

Celtic Fiddling Star Jamie Laval Casts Off the Classical Shackles

Story by Sally Treadwell

“A new star for the old world”... “Subtle and energetic at the same time...” “Red hot!”

Fiddler Jamie Laval, who will perform at Jefferson Landing’s Tartan Day Celebration this Saturday, April 8, is a favorite with critics and concert crowds alike wherever he goes. He is the 2002 U.S. National Scottish Fiddle Champion, and he has worked on the soundtracks for the movies *Wild America* and *Finding Home*, the Grammy-nominated theme for the TV show *Everwood* and Dave Matthews’s CD *Some Devil*. But best of all, the classically trained musician has found his musical niche.

“Celtic music just comes from my heart,” he said, and he has an incomparable take on the traditional Scottish, Irish, Appalachian, Breton and Québécois melodies he loves.

Laval trained as a classical violinist, leaving his Seattle school early to attend the Victoria Conservatory of Music.

“I never envisioned any career other than being a symphony violinist—I just played fiddle music on the side as a mild amusement. But as I got better and better, and started getting feedback, I realized that yes, it was possible to have a career fiddling. So I cast off those classical shackles!” he laughed. “Musicians like Daryl Anger and Mark O’Connor have redefined what’s possible on a violin. It was just ignorance. There’s such a well-established training path: you take Suzuki lessons, learn Brahms and Beethoven, attend a conservatory, play for an orchestra... I just didn’t know any better and it wasn’t right for me. If I could do it over, I’d like to pursue both kinds of music with no clear distinctions. And I really think it ought to be possible to pursue a rigorous education in roots-based music.”

His classical training, however, was far from being a waste of time. “I bring some of that to the music I’m playing now. Depth, sound quality, knowledge and theory of harmonics—all that is classical. But I break the rules, too, in the way I handle the bow for instance, and I’m adding to the tonal vocabulary [of Celtic music]. People who come up to me after a show can’t always articulate what they like about my music, but they recognize that it’s different from what other people are doing.”

Although much of the music he plays has been carefully crafted from jigs and reels, and the audience will find its lilt irresistible, it’s not really dance music.

“It’s arranged for constant intrigue,” he said. “We consider each nugget of traditional music carefully. At first glance, the melodies often seem almost childlike, but there’s always some complexity there and we throw that emotion into stronger relief. If it’s a rather forlorn tune, we’ll develop it by enhancing the emotion. When you change the key, the effect is really brought out.” The resulting “collection” of nuggets becomes an almost symphonic arrangement, he said, even though there are only two instruments.

His partnership with new love Ashley Broder has, he feels, brought a new dimension to his music. He and Broder, who plays mandolin, cello, guitar and fiddle, met last June at the prestigious annual fiddling festival in Weiser, Idaho. Laval was doing a demonstration solo and Broder was competing, and the two hit it off right away. “Then we found out that we’re crazy about each other’s music, too, and we found a new sound when we play together. We started performing together around Thanksgiving last year. It’s just a great thing.”

Laval is immensely popular, playing about 120 concerts a year. He and Broder are quite literally living out of a suitcase as they zig-zag the country. “We don’t quite know where to get our mail—traveling like this is almost doable, thanks to the Internet and email, but we have to figure out about the mail. And it can be really tricky to make a home-cooked meal. “I’m getting really tired of a vagabond existence, though. We’re eyeing Asheville—it’s a good hub for fiddle music and we really love this area. Other traveling musicians are our community now, but it would be a nice surprise if we found ourselves fitting into a local scene.”