

Jamie Laval Stages Unexpectedly Colorful, Varied, and Multilingual “Celtic Christmas”

EVENT INFORMATION

Sunday, Dec. 29, 2019, 7:00 PM, Charlotte
 Jamie Laval’s Celtic Christmas: Music and
 Stories for the Deep Midwinter
 \$25–\$50 Booth Playhouse 704-372-1000
<http://www.jamielaval.com>

Review by Perry Tannenbaum

Jamie Laval’s “Celtic Christmas: Music and Stories for the Deep Midwinter” attracted a capacity crowd at Booth Playhouse on Sunday evening. Greatly enhanced from his original 2015 production at the Great Aunt Stella Center, Laval took fine advantage of the larger stage at the Blumenthal Performing Arts Center with a larger lineup of performers, rear screen projections, and thoughtfully designed lighting.



Photo courtesy of Daniel Coston, Charlotte

Laval’s instrumental ensemble and vocalist Megan McConnell cruised through the first three selections on the playlist without pausing. Lighting design and atmospheric, wintery images corresponding to the musical selections provided visual bookmarks at key transition points.

Laval provided spoken intros and was especially charming in discoursing about Brittany, the bombard (medieval oboe), and the folkloric significance of wrens for the people of Ireland. Later in the evening, Laval gave a very effective narration of the touching story, “Saban the Woodfitter”, accompanied by offstage bagpipes and enhanced by onstage fog and oceanic images in the background.

Laval’s violin virtuosity was prominent throughout the evening, peaking when he took the spotlight for his solo composition, “Variations on Deck the Halls.” The bouquet included double-stopping, ricochet bowing, a pizzicato chorus, a Scottish bagpipe-like variation, a lyrical variation in a minor key, an Irish jig, a reel (peasant dance), and a brilliant climax that alternated between double-stopped and ricochet-bowed passages.

As artistic director, Laval provided a surprisingly varied assortment of instrumental and vocal combinations.

Asheville-based Rosalind Buda, the only holdover in Laval’s ensemble from 2015 production, was the most chameleonic of the instrumentalists. Buda switched from pennywhistle to bagpipes during “Da Day Dawn (Shetland Air),” from bassoon to recorder during the “Round About Our Coal Fire / Cornish Wassail” medley, and back to bassoon during the “Medieval Dance Carols / Patapan” potpourri. In “Joyful Mysteries” and “Kanomp Nedeleg” (Breton carols and dances), Buda picked

up her bombard, making a glorious sound somewhat akin to a soprano saxophone with a Middle Eastern tinge. These strident ancient reed instruments hardly need amplification! Later, Buda would brandish the riq (Arabian tambourine) in “Patapan” and again in the “Gower Wassail.”



Photos courtesy of Daniel Coston

McConnell was also notable for her versatility, traversing a range of languages that hopscotched from English to Scots Gaelic, Breton, and finally to Galician, exemplifying the full spread of Celtic culture. The Galician “Fum, Fum, Fum” just before intermission was especially eye-opening and was arguably McConnell’s zestiest vocal. I was not expecting to hear Spanish at a Celtic concert! When the soprano retreated from her vocalist microphone, there was a percussion station with an assortment of cunning little devices, including wood block, finger cymbals, and glockenspiel. McConnell made a brief cameo with Quebécois wooden spoons in “Hornpipe Carols,” eliciting a rowing ovation.

As the evening progressed, it became harder to overlook the versatility of Irish dancer Claire Shirey. Apart from the fairy-like, softshoe dance steps and the powerful, percussive hardshoe features, Shirey showed considerable expertise in playing the bodhrán (Celtic frame drum). Then in the final “Jacobstowe Wassail / Reels” medley, Shirey appeared from the wings with a fiddle and performed a duet with Laval. Quickly depositing her violin offstage, she returned with merrily adorned silver spangled shoes, vigorously tapping away in front of the ensemble as the tempo accelerated.



Celtic harpist Rachel Clemente was showcased in both halves of the evening, playing glimmering preludes during Buda’s poetry readings of “White Eyes” and “Snowbound.” Clemente’s harp also took the lead during the transition to “Caleno,” a lovely McConnell-Buda vocal duet, and “Winter, Fire and Snow,” in which Clemente provided rippling arpeggios as McConnell alternated vocal stanzas with Laval’s violin interludes.

For those of us who have overdosed on Christmas music, Laval’s opening description of his program reassured us that the emphasis would be on celebrating the midwinter solstice. Indeed, the evening delivered as promised with a compelling arc of seasonal music from the wider and less known reaches of the Celtic diaspora.

