

'Twas only an Irishman's dream come true

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Bucking a torrential downpour and a Yankees-Angels playoff game cancelled belatedly in the Bronx, "If It Wasn't for the Irish and the Jews" still managed to draw a full house to Manhattan's Peter Norton Symphony Space on Sat., Oct. 24. Conceived, directed, and hosted by Mick Moloney, this concert celebrating Irish and Jewish musical links during the vaudeville and early Tin Pan Alley era was simply too appealing to ignore, and the performances exceeded expectations.



CEOL Earle Hitchner
letters
@irishecho.com

First out on stage were Moloney, harmonizers Susan McKeown and John Roberts, uilleann pipes, whistle, and flute player Jerry O'Sullivan, button accordionist Billy McComiskey, pianist Donna Long, and a string quartet led by Dana Lyn on viola with Athena Tergis and Liz Hanley on violins and Alex Waterman on cello. The song they performed was "Mother Malone," a staple of vaudeville's McNulty Family from 1936, and several step-dancers from the Niall O'Leary School of Irish Dance came out to perform.

The next song was another covered by the McNulty Family, "Along the Rocky Road to Dublin," and following it was a John O'Brien and Al Dubin song, "'Twas Only an Irishman's Dream." They, too, featured an expertly complementary string quartet arrangement from Dana Lyn, whose talent as an Irish traditional and Oberlin-trained classical musician is now converging with breathtaking strength. (I'll be reviewing her 2009 all-classical CD with tenor guitar and mandolin player Rob Moose in an upcoming "Ceol" column.)

Those three songs got the night off to a potent start in a concert that was both entertaining and edifying. Between songs Moloney spoke eloquently about their history and composers, often with large images projected on a back screen. He even tucked in a funny, fairly contemporary Irish-Jewish song, "Shirley Levine," sung just by him with Athena Tergis backing on fiddle.

Vince Giordano's Nighthawks added their distinctive vintage-jazz touch on brass, woodwinds, and strings, with Dana Lyn on fiddle, to an even earlier period song, Harrigan and Braham's "The Mulligan Guards," as well



A memorable night in Manhattan.

Concert organizer and host Mick Moloney.



Leader of the Nighthawks: Vince Giordano.



Seen here with Baltimore's Hedge Band, pianist Donna Long (far right) and button accordionist Billy McComiskey also performed at Symphony Space.

humored giggles bubbled up from the audience at the line "Without the Pats and Isadores, we'd have no big department stores."

The second half of the concert opened with Leonia, N.J., cantor Kerith Spencer-Shapiro accompanied by pianist Joyce Rosenzweig. The wife of Washington Square Harp and Shamrock Orchestra flutist Scott Spencer, who was one of the recording engineers for the 2004 CD "Live at Mona's," Kerith spoke briefly about her own Jewish-Irish lineage and then deftly sang three songs in Yiddish, the last featuring Dana Lyn on fiddle, an instrument popular in both musical traditions.

Also in the second half, the Washington Square Harp and Shamrock Orchestra, founded nine years ago by Mick Moloney, performed a medley of barn-dances and a reel with genial spirit, and they were eventually joined by some stepdancers.

Dana Lyn's string quartet meshed skillfully again with Moloney, McKeown, Roberts, McComiskey, O'Sullivan, and Long on the wistful "The Old Bog Road" and "Maloney Puts His Name Above the Door," a 1930 hit for the Waterford-born Flanagan Brothers in America.

A spotlight treat was Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks' stirring rendition of Irving Berlin's 1911 composition "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

Just as memorable were the bouncy Irish war anthem "Faugh a Ballagh" and the joyful, jaunty song "There's a Typical Tipperary Over Here," both propelled by Giordano's Nighthawks.

The encore became a virtual audience sing-along, "Has Anybody Here Seen Kelly?" It was a fun, fitting close to a concert replete with wit, fascinating cultural history, and outstanding musicianship, all neatly integrated for optimal enjoyment.

This now makes two concerts organized by Mick Moloney that have sold out Symphony Space. (The previous one, "Irish Musicians for the Mercy Centre," was a special benefit performance held on Oct. 12, 2008.) That's an extraordinary achievement during a long, deep recession.

Kudos to Mick Moloney and the Irish Arts Center, which produced the Oct. 24 concert, for an inspired evening of music and speculation about "what would this great Yankee nation really really ever do / if it wasn't for a Levy, a Monahan, or Donohue."

Irish-Jewish link in sold-out Symphony Space

as to two songs expressing anti-theoretical viewpoints on WWI, "When You Come Back and You Will Come Back" and "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier." The first was written by George M. Cohan in 1917,

and the second was composed by Alfred Bryan and Al Piantadosi in 1915. That two-year difference between songs marked the difference between American isolationism and militarism spurred by the sinking of the

Lusitania off the Cork coast.

"If It Wasn't for the Irish and the Jews," a song written in 1912 by Jean Schwartz and William Jerome (real surname: Flannery), concluded the concert's first half, and a few good-

Connollys in Connecticut

The father and daughter duo of Mattie and Deirdre Connolly will be giving a house concert at 8 p.m. on Sat., Nov. 7, in Fairfield, Conn.

Born in New York but raised in Scitstown, Co. Monaghan, Mattie Connolly is a compelling singer and a former All-Ireland senior champion on uilleann pipes. Queens, N.Y.-born Deirdre Connolly plays flute, whistle, and bodhran and is also a talented vocalist who toured and recorded with Cherish the Ladies.

Mattie and Deirdre Connolly recorded two tracks together for "Fathers and Daughters," a 1985 Shanachie LP, and "The Kylemore Pass" is their new, full album debut as a duo.

For location and other information about their Nov. 7 house concert, sponsored by the Shamrock Traditional Irish Music Society, contact Tim Quinn at tmquinn@optonline.net or 203-256-8453. Also visit www.shamrockirishmusic.org.

Drew U. symposium

On Fri., Nov. 6, Drew University's Caspersen School of Graduate Studies and the N.J. Catholic Historical Commission are sponsoring a symposium entitled "Understanding the Irish in New Jersey: Researching Their History, Struggles, and Diverse Contributions."

Among the speakers will be novelist and historian Thomas Fleming, Kean U. instructor and Irish Echo columnist Terry Golway, author Greg Tobin, and Drew U. professors William Rogers and Christine Kinealy. Slated events will conclude with a musical presentation by singer Heather Mulvey.

For the full schedule and other details of this one-day symposium, visit www.drew.edu/conferences/theirishin-newjersey.html or e-mail Fran Becker at fbecker@drew.edu. All events will be held inside Mead Hall and the Dorothy Young Center for the Arts at Drew U., 36 Madison Ave., Madison, NJ 07940, 973-408-3000.