



Lunasa has several dates remaining on their current U.S. tour.



Dublin fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh and West Kerry button accordionist and singer Brendan Begley gave a captivating concert in Connecticut.

An inspired pairing

Begley and O Raghallaigh make music of depth and daring

The exhibit of sculptures inside the Fairfield Arts Council Gallery on Sanford St. in Fairfield, Conn., was an unintended harbinger of the music to come on Sept. 15 from West Kerry button accordionist and singer Brendan Begley and Dublin fiddler Caoimhin O Raghallaigh. Sculpted on idealized forms of art, the sphere and the square, were nonidealized white plaster body parts: noses, lips, elbows, knees, nipples, eyes, ears, fingers, etc. Human angularity intruded on classic models, creating a bond and tension between the two.

Begley and O Raghallaigh respect the classic model of Irish traditional music on button accordion and fiddle, but the angularity of their individual styles and the inventiveness of their approaches often combined to upend expectations. In their playing they recognize the inherent flaw in flawlessness: patterned rigidity. No one could accuse them of rigidity in this night's performance. It was thoughtful, exploratory, driving, delicate, heartfelt, fascinating, and fun.

O Raghallaigh issued a promising solo album in 1999, "Turas go Tir na nOg," and a more experimental new solo CD this year, "Where the One-Eyed Man Is King." In 2003 he joined Dublin uilleann piper Mick O'Brien for what was indisputably the best Irish traditional album of that year, "Kitty Lie Over." Within the trad community was much discussion of O Raghallaigh's ability to fashion from low tuning, cross-tuning, and droning a fiddle sound that was a breathtaking complement to O'Brien's playing on a flat set of pipes. It was neither luck nor trick from O Raghallaigh. Instead, it was a natural evolution in technique of his own musical philosophy: sustaining the flash-spark of creativity.

During his solos inside the Fairfield Arts Council Gallery, O Raghallaigh bowed with high-low dynamism unlike that of any other Irish fiddler I can think of. At times his playing grew softer to the point of a barely breathed flute or whistle, just a short, slowed stroke like a shallow inhalation. The effect was to ease the audience into a kind of performance complicity, in which the more noticeable ambient sound of their own breathing and subtle shifting in chairs would contribute to the fabric of his fiddling. For O Raghallaigh, an audience's



Geol

Earle Hitchner

listening is not a passive undertaking but a crucially participatory element in establishing a higher, unfiltered plane of mutual communication. This approach can be a little unnerving at first, but once you realize what he's doing, it's sweet surrender for listeners to follow the path he charts anew each time.

O Raghallaigh has been extremely blessed in musical partners: Mick O'Brien and, more recently, Brendan Begley, whose credits include recordings and tours with the bands Beginish and Boys of the Lough and the 1999 solo album "We Won't Go Home 'Til Morning." The Dublin fiddler and Kerry accordionist toured Ireland in May-June of this year, and the strong, positive response there prompted a tour of the U.S. this month.

Begley frequently relies on his bellows work to coax out the energy he wants for Kerry dance tunes, whether on a two-row red Soprani or a melodeon. He invests polkas and slides with power and precision, and tosses in ornaments to heighten the impact, yet he can also start off contemplatively, as he did on the "P&O Polka," composed by Cork's Christy Leahy.

Like O Raghallaigh, Begley can grow very quiet in his playing. This was impressively apparent in "An Chead Mhairt den Fhomhar/Na Gamhna Geala," a twinning of two slow airs learned from Sean O Riada, in which Begley exposed a layer of emotion that might easily have eluded less sensitive accordionists.

Risk-taking is not foreign to Begley's box style, either. At the onset of "O'Sullivan's March," he used the press-and-pull breathing of the bellows--without fingering a note--to establish an aspirated, lightly percussive rhythm leading into full-note playing.

In "Tonn Cliodhna," a three-part tune composed by Begley, box and fiddle evocatively conveyed the progressive

action of a wave, from the calm of the harbor, to the chop of the bay, and finally to the churn of the sea.

On the melodeon, or single-row box, Begley expertly tackled some reels, including a version of "Cup of Tea" learned from his Boys of the Lough colleague, Cathal McConnell.

A wake scene in the acclaimed 2006 movie "The Wind That Shakes the Barley" inspired Begley to sing the titular song, based on the 1798 rebellion in Ireland. His was a more broodingly poignant rendition than that sung with defiant gusto by Karan Casey with Solas. Begley also sang a song in Irish that he followed with a box solo of the melody.

Other tunes performed memorably this night included Cree fiddler Patrick Kelly's version of "The Bucks of Oranmore," played as a solo by O Raghallaigh, and "Cronin's Slippery Jig," a nod to Gneeveguilla fiddler Paddy Cronin, described by O Raghallaigh as the "master of the slippery and elegant."

Slipping barefoot in and out of green rubber Croc shoes, O Raghallaigh sometimes projected a hippie-like disposition, but his ideas stem from an unfettered imagination and are firmly grounded in the purest aesthetic: making music a close experience for listeners, who are expected to connect and even reciprocate.

Standing beside him, Begley projected vibrant joy and enveloping tenderness in his music, whether vocal or instrumental. His playing and singing were disciplined yet emancipated, a paradox he plumbs as well as any Irish traditional musician alive.

The openness and adventure displayed by each musician seeped into the performance of the other and then, by intent, ebbed into and flowed back from the audience. Together, these musicians embodied a truism uttered by Begley on stage: "A moment of madness is better than a life of logic."

In the case of Brendan Begley and Caoimhin O Raghallaigh, logic be damned. There is some of the most maddeningly nourishing, elevating, and mesmerizing Irish traditional music you'll hear today.

Begley and O Raghallaigh's Sept. 15 concert was organized by the Fairfield-based Shamrock Traditional Irish Music

Society with grant support from Culture Ireland, which also helped to fund directly the duo's entire U.S. tour. Over the past two years Culture Ireland has given several grants to underwrite STIMS-sponsored concerts. Underwriting aid for STIMS has also been frequently provided by the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism.

Upcoming events

Lunasa, the best all-instrumental traditional band in Ireland today, has these dates remaining on the current U.S. tour: Sept. 26, Shaskeen Irish Pub, Manchester, N.H.; Sept. 27, West Springfield High School, West Springfield, Mass.; Sept. 28, Somerville Theater, Somerville, Mass.; Sept. 29 (afternoon), Oyster Festival/Ulysses Pub, New York City; Sept. 29 (night), Celtic Classic, Bethlehem, Pa.; and Sept. 30, 7 p.m., Bodles Opera House, 39 Main St., Chester, N.Y. (845-469-4595).

Earlier that same Sun., Sept. 30, two members of Lunasa, flute and whistle player Kevin Crawford and uilleann pipes and whistle player Cillian Vallely, will be holding master classes and then performing a concert together from 2 to 3 p.m. at the Irish Arts Center, 553 W. 51st St., Manhattan. Call 212-757-3318 or visit www.irishartscenter.org.

Currently comprising piano accordionist Jimmy Keane and singer and bouzouki player Pat Broaders, Bohola will be performing at 9 p.m. on Fri., Sept. 28, at New York University's Glucksman Ireland House, 1 Washington Mews, Manhattan. Call 212-998-3950 for more information.

Another duo, Mayo-born Grainne Hambly and Glasgow native William Jackson (of Ossian band fame), have done a number of tours as the "Masters of the Celtic Harp." They will be performing at 8 p.m. on Sat., Sept. 29, at the Seabury Center, 45 Church Lane, Westport, Conn. Call 203-256-8453 or visit www.shamrockirishmusic.org for directions and other details.

Fiddlers Liz and Yvonne Kane, Seamus Connolly, Brian Conway, and Larry Reynolds, flute and whistle players Mike Rafferty and Jimmy Noonan, keyboardist Felix Dolan, and harper Grainne Hambly are among the more