

# Music from the Irish soul

BY JOAN LOWNDS

Strumming on her harp, Fionnuala Gill sang a song in Irish about a mermaid who tragically fell in love with a human — while nearly 240 Montessori students sat silent and rapt. Ms. Gill, a former Riverdance soloist who was also a member of the internationally acclaimed Secret Garden band, performed last month with other noted musicians at Wilton's Whipple Road Montessori School.

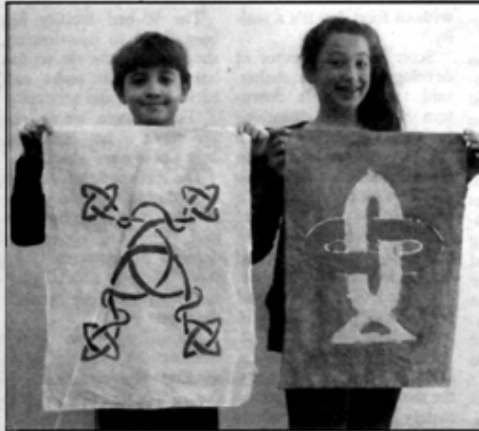
The event, "A Celebration of Celtic Soul," was part of the musicians' tour in the area to mark the Irish festival of Samhain, a spiritual time of darkening days and remembrance of the dead, which takes place around Halloween.

Ms. Gill, who has just released her first solo album, "Whispers of Love," told the audience that Irish music is traditionally divided into three types: "music of rest, or sleep; music of sorrow; and lovely, happy music." She then sang examples of each, some in the Irish language, backed up by her band, which included Belfast singer Robbi McMillen, guitarist Beth Bradley and percussionist Marion Najamy, both of Fairfield, and singer and recording artist Sister Kathleen Deignan, C.N.D.

The stage was decorated with students' drawings featuring original variations of Celtic knot designs and images from the Book of Kells.

Irish music also draws inspiration from the sea, which surrounds the island country, said Ms. Gill, before singing one of these traditional songs. A classically trained Dublin native, Ms. Gill has performed traditional and ancient Irish songs before the president of Ireland, Queen Fabiola of Belgium and Bishop Desmond Tutu, and has appeared regularly on PBS.

At the end of the show, the Montessori students stood and joined Ms. Gill and company in a musical rendition of an old Irish blessing: "May the road rise to meet you/ May the



Alex Rothwell and Gaby Pisano, Montessori School sixth graders, show the artwork they created for last month's Celtic festival of Samhain at Montessori School on Whipple Road.

wind be always at your back/ May the sun shine warm upon your face/ The rains fall soft upon your fields/ And until we meet again/ May God hold you in the palm of his hand."

The show ended with Sister Deignan wishing everyone "Slán abhaile," which means "safe home" in Irish.

The Irish Times described Ms. Gill as "a Celtic revelation with a voice that is out of this world," and the standing ovation she received at the end of the show seemed to underscore this.

After her performance, Ms. Gill said the Montessori children were "adorable and the highlight" of her tour. When asked what seemed to keep them so silent and spellbound throughout the performance, she said, "Maybe it's my harp. The harp is a novelty to the children, and it is magical in a way." She said she had a "wonderful experience" touring with Riverdance for about 10 years.

Sister Deignan, who is also founder and director of Spirituality Institute at Iona College, said the concert celebrated the "the Festival of Samhain — a time of opening to worlds that lie beyond the

thin veil of this world. And in the Christian community, this is the season for honoring our saints and remembering our holy souls."

She is also affiliated with the Benedictine Grange, a small monastic community in West Redding, she said.

Gaby Pisano, a Montessori sixth grader whose artwork was displayed over the stage, said she drew inspiration from a study of traditional Irish knot patterns. Alex Rothwell, Gaby's sixth grade classmate, said his drawing, which also graced the stage, was based on the Irish idea of "Mo anam cara," or "My Soul Friend."

"It's the belief that once you meet your 'soul friend,' the world opens up and you get a bigger perspective and can see a larger picture," Alex said.

Kelly McKenna, another sixth grader, of Wilton, described the concert as "very special to me, because I am part Irish, and I loved learning about the history and traditions of where I came from."

Her classmate, Michael Kimball, also of Wilton, said he would love to go to Ireland sometime, "especially around Samhain."



Music was provided by, from left, Rob Silvan, Montessori's music department chair; Fionnuala Gill, internationally acclaimed harpist and former Riverdance soloist; Robbi McMillen, Sister Kathleen Deignan, C.N.D., Marion Najamy and Beth Bradley.

—Joan Lownds photos