

# Singer-Harpist dishes out a feast for the ears

Mary O'Hara  
Jubilee Auditorium  
October 2

review by Christine Koch

Mary O'Hara, touted as "Ireland's ambassador of song," delivered a smooth and sophisticated performance at the Jubilee Auditorium Sunday evening. Accompanying herself on the Celtic harp, with flautist Joan Pecover and pianist Matthew Freeman, Ms. O'Hara's repertoire drew from traditional Irish and Scottish Gaelic lyrics, through Elizabethan and classical pieces, to contemporary folk songs.

The concert was a pot-pourri with something for everyone: songs of love, of whimsy, of war, of Irish nationalism, of Gaelic myth, folklore, and balladry. Yet her inclination toward traditional and popular lyrics and melodies does not of itself make her a "folk singer": "I am not, I think, a folk-singer as the purists understand it. What I try to do is interpret traditional songs with the skill and respect given to art songs simply by singing them with all the understanding I possess," says O'Hara.

Her skill and understanding are indeed great. She is technically very accomplished, and though her soprano voice is not strong it has a flexibility and delicate timbre which lend themselves to lyrical interpretations. Her graceful and spirited counterpoint on the harp complemented this quality of her singing. Ms. O'Hara's own serene and gracious presence combined with the harmony of her vocals and accompaniment to provide a very polished performance.

At times it was too polished, too controlled and too delicate. And it sometimes lacked the colour and expression necessary to remain consistently interesting.

But she was very strong in her traditional Gaelic songs. Though she spoke with a careful English accent, when singing these she resumed the broad Scottish or Irish intonations, and her melodies and expression seemed to assume the colour of the dialects. "The Hebridean Milking Song," "The Song of Glendun," and "Bailero" were executed with a spirit and sensitivity lacking in her versions of contemporary pieces such as Gordon Lightfoot's "Song for a Winter's Night" and John Denver's "Perhaps Love." Her deliverance

of "English Country Garden" was delightfully animated by her own love of her cottage garden in Berkshire. But the highlight of her concert was perhaps Gilles Vigneault's "Mon Pays" in which the lyrical French language as well as the richness of melody allowed her voice to soar and resonate with feeling.

The standing ovation Ms. O'Hara

received was due more to her international reputation and to the fact that the audience was composed largely of Britons, than to an outstandingly moving concert. Her performance was more pleasant than profound. Yet pleasantness was perhaps enough, and an evening of her lovely voice and traditional songs was refreshing and soothing.



photo Bill Inglee

Mary O'Hara tickles the stringies.

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which is simply not beautiful or even particularly interesting. His general demeanor was one of peevishness and he seemed irritable, even in the love duet and could not fail to make a negative impression.

Soprano Cristina Deutekom, who played Lucia, has a much more striking and attractive voice but one which, on this occasion seemed out of sorts and seriously underpowered, particularly in the first scene. As the evening progressed she gained in security and volume, doing some really lovely singing in the upper register where the top-most notes are of surprising fullness. A serious drawback, however, lies in her singing of rapid scales and fast passage-work where she seems to separate each note with a soft consonant (mostly G's and W's) to provide an effect somewhere between yodelling, gargling, and strangulation. Bizarre it is, but she's been singing that way for years.

Space does not allow for a detailed description of other aspects of the production, but it should suffice to say that the supporting cast was uniformly competent and looked rather better than the principles. The chorus was most notable for its lusty enjoyment of the party scenes. Orchestral work was occasionally scrappy and the beautiful harp solo in the first act was managed very curtly indeed. Conductor Alfredo Silipigni seemed to accommodate rather than accompany the leading lady, pulling the tempi about rather uncomfortably whenever she was singing and dragging elsewhere.

Edmonton Opera organizers seem concerned of late about a diminishing audience size. Perhaps a close observation of Irving Guttman's staging of Lucia's Act 1 love duet could suggest a possible explanation for a falling off of attendance. In this scene, we saw Edgardo get down on his knees before Lucia who seemed somewhat perplexed, but she endeavored nonetheless to kneel beside him. For her it was a laborious process. The two exchanged vows without actually looking at each other. Then he got up, she struggled to her feet, and the two took turns following each other around the stage until he ran away, and all this while singing passionately of an undying love.

What does it mean? What is on Irving Guttman's mind? Do humans behave like this? I don't think so. Perhaps more Edmontonians would attend the opera if there was no idiocy rampant there.



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