

Reviews

Best of Irish: Conor Byrne, Méabh O'Hare, Gavin Ralston & Andrew Murray

The Little Theatre, Skerries, Dublin.

The mantle has been passed to the next generation. This impromptu quartet, gathered under the fine patronage of Music Network for a whirlwind 14-date tour, is as fine a gathering of trad's next generation as you'll find this side of a Comhaltas-fuelled *Starship Enterprise*.

Flute, fiddle, guitar and voice were the scaffolding, but the tunes and songs were the bricks and mortar. Marrying the most stalwart traditional pieces – passed on from Tommy Peoples, Paddy Fahy, the Ó Domhnaills and many more, each duly name checked – with contemporary tunes, many of them written by Byrne and O'Hare, alongside beauties from Richard Thompson, Máire Breatnach, Tim O'Brien and Paul McGrattan, this was not so much the past colliding with the present as the tradition growing into its skin as it navigates a path through the 21st century.

The Little theatre offered a welcoming gabháil, but O'Hare's fiddle and Ralston's guitar took a while to loosen their collars. Murray's magnificent voice was the glue that held the tunes together.

Lurking in a netherworld in which vocal cords are drenched in a blend of warm tar and brown sugar, his voice enveloped the gorgeous miner's refrain *School days Over* and the eternally classical *Lord Franklin* with equal parts of grace and danger.

Byrne's original tunes were a revelation: cheekily flaunting the usual conventions of reel time, yet intensely respectful of the DNA that defines them, they nipped and tucked between O'Hare's fiddle and Ralston's self-effacing guitar, egoless.

O'Hare's viola made a brief appearance, heralding a gorgeous Tommy Peoples tune, and she shifted seamlessly from jigs to reels and polkas, but it was the slow reel that highlighted her bow hand, an apt reminder of why she was voted TG4's young traditional musician of the year for 2001.

The temperature was just reaching boiling point when it was time to go, but this being only the second night of their tour, it's reasonable to suppose they'll keep the fire well stoked for the rest of their heady fortnight on the road.

Siobhán Long – The Irish Times Jan. 17th 2002.

Best of Irish traditional Music Tour

Gaelscoil na Cille, Ashbourne

These days the young turks sit comfortably enough alongside the older generation as the worldwide growth of our native muse multiplies apace. What a neat idea then to bring four of them – Conor Byrne on flute, Méabh O'Hare on fiddle, guitarist Gavin Ralston, and vocalist extraordinaire Andrew Murray together for a tour. From the opening bars of 'The trip to Seapoint set', a composition of Conor's, that we were in for no ordinary night, was glaringly obvious.

The playing of all three was beautifully smooth throughout, with the inter-play between fiddle and flute being, as befits a couple, drumtight. Gentle, simpatico, backing from Gavin Ralston's guitar – never loud, but forceful

where necessary – was entirely in order, for this music was born to breathe. New tunes predominated over old, a sure sign that the lessons learned from elders have been well absorbed, and with integrity. A piece like ‘Bulgarian Red’, slow and stately was a delightful indication of the direction the new can take.

As a vocalist Andrew Murray, on this evidence, has few peers. Possessed of an amazing emotional range, he truly gets the best out of great songs like Thompson’s ‘Dimming of the Day’, and the traditional Lord Franklin’. There’s no fuss, just a sense which inspires the audience to hang on his every word. Those who missed these gigs – the band are whipping round the country as I type this – may well have missed one of the gigs of the year.

**Oliver P. Sweeney – *The Hot Press*
13th Feb. 2002.**

Conor Byrne & guests

Whelan’s, Wexford Street, Dublin.

Flautist Conor Byrne’s musical pedigree is excellent – a nephew of Christy Moore and Luka Bloom, his mother also Eilish Moore, is also a well-known singer. And playing to a packed house in Whelan’s, Byrne showed himself to be a formidable talent.

The concert opened in relaxed style, with Byrne & accompanist Niall Ó Callanáin (bouzouki) playing some tunes. Byrne has a fine technique, phrases beautifully and always allows a melody space. His tone is warm and totally free of that irritating breathiness which one so often associates with the flute. An early highlight came with his wonderfully sensitive version of the air *Padhraic the fiddler*, which continued neatly into a fast dance. At this point he was joined by the young fiddler Tom Morrow, and the pair worked well together – particularly well on an intricate set of hornpipes.

The special guest of the evening was ubiquitous fiddler Máire Breatnach, who contributed a brief but excellent solo set, then switched to viola and joined Byrne for a fine set of slow reels (These reels, and, indeed, many other tunes in the concert were composed by Byrne and his melodies are strikingly well constructed and memorable).

Other highlights included a powerful rendering of *the Emigrants Farewell* (with some perfectly judged slides and bends) and a jig performed unaccompanied as an encore. He even sang at one point – a decent version of the Tom Waits song *Shiver me Timbers*. A thoroughly enjoyable evening.

Alex Moffatt – *The Irish Times*
