

Musical Mosaic

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What does a sarangi, a bowed psaltery and a handsaw have in common? OK, let's add a sitar to that list. Now you think you have it. A sitar, as everyone knows, is a stringed musical instrument from India--a long-necked lute, to be exact.,with eighteen movable frets and a wooden body--Ravi Shankar, and all that.

But what does a sitar have in common with the other three? You might be inclined to guess that they were all musical instruments, except that a bowed psaltery sounds more like a book of psalms that someone sat on, and a handsaw is a handsaw and not a musical instrument.

But then some of you from Belfast with a memory to match the length of your tooth might remember yer little man who used to sit on Donegal Square of Castle Place, every day bar Sunday, with a duncher at his feet, a few coppers or may be a couple of tanners in it, playing beautiful melodies on--that's right--a musical saw. And man, how could he play that thing. Fine as a fiddle. First busker I ever knew--before I even knew the word, "busker".

So back to the sarangi and the sitar and the bowed psaltery. Yes, they're all musical instruments. So's the humble handsaw. And what this is all leading up to is the other thing they all have in common. (Can they have something else in common?) Yes, they were all played in the Cultural Centre on the evening of October 27, 1990. That night Celtic Folk played host to members of the Canadian Society for Musical Traditions, who had come to Calgary from all over Canada to attend their annual convention. And what better way for members of a society for musical traditions to spend a Saturday evening than by listening to some of the best practitioners of Canada's varied musical traditions?

So what's Canadian about a sarangi or a sitar? Or a bowed psaltery for that matter? A handsaw's something else, but not too many Canadians play music on it. Well, they are all part of our musical traditions now. And like

Ukrainian dancing or Chinese cooking or Hutterite farming, they're part of the Canadian cultural scene. Canada, we've been told for years, is a multi-cultural mosaic, where everybody's traditions becomes Canadian traditions because they're carried on in Canada. And with any luck they'll go on being practised here for a long time to come.

Judging by the performers who entertained us on October 27, we need have no fears for the longevity of musical traditions in Canada. Such a wide variety of music and song from so many different parts of the world has almost certainly never before been heard in this city in one place on one evening. As a true international musical mosaic where all the pieces fitted so well together, they made a most exciting, entertaining show.

So what's a sarangi? It's the Indian--East Indian--equivalent of a fiddle, but it has a four cornered, skin-covered, wooden sound box, with a rather wide finger-board, three strings and maybe a dozen understrings--sympathetic understrings, I think they're called. It sounds like a viola. Regula Qureshi, who now lives in Edmonton, played it to accompany James Hamilton on sitar. The amazing thing is that James Hamilton lives in Vancouver. He and Regula had only just met for the first time, but played as if they'd been accompanying each other for years.

That kind of thing isn't as rare as you might think when member of the Society for Musical Traditions get together. Josko Caleta hails from Croatia, but now lives in Vancouver. He's a singer, and a fine one. Judith Cohen lives in Toronto. She's a singer too, specializing in Sephardic Jewish and Moroccan songs. Somehow or other, never having met before, and with only two hours of practice, Judith and Josko say a duet from Yugoslavia that was so hauntingly lovely it sent shivers down your backbone.

Judith came back later as a soloist to sing songs in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language spoken by Sephardic Jews from the Balkans and the Middle East. (There's got to be a lot of history hiding there.) She accompanied herself on a drum that looked like a first cousin of the bodhran, except that it was held between the palms of both hands and played with the fingers. Even so it had a range of

percussive sounds such as I've never heard from any bodhran.

And the bowed psaltery? The psaltery is an ancient instrument, 12th century at least, that's related to the zither, but smaller and made in a variety of shapes. David Woods put aside his musical saw and played a small, triangular psaltery with the same bow.

The dulcimer is a psaltery in which the strings are struck with hammers instead of plucked or even bowed. And yes, among the CSMT performers there was a hammered dulcimer player--that is, the dulcimer was hammered. The player, not hammered, was Sheila Brunskill from Manitoba, who, along with Gregg Brunskill on banjo and fiddle, make up the duo known as "Meadowlark".

And that brings us to performers closer to the Celtic Folk tradition using fiddles, guitars, whistles, bodhrans, autoharps, dulcimers and, of course, the human voice itself. Colin Quigley, from Los Angeles, teaming up with his old buddy, Neil Rosenberg from St. John's; Amelia Kaminsky, a fiddler from Edmonton; Bill Sarjeant, a singer from Yorkshire; and Calgary's own singer-songwriter, Vic Bell. And what held this multi-coloured, multi-talented musical mosaic together were strong performances from Celtic Folk's own meadowlarks, Deirdre Halferty and Maureen Hutchens, and familiar Celtic Folk musicians hiding behind less familiar names like Scatter the Mud and Banshee. What a night!

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