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Fiddler Liz Carroll doesn't hide her exuberance for Irish music

By Walter Tunis — Contributing Music Writer

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Liz Carroll says that even after 30 years, she is fascinated by the emotion of Irish music.

There is an animation that surfaces when Liz Carroll is speaking that often reflects the spirited tone of her playing.

She is one of today's most celebrated torchbearers of traditional Irish music (she is America-born of Irish parentage), and her fiddle music bears confidence, precision, no modest level of speed when the occasion calls for it and, above all, a bountiful sense of Celtic abandon.

All kinds of musical alliances have promoted and benefited from her work: from traditionally inclined alliances with Trian, String Sisters and especially two extraordinary albums with fellow fiddler John Doyle (including 2009's Grammy-nominated *Double Play*), and collaborations with non-Irish-inclined stars Don Henley and Yehudi Menuhin.

But the very exuberance that has ignited Carroll's recordings for more than 30 years positively erupts in conversation. There is no trace of an Irish accent as she talks, but there is no mistaking the heritage that has longed fueled her music.

"It's amazing," she said recently from her home in Chicago. "So many of these Irish tunes are just eight bars followed by eight bars. And then you repeat. Now, how could that be so moving? It's just so Irish and so doggone sentimental.

"Sometimes the tunes go by so fast for listeners that they're content to just pound away to them, whether it's by clapping or tapping their feet. It can also be that way for us that play this music and journey through these fast tunes. But there is every bit as much in the slow tunes as in the fast ones. They can seem almost maudlin at time. With almost every tune, if you slow it down, you would have as big a tearjerker as something like *Danny Boy*."

Following an extensive musical partnership with Doyle, Carroll is currently touring with pianist Cormac McCarthy, a native of Cork, Ireland, who also lives in Chicago. McCarthy's broad musical scope — which extends from obvious Irish links to some less- expected jazz leanings — appealed to Carroll. So did the harmonic possibilities of matching fiddle with keyboards. But there also was a practical consideration — as in having a kindred musical spirit who lived in her hometown.

"It always feels like the people I play with all live far away," Carroll said. "With Trian, the accordion player lived in Baltimore and the guitar player lived in Minneapolis. For that matter, John lived in North Carolina. So I couldn't resist grabbing somebody that I could play with on a whim. It's been fantastic so far."

There are obvious contrasts in duets with McCarthy and Doyle — not the least being the instruments they play — but Carroll said both bring ample stamina and invention to the music.

"John would always want to just dive in with a tune. He would take off right away. I would always have to say, 'Wait. You have to hear it the way I heard it first and then run with where you want to go with it.' Then as we played the tune, the music just got nicer and nicer. He would wind up knowing more about what he was doing chord-wise than I did.

"The same thing happens with Cormac. With the piano, he is able to stretch out those fingers so amazing shifts in chords can happen. It's still an experiment, really. But I think we're making good music already."

Although McCarthy provides a strong local link for Carroll, she will hardly be confined to Chicago gigs — or even North American ones — in the coming year. On tap are dates in Ireland and Malaysia with the all-fiddle-playing String Sisters, which brings together artists from Norway, Sweden, Scotland — and Kentucky, in the person of Liz Knowles. There also are plans for teaching at summer festivals in France, and fall concerts in Ireland with accordionist Mairtin O'Connor.

Among all that, Carroll hopes to begin work on her first solo recording since 2002's *Lake Effect*. Tentative plans call for involvement from McCarthy, Doyle and Solas chieftain Seamus Egan, who worked with Carroll on her outstanding 2000 album *Lost in the Loop*.

"That always seems to be the musician's life, doesn't it? You're always introduced to a lot of different things. And what a really good life it is."

Read Walter Tunis' blog, The Musical Box, at LexGo.com.

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