



From the Hob

By Paul Keating

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When art and entertainment intersect under the right conditions, the creative forces that emerge can move the soul and energize it at the same time. When the Executive Director of the Irish Arts Center Aidan Connolly announced unabashedly to a sold out crowd on Sunday night “That you don’t know how lucky you are” he had the benefit of seeing how powerful the first concert concluding the fourth edition of the Masters in Collaboration Series at the IAC was on Saturday night. An air of anticipation filled the small Donaghy Theater as the fortunate audience awaited the work of two artists whose week was given over to one another to compliment and stretch each other and in doing so carry out the mission statement of the innovative program.

Perhaps more than any of the first three collaborations (Paul Brady and Sarah Siskin, Andy Irvine and John Doyle, Martin Hayes with Dennis Cahill and Gregory Harrington), the stage performance this night put the Irish Arts Center at a crucial crossroads. Since hosting the ambitious series in 2008, the number of artists on stage hasn’t taxed the small stage and, in fact, created a very intimate and supportive bond between the collaborating artists and the ninety-nine seats contained in the Donaghy Theater as presently constructed.

But with Bill Whelan’s more expansive plans to enhance the music that he and Tergis were working by featuring a nine-piece string ensemble plus a bodhrán player and step dancer, space was at a premium. It wasn’t intentional but you couldn’t envision a better marketing opportunity for the vision of a larger expanded performance area and building for the Irish Arts Center currently underway where quality programming like this could be seen without any limitations. With luminaries in the audience like Ireland’s Cultural Ambassador Gabriel Byrne, former U.S. Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith and even series creator --or as Connolly referred to him the Ambassador to Irish Music in America-- Dr. Mick Moloney, you can be sure the potential for growth would not be lost.

But the night belonged to Whelan and Tergis and the spectacular program they presented the audience. They dipped into a varying array of new and old work polished up through their work together in advance of the week and throughout the week as they readied the two-day performances. Whelan asked the ever-accommodating IAC if they could add a string ensemble of classical musicians to the cast along with a pair of Riverdance veterans in Robbie Harris (Bodhrán) and Mick Donegan (step dancer). Connolly and crew at the IAC were happy to oblige the music maestro. Whelan amusingly compared their concurrence with the Irish contractor (in the good old days) who met his every request for his new beautiful Connemara home in Roundstone with the expression “Sure why wouldn’t ya, Bill”. The additional artists including the nine-piece string section based in New York allowed Whelan to display his orchestral skills for arrangements and composition and a more dramatic presentation of the creations of Whelan and Tergis.

Nowhere was that more effective than in the performance of Whelan’s compositions as part of his “Connemara Suite”. His concerto for violin and fiddle entitled “Inishlaken” was debuted at the Kennedy Center in May of 2000 at the request of Ambassador Kennedy Smith with its three movements that rely on a musical conversation between a classical violinist and traditional fiddler rounded out by a full orchestral treatment. Olivier Fluchaire took on the solo classical role here while Tergis masterfully performed the traditional role that actually required classical training as well to get the full measure of the piece as written. Inspired by the awesome beauty of an island near his Connemara home, one is tempted to capture the recording on an iPod and head directly to the small island to experience its peace and solitude --and at times- the tempestuous sea surrounding it. (Maybe there is a new marketing angle for Tourism Ireland in these challenging times?).

Similarly, another composition “Carna” conveyed more rugged beauty and inspiration and featured Mick Donegan for some of the percussive Irish stepdancing that Riverdance liberated from the competitive realm for worldwide recognition as its own art form. It even included a bit of mouth music or lilting by Whelan who was obviously having fun with this rare opportunity to challenge himself in public performance right here in the Big Apple for the very first time.

Tergis proved her own compositional mettle throughout the evening as well as her splendid fiddling with three pieces of her own work along with tunes from the Irish tradition. All of which displaying an artist whose best work may yet be before her as she continues to mature and work with some of the finest musicians in and out of the Irish scene. “Temporal” evoked the same creative response to the environment she inhabits after witnessing changing weather patterns round her Tuscan home in Northern Italy. Her pairing of “Lullaby for Haiti” and “Waltzing with Lars” (the second composed very recently and refined last week in workshop with Whelan) revealed a sensitivity that artists use to express themselves when drawing from their own real lives.

Naturally the evening’s finale was “Riverdance” the theme music now familiar round the world composed by Whelan and part of production that changed Ireland utterly since its inception first as a Eurovision Song Contest interlude piece lasting seven minutes in 1994 and then a full-blown theater piece in 1995 that is still conquering new audiences like in China.

Whether it was serendipity or fate that brought Whelan and Tergis together back in 1999 when she overcame an ‘indifferent’ audition in Galway to land a starring role as the featured fiddler on Broadway, it is clear that their lives were changed forever by the Riverdance experience like so many others who have performed in it. As the entire ensemble played this music as the Sunday night show drew to a close, the sense of exhilaration and enjoyment both from all the artists on stage and the audience bore out Connolly’s prophecy that we were all indeed lucky to be in the house that night.

For the encore Whelan reached into his deep reservoir once again for piece composed with another inspired Irishman and former Planxty mate Donal Lunny for ‘Timedance’ performed at the 1981 Eurovision Song Contest.

The blending of Whelan and Tergis in this collaboration at the Irish Arts Center was a celebration of contemporary Irish music and innovation rooted in an ancient culture and presaged greater things to come not only for this duo individually and, perhaps, collectively but also for the Irish Arts Center if this type of creativity is encouraged. Riverdance showed that the appetite for Irish music and dance was wide and commanded the largest stages in the world. The spirit of Riverdance infused this IAC production and collaboration and now the challenge as the Center looks for further growth is to design a proper space to capture that magic on an ongoing basis commensurate with the talent they attract to its home in Manhattan. It could be a very interesting journey and the Masters in Collaboration IV with Bill Whelan meeting Athena Tergis certainly shortened the road through its solid artistry.

And the Irish Arts Center will once again present “An Irish Christmas” starring Mick Moloney, Athena Tergis, Billy McComiskey, Brendan Dolan, Rhys Jones and Niall O’Leary that will range from traditional to contemporary music in celebration of the upcoming holidays. An array of special guest artists will appear at each of the ten shows over two weekends to add some spice and variation. Shows are scheduled from Thursday, Dec. 9-19 (Thursday, Friday, Saturday at 8 p.m.; Saturdays at 2 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.). Tickets are available at SmartTix at 212-868-4444 or www.smarttix.com.