

Leitrim's Hidden Treasure

THE McNAMARA FAMILY

DURING THE SUMMER OF 1998 the McNamara family of Aughavas released one of the most substantive albums of traditional Irish music ever produced. Entitled *Leitrim's Hidden Treasure* this recording is receiving widespread national and international acclaim for its quality and contribution to the Irish music tradition. Earle Hitchner, music critic with New York's *Irish Echo* newspaper has described it as "a masterful vanity release" and "a magnificent tribute to the rich musical tradition of South Leitrim". The eminent *Irish Music Magazine* has described it simply as "a superb CD".

Leitrim's Hidden Treasure features over seventy minutes of music all of which has strong Leitrim associations. Through each of the seventeen tracks of beautifully played music we get an insight into our traditional Irish music. In the words of Paddy Ryan, National Music Officer of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Shannonside Radio presenter "the McNamara family display an extraordinary virtuosity and technical brilliance which every traditional musician dreams of, but few of them achieve." Mr Ryan also praises the manner in which their music "reflects a tremendous sense of place and a great love and deep understanding of the musical heritage of their native place".

Each of the 17 tracks reflects some significant feature of the origins and development of the musical



traditions of south Leitrim. This mould breaking production includes over twenty pages of historical references related to the music recorded. *Leitrim's Hidden Treasure* thus provides a unique and comprehensive account of the musical tradition of the area and highlights Leitrim's importance in the annals of Irish music.

A striking feature of the presentation is the inclusion of a full colour booklet with illustrations giving prominence to Leitrim landmarks with which the music is associated. Thus it is no surprise that fellow Leitrim musician and recording artist John Lee has described the album as "one of the milestone recordings in the Irish music tradition".

The McNamara family, although very widely known musicians throughout Ireland and abroad have chosen to

dedicate their first family album to the music of their native South Leitrim. On *Leitrim's Hidden Treasure* their skilled musicianship, which has brought them widespread acclaim, is focused on their wish to promote the musical significance of their native area. It is a recording which in the words of Harry Bradshaw, RTE Radio music producer, "will introduce new audiences to the music of south Leitrim". Although widely travelled musicians, the McNamaras have been able to retain a deep appreciation for the music that is so familiar to them. Their musical experiences throughout Ireland and abroad served to further increase their desire to have the music of their native Aughavas and the surrounding parishes to be heard and played countrywide.

Each of Michael & Mary McNamara's

four sons and daughter feature on the album. Brian and Ray are pipers while Ciaran, Enda and Deirdre play flute, fiddle and concertina respectively, while their father Michael plays the flute. All have won All-Ireland titles, and many of them multiple titles at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann over the years.

Following on from these successes, the McNamara family are constantly in demand both as performing artists and teachers at various musical events both in Ireland and abroad. However, their involvement in Irish music stretches far beyond their achievements in competition or indeed their previous recordings.

They are a family appreciated for their active participation as members of Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann and Na Piobairi Uilleann fulfilling the roles of performing artists, teachers and adjudicators at Fleadh Cheoil competition. A number of the family members have toured extensively representing The Department of Foreign Affairs, Bord Fáilte and Comhaltas. Family members have also made regular and frequent appearances on TV and radio in and outside Ireland.

This album is also a testimony to the extraordinary wealth of music to emanate from their native area. The tunes on this album are taken from two primary sources, local music manuscripts and music played by past South Leitrim musicians. The



The Gier Manuscript

comprehensive sleeve notes tell of the significant contribution made to Irish music by Stephen Gier (1824-1894) who compiled a collection of approximately one thousand tunes in 1883 at his home in Gortletteragh. As Gier's collection was never published his work may never have received its due prominence were it not for the roles of Fr John Quinn, PP Gortletteragh, in bringing the collection to light and the McNamara family who have now given Gier's repertoire its first recording.

Similarly, the contribution made by Alex Sutherland (1873-1967), Carrigallen has been highlighted nationally, once again due to Fr Quinn's work and the McNamara's new album. Although the bulk of Sutherland's collection was accidentally destroyed, fortunately over two hundred tunes are to be found in the Folklore Commission in University College Dublin. These collections provide an invaluable written record of the music played in the area well over one hundred years ago, and serve to substantiate the many other written references to the music of parishes such as Aughavas, Cloone, Carrigallen, Drumreilly, Gortletteragh, Fenagh, Ballinamore and Mohill.

The sleeve notes accompanying this unique album in themselves emphasise the uniqueness of Leitrim's musical heritage. We have

indeed good reason to be proud of our county's contribution to the development of our native traditional Irish music.

The album also provides an insight into the music played by numerous south Leitrim musicians featuring tunes learned from Michael and John Blessing, Mike and Pee Fitzpatrick, Jimmie and Bernie McKiernan, and the Reilly family. This is music which has been handed down from generation to generation, a tradition which is continued by the McNamara family. As many of these tunes have never been written down, we are fortunate to have this recording to ensure their preservation for future generations.

In the words of fellow Leitrim musician and composer Charlie Lennon, the McNamaras' album *"makes an important statement about the strength of our tradition"*. By its very existence this recording has provided us with a note of anticipation for the future as we can look forward to hearing the music of south Leitrim being played and heard by people everywhere.

Leitrim's Hidden Treasure, the album, provides us with a memorable landmark which facilitates the passage of south Leitrim's musical heritage from the past through the present and into the next millennium.

"Leitrim's Hidden Treasure" in CD and Cassette format with accompanying booklet, may be obtained directly from the McNamara family, Carrickavoher, Aughavas, Co. Leitrim. Tel: 078-36023 or from local shops and music outlets nationwide.

The album is also distributed by Gael Linn, Claddagh Records and Chart Records.

