

March 7, 2013

Masters of Tradition present Ireland's musical heritage

by Jack McManus '13
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In a refreshing departure from Wellin Hall's usual choral, orchestral and jazz programming, last Saturday the community gathered to celebrate St. Patrick's Day a few weeks early with an impressive demonstration of Ireland's musical traditions from Martin Hayes and his touring company, the Masters of Tradition. Taking the stage in different combinations through the night, the seven-piece collective presented historic and treasured tunes in a respectful but nonetheless lively way, often drawing wild whoops of approval from the enthusiastic audience. Between songs they spoke comfortably to the crowd in their thick Irish brogues, explaining the unfamiliar tunes, styles and instruments with a healthy dose of Gaelic wit and cheer.

Borrowing their name from a famous music festival in Ireland's County Cork, the annual Masters of Tradition tour brings together a lineup of top traditional Irish musicians under the direction of fiddle virtuoso Martin Hayes. Representing six counties of Ireland and the Chicago Irish-American community, this year's group includes some of the world's most celebrated masters of the fiddle, accordion, guitar, vocals and Uilleann pipes. While anyone expecting to hear "Danny Boy," "Whiskey In The Jar" or other Irish rebel/drinking songs may not have had their wishes fulfilled, this lineup of serious traditional instruments allowed the performers to ably demonstrate Ireland's rich history of instrumental dance music and vocal ballads.

After a brief introduction from



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The Masters of Tradition together on stage, featuring (from left to right): David Power, musical director Martin Hayes, Cathal Hayden, Máirtín O'Connor, Seamie O'Dowd, Dennis Cahill and Iarla Ó Lionáird.

Hayes, vocalist Iarla Ó Lionáird to the stage to perform a haunting traditional ballad in the Sean-nós style—a tradition of ornate, highly melodic unaccompanied singing in Ireland's native language. Later in the evening Ó Lionáird explained that he was raised outside of Cork in one of Ireland's few remaining native Irish speaking communities, making English his second language. Like most untrained listeners, the Wellin crowd found the unique language lovely but incomprehensible.

The traditional Celtic exoticness continued as Uilleann piper David Power took the stage for the next few numbers, fill-

ing the hall with his peculiar instrument's powerful, familiar sound. A member of Liam Clancy's touring band, Power has been a top Irish piper since winning the Senior All-Ireland Piping Championship in 1992. After demonstrating its sweet, bright timbre with a solo tune, Power explained his unusual instrument, which is related to but noticeably different from its louder, harsher cousin—the Scottish bagpipes. Unlike the bagpipes, Uilleann pipes are played sitting down and inflated with a bellow tucked under the player's elbow. Rather than blowing into it, the player pumps his arm (chicken dance-style) to maintain air pressure through the reeds. While it naturally produces a low drone, Powers demonstrated how he plays rapid-fire melodies by covering holes in the main tube (or "chanter") with his fingers and sustained harmonic chords by engaging levers (or "regulators") with his wrist, creating a layered effect. After a pair of solo tunes, Power was joined by Hayes and Ó Lionáird to form a trio with vocals, fiddle and pipes.

To close the first set, Hayes was joined by his longtime duet collaborator Dennis Cahill, a nylon-string guitar player from Chicago who learned Irish music from his Irish immigrant parents. Cahill's percussive, minimalist playing built a solid rhythmic foundation for Hayes's soaring melodies. The duo closed the set with a medley that began with a non-traditional improvisation section and quickly built into a furious dance number, whipping the Wellin crowd into a rare frenzy of energy before intermission.

Ó Lionáird opened the second set with another Sean-nós song before The Máirtín O'Connor Trio came on for a 20-minute mini-set of their own. The trio featured O'Connor on accordion, Cathal Hayden on fiddle and Seamie O'Dowd on vocals and guitar. After a few traditional jigs and reels, the trio quieted down for one of the most

interesting songs of the night—a contemporary-sounding ode to Sligo Bay sung by Seamie O'Dowd, a native of the coastal northwestern county Sligo. After their short set the trio were joined by Hayes and Cahill for a group number, then by remaining Masters of Tradition, Power and Ó Lionáird for a rousing final medley that Power kicked off with an extended pennywhistle intro.

Drawing huge applause with their final medley, the supergroup returned for a two-song encore of Dublin Reel and Drogheda Jig, the latter of which is composed of 13 distinct sections even though it only lasts about five minutes. Stunned and exhausted by the energetic and virtuosic display, the crowd thanked the performers with an extended standing ovation after the concert, which lasted slightly over two hours. It may still be a week away, but The Masters of Tradition kicked off Hamilton's St. Paddy's Day celebrations with a night of tradition and joyous excitement.



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Frequent collaborators Martin Hayes and Dennis Cahill (top) and the Máirtín O'Connor Trio, featuring Seamie O'Dowd and Cathal Hayden.



PHOTO BY SARA MEISSNER '13

David Power explained his Uilleann pipes in Wellin.