

TribunePeople

Acclaimed musician returning to Birr

Derek Fanning

KARIN LEITNER is famous for being a fantastic player of the flute, a beautiful and charming instrument which often makes listeners think of pastoral scenes or scenes from paradise.

She grew up in Vienna, a city which could lay claim to being the capital of classical music (if there was such a thing) and learned her craft among the best. Many years ago she bravely decided to branch out into a solo career and it's gone very well for her ever since.

A long time ago Karin visited Ireland for the first time and immediately fell in love with our country and our people. "I was 16 years of age when I first came to Ireland and I fell in love with the place. I am still in love with it. There's a wistfulness, a magic about the landscape which gets the imagination going, which makes the person viewing it think of fairytales (light and dark), and about stories featuring all sorts of weird and wonderful creatures and invisible spirits of the countryside.

"I love the soft landscapes of the countryside here, the colours (especially in Spring and Autumn), and the omnipresent green (which is pleasant to look at, especially from the air when flying into Dublin). There's a loveliness and feminine beauty about the scenery."

Karin lived in Birr for two years about a decade ago, during which time she rented several places, and has kept coming back over the years, for a few weeks every time. "Birr feels like home to me," she says.

She loves the spirit in Irish people (a Celtic spirit, if you will) which responds strongly to the soul and the imaginative world. "Irish people are strongly connected to the invisible force, to God; they are strongly connected to their inner, finer, higher natures. They have immense respect for the Life Force of the Universe. Out of this profound and ancient connection came Irish music and poetry. People were able to positively respond, without any



Acclaimed musician Karin Leitner, pictured here at Ballymaloe House, Cork, has given many concert tours in Ireland during her career. She loved the country and its people so much that she decided to live here for a couple of years. She particularly liked Birr, because of the town's old world charm, and returns to the town on March 20 to give an eagerly anticipated return concert.

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cynicism or negative rationality, to the energy and the beauty of music and poetry. There were no cynical barriers. They allowed each musical seed and each poetic thought to sink into their hearts where it could thrive and blossom. Because of this quality, Irish people are special and unique in the world. They often seem more willing and better primed to break through the veil between the material world and the Invisible."

Her love affair with Ireland has lasted thirty years and she continues to warm to our wit and occasional dottiness, qualities which she finds "refreshing and unique." Our concept of time, especially in rural Ireland, remains philosophical and relaxed, which, Karin feels, is another positive characteristic.

"Coming from Vienna and growing up in a historically and architecturally beautiful city," she continued, "but with a very chauvinistic, perfectionistic and competitive music world, I felt much more relaxed in Ireland. And I was greatly appreciated here. People loved listening to my music and many of them listened with their souls and hearts and unjudgementally. I was in heaven and I have toured Ireland for 25

years now. I have played in theatres, art centres, castles, country houses, Blue Book Hotels, Hidden Ireland Hotels, churches, art festivals and private concerts all over the country and I feel I know Ireland better than Austria, having driven all over so many times. I feel my soul is Irish." She does three concert tours of Ireland every year.

However, she has watched with dismay as the negative characteristics of the contemporary world have become more and more widespread and evident in Ireland. "Ireland during its history has shed a lot of tears and has fought many a battle against the greedy and the arrogant. Unfortunately, I feel that the greedy and the arrogant, the bureaucratic and unimaginative, are getting more and more of a foothold in Ireland."

Like all other countries in the Western World, things like smartphones and social media have unleashed dark and negative forces in our lives, fuelling our addictive personalities. The tech world has unleashed a Pandora's Box. "I see too many people in Ireland locked into this tech world, this world of the smartphone, a world which is so powerfully dominated by American culture (a culture which often leaves a great deal to be desired); when it might be more beneficial for them to go out of an evening and engage with some realworld, live, cultural activity; engage with cultural events that are real soulful expressions but in a live setting. We need to become healthier in our habits."

She is also greatly dismayed to witness so many Irish people placing far too much importance on things like money, celebrity, and physical appearances. Sometimes it's obvious to her that people are placing much greater importance and value on superficial qualities

such as wealth and prestige than on deeper, wiser qualities such as heart, soul, connection to God, the beauties of the natural world and the kindness of people.

She recoils from the cult of the busy people, who wear their busyness like a badge of honour, and she recoils from the overvaluation of money (an overvaluation which often gives us a sly, calculating, unattractive air). This wrong attitude frequently leads people into making stupid, dangerous decisions or falling prey to mental problems such as depression. True peace, she argues, can't be found in chasing after exterior things, but is found within our quieter, reflective selves. She prefers rural Ireland to the big cities like Dublin, because she feels we are not as corrupted here; and she's noticed the worsening of Irish bureaucracy which means a more expansive and cumbersome paperwork burden.

Karin's first instrument was the recorder, which she began playing at the age of four. She changed to concert flute when she was ten. Her father was a cellist in a string quartet. "My father expertly guided me towards the instruments that would be right for me. My mother practised with me every day. I tried the piano but I wasn't happy with it, because I didn't like doing two different things, playing with two hands, at the same time. The flute was perfect. And I still play the recorder in concerts."

She has an eclectic taste in music. "I love all sorts of music, as long as it has a charm about it, or is played from the heart. If it's sincere and coming from the heart I don't care what style it is. Unfortunately, a lot of stuff which is on our airwaves is banal. A lot of pop music isn't real music. It's artificially, digitally made and has no

heart or soul. Compared to classical music, to trad music, to jazz, and to world music, pop music isn't really music at all. A lot of it is cynical and commercial."

Karin worked for a while as a flautist in the Stage Orchestra of the Vienna State Opera and with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in London. She continues to regularly play with the Vienna State Opera, and with the Volksoper, as well as other professional orchestras, including Chamber Orchestras. She has performed with a number of famous conductors including Claudio Abbado, Riccardo Muti and Sir Neville Marriner and with many famous singers and solo instrumentalists.

She has recently finished a series of New Year Concerts with the Ballhaus Orchestra in Germany and Austria, concerts which are always massively well received. "Playing in orchestras is all very well and good," she remarks, "but I prefer freelancing, which I have been doing my whole life. It suits me better. I can pick and choose where I want to play, and I like being on the road, on the move. It also means I don't get involved in the negative things which can fester in orchestras, such as intrigues, petty attitudes and narrowmindedness, and unpleasant overblown egos. By contrast, when I am touring my intention is not just to play music but to take people on a positive, spiritual experience during my concerts. At the end of the day, positive, spiritual experiences are at the heart of what music is about."

Karin believes that many artists, musicians and writers believe in an invisible Life Force running through all of us, running through the animal world, and the natural world. "This Life Force is pure love and is the highest energy possible, but layers of things like fear, erroneous beliefs and anxieties cloud over it. Artists and musicians perceive this problem and try to bring about a healing, a reunion, through our work. We artists feel the pain of others, the disconnect in their psyches, the numbness of

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their separation from the Life Force, the anxieties which threaten to engulf them because they have lost their connection to a higher principle. Our music aims to soothe, calm, open up, reconnect and inspire. This is our service to humanity, basically an expression of the beauty and love at the heart of every living thing, a desire to express this inner truth in positive and unsullied environments."

Karin will be performing with Irish harpist Teresa O'Donnell in Birr Theatre and Arts Centre at 8pm on Friday March 20. Karin's and Teresa's recent concert in the National Concert Hall was sold out. The programme will include music from John Rutter, Handel, Genin, Angerer, Karin herself, Percy French, and Irish airs Mo Ghile Mear, Raglan Road, Eileen Og. Karin and Teresa have played many concerts together over the years. Teresa has written two books, including "Sisters of the Revolutionaries" (which is about the Pearse sisters). Teresa has also played with the RTE Concert Orchestra and the Irish Chamber Orchestra. She and Karin have recorded a CD called "Music of Irish Drawing Rooms".