

Cleveland Orchestra Holiday Festival: Natalie MacMaster's Christmas in Cape Breton (Dec. 17)

by Daniel Hathaway



Last December, Cape Breton fiddling phenomenon Natalie MacMaster brought her husband and fiddling partner Donnell Leahy and their children along for a heartwarming program of Nova Scotian fiddling at the Cleveland Museum of Art. This year, MacMaster popped down from Ontario in the middle of her family's Christmas tour for a one-night show with Brett Mitchell and the Cleveland Orchestra at Severance Hall.

One Wednesday evening, December 17, McMaster was joined by her long-time pianist, Mac Moran, and more recently acquired drummer, Eric Breton, for a delightful evening of Celtic music as transplanted to Canada.

MacMaster joked about the experience of playing in Severance Hall. After one energetic set that included both clogging and some mighty athletic fiddle playing, she said, "It feels good to sweat, but on this stage, I perspire." But in *Tunes-a-plenty*, the first of several medleys, she immediately proved that her amazing bow arm, flawless technique and steady command of tempo were quite on par with her Cleveland Orchestra colleagues (some of whom happen to be accomplished folk fiddlers themselves).

As if you needed any further proof of that, concertmaster Peter Otto and MacMaster staged a duel in *Bach Partita / Devil's Dream* that began with Bach and ended in a fiddling draw. At one point, the down-to-earth MacMaster reached over and helpfully pulled Otto's sprawly score across the music stand.

Strathspey and the Three Reels, Leahy Christmas Fiddle Medley, Stars on the Hill Medley, More than a Clog, Christmas in Killarney, The Carnival Medley and a set of

MacMaster solos allowed the program to sail along on a resolutely cheerful course, decorated from time to time with step dancing and clogging — and at one point by some astonishing legwork by MacMaster that would have put others' knees out of joint.

In complete contrast, Maurice Lennon's *If ever you were mine* provided a gorgeous moment of calm late in the show.

In 2013, four of MacMaster's five children shared the stage at one point, all with appropriately-sized fiddles in hand. This time around, only her 8-month-old, the sixth and most recent addition to the MacMaster-Leahy clan, came along but stayed backstage. Her babysitter was one of the Severance Hall personnel MacMaster profusely thanked in her remarks from the stage.

Brett Mitchell served as an engaging host for the evening, partnering expertly with Natalie MacMaster and leading the orchestra in Malcolm Arnold's *The Holly and the Ivy: Fantasy on Christmas Carols*, and John Williams's orchestral suite from *Far and Away*.

Among the many charming details of the evening were MacMasters' remarks about the music-fueled holiday house parties she grew up with in Nova Scotia — and how when she lived for a time in Southern Ontario, she was surprised to attend parties with no live music. “What's the point?” she mused. Another was when she noted that Eric Breton had left his traditional hand clackers or “bones” behind, but found that the wooden doorstops he saw backstage would work just as well. They did, brilliantly.

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 23, 2014.

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