

A GAELIC GATHERING

Irish Music & Dance

Art Form: Music & Dance

Style: Traditional

Culture: Irish (Gaelic)

MEET THE ARTIST:

A Gaelic Gathering – Irish Music and Dance, was first commissioned by the Music Center for World City, the acclaimed performance series for children and families. The company of internationally award-winning dancers and musicians gave a rousing performance in March 2007 at the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

The program is a feast of Irish tunes and dances originally created, and now adapted for schools, by **Máire Clerkin**. She is accompanied by Musical Director, fiddle player/dancer, **Kira Ott** and champion stepdancer **Jennifer Keogh**. **Frank Simpson** plays an array of flutes and whistles; **Patrick D'Arcy** plays ancient instruments including *uilleann* pipes (elbow bagpipes) and *bodhran* (drum). Renowned vocalist **Moirá Smiley** sings haunting songs and plays accordion. Together they guide their audience on a cultural journey through Ireland's rich heritage.

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

A Gaelic Gathering – Irish Music & Dance celebrates the exuberance of Irish culture. Traditional instruments accompany rhythmic hard shoe jigs and Hornpipes, as well as lyrical soft shoe Reels and Slipjigs. The artists explain the social context of Irish people gathering to socialize and relax, by singing, playing and dancing. Students will: experience interactive rhythm exercises and participatory singing; hear stirring melodies; and see intricate footwork in both the rhythmic step and *Ceili* (group) dances. After they are shown specific foot combinations and told their name, students will be asked to identify them during a demonstration. The musicians will describe the origins and mechanics of their instruments and get the audience to learn the names, as well. Later in the performance, six volunteers will be invited onstage to learn a *Ceili* dance to music. The program also traces the emigration history of Irish people to the United States and highlights their impact on American culture.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Ireland – the small island on the outskirts of Europe – is a rural country, made up of small farms, large families and close communities. Traditional Irish music and dance originates in those communities whereby people would assemble after work in kitchens and barns. Before television, computers and easy transportation, this was the main form of entertainment and social interaction. Vocals were a central part of the culture with song and storytelling often in *Gaelic*, the Irish language. Fiddles, flutes and pipes formed the basis for many get-togethers. One of the oldest instruments is the *Uilleann Pipes*. *Uilleann* (“illun”) is Gaelic for elbow, which pumps air into the bag strapped to the piper’s waist. There are many varieties of whistles, including flute and tin whistle. *Bodhran*, (“bowrawn”) the unique Irish drum is made of goatskin and wood. The fiddle (violin) is the oldest stringed instrument played in Irish music, along with the harp. In contemporary Irish bands, guitar, banjo and mandolin are added to the mix along with accordion and piano. The main tunes and dances are the *Reel*, *Jig*, *Slipjig* and *Hornpipe*. Social dances in groups of four, six, eight and twelve, known as *figure* or *Ceili* (“kaylee”) dances, are ancient formation dances. Within a figure dance you will see symmetry and shapes such as circles, squares, and straight lines made by the dancers. Stepdancing’s intricate footwork has evolved in part from visiting European dancing masters in the 18th and 19th century. Rhythmically, it reflects the complexity of the music. Students may be familiar with Irish Dancing’s American

relation Tap Dance (an African American / Irish clog amalgam). Appalachian culture traces its roots back to Ireland. *Ceili* dance is closely linked to other folk dance. Today Irish dancing has become a global phenomenon with touring shows such as *Riverdance*. Irish stepdancing is always recognizable: the body is upright, the legs move fast, but the arms stay down by the sides. A large party of Irish music and dancing is nowadays referred to as a *Ceili*, with musicians onstage and dozens of dancers on the floor, holding hands, standing in floor patterns of lines and circles, their

feet keeping time with the music. In Irish pubs, it is called a *Seisiun* (i.e. session). A smaller party at home is referred to as a gathering.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- List the musical instruments you saw and heard (*bodhran* drum, *uilleann* pipes, whistle, fiddle). Discuss the sounds made by each; then divide the instruments into these three groups - string, wind and percussion.
- Identify how the type of shoes make some dances distinct from others.
- Name all the Irish dance moves and patterns (square, chain, rock, wheel, heel and toe taps, etc.). Discuss the differences between these movements or how they are combined).
- Describe how the body is held in Irish dance: posture, arm position and position of the legs. How does this compare to other dance forms you might know?
- Choose your favorite instrument and explain what you like about it – the sound, appearance, and the name.
- Culturally, what did people in Ireland do to enjoy themselves before electricity? Do you know of any situations where people today entertain themselves without electricity?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - HISTORY/SOC. STUDIES:

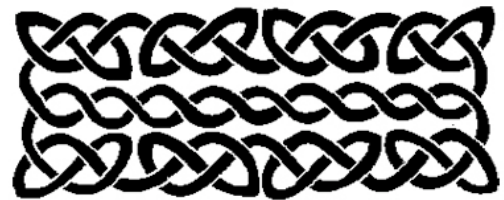
The traditional music and dance of Ireland started in the kitchens of ordinary country people. Family and friends would come together to eat, drink, tell stories, sing songs, play music and dance. However, now these folk traditions have evolved into very defined practices that are taught to children who continue to develop their skill as they grow to adults. There are specific dances and steps that are learned and perfected; people come together to compete and are awarded different levels of achievement. Today, there are community-based festivals throughout the world, called a *féis*, to promote and maintain Gaelic culture and traditions which include Irish Dance competitions. Discuss other competitions, such as sport events, dance contests and TV shows where people compete. (Dancing With the Stars, American Idol, America's Top Model, etc.) Discuss reasons why people come together to compete and strive for excellence, promotion or awards. Guide students in a discussion that allows them to express their experience with and ideas about competition. Here are some suggested questions: Do you study sports, instruments, dances or other activities that lead to competitions? What are your ideas and feelings about the value of competition? What purpose does it serve? Who benefits? What are the negative aspects of competition? What about winners and losers? When do you think competition is important? When is competition not a good idea?

Legend:

- Artistic perception
- Creative expression
- Historical & cultural context
- Aesthetic valuing
- Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- Take a partner and have a rhythm conversation: call & response. You clap a phrase: your partner echoes in reply. Now repeat with foot stamps. Alternate stamps and claps. To develop the exercise, respond with a different rhythm to your partner. This can be expanded, where one person beats a rhythm (claps or stamps or a combination) and the rest of the group responds in unison. Try doing it with a recording of Irish music.
- In groups of four, re-enact the *Ceili* dances from memory – the *Square*, *Chain*, *Wheel*, *Ring*. Don't worry about doing the exact steps: walk or skip to a beat (recorded music or someone clapping); make the shapes of circle, straight lines, square and being opposite. Hold hands at shoulder height.
- Think of yourselves as Irish storytellers and sit in a circle with three or four others. One person tell the group about a typical Irish gathering, a meeting of people playing music and dancing. Describe the scene, calling upon your knowledge of Ireland's climate, musical instruments and dance traditions. After a couple of sentences, the next person takes over, building onto the ideas of the previous storyteller.
- Discuss the meaning of "tradition". Consider how activities originally meant for fun can become performance and even a career. What traditions do you and your family share? Are there similarities with the Irish culture? Write down examples of another culture and compare it to Irish culture. Aspects of culture can be the language (e.g. Gaelic), customs, symbols, food, clothing, music, dance, and song.



An example of a Celtic Knot

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Brennan, Helen. *The Story of Irish Dance: Brandon*. Mount Eagle Publications Ltd., Dingle, Co Kerry, 1999.
- Cullinane, John. *Aspects of the History of Irish Dancing*: Self-published, Cork, 1990 (contact CLRG).
- www.celticcafe.com/celticcafe/Dance/index.html - Dance and Dancers at the Celtic Cafe
- www.clrg.ie - Irish Dancing Commission, Dublin, Ireland
- www.comhaltas.ie - Promoting traditional Irish music and dance around the world
- www.geocities.com/aer_mcr/irdance/irhist.html - Irish Step Dancing: A Brief History, by Don Haurin & Ann Richens