

MUSIC REVIEW; Bounce and Innovation For Lovers of Irish Music

By ANN POWERS JAN. 14, 2000

The word supergroup gets thrown around often in Celtic music circles. The genre is based on competition, with titles like All-Ireland Champion distinguishing rising stars. And because players move through ensembles while studying the traditional repertory, it doesn't take long for young masters to become the elite. That's what's happened to the members of Lunasa, who all played with other notable bands before uniting a few years ago. But these open-minded musicians have no interest in showing off or settling down.

"Feel free to do a bit of dancing," said the flutist Kevin Crawford at the band's concert, sponsored by the World Music Institute, on Sunday at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College. "We can't see you, but we'll hear you!" Lunasa's rhythmic style invites movement, and despite the comfy cushioned seats, the audience couldn't resist. People quietly stomped, then clapped heartily, and finally three young fans jumped up and danced as if they were watching the Dave Matthews Band.

That comparison fits, and not just because of the bouncy beats provided by the stand-up bassist Trevor Hutchinson and the guitarist Donagh Hennessy. Although far more precise than such rockers, Lunasa is rather like a jam band for Irish music lovers. The group's roomy arrangements absorb elements of jazz, rock, country and world music, stressing delicate interplay alongside playful battle.

Mr. Crawford, the fiddler Sean Smith and the uilleann pipes player Cillian Vallely proved to be real athletes, but the rhythm section added depth and complexity that required those soloists to rethink their usual roles. Each musician played off the others to change the familiar shapes of the traditional tunes.

Mr. Hennessy's guitar sometimes added a country feel, or, as on his own composition "Donal's No. 98," a nod to rock bands like Oasis. Mr. Hutchinson, who once played with the rock band the Waterboys, more often lent tunes a blue, jazzy feel with his fluid fingering.

Making the now-common Celtic journey from Britain to France to the United States, the band nodded to other innovators by doing tunes by the Indiana-based hammer dulcimer player Malcolm Dalglish and the French-Algerian guitarist Pierre Bensusan. Those players have been linked to New Age music, a category often condemned as vapid. But, as Lunasa proved, traditional and folk music is in a new age, one dominated by world exploration and synthesis rather than preservationism. With modest authority, Lunasa is leading that movement's Celtic front.

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