

# The Irish Sea Sessions 2010



A selection of press coverage.

**All enquiries:**  
Simon Glinn  
+44/0 7952 412709  
[simon.glinn@liverpoolphil.com](mailto:simon.glinn@liverpoolphil.com)

**[www.irishseasessions.com](http://www.irishseasessions.com)**

The Irish Sea Sessions 2010 was devised, produced and presented by Liverpool Philharmonic as part of Liverpool Irish Festival 2010.

## **Review: Irish Sea Sessions/Philharmonic Hall**

### **History was made on a frenzied Friday night. Lew Baxter was among the witnesses**

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WE'D been treated to about 20 minutes of scorching traditional Irish music and a couple of heartfelt songs, including the Gaelic 'Fear a Bhata' by Dublin's Niamh Parsons, which were already turning the evening feral.

Then, as the ten players and four singers launched into the chorus of that shanty favourite, Yaller Girls, my mate muttered that it was about time they'd got stuck into the maritime stuff.

Later he confessed that he misjudged the emphasis of the title "Irish Sea Sessions", thinking ships and saucy, swaggering sailors, as opposed to melodious links across the water to the Emerald Isle, which was the inaugural thrash for a spectacular gathering of singers, storytellers and musicians.

Those who packed the Philharmonic Hall for this truly trail-blazing gig will preen for years to come that they were at the first of the "Sessions", which will surely become a regular feature of the Liverpool Irish Festival, and maybe elsewhere.

The collaboration was the vision of the Phil's Simon Glinn, the mainstay of Liverpool's celebration of the city's Irish heritage, now in its eighth year. In truth, it is not a new concept with Glasgow's Celtic Connections featuring such line-ups; and the ceilidh mood could have been lifted from raucous nights in Dublin's Brazen Head pub or Liverpool's once equally anarchic Atlantic on the Dock Road.

But it was still a stonker of an idea. It was, I mused, rather opportune that the Liverpool Confidential editor had come upon this gig at the last minute, as the publicity for the festival itself was like a leprechaun - fanciful and mostly hidden.

In a concert hall setting - perhaps a risky option for such a riotous assembly - we had the emotional delivery of balladeers like Liverpool's Lizzie Nunnery - an award-winning playwright who can also pen songs of raw energy such as England Loves A Poor Boy With A Gun - and Ian Prowse, front man for Amsterdam, whose Does This Train Stop on Merseyside? kicked off this grand tribute to Liverpool Irish bonds.

The link between the singers and solo instrumentalists, who individually can set the seat of your pants on fire, was the bassist Bernard O'Neill whose musical pedigree includes a role as musical director for Rolf Harris.

Singer Damien Dempsey's compositions are incandescent with social polemic as befits a man from Dublin's Northside, while Alan Burke has a repertoire of Gaelic and contemporary songs that almost ranks alongside those of Niamh Parsons, rightly hailed as one of the inspirational singers of Irish music.

Later - and while clutches of bewitched punters were still howling for more inside - we spied her bowling along to an after show party at the Hope Street Hotel and exchanged a few pleasantries in the street, ending in a sycophantic senior moment with me revealing that I had several of her records. With a cheery wave and a hearty chuckle, she said that she didn't mind; I could keep them, she had plenty.

The show was a melange of similar banter, rattling roaring jigs and reels and songs such as Bootle born Stan Kelly's I Wish I Was Back in Liverpool - which, years back, used to lift the ceilings in the back room of Ye Cracke - along with the tongue tripping Rocky Road to Dublin.

I swear people were shedding tears of joy in that audience - while the hollers and whoops accompanied ferociously played traditional tunes that triggered both legs to jiggle uncontrollably, and forced hundreds of feet to tap like a flock of manic woodpeckers.

There were quieter moments that embraced sheer pleasure as Northern Ireland flautist Eimear McGeown hushed the furies and then lifted our spirits once again by dueting with Liverpool's very own 'pied piper', Terry Coyne, who, as a former member of Garva and along with his family, is the essence of the city's Irish traditional music scene.

And even the bodhran playing of Gino Lupari had a soothing effect, although he can shift up four or five gears like the rest of them when required.

They were complemented by four other musicians in whose wake comets might trail: the astonishing Uilleann piper Becky Taylor - one of a handful of women exponents of the Irish pipes that historically lulled sheep to slumber - fired the blood to fever pitch as she joined with pianist and button accordion genius David Munnelly, forging a remarkable alliance with the fiery accordion of Kerry's Collette O'Leary, while Carlene Anglim's fiddle danced fine skittering tunes with them all.

Frankly, the pace and power was exhausting for the audience, never mind the performers and the penultimate number was a relentless instrumental that drove the audience to its feet on a journey that picked up a speed and frenzy that was literally breathtaking.

It was just as well - for those with weak tickers - that the evening calmed down and ended with the traditional sailors' lament, The Leaving of Liverpool, although some folk were again awash with tears. It was actually a session and a half. Fair play to ye all.

**15/10 (honest).**

## Liverpool Echo

### **Review: The Irish Sea Sessions at the Philharmonic Hall by Jade Wright**

By Jade Wright on Oct 25, 10 02:20 PM

THERE are few musical experiences that can beat a good pub session. Tucked into a packed back room and huddled in a circle, an impromptu band of musicians playing flutes, bodhrans, melodians and fiddles can build up a level of excitement that can't be matched in a concert hall. Or so I thought until the Irish Sea Sessions, a pioneering collaboration in which 14 musicians shared equal billing on the Philharmonic stage.

Behind the scenes, they'd spent the days leading up to the session working together on new arrangements of traditional tunes and each-other's songs.

The results were impressive, with a fantastic ensemble atmosphere throughout.

Kicking off with the best version of Does This Train Stop on Merseyside since Christy Moore's breathtaking cover at the Phil two years ago, Damien Dempsey, Niamh Parsons, Ian Prowse and Lizzie Nunnery brought new richness to the vocals, while the remaining 10 musicians transformed a rock n roll song into a rollicking jig that could wake the dead.

From one twirling jig it was on to two spectacular reels, with hair-raising renditions of The Red Haired Lass and The Merry Blacksmith, showing off the huge skill of the assembled musicians.

Slowing the pace, Niamh Parsons filled the huge Philharmonic Hall with emotion for the starkly beautiful Fear a Bhata (My boatman). Singing in Gaelic, she held the crowd's focus in the palm of her hand, telling her story with such passion that we didn't need to be able to understand the words.

Similarly, Terry Clarke Coyne's flute playing on The Other Side told a story in itself. Rich, lyrical and fluid, his technique brought life to every note. Thanks to the Phil's impressive acoustics, the crowd could hear every tiny element of his playing.

Alan Burke's rocking rendition of Yaller Girls picked up the pace again, bringing a flavour of Irish punk to proceedings.

But the biggest cheers came for Damien Dempsey, the bright young Dubliner whose name has become a byword for the new branch of talent coming out of Ireland. Singing Stan Kelly's I Wish I Was Back in Liverpool, and an ensemble version of Rocky Road to Dublin, he brought new meaning to every line.

And that was the real beauty of the Irish Sea Sessions - reworkings of classic songs, surprising collaborations, and above all a huge passion and respect for the songs they played and sang made it a real highlight of the Irish Festival. I'm already hoping for another one next year...

## Sevenstreets: Making the Most of Liverpool

### **Irish Sea Sessions: The Review ~ How to create a musical night that stirs the soul? Reel 'em in...**

Don't look back? Don't knock it. In a world so fouled and confused, it's comforting to know that some things will never change and great songs and singing will always hit you where it counts.

Liverpool was cold last weekend. The wind was whistling in from the Irish Sea and the Mersey was blowing it around town. Collars were up and heads were down.

Things were different up on Hope Street though.

The Philharmonic Hall's Executive Director Simon Glinn had convinced Irish folk hero Damien Dempsey to come across the water and star in the inaugural Irish Sea Sessions, as part of the Liverpool Irish Festival.

Joined by such wonderful roots artists as flautist Eimar McGowan, Uilleann piper Becky Taylor, pianist David Munnely, accordion player Collette O'Leary, ballad singer Niamh Parsons, fiddle star Carlene Anglim and musical director and double bass for the night, Bernard O'Neill; Dempsey helped lead the ensemble through a night of riotous reels and Celtic soul.

The format worked like a dream.

Each artist took a turn in the spotlight, before being helped out with harmonies from whoever made the mic first. As one song finished, a reel would announce itself from the dying embers of the previous melody and we'd be off again on a journey as fun as a hen party starting early on Easyjet.

Liverpool was represented by the pipes of Terry Coyne, singer and writer Lizzie Nunnery and Amsterdam's Ian Prowse. They didn't let you down.

Nunnery's 'England Loves A Poor Boy (With A Gun)' and Prowse's 'Does This Train Stop On Merseyside' both more than held their own alongside such folk classics as 'The Rocky Road To Dublin' and 'I Wish I Was Back In Liverpool', and we can pay said songs no finer compliment than that.

Damien Dempsey's 'Sing All Your Cares Away' also ensured that there was not a dry eye in the house, as the big Dubliner's deep and soulful voice reverberated around the hush of the grand old hall and brought people closer together. It was that kind of night.

And that was the point. Music like this is inclusive and it was ironic to note that – on a stage that relies so much on the abilities of those who understand and revere musical theory – it was a gaggle of folk artists who provided one of the best nights that the Phil has seen in a while.

More highlights included Lizzie Nunnery's acapella 'The Leaving Of Liverpool', Niamh Parson's 'Fear a Bata' (performed in Gaelic) and Prowse's wounded determination shining bright on 'Back Home In Derry'.

In Glasgow, the Celtic Connections events have become big noises annually and it would be a shame to remember the Irish Sea Sessions for one night only. Phil man Glinn has spoken of his desire to stage the event each year, perhaps even take it on tour. Let's hope that it happens.

A folk singing hero? It's something to be...

*Alan O'Hare*

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by Jeanette Smith. Published Sat 23 Oct 2010 14:58

**The Irish Sea Sessions  
Liverpool Philharmonic Hall  
Friday 22nd October 2010**

The cream of Irish and Liverpool musicians came together for a celebration of music from both sides of the Irish Sea to a tumultuous welcome from Irish music aficionados.

This was the first specially devised 'meeting of musicians' for the Liverpool Irish Festival 2010, of music that gets feet tapping and souls a-singing, a homage to traditional music both sides of the water.

Led by lauded double-bass player Bernard O'Neill, the whooping audience was treated to beautiful melodies and tunes by a plethora of talented musicians and singers.

Amongst the 14-strong gifted ensemble was well-known Liverpool-Irish musician Terry Clarke-Coyne, mainstay of the Liverpool Irish Centre in its heyday, showing off superb dexterity on the flute, with a haunting rendition of The Red-Haired Lass and The Merry Blacksmith. Terry has won top honours in many world championships.

The effervescent Naimh Parsons wowed the crowd with her beautiful resonant voice, firstly with the sad Gaelic tale Fear a Bhata and later with her own interpretation of The Water is Wide, soulful and expressive with beautiful phrasing.

Multi-talented Lizzie Nunnery sang the anti-empire protest song, England Loves A Poor Boy, with her striking voice and joined in with many more group pieces, including an a capela version of "The Leaving of Liverpool" to round off the show in which her fellow musicians joined one by one to end with a rousing version of this well-known traditional song.

The musicians played a variety of traditional instruments including guitars, flutes, fiddles, bodhran, and whistles creating vibrant, evocative resonant sounds.

Amongst the ensemble were many brilliant musicians, too many to name, but flautist Eimear McGeown from Northern Ireland and Becky Taylor on the Uilleann pipes offered haunting melodies that wafted images of Irish mists around the space. And Liverpool born singer-songwriter Ian Prowse led the musicians in a rousing rendition of his song – recorded by Christy Moore – Does This Train Stop on Merseyside.

What was missing was more audience participation and perhaps a couple of Irish dancers on stage. Naimh broke into a dance towards the end of the show as the audience, warmed up and ready to stomp themselves, stood up and clapped along with the music.

Praise was heaped on organisers Simon Glinn, Executive Producer and Toby Mills, Production Manager, by compere Bernard O'Neill, who said the talented musicians were excited to have come together to celebrate songs and tunes that had endured many 'rough seas', to bring to Liverpool a new presentation of talent and tradition.

For a first show of this kind it was a triumph and hopefully will be repeated in years to come.