

KT Sullivan Celebrates All Things Irish — Especially the Music

When she wasn't breaking our hearts or tickling our funny bones, the singer was prompting us to raise our steins and join in with those songs of the Emerald Isle that everybody knows.



KT Sullivan at Pangea. Howard Melton



WILL FRIEDWALD
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'When Irish Eyes Are Smiling'

KT Sullivan at Pangea

In 1948, Charlie Parker's All-Stars recorded one of many variations on "I Got Rhythm," which Bird titled "Ah-leu-Cha." First Parker soloed, then Miles Davis,

then pianist John Lewis, and then Parker again. As he re-entered, he played a quote from a traditional Irish song titled “The Kerry Dancers.”

This tells us two things. First, it says Parker knew the song and expected that his listeners would too; indeed, there were many pop recordings of “Kerry Dancers” during the big band era. Second, most people expected to hear it played rather fast — it was, after all, an uptempo dance number — though it would take a shot of adrenaline for even a leprechaun to keep up with Parker’s tempo.

Even by then, though, a few artists were slowing it down, like Connie Boswell in 1941. We find that when you take the time to sing it in a way that one can take in the lyrics, all of a sudden it becomes something more than just a catchy Irish jig. Unexpectedly, we are now immersed in a profound remembrance of things past and lost time: “Oh, for one of those hours of gladness / Gone, alas, like our youth too soon.”

KT Sullivan — who made her entrance at Pangea singing a personalized respelling of George M. Cohan’s “Harrigan” — knows all about those Kerry dancers, lost hours of gladness, and youth that has gone with the wind. On March 16, just before St. Patrick’s Day, she gave a remarkably intimate and moving one-woman celebration of all things Irish: especially the music. She combined authentic airs and ersatz Tin Pan Alley Irish songs, Irish melodies from County Cork, County Clare, the fair city of Dublin, and County Broadway (like “How Are Things in Glocca Morra?”). They are flighty, funny songs that make you laugh, as well as deep, soulful ballads that bring a tear to this old bald-headed half-Irishman’s eye.

Ms. Sullivan has been long known as the ruling doyenne of what we New Yorkers call “cabaret,” a community that she presides over as the chairman of the Mabel Mercer Foundation. Ever since the passing of Queen Elizabeth, I’ve taken to addressing her as “Your Majesty.”

During all of her career thus far, Ms. Sullivan has worked with excellent musical directors and piano-playing partners, but she took the opportunity presented by the pandemic to master the art of accompanying herself. Draped in a kelly-green scarf and applying her bright green pumps to the pedals, like MacNamara's band, she blazed away.

By now Ms. Sullivan knows well how to structure such a program, giving the full treatment to some numbers, such as "A Little Bit of Heaven (Shure, They Call it Ireland)," while merely passing by other in medleys — like "Come Back to Erin" into "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" — almost like we were taking a scenic railway tour of Ye Olde Sod. We all think of Irish songs as being mainly about dancing, drinking, and otherwise parading, but Ms. Sullivan offered a tryptic of songs about partition, immigration, and famine. She also interspersed the program with notable quotes from Irish poetry and prose, like, "The great Gaels of Ireland are the men that God made mad, For all their wars are merry, and all their songs are sad" (G.K. Chesterton).

Just when we were taking that literally, at a moment when there were so many bittersweet songs that we became aware why the Irish drink so much, Ms. Sullivan switched it up with an archaic comedy song called "McBreen's Heifer," which finds its literary parallel in Gertrude Stein's "A Book Concluding With As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story."

When she wasn't breaking our hearts or tickling our funny bones, Ms. Sullivan was prompting us to raise our steins and join in with those songs of the Emerald Isle that everybody knows, such as "Londonderry Air" (aka, "Danny Boy"). In short, she did everything but climb up on top of the piano — emerald green pumps and all — and dance without moving her arms.