the main culprit and changed climatic conditions. I have to make sure damage is minimal or none at all."

What are you listening to right now on your iPod?

"I'm listening to Miles Kennedy, Alter Bridge, Blackbird; Gabriel Kahane, Delusion Road, David Garrett, Rock Symphonies, Karl Nesbitt, Vista Point".

Who picks the tunes that you play? Does David (Downes, musical director of Celtic Woman) pick them or do you have input?

"David Downes is our music director and composer of Celtic Woman. He picks the music and knows each one of us really well. We have a certain amount of input but the responsibility of actually picking the music rests with David. It is really great that David and Celtic Woman have been nominated for an Emmy for "Best Musical Direction!"

Finally, I asked Máiréad if she ever steps down the road and sits in on a good session when she is home?

"Yes, I do!" "There is a session that my brothers play in if I'm home and its fantastic to meet up with them and play with them!"

The extended "Songs from the Heart" tour will end in Denver, Sunday September 12 at Red Rocks Amphitheatre, featuring vocalists Chloë Agnew, Lynn Hilary, Lisa Kelly, fiddler Máiréad Nesbitt and orchestra. Buy tickets at www.LIVENATION.com www.celticwoman.com