

Janelle Nadeau Ensemble keeps Prairie Christmas traditions alive in SMC Concert

As promised, the Janelle Nadeau Ensemble kept tradition alive with A Prairie Christmas. Coming home to the Prairies is what Christmas is all about for Manitoba harpist/vocalist Janelle Nadeau. Nadeau celebrated the traditions of Christmas in the Southern Manitoba Concerts 45th Anniversary series Christmas offering Sunday, Dec. 4 at Buhler Hall in Gretna. The "Janelle Nadeau Ensemble: A Prairie Christmas" offered a captivating concert of music that honoured the season's traditions and celebrated family. "We want the audience to sit back and enjoy the enchanting journey of our music. We will share our Christmas memories and create new ones for friends and families attending," explained Nadeau.

In the festively decorated Buhler Hall in Gretna, appreciative audience members enjoyed the sounds of Nadeau on Classical pedal harp and vocals – along with her friends from acclaimed group Winter Harp, world renowned Kim Robertson on Celtic Harp/vocals and Joaquin Ayala with a special collection of rare instruments dating back to the 9th century. The afternoon was a cleverly woven tapestry of songs old and new, with Nadeau's own Christmas traditions woven throughout the song selections.

The afternoon opened with a rousing "Joy to the World" which set the stage for a series of traditional English Christmas carols. "Child of the Poor", a combination of "What Child is This" and "Star of the County Down", followed by the 15th century carol, "Ding Dong Merrily on High" masterfully showcased both Celtic and Classical harps, as the voices wove in lovely harmonies. The lilting "Comb Your Hair and Curl it", a contemporary arrangement of a traditional Irish folk song arranged by masterful Robertson, danced as the harps shared the melody and playfully intertwined. Janelle's resplendent skill and talent as harpist shone through, as did Kim Robertson's harp playing and song arranging.

Joaquin Ayala provided seasonal readings and adept instrumentals, especially in "We Three Kings" and Ayala's own "Nigel's Estampie" where he switched between the Swedish medieval folk instrument, the Nickelharpa, and the Symphony, a 9th century instrument from southern France, but evoking eastern Arabic sounds. The instruments added grounding and texture, at times sounding like a cello, at others, violin, and yet others, like bagpipes.

Rossetti's "In the Bleak Midwinter" featured the lovely voices, pure and sweet, of both harpists, never overtaking the beautiful harp arrangement, but deftly complimenting and offering gentle and delicate whispers of falling snow. The two interacted effortlessly and seamlessly to create a beautiful blend.

The final song of ACT 1, "The Snow Lay on the Ground/Merrily Kiss the Quaker's Wife", both Irish carols, was replete with Nadeau's memories of Christmases with Grandma (who was in attendance), the family gift exchange and beloved stories of wrapping paper follies, and Christmas memories with waves of Celtic harp, harmonies and French Canadian spoons, a storied Nadeau family tradition.

Act 2 opened with a poignant reading by Ayala, "Lift our faces to let the light find us, the blessed Light, in the days of darkness", which introduced the French Carol "D'ou Viens-to Bergere". Ayala then followed with a Canadian classic, "The Huron Carol", featuring all of his varied instruments, with the help of both harpists, Nadeau and Robertson.

Referring to a trip to Jerusalem, during an archaeological dig near the sea of Galilee and where he subsequently spent Christmas and witnessed the Wailing Wall, Ayala regaled the audience with his memories of this succinct moment, asking for all to pray for peace, all walks of life, and all religions. This segued seamlessly into Nadeau's "Grant us Pardon" featuring Nadeau's eloquent song-writing skills and perfectly simple and waif-like vocals. "One does not have to be

the best singer," stated Nadeau, "as long as the gift is shared in the true spirit of the season." And the vocals were always just that, hushed whispers, with the harps always taking the lead and centre stage.

The audience was then treated to a demonstration of both the Celtic and Classical harps, leading into a festive "Good King Wenceslas", which also featured a set of sleigh bells, 6 generations in the Nadeau family! The afternoon continued with several more rousing Traditional French and English Carols, including "Noel Nouvelet", the "Nutcracker Cadenza" and "God Rest Ye". And what better way to continue into this festive season than with an exquisite "Auld Lang Syne", featuring both harps and vocalists, tenderly woven together. Concluding the afternoon was Gruber's beloved Christmas hymn "Silent Night" in which the audience joined voices with the musicians on stage, while the harps eloquently delivered a beautiful end to a wonderful afternoon of song.

Through these glorious musical offerings, the appreciative audience was indeed "back in the living room of a loved one, surrounded by happiness, love and exceptional music "and hopefully also a place where new and lasting traditions could be created. The Janelle Nadeau Ensemble delivered a perfectly wrapped gift of the season that wove together tradition, family and music-all necessities in a perfect Prairie Christmas!

Southern Manitoba Concerts is celebrating its 45th Anniversary Season this year. The next SMC concert "Everything Fitz" taking place January 26, 2017, at 7:30 at the Morden Access Event Centre. Details are available at <http://southernmanitobaconcerts.org/>