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Fiddler Jamie Laval gets down with tradition

'Shades of Green' a taste of Ireland

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It's difficult, given the currently blazing-hot blue sky, to imagine myself in Ireland right now. It's a place I associate with heavy gray clouds, warm wool sweaters and roaring stone fireplaces, with mud-covered boots and damp, bleating sheep moving slowly across fog-covered fields.

If I do picture Ireland in the sun, it's standing in front of a thatched-roof cottage by the sea, the fresh salt air blowing up in a fine spray, something about as far from this heat and dryness as I can imagine.

However, when Jamie Laval's new release, "Shades of Green," came across my desk, I didn't hesitate to pick it up. As far as I'm concerned, there's never a bad time to listen to Celtic music, in all its variations.

I wasn't familiar with the fiddle player's work, and couldn't tell from the cover just what I was getting into, whether it would be a classical music take on traditional songs, whether I'd be immersed in New Age pseudo-Celtic pieces, or if it would be the increasingly popular world fusion music that takes a bit from each corner and mixes them up in an often delightful new way.

I was pleased when the first song queued up on my computer CD player and "Danse Rustique," a Brittany dance set, filled my headphones. Clearly, Laval is not only a skilled player, but also deeply respectful of traditional Celtic music.

Although he and his fellow musicians make traditional songs their own, they do so without dramatically altering the original base of each piece. Though I often enjoy music based in Celtic roots with modern touches, the most satisfying musical experiences I find are those that emulate the music still played in pubs across Ireland.

On his Web site, www.jamielaval.com, Laval writes, "When I play from the heart, the music of countless past generations becomes my own voice."

His playing backs up this statement, as tune after tune on "Shades of Green" evokes an ancient tradition of music from Ireland, Scotland and Brittany, and the listener can travel back in time through the notes.

The march "Farewell to Loch Katrine" is one of the finest examples of this, as Laval could easily be performing for a small crowd in front of a blazing fireplace as he could on stage in front of hundreds.

Almost all the pieces on the CD are a mixture of traditional pieces, from "O' Dowd's Favorite" to "The Cat that Kittled in Jamie's Wig," although "Just Before Daybreak" is Laval's own work.

The sweetest song on the collection is "Fiona's Waltz," one of the most moving fiddle pieces I've heard in a long time.

The 2002 U.S. National Scottish fiddle champion, Laval now resides in Seattle, and will be performing in Yachats in November at its annual Celtic Festival.

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