

Sunday World-Herald

6E • SUNDAY, MARCH 6, 2016

LIVING

REVIEW

Symphony takes lively go at Irish culture

By TODD VON KAMPEN

WORLD-HERALD CORRESPONDENT

It's a happy sign of modern times, not to mention this musical weekend in Omaha, that a highly accomplished concertmaster such as Susanna Perry Gilmore proudly calls herself a fiddler as well as a violinist.

"Celtic Journey," debuted by the Omaha Symphony to frequent ovations Saturday night, will take its place as one of the most ebullient programs in the orchestra's Holland Performing Arts Center decade.

The show, which repeats today at 2 p.m., samples the enticing depth and breadth of Irish culture — its dances, ballads and storytelling — with a host of inviting guides accompanying Gilmore's frantically joyous fiddling in the Celtic style.

Audience members returned to the Emerald Isle as storyteller Tomásean Foley sketched scenes from his western Irish childhood and singers, step dancers, the symphony and Gilmore's Celtic Journey Band colleagues filled in the colors.

Though Celtic-themed pro-

CELTIC JOURNEY

What: Omaha Symphony concert

When: 2 p.m. today

Where: Holland Center, 1200 Douglas St.

Tickets: \$19 to \$90

Information: omahasymphony.org or 402-345-0606

grams like "Riverdance" and "Lord of the Dance" have been popular for 20 years, "Celtic Journey" arose from Gilmore's desire to share her love of Celtic music and culture with Omaha concertgoers.

The word "fiddle," as opposed to "violin," still conjures up the Grand Ole Opry more than it does a symphony stage. Thus it seemed doubly impressive to hear Gilmore ripping off perpetual-motion, 16-notes-to-the-bar cadences of Irish jigs, reels and polkas with guitarist William Coulter, Samantha Harvey on accordion and especially Brian Bigley on uilleann pipes, flutes and whistles.

She paid homage to both her musical worlds in "Symph-ly Fiddlin' Around" and "Beetho-

ven's Fifth of Whiskey — Music for a Found Harmonium." Gilmore shredded any violin-vs.-fiddle pretentiousness in the first of those pieces, sandwiching passages from Aaron Copland's "Hoe Down" and Mozart's "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" with the breakneck "Orange Blossom Special."

Concertgoers hoping for a taste of Michael Flatley were rewarded with the power and grace of step-dancers Garrett Coleman and Caitlin Golding (alumni of "Riverdance" and "Lord of the Dance" respectively), joined occasionally by Harvey as well as a dozen brightly costumed students from Omaha's own Dowds Irish Dance Academy.

Principal Pops Conductor Ernest Richardson mostly turned over his usual commentary to Foley, who wove humorous Irish sayings into his descriptions of the "rambling houses" in his native west Ireland parish of Teampall an Ghleanntáin.

"It might help you to understand that there are three rules to understanding the Irish," he said. "Unfortunately, no one

knows what they are."

He was born, he said, "into the last generation of Irish people for whom storytelling was as natural as breathing." In those last days before TVs and computers, villagers would gather in each other's homes in the winter to share music, dancing and stories. The Irish spirit lay within those evenings.

Singers Ross Hauck and Eilís Kennedy gave voice to these expressions. Hauck endowed his tenor voice with powerful tenderness in "Danny Boy" and "Galway Bay," while Kennedy offered a haunting, lilting Gaelic in "Pórt Na bPúcaí" ("Dance of the Fairies") and "Pé 'n Eirinn I," described by Foley as a poem comparing Ireland to "the heavenly woman."

Foley also paid extensive tribute to the deep ancestral ties between Ireland and the United States formed by two centuries of Irish immigration.

St. Patrick's Day may be less than two weeks off, but another "Celtic Journey" — should the symphony offer one — surely would be well-received any time of year.