

Celtic College: Traditional Music For All Ages

By ART EDELSTEIN

Correspondent

Maura Morse of Essex Junction owns a Celtic harp but her repertoire is small.

Barb Kester from Burlington plays a big red accordion with limited success. She wants to accompany other musicians and singers.

Tom Kemp, also of Essex Junction, put down his guitar a decade ago but recently got the urge to play again.

All three met for the first time at the Congregational Church in Burlington when they attended the first class of the 1999 session of Celtic College. For six concurrent Monday nights in February and March, anyone can learn Irish or Scottish traditional music from experienced Vermont musicians versed in this style. Celtic College is the brainchild of Burlington musician Brian Perkins who conducts the classes at the church located at College and Union Streets.

At this first class nearly 50 people crammed two church rooms to hear Perkins and Monkton-based fiddler-guitarist Pete Sutherland play traditional Irish music. After a few tunes the two-man faculty separated the Celtic musicians-to-be. One group joined Perkins to learn the nuances of the melody, and the others, including Morse, Kessler, and Kemp, stayed with Sutherland to practice rhythmic accompaniment.

"In a sense I started the Celtic College as a musical singles club so that people could meet each other and then go off and make music together," said Perkins.

Perkins, 34, a full-time musician who plays a variety of stringed instruments in the band Atlantic Crossing, said, "The essential factor in whether a musical form gets carried on is whether people can play the music socially. Solitary practice just can't sustain interest unless people have the opportunity to hang out with other musicians and experience the music as a form of social intercourse."

Irish music has become very popular in recent years partly because of the popularity of the musical "Riverdance." But it is also similar to traditional New England musical forms.

Perkins didn't charge a cent for Celtic College in 1997, the school's first year. Yet it attracted 30 or more people for each class. For 1998 he instituted a nominal \$5-per-class fee to help meet his expenses.

The first class this year showed just how much the school had caught on as the musicians and would-be musicians arrived. They brought fiddles, guitars, mandolins, a bouzouki, flutes, bodhrans (Irish drums), and accordions. There was even a cello.

A few students, such as Kemp and Morse, had no instrument at all. Kemp said he was trying to get back

into music.

"I have Irish heritage in me, so this is timely," he noted. "I didn't know what to expect. It's really nice to get together and not have to perform. It's about getting together and having a good time."

Morse was impressed by the first class. "I want to see about dragging my harp here next week," she said.

"Organizing is in my blood," said Perkins, who has been dubbed the college's "dean." He has years of experience as a radical student organizer at the University of Vermont in the anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid movements. More recently he helped run the Last Elm Cafe, a Burlington coffeehouse.

"Now I organize dances, folk festivals and classes to bring people together," he said.

At Celtic College Perkins leads with a very relaxed grip and tuition payments are dropped into a cardboard box on a table.

"I had no model for this," he said. But he did borrow from the concept of the slow session conducted in Bloomington, Ind.

"A slow session," he noted, "is a different take on this. It's Irish music at a slow speed."

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music might not feel comfortable.

"Most sessions are too intimidating," he admitted.

Thus Celtic College was born. Think of it as a place to learn some melodies, basic rhythms, a few of the most common guitar chords, all within a very non-intimidating atmosphere, Perkins explained.

"I don't want to boost Irish music as a big thing, but I do want it to be accessible," said Perkins.

John Murray of Burlington agreed. This Irish native from County Kildare brought along a bouzouki.

"I know some tunes but want to learn more," he said. "It's cool, all these people playing and how serious and earnest they are."

With the first night packed, Perkins foresees a successful term. In coming weeks, fiddlers Sara Blair, Lausanne Allen and Becky Tracy will teach new tunes. Guitarist Doug Riley and bodhran-player Marty Morrissey will explain rhythm. The term ends with a benefit concert featuring Sutherland, Blair and Morrissey on March 18.

Celtic College continues on Mondays through March 8 at 7:30. For more information contact Perkins at 660-9491. The college also has a web site at www.hbconcoctions.com/burlington.celtic.