

Artist Management

Ensemble Galilei with NPR's Neal Conan: A Universe of Dreams

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Celtic music, cosmos intertwine By EVAN GILLESPIE

SOUTH BEND — On Friday night, the Leighton Concert Hall of Notre Dame's DeBartolo Performing Arts Center was awash in the colorful clouds of distant galaxies and the sounds of ancient melodies.

The cosmic performance was courtesy of the Ensemble Galilei, an early music sextet that specializes in early Scottish and Irish folk tunes; the ensemble was joined on Friday by special guest Neal Conan, the host of NPR's "Talk of the Nation." The joint concert, dubbed "A Universe of Dreams," consisted of the ensemble's traditional program augmented by Conan's reading of astronomically themed poetry as images from the Hubble Space Telescope were projected on a giant screen at center stage.

The juxtaposition of Celtic music with breathtaking images of the universe might seem at first like melodramatic entertainment more suited to a PBS pledge drive than to the dignified environs of the Leighton Concert Hall, but the Ensemble Galilei is not a lightweight musical group.

Rather, it is a serious early music ensemble intent on performing authentic renditions of traditional songs and dances, as well as some original contemporary pieces. The group features not only the expected fiddles, bagpipes, and Celtic harp, but delightful and rarely heard instruments as well, such as early oboes and recorders (played with fiery flair by Kathryn Montoya) and the viola da gamba. The core quintet is filled out nicely by the sprightly percussion of Laura Jordan.

Conan's contribution to the program set the astronomical tone, as he delivered stargazing poems by Michael Glaser, William Shakespeare, Ann Lister, and others. His readings were fitting accompaniment to both the music and the images projected on the huge screen, and his attempt to inspire awe was undermined only by the unavoidable familiarity of his voice; NPR listeners would be hard pressed to think of him as anything other than his on-air personality.

Yet the combination of art forms -- music, poetry, and photography -- worked well for most of the evening, and the performance aligned itself smoothly with the marriage-of-art-and-science theme that Notre Dame established last spring with its production of Tom Stoppard's "Arcadia." At times, the pairing of poetry and galactic photos was nearly overwhelming, as when a swirling cosmic cloud served as backdrop to Stanley Kunitz's "The Science of the Night": "My touch is on you, who are light-years gone/We are not souls but systems, and we move/In clouds of our unknowing/like great nebulae."

In its best moments, "A Universe of Dreams" made the problems of people -- indeed, our entire planet -- seem incomprehensibly insignificant and the mysteries of the universe unfathomably vast.

But when that realization became almost crushing, Conan and the Ensemble were quick to offer the reassurance of Monty Python's Eric Idle, whose "Galaxy Song" suggests a small ray of hope: "So remember, when you're feeling very small and insecure, how amazingly unlikely is your birth, and pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space, 'cause there's bugger all down here on Earth."