

# Exciting Times for Irish Arts Center

## FROM THE HOB

Paul Keating



**T**HERE certainly is a lot of excitement at 726 11th Avenue housing the extraordinary new edifice that is the Irish Arts Center (IAC) still punching very much above its weight there in Hell's Kitchen in Manhattan.

The new state of the art IAC facility is about to mark its first year of operation having produced over 100 shows and events since last November when the easing of pandemic restrictions and completion of the finishing touches first allowed loyal patrons entrance to its new home. Located just around the corner from its humbler beginnings at 553 West 51st Street, the three-story tenement building that boldly celebrated and introduced Irish culture through community grass roots initiatives, it also launched its highly impressive decade long campaign to raise over \$60 million for the new space.

On October 20, IAC Executive Director Aidan Connolly and Vice Chair Pauline Turley welcomed a crowd of almost 800 people to Chelsea Piers to mark several auspicious landmarks at its annual Spirit of Ireland gala which is a principal vehicle to raise funding.

Choosing guests of honor from the business and cultural spheres is very important for this fundraising task, and selecting popular entertainer Ed Sheeran and businessman Tom McInerney of Genworth Financial certainly was a home run this year.

Despite the pandemic pause that delayed the opening of the new IAC, a massive and enthusiastic throng of loyal supporters attended the gala to mark 50 years of the IAC and acclaim the successful first season in their new home. In so doing they set a new record of \$2.3 million garnered by their generous and approving faithful for this night. Adding a bit of live excitement to the affair was the auctioning of an autographed guitar by Sheeran.

Bids rapidly accelerated reaching \$100,000 matched by the other guest of honor McInerney (proud of his own Clare roots) and a former gala honoree, Eileen Murray, who is currently an IAC board member. As that pinnacle was reached Sheeran approached the



Ed Sheeran performs at the Irish Arts Center gala. (Photo by Nir Arieli)

stage quietly and offered up a second donated guitar to satisfy the show of generosity by both donors. That "second collection effort" rounded up the evening's take to \$2.5 million.

Sheeran further captivated the audience after being introduced by last year's cultural honoree Joanie Madden, the founder and leader of Cherish the Ladies, as he articulately and sincerely spoke of two grandparents from the Emerald Isle and his own fondness for Ireland. When he did four solo songs ending with the emotive "Parting Glass" he surely had those fortunate to be in attendance beguiled as he was hugely applauded.

As usual, the Irish government signaled its considerable support for the event with the presence of Minister Catherine Martin whose brief in the Irish Cabinet is to look after the departments of arts, culture, gaeltacht, tourism, sport and media. Even with such a vast workload, the Green Party deputy leader has established herself in just two difficult years in the government, especially in the fields of arts and cul-

ture where many initiatives and new and improved funding opportunities for struggling artists have emerged.

Along with a eloquent and genuine speech lauding those accomplishments as Ireland grapples with a post-pandemic world, she brought yet another million dollar donation to the IAC which added to the evening's substantial haul.

As notable as the above is for the IAC, it is what takes place in its new home that really tells the story of what the mission is.

Coming up on November 15 will be a special collaboration with Dublin's Irish Traditional Music Archive ([www.itma.ie](http://www.itma.ie)) which is experiencing its own regeneration as a body that is reaching well beyond its four walls.

Last June the ITMA launched its online exhibition entitled "From the Bridge: A View of Irish Traditional Music in New York," an extensive collection of music digitally gathered to reflect a 150-year history of Irish music in New York and America. Local legend Don Meade diligently curated the still-growing collection in New York working with a team of ITMA folks who have been growing the well-respected archive preserving Ireland's native music and encouraging its propagation in this Century.

The November 15 launch at the IAC will be the official New York launch for the collection. Some of the digital collection will be shown that night highlighting archival recordings, photographs, manuscripts and video that helps tell the story of the close affinity between Ireland and America.

The ITMA Chief Executive Liam O'Connor, himself a brilliant fiddle player from Dublin, will lead a contingent from Ireland including uilleann piper Sean Og Potts, a piper and ITMA ad-

ministrator, and ITMA board member Edwina Guckian, whose promotion and preservation of Irish folk dancing in recent years has raised it to a higher level in Ireland including the mass media.

The special guest will be the Roscommon flute player Matt Molloy, of Bothy Band and Chieftains fame, and also appearing from Co. Kerry is accordion player Martin O'Connell.

There will be a New York contingent also to represent the Big Apple side. Slated to appear are Dawn Doherty (vocals and whistle), John Walsh (guitar), Lauren Tuffy (vocal and whistle), Frank McCormick (banjo), James Keane and John Nolan, two of New York's outstanding button accordion maestros.

Seats are limited for this special evening at the Irish Arts Center so best to check the website later for details at [www.irishartscenter.org](http://www.irishartscenter.org).

Plenty of availability for another IAC artist featured in the past focusing on the linkage between Irish traditional and Indian classical music in "Ragas to Reels" in shows from November 17-19 which demonstrates the multicultural collaborations to be found in the IAC programming.

Utsav Lal is the producer here with extensive experience in both genres leading Sam Comerford, Ganavya, Nitin Mitta and Sahar Romanai with special guests Dana Lyn and Winifred Horan.

And perhaps you caught the first of three free Irish music sessions in the first-floor café space at the new IAC with Pat Mangan and Matt Stapleton on Friday, October 28. There are two more remaining on November 18 with Brenda Castles and Matt Stapleton, and with Caitlin Warbelow and Aln Murray on Friday, December 9. These are open sessions curated by Warbelow.



**FROM THE BRIDGE**  
A view of Irish traditional music in New York



Kitty O'Neil  
dancer

**From the Bridge is coming to the IAC.**