

The Irish Sea Sessions 2011

Reviews



www.irishseasessions.com

The Irish Sea Sessions was devised, and is produced and presented by Simon Glinn for Liverpool Philharmonic. The project launched in 2010, and video footage, including a Making Of documentary, and reviews for 2010 are available from the website. Highlights of the Irish Sea Sessions 2010 are available on CD LPISSCD001 through the website.

In 2011 the Irish Sea Sessions took place in Liverpool, Belfast and Derry/Londonderry. These are the reviews. Further information, including photographs, personnel, and a downloadable programme, are available from the website.

The Irish Sea Sessions will return in October 2012. We are now looking for partner venues/promoters.

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Seven Streets

Review: Irish Sea Sessions 2011

The Philharmonic Hall flings open its doors to the Liverpool Irish Festival once again for a celebration of song

For some things, at some times, it's the same time all over the world. God knows who first said that. They were right, though. Music can stop the clocks. I honestly believe that. And, last night up the hill at the Philharmonic Hall on Hope Street, time stood still. Not for very long. And not all night, either.

But during a few precious moments of the Irish Sea Sessions, the waves stopped and an ethereal calm ruled. Following the now-traditional opening of the show with Merseysider Ian Prowse's 'Does This Train Stop On Merseyside?', a set of reels led us behind the bars of London-born Alan Burke's 'Derry Gaol'. And what a place to be. The singer/songwriter took us on a journey of desperation, pathos, downright hilarity and a world of hurt and emotion. All in one song! It was a relief, then, to be soothed by the gentle sounds of Niamh Parson's beautiful singing on 'Blackbirds And Thrushes', before Sense Of Sound's Jennifer John gave her adopted hometown a sweet version of Van Morrison's 'Tupelo Honey'.

As with the inaugural show last year, the sessions format rides "on the seat of its pants" (Musical Director, Bernard O'Neil), as tunes spark from the dying embers of the last song and the audience has no time to reflect. It's a concert that relies and thrives on risk – with both artist and audience taking a chance on each other. Luckily, the songs chosen leave nothing open to interpretation: they're just great.

As are the singers. Donaghmede's Damien Dempsey may well be the best of them all: brave, bold and beautiful, Dempsey rarely gets it wrong. Last year he treated us to 'In Liverpool', this time we were sat in hushed awe as he delivered a devastating dock-side dirge, 'Go To Sea No More'.

As traditional songs go, this was one exhumed from under sixty feet of Mersey mud – but Dempsey wrought the melody and emotion behind the tune from its minor key misery and turned it into a thing of pure gold. "In the darkness/there will be hidden words that shine," sang Bruce Springsteen many moons ago. He was talking about Dempsey last night.

The Irish Sea Sessions shines its light on more unknown performers too and Liverpool flautist Terry Clarke-Coyne stepped into the spotlight following Dempsey's tour-de-force.

He had commissioned a set of tunes examining Liverpool's Irish links and as the high notes and tempo changes of flutes, fiddles and bodhran rattled around that famous old hall, he should have felt proud – with 'Liverpool Remembers' and 'Great Craic on Mount Pleasant' bringing back to life long-gone nights at the Liverpool Irish Centre.

The audience doesn't get a minute and this is one gig where an interval is certainly the right call. Last night, however, we were treated to a highlight at the end of the first half that sent us into the second act with tears in our eyes: Amsterdam singer Prowse invited Dempsey, Burke, John and Parsons to hold him up with harmonies, as he delivered a definitive take on Pete Wylie's 'Heart As Big As Liverpool'.



Think that tune is overwrought and banal do you? Think again. Prowse found the heart of it last night, with a restrained and righteous version (complete with "Justice for the 96" ad lib at the end). The second half took a while to get going.

Virtuoso turns from Belfast pair, Stevie Dunne on banjo and Meabh O'Hare on fiddle, were greeted with appreciation rather than excitement from the packed and seated crowd, before button accordionist Dave Munnely brought some beauty and bottom end to the night with a lovely workout.

But it was left to Dempsey to include the crowd again: something magical really happens when that giant frame walks up to a live mic in front of people.

He was joined by Prowse for a powerful take on Brendan Behan's 'The Auld Triangle' – complete with "written in a five star hotel in Liverpool called Walton Prison" intro. Maybe its his lightness of touch that sets him apart. Who knows?

Jennifer John stepped back up to sing 'Shipbuilding' (told you the song choices were on the money) and Prowse gave Amsterdam's 'Home' for the offertory, before more riotous reels brought us into view of those Three Graces and the end of our journey.

It was apt that, with the Irish Sea Sessions travelling to Ireland for gigs in Belfast and Derry this weekend, the whole ensemble grouped together to sing 'The Leaving Of Liverpool' and were serenaded on their way by a standing ovation and sing-a-long.

We don't do marks out of ten here at Seven Streets, but here's a verdict for you: **better than last year.** Roll on 2012...

Alan O'Hare

Liverpool Confidential

The Irish Sea Sessions 2 - Philharmonic Hall

“We cheered, we roared and some wept at what was another Sessions triumph”



Lew Baxter is still trying to get his breath back. Pictures: Mark McNulty

YEARS ago, when I lived in China, I introduced - via the now increasingly ancient medium of CDs (and the odd tapes - remember them?) - cohorts of Chinese chums to the frenzied sounds of Irish “hooligan” music. They responded wide-eyed and with, for them, unusually unrestrained fervour as we clumsily tackled a couple of Riverdance-style routines in the confines of an austere apartment built by melancholic Russians.

The Chinese clearly loved the fiddles, the uilleann pipes and the bodhrans and, I fondly imagined, the private unfettering of their social chains. I have long been persuaded of a “Bloodline” swirling between Oriental and Celtic music, the very nature of both performance and sound bearing many similarities (aka the Chieftains, et al, and their sorties into cross cultural liaisons in China).

So, as I took my seat for the second of the Irish Sea Sessions with bursting, almost gleeful, anticipation, having been fired to the furies by the first last year, I was bemused to see a rather distinguished Chinese lady sitting in the row in front. Wow, I thought, the conversion is complete. However, unlike most of the wildly enthusiastic sell-out audience at the Philharmonic Hall, she remained stoic throughout the gig, even remaining seated while the rest of us rose to our feet like an erupting volcano to holler and whoop, as though greeting conquering heroes (and heroines), as the combined talents of 14 performers ripped into a set of tunes laced with such glorious, spiring, boosting energy and verve that surely could give the very Sirens themselves a grand run for their airs.

That the extraordinary bassist, and the evening's informal master of ceremonies, Dubliner Bernard O'Neill can already wax lyrical about the "tradition" of the Sessions is testament to how this seemingly anarchic gathering of musicians, singers – and, heaven forefend, let's not omit dancer Mary McGuiggan who set a corking pace herself - has become part of the fabric of folklore in Liverpool. And the "show" has also been unleashed on Belfast and Derry.

In truth, the first sessions, some 12 months back, felt at times as though the performers were winging it by the seats of their pants, were overjoyed at the seamless flow, and were even themselves taken aback at the sheer exuberance displayed by the audience. This time it gave the impression of being just ever so slightly more considered and rehearsed. But this did not affect the fizz and the passion one jot. Yet, when Jennifer John, lynchpin of Liverpool's Sense of Sound organisation, sashayed towards the microphone and admitted her own Irish antecedents were a bit thin but that she would like to offer up Van Morrison's Tupelo Honey, some might have thought it an unusual ingredient. To the contrary, her emotional, soaring blues-stained voice stunned the audience. It was little short of a tour de force that suited the mood perfectly.

The Liverpool Irish Festival is celebrating its ninth birthday this year and has stamped such a mark on the city's cultural zeitgeist that it feels as though it's been around since the Irish Diaspora first landed here when fleeing the Famine. It continues throughout this month with music, plays, films, talks...and laughter. And the much talked – and raved - about Irish Sea Sessions, a creative inspiration from the festival's champion Simon Glinn, is now almost the flagship event with the line up this year featuring some stalwarts from the first gathering; such as acclaimed singer Niamh Parsons, guitarist Graham Dunne, the irascible bodhran sage and singer Gino Lupari, Merseyside's singer-songwriter Ian Prowse and one of Liverpool's most highly regarded traditional musicians Terry Clarke-Coyne, a former Garva member whose dad was in the legendary Liverpool Ceili Band.

The remaining "veterans" - guitarist and singer Londoner Alan Burke, astonishing button accordion player Dave Munnely, who will no doubt one day be nominated for sainthood in Irish traditional circles, and Dublin singer-guitarist Damien Dempsey - were joined by a trio of equally nimble fingered young musicians whose playing could set heather aflame. The latest recruits were all strikingly of note, if you'll pardon the expression, with John McSherry, from the new generation of uilleann pipers, a man worthy of listing alongside the likes of the fabled Liam O'Flynn, Davy Spillane and others of that ilk. And Belfast's Stevie Dunne is a banjo player whose skittering along the strings dazzles while alongside him on the Philharmonic stage his skills were matched by the quietly confident fiddler Meabh O'Hare, another Belfast export, who conjured up sheer magic with her bow. It was obvious from the opening song, Prowse's Does This Train Stop on Merseyside - made famous by Christy Moore, that the ensemble were up for the craic and ready to answer the call. They swept through two sets of songs and tunes that had an appeal for everyone, and included many familiar lyrics and choruses that had the audience teasing their own tonsils; in particular Brendan Behan's paean to prison life, The Auld Triangle. In between songs of love, turmoil and torment – oh, and a singalong shanty Go To Sea No More - the ensemble engaged in a powerhouse of jigs and reels that could blast the breath out of a marathon runner but didn't faze Mary McGuiggan or Niamh Parsons as they

frolicked in carefree abandon about the stage; as indeed did Jennifer John on occasions.

Like Liverpool Confidential said last year: “One day people will brag about being at these early Sessions, sporting that experience as a badge of honour.” Naturally, the finale was that lachrymose anthem to the host city that had both performers and audience joined in one thunderous welling tide of emotions as many, many hundreds of vocal chords tackled the Leaving of Liverpool. We cheered, we roared and some wept at what was another Sessions triumph. As the house lights rose, the inscrutable Chinese lady in front of me, stood up, gathered her coat, glanced around puzzled at the still-stomping crowd, and quietly left.

10/10

Scouse pride adds to night of Celtic passion at the Irish Sea Sessions

Both critics and fans proclaimed 2010's gig one of the events of the year, with the anticipation inside the Philharmonic Hall making for an atmosphere rarely seen in this most stately of venues.

The idea behind the night is a good one. Fourteen singers and musicians collaborate to replicate a traditional Gaelic pub session, with all the boisterous spontaneity and interaction between generations that such a night can bring.

Of course, this being Liverpool the link to Ireland is an obvious one but what the Sea Sessions does is celebrate that link with its own Scouse slant on things. This is no slavish reproduction of Irish folk music that you can get in any Dublin tourist trap and instead the Session gives us something uniquely Liverpudlian. As a result we get the likes of Pete Wylie's anthem '*Heart as Big as Liverpool*' reinvented as a passionate rebel song, complete with exhortations to not buy the Sun newspaper. It is a pronouncement that gets a standing ovation and a perfect example of the kind of Celtic pride which is on show.

There are also beautiful re-workings of Van Morrison's *Tupelo Honey* by singer Jennifer John and Amsterdam's Ian Prowse revels in his role as chief wine pourer and de-facto band leader as he dedicates *Home* to his mum and unborn baby and fronts a great version of his own *Does This Train Stop On Merseyside*.

In a more traditional style, we get Terry Clark-Coyne's specially commissioned *Liverpool Remembers*, a slow air reflection on Liverpool's crucial role in the Irish diaspora. Gino Lupari's accompanying reading of playwright Lizzie Nunnery's lyrics on *Going Into Exile*, with Clark Coyne's flute is one of the more touching moments of the evening.

Each of the musicians got their moment in the spotlight with Dave Munnely's dexterous light touch on the Irish button accordion a stand out, with the versatile John McSherry showing his talent on the uilleann pipes. Not everything works. The addition of a dancer was an unnecessary gimmick with most of the audience sadly unable to see Mary McGuiggan's fancy footwork.

As a long and emotional night began to draw to an end the mixture of contemporary and traditional continued with Elvis Costello's classic *Shipbuilding* given a beautiful stripped back rendition by the soulful Jennifer John.

With the larger than life Lupari urging the crowd to get to their feet, the players respond by embarking on a series of jigs, hornpipes and reels to bring the session to a suitably frenzied end but it was the sing-a-long finale of *The Leaving of Liverpool* that summed up a special Scouse night.

4 stars

Irish Sea Sessions at Liverpool Philharmonic

PROBLEM: How do you improve on an unexpected smash hit?

Last year's Irish Sea Sessions was one of the highlights of the Liverpool musical year, a get-together that surpassed all expectation as the showpiece of the annual Irish Festival in the city. As the ECHO said at the time, it was one of those evenings about which people will boast for years to come, "I was there".

Small wonder then that the second set of Irish Sea Sessions was a sell-out at the Philharmonic Hall last night, and judging by the thunderous ovation at the end the old Liverpool-Irish magic had worked once again.

The formula is one of half-formal concert and half informal Irish jam session. It's the kind of thing you might hear at any superior Irish pub that knows its customers, but with a far less rowdy audience. It means that the performers – 14 of them in all from Ireland north and south and Liverpool – can be heard properly and can express themselves without having to turn up the sound level to the maximum.

Terry Clarke-Coyne and Ian Prowse are, of course, stalwarts of the Liverpool-Irish music scene, and they were joined by Jennifer John as the Mersey contribution to the evening. As she admitted, Ms John is hardly your typical Irish performer, but her solo efforts in both halves were penetrating with consummate artistry.

Holding the whole evening together was the Dublin performer Bernard O'Neill, as accomplished a bass player as you will hear, who doubled up as compère for the night.

The repertoire ranged across all things popular and Irish, from traditional Gaelic melodies through Brendan Behan's The Auld Triangle – Damien Dempsey in good form – to a massed rendition of The Leaving of Liverpool that brought the audience to its feet. Mary McGuiggan showed everyone the right way to do Irish dance, and, while it's not possible to name everyone who performed, there must be a special mention for the marvellous accordion player Dave Munnelly.

Belfast Telegraph

Bridging the divide is just music to our ears

(Rated 4/5)

By Michael Conaghan
Tuesday, 25 October 2011

Irish Sea Sessions, Ulster Hall

Taking a leaf out of BBC4's excellent Transatlantic Sessions, these Irish Sea Sessions celebrate the enduring link between Irish musicians and the Liverpool diaspora, gathering together a coterie of superb artists who represent the best of each.

Singer songwriter Ian Prowse kicked the evening off at the Ulster Hall on Saturday with Does This Train Stop on Merseyside? — an anthemic tune in the Ian McNabb/Pete Wylie mould — before king of the bodhran players, Gino Lupari, led the ensemble charge into Crooked Road to Dublin.

What followed was a soundtrack of traditional music punctuated by superb performances from each of the guest musicians.

Singer Jennifer John may have mixed up Belfast and Dublin, but certainly knew her way round Van Morrison's Tupelo Honey.

The revelation of the night was Damien Dempsey, whose interpretation of the old folk song Go To Sea No More was the missing link between sea shanties and John Lennon's Working Class Hero.

As compere and bassist Bernard O'Neill remarked 'there are no rules, apart from the audience enjoying itself'.

On that front, job done.