

MacMaster, Symphony Nova Scotia pair up to put joy in music

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Natalie MacMaster salutes the crowd during a performance with Symphony Nova Scotia on Friday night. (ADRIEN VECZAN/Staff)

Classical musicians play their pieces in movements, but Cape Breton fiddler Natalie MacMaster plays with movement in her music, rarely staying still throughout the first of two concerts with Symphony Nova Scotia at the Rebecca Cohn Auditorium this weekend.

"This is really great, I'm working up a bit of a lather," she grinned late into the Friday night programme. "I always tell people that being onstage is like a day at the spa."

The sold-out audience could feel the heat coming from the stage as MacMaster, pianist Mac Morin and percussionist Eric Breton fronted the orchestra for its season-opening concert, which was also recorded for broadcast on CBC Radio's new East Coast Music Hour on Oct. 18.

The show was also a nice warm-up for the Troy fiddler before she heads home to Cape Breton to headline the finale concert at Celtic Colours International Festival on Oct. 18 at Sydney's Centre 200.

Conducted this weekend by Cape Breton-born Martin MacDonald, Symphony Nova Scotia has a long-standing relationship with MacMaster, stretching back near two decades.

"Every time we work with her, it's always a joy," said MacDonald, and it showed in his quick glances over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of the fiddler moving to the Gaelic rhythms in her sparkly indigo top and rhinestone-studded pants.

After a bracing orchestral Suite of Scottish Dances by William Alwyn, MacMaster came out to tear into Tunes a Plenty, with the Scott Macmillan-arranged strings and French horns providing a harmonious foundation for her determined playing, with hips swinging and foot tapping. With a whoop, she increased the speed, gliding across the stage to join Morin at the piano while Breton kept a strict tempo on brushed snare drums.

The tunes ended with a flurry of notes and a high kick from MacMaster; the woman is energy personified, especially if you consider she gave birth to her sixth child, baby Sadie, only five months ago.

MacMaster's billowing tone and warm vibrato graced the sweeping melody of Maurice Lennon's If Ever You Were Mine, and she explored the grey area between traditional Celtic and classical music in a concerto by the blind Irish harpist Turlough O'Carolan, whose famous tune is at once both stately and carefree, punctuated by the sharp rip of MacMaster's bow.

"Some people wonder what the difference is between a fiddle and a violin," she said, before blowing a cloud of rosin dust off the body of her instrument.

"I guess that's the difference: a fiddle is dirty and a violin is clean."

That doesn't mean concertmaster Renaud Lapierre couldn't get his hands dirty, taking part in a violin/fiddle duet combining a bit of Bach with the traditional Devil's Dream, an arrangement concocted by George Maxmann and MacMaster for her first symphony show 19 years ago.

The two were well-matched — as were their instruments, one made by the son of the other's maker — and Lapierre's all-too-brief solo memorably soared up out the swirling strings.

There was also a tribute to the late Buddy MacMaster, Natalie's uncle and noted Dean of Cape Breton Fiddling, who passed away this summer, although she noted that "this whole show might as well be for Buddy — 80 per cent of the tunes I know I learned from him."

"People ask what I learned from Buddy, and it's what he always said, 'Take what you're given and give it back.' He was the most charitable man I ever knew."

With that, MacMaster, her band and the symphony gave the audience a crash course in the history of Scottish fiddle music, starting with a slow air, going into a march and strathspey, then a bit of Devil in the Kitchen followed by tunes by Dan R. MacDonald and John Morris Rankin.

MacMaster Symphony Nova Scotia master can get, especially when Morin delivers great swoops of the keys on Devil in the Kitchen, when it comes to the slow tunes, there's no one better, and on Bovaglie's Plaid you could sense her channelling Buddy in every rise and fall of the bow and throb of her fingers on the fiddle neck.

The second half had MacMaster blast off with Jesse's Polka and deliver a jazzy take on some clogs by New Waterford pianist Dougie MacPhee, bringing some wonderful warmth by cellist Norman Adams into the mix. One of her favourite songs, Blue Bonnets Over the Border, told of Highland courage with a simple evocative melody and heart-swelling lift from the orchestra, and MacMaster's solo rendition of the finger-challenging Tullochgorum saw her playing quadruple time as her bow moved faster than you can blink.

As an extra surprise, her eight-year-old daughter Mary Francis came out to play a tune under mama's watchful eye, and the two chimed in together while Morin added a contemporary groove to his accompaniment. As everyone clapped along, Mary Francis came out front to step-dance, kicking up her knees with a jaunty strut all her own.

“In case you're wondering, yes, we do force them to play,” MacMaster said as her daughter took her bows.


“What did you expect? But they love it. Not so much the practising, but they love to play.”

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