

A meeting of minds and muses: Bill Whelan and Athena Tergis

FIRST were Paul Brady and Sarah Siskind, two singer-songwriters displaying a contemporary sensibility in music. Second were Andy Irvine and John Doyle, singers and multi-instrumentalists in a more definitively trad-folk vein. Third were Martin Hayes and Gregory Harrington, an Irish traditional fiddler and a classical violinist, respectively, along with Dennis Cahill, Hayes's regular partner on guitar. Fourth were pianist-composer Bill Whelan and fiddler Athena Tergis, steeped in Suzuki-method classical violin training but also very comfortable in Irish traditional music.

Since 2008, all four of these successive musical pairings have comprised the vibrant "Masters in Collaboration," an original concept and series from Mick Moloney and presented in the Donaghy Theatre of the Irish Arts Center on West 51st Street in Manhattan. Only the Hayes-Harrington collaboration was disappointing, with Harrington unable to locate or express the indwelling soulfulness of either genre and thus unable to find firm footing on any bridgework between the genres. Hayes's superb performance with guitarist Cahill was the saving grace of "Masters in Collaboration III."

Whelan and Tergis were a far better blend in "Masters in Collaboration IV." They did two shows, on Nov. 20 and 21, and the Sunday night concert I saw at IAC nimbly reflected and fused the strengths of these mainstay performers.

A Limerick native like Moloney, Bill Whelan has an impressive experience in performing or composing music for theater, orchestras, trad (he toured with Planxty and is on the band's 1983 album, "Words and Music"), film ("Dancing at Lughnasa," "Some Mother's Son," "Lamb"), and, of course, "Riverdance."

Causing a tectonic shift in the way Irish stepdancing and any musical show framing it would be perceived thereafter, "Riverdance" was first performed on April 30, 1994, during the intermission of that year's televised Eurovision Song Contest held in Dublin's Point Depot. But "Riverdance" had part of its musical germination in "Timedance," co-written by Whelan and Donal Lunny and first performed by Planxty at the 1981 Eurovision Song Contest. A tripartite piece, "Timedance"

This fourth Irish Arts Center collaboration stood forth



IRISH ARTS CENTER
Bill Whelan addresses audience as Athena Tergis watches inside the Donaghy Theatre.

ends with "The Ballymun Regatta," a slip jig performed crisply by Whelan on piano, Tergis on fiddle, and Robbie Harris on percussion as the first encore of the Nov. 21 concert in IAC's Donaghy Theatre.

The by now very familiar set piece "Riverdance" popped up

twice at the concert: before the encore and then as the second encore, each time featuring Mick Donegan stepdancing and a nine-piece classical string section of concertmaster Olivier Fluchaire, Monica Davis, Amanda Lo, Victor Heifets, and Sandra Billingslea on violins, Nora

IRISH ARTS CENTER
Green Fields of America fiddler Athena Tergis displaying her musical talent in "Masters in Collaboration IV."

Krohn and Ting-Ying Chang-Chien on violas, and Elizabeth Means and Erich Schoen-Rene on cellos. Donegan and the string section were an ideal complement to what Whelan and Tergis were doing musically, although I was worried any further iterations of "Riverdance" would lead to Flatley-like overkill. Wisely, Whelan and Tergis ended it after one repetition.

Born in New York City and a subsequent resident of San Francisco, Ireland, and currently Tuscany, Athena Tergis became heavily hooked on trad at Scottish fiddler Alasdair Fraser's Valley of the Moon fiddle camp,

where Altan fiddler Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh was among the instructors leaving a deep imprint on her. My initial exposure to Tergis's recorded music was "Journey Begun," an album she made as a teenager with another fiddler, childhood friend Laura Risk, for Fraser's Culburnie record label. Tergis's direct musical link to Bill Whelan dates back to her audition and selection as the main fiddler in "Riverdance on Broadway." Since then, she has often performed with Mick Moloney in Green Fields of America when she's not involved in Terrasole, the winery she and her husband, Mario Bollag, operate in Tuscany.

A nod to Tergis's life in Italy is "Temporali," her own composition that she played at the IAC concert with gradations and fluctuations in sonic texture expertly conveying the title's variable-weather meaning, "Thunderstorm." Equally admirable was her playing of a slow air followed by "Waltzing with Lars," the latter named for her brother. Its 4/4 time signature, rather than the customary 3/4 time signature for a waltz, gave the melody a delectable piquancy.

"Hymn to a Broken Marriage" and "Flying Blind" spotlighted Whelan's musical settings for verse written by Dublin poet Paul Durcan, and Whelan's singing of each song at the piano was quite competent.

But the evening's acme came with "Inishlacken," Whelan's concerto in three movements for traditional fiddle and classical

See CEOL, Page 20

POLLAK THEATRE

CHERISH THE LADIES: CELTIC CHRISTMAS

ACCOMPANIED BY
IRISH STEP DANCERS

SAT, DEC 18 | 8 PM



MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY · WEST LONG BRANCH
732-263-6889 · www.monmouth.edu/arts

MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY
WHERE LEADERS LOOK forward



THE ORIGINAL RIVERDANCE VIOLINIST

eileen ivers

AN NOLLAIG — AN IRISH CHRISTMAS
Sat, December 11 at 8pm

SAVE UP TO 20% OFF WITH YOUR GROUP!

Ticket Hotline: 732-246-SHOW (7489) • Buy Online: www.StateTheatreNJ.org
Group Discount Hotline: 732-247-7200, ext. 517
State Theatre • 15 Livingston Ave • New Brunswick, NJ