

Inside the Artist - Annabel Moynihan February 2017



After discussing the program she is helping to produce for a March 17th St. Paddy's Day celebration of traditional Irish music and dance, violinist, international musician, composer, and violin teacher Annabel Moynihan spoke with me at the Grange Hall Cultural Center about how she has her "foot in a lot of different worlds."

How did you get started in this artistic journey? What brought you to the place where you thought you wanted to do this?

I started playing the piano when I was five with Margaret Tan. I switched to violin when I was seven and studied with the Concert Masters of my dad's orchestras. I played in youth symphonies and started my first quartet when I was fifteen; we played Brahms, Shostakovich and other bombastic teenage pieces.

I grew up with my father being a musician, a conductor, piano player, and my mother is an artist. I grew making art and knowing a lot about art, seeing a lot of art, and hearing a lot of music. Both of my parents were not interested in firm boundaries between genres. It wasn't their concern. They weren't against them, but they just didn't care about them. My dad did a lot of new music. He included a lot of music that wasn't really considered classical music in classical performances. For instance, he was the first person to invite Laurie Anderson to perform as a musician. She came from the art world and was a performance artist doing things in galleries and museums and her violin had always been a part of her performance art. My dad invited her to be part of a New Music America Festival. So he was very open minded about what was music, and what was high art, and I grew up with a very open mind about what was music and art. And my mom was an early multi-media artist, multiple projections with 16mm projections with three screens with dancers on stage and dancers in the screens and very complicated high-tech stuff.

I started playing Irish traditional music about 25 years ago when I was living in Portland Oregon. I studied with Kevin Burke, who was the founding member of the Bothian Band who is an amazing and influential fiddle player with whom I was lucky enough to study. I played out there in a band that played traditional Irish and Scottish music with a Scottish singer. That was a bar band and we played 4 or 5 nights a week--all Irish music, all Scottish music, and lots of country western music. No English music (laughs). I also play the electric violin in a number of different experimental and electronic music bands and with those bands I've toured Europe and gone to Moscow three times in the past 6 years and to St. Petersburg and Kiev and it's been really a lot of fun to use my violin to tour and go to these places. That music is recorded music, and we don't perform it here. It's hard to put together, it's a big operation, and we play big shows.



I have my foot in a lot of different worlds. I just played for 1,200 people in Leipzig (Germany), in this heavy electronic band, and then played for 12 people at the Red Hen Bakery playing traditional Irish music. And it seems natural to do these things. When I teach, a lot of the kids want to learn traditional Irish music, and for me, it's not that far off of the classical tradition. The way we teach traditional Irish music, I've come to believe, and the way we teach Suzuki method, actually, by ear, by rote, is shared repertoire and a sincere emphasis on oral learning and not music reading. That's where the two things meet up again. But when I go to Suzuki teacher workshops with classical musicians, I'm the only one that plays Irish traditional music and when I go to the traditional sessions there are a lot of people who were classically trained.

Locally I try to keep my chops up playing once a month at the Red Hen Bakery every second Sunday with my band "Knotwork",

which plays mostly Irish traditional music in the style as its played here in Vermont. Locally I also teach and I love doing that! I am inspired and learn so much from my students every week. And I have been glad to be a part of the Suzuki teacher's community with the Burlington Vermont Suzuki Violins who have been really helpful and supportive for me. So I've been teaching for ten years now. I have a studio in Waterbury. I also have given classes as a part of the Vermont School of Irish Traditional Music, which is run by Hilary Ferrington and Benedict Kohler, and they've been teaching classes on Irish traditional music and Irish repertoire which has been a boon to our Irish music community because we have all grown to share a broad repertoire of tunes that we've all learned from Benedict and Hilary, or worked on, or because our friends were working on them. So I'm indebted to them. Sometimes I represent them here in Waterbury when I give Irish traditional fiddle lessons or workshops.



What most inspires your work right now? What's the criteria, the guide to choosing your creative projects?

I am guided by a commitment to show the beauty and melody of the world. My students inspire me every week.

I am inspired to create work that is immediate, straightforward, superficially beautiful and profoundly complex, both simple and sophisticated.

Right here in Waterbury and with this March 17th show in mind?

That comes from wanting to do things together in my community, and Heather Morris does the dance (Celtic Company at Green Mountain Performing Arts). We have tried to do things over the years, but it's hard to coordinate the kids and us and the parents and all of that. I appreciate that Heather wants to do things with the community. I teach kids Irish traditional music and I always thought it would be nice if they could play the music while their friends, who have learned the dance steps, could dance to it. Because ultimately, it's dance music, and one of my goals is for the young musicians to play for their peers who dance. I've also always hosted youth ensembles and trying to find ways for the kids play music together.



My criteria for my electronic music is to make it sound gorgeous and well-made and well-constructed and meaningful and have it be powerful too. It's music with big chords and big sounds. It's not heavy metal music, but we play in heavy metal line-ups. I have, ever since I lived in San Francisco (Oh, that's part of my history!-laughs), I played in this band, The Amber Asylum, and we played psychedelic chamber music—electric violin, electric cello, and an acoustic guitar and a woman's voice—three women. And we played often in the "Chill Out Room" at "Raves" and we also opened up for a couple really heavy metal bands which was really interesting because we really just wanted to make beautiful music. That was our goal. To make it be really beautiful. It was melodic and it was great. People were really taken aback. There's was a great show in Orange County where the kids were taking helium in the parking lot and we thought "this show is really going to (makes a sound like crashing and burning)." These kids were real heavy metal, looking like they crawled out of the woodwork. And they came in and it was like they had never seen a violin before. They were completely enchanted. It was awesome! They loved it. They were the quietest audience ever and they were mesmerized and they had

never come across that before. They were so sweet and it was one of the nicest concerts.



What has been the biggest thing/event to influence your work? Do you have any artistic heroes, musical or otherwise?

Oh boy... For fiddle it would be Kevin Burke and Martin Hayes, they are both Irish fiddlers who live in the Northwest. They were the first ones I heard, so they were the most influential for fiddling. Then Tony DeMarco, from Brooklyn, who I'm going to see this evening. He plays in this really lyrical, delightful and powerful way. I come from this super avant garde world in my background and my family and it's really the opposite that. It's like, don't stand out. It's so different from jazz, for example, because there's never this take-it-away Johnny moment. It's just sit down and play that tune the way that everybody else is playing it and you play with a seven year old (or a master). I have a student who can play one tune, but she can play that tune with someone like Tony. I also like Andy McGann, I like a lot of the Irish traditional music was played in NYC. There are a lot of great fiddlers down there. And it's expected that you play that tune the way that everybody else is playing it. Too much straying from the original melody with variations is not appreciated. Novelty is not prized as it is in other arts and music; the attitude is more that there are thousands of good songs out there, no need to write more. Or, 'who do you think you are writing your own songs.' Nevertheless, I write my own songs. I write my own music.

I have also been playing music with my husband Michael Moynihan for 21 years. He plays the traditional Irish drum and

sings. The name of the drum is "Bodhran" which means sieve, like what is used for flour, and what they used to be made out of. He makes his own drums, and he's one of the few people I've actually seen who sings while playing it. And he gets a huge amount of melody out of this drum. One hand manipulates the skin so that you can change the timber of it, and then you use different brushes and different sticks and things. He plays a simple instrument very sophisticatedly. As our band "Knotwork," we usually play with Don Schabner, on guitar who we've been playing with for 8 years. He is our dear friend and a beautiful guitar player and picks out the tunes which is a rarity- they are not that easy to pick. We play together every week and every second Sunday at the Red Hen Bakery.



Tell us about activities you enjoy outside of music.

Skiing, reading, not weeding (laughs)--I don't love gardening but I can't help but garden. I have a horse, Fresa (Strawberry). She's trusty and sweet and I ride a few times a month. I do stuff with my son. He plays the saxophone! What else do I do? I travel (I have a lot of family dispersed). I just try to play a lot of music with friends in different ways.

I also translate books from German into English; mostly translate books about medicinal herbs. The last book I translated will be published in March. "The History of Healing: from the Stone Age to the Present" by Wolf Dieter Storl. It's about the history of using herbs as we do in medicine, talking the similar steps they

used herbs in Siberia, and Native America, through the Europeans. He thinks it all goes back to when we were all one people chasing around the wholly mammoth on the steps of Asia. Then we all went in different directions. Some of us went to Europe, some of us went to up to Siberia, came back around over the Baring Straights or over the Atlantic and here we are again. And that's why there are some commonalities between certain healing methods of the Europeans and the indigenous people, because the methods were much unchanged since the Stone Age. It is a profound idea, largely based around the humble ritual of making medicinal tea.



What are you reading right now, (now that you're not translating a book)?

I've been trying to get back to reading. I've been enjoying "Bury Me Standing," about the Roma people. These people were so awesome and so awful at the same time. It's so interesting. They are these great musicians, they have amazing plant knowledge, yet they beat their wives, the children, and the men wear lots of gold and have tons of cash and the women and children are begging. They are so into being despised because it allows them to be left alone. It's also a way to maintain their culture and their identity, because no one wants to deal with them.

I'm also reading, "Raven In Winter," a UVM scientist, Bernd Heinrick about the social order of Ravens. He's a funny writer.

What's next for you?

On St. Patrick's Day, Friday, March 17th, I'm excited about this night of traditional Irish music and dance at the Grange Hall Cultural Center in Waterbury Center. My husband and I will be playing and I am going to accompany some dancers as well. Local fiddler Katrina van Tyne will play a few tunes and so will Allen Church. A few of the local fiddle students will play too, so there will be performers of all ages.

"Knotwork" is also playing on Saturday, March 18th at River Arts in Morrisville. My students and Alan's are going to play some Irish music at this performance.

Michael and I are going to play with our electronic band "Witch-Hunt" in "The Covenant Festival" in Montreal in April. But you can't get tickets because it's already sold out.