

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

December 6, 2004

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MAGICAL STRINGS

Yuletide Magic – 26 Years and Counting

Magical Strings' Celtic Yuletide Concert -- 26th Season

Musical family plays together, stays together

In an age when families have trouble just gathering around the dinner table, the Boulding family of Olalla, WA, is something of a phenomenon. For 26 years without fail, Pam and Philip Boulding and their five children have gathered to perform a Celtic Yuletide Concert series hosted by their group, Magical Strings. The first concert was in 1979 in Seattle. This year the Bouldings have plenty to celebrate—there is another grandchild in the third generation with a fourth on the way. Their youngest and only daughter, Brittany, graduated from Rice University's Shepherd School of Music with a degree in violin performance, and is pursuing graduate work in Los Angeles at the prestigious Colburn School of Performing Arts, under the tutelage of world-renowned Robert Lipsett. In accord with tradition, she will perform a stunning solo at this year's Christmas concerts.

Celtic Yuletide has become a beloved Northwest tradition with a growing legion of audience members from all walks of life. Some say taking part in the event has changed their lives.

The Bouldings and Magical Strings have earned critical acclaim throughout the United States and around the world (see "About Magical Strings"). Their music is rooted in Celtic tradition but is influenced by worldwide cultures, including African, Japanese, Hawaiian and Jamaican. It is spirited yet lyrical music, filled with what Pam describes as "soul-enlivening forces in syncopation with heart-felt rhythms of life."

Tied by Tradition

Celtic Yuletide is a sumptuous banquet for the senses, filled with colorful song, dance, storytelling and even juggling. Joining the Bouldings is a host of highly regarded professional performers, including the spirited Raney Irish Dancers, the renowned guitarist and singer Mike Saunders, a storyteller and many others.

The spirit of the concert harkens back to ancient tradition and the lighting of the Yuletide fire at the darkest time of year by people yearning for the return of light. According to Philip, the concert is designed to be all embracing and appeal to people of all spiritual and ideological persuasions.

The event mixes familiarity with innovation. The singing of favorite carols, a stirring children's processional, and an audience participation interlude – complete with extravagant costumes for young and old – are all treasured parts of the Bouldings' Yuletide tradition. This year's concert will feature selections from "Where Dragons Dance," representing a bold new phase in Magical Strings' musical evolution. Elements of the concert carry back to the earliest performances. Brittany Boulding, now a professional violinist, was just a babe in a basket at the fourth concert. That year Pam and Philip wove a charming tale about an elf princess (a.k.a. Brittany) and the gifts she receives from shepherds (a.k.a. brothers Geoffrey, Brenin, and twin brothers Morgan and Marshall).

Juggling on and off stage

The Bouldings first gathered for their annual concert back when the biggest challenge was keeping track of the twins among the instruments. Now that the children are grown, married and scattered about the country, they will gather again – despite jobs, final exams and the imminent birth of a fourth grandchild. They wouldn't miss it for the world.

Making the concert happen has never been easy, and just try raising five children while making a living as musicians. Pam and Philip shake their heads in amazement that they were able to pull it off, especially in the early years. The couple had to juggle every aspect of preparing for the concert, from booking venues to making and distributing flyers. They designed the staging and costumes, selected and arranged the music (or composed it themselves), and practiced, practiced, practiced.

Every evening, beginning in September, the family would leave the supper dishes unwashed and gather in the living room of their Olalla farmhouse to play the music that became woven into their souls. While other families were out shopping for gifts and trimming Christmas trees, the Bouldings were tied to a rigorous schedule of practice and performances.

Only once, when the twins were 8 or 9, was there any thought of not doing the concert. “I remember one Christmas, I looked at my children, because they never had had a normal holiday season, and saying to them, ‘Maybe we should skip a year,’” Pam said. “Then Morgan looked at me and said, ‘But Mommy, what about all the people? We have to give the concert. Look how happy it makes them.’” End of discussion.

Music is their life

For Pam and Philip, there is no line between their life and their livelihood. Music is their reason for being and the glue that holds their family together.

The couple met through their love of Celtic music. Both began their artistic journeys in childhood. Their paths crossed in 1978 when Pam, a visual artist and teacher, took a hammered dulcimer class from Philip, a musician and instrument builder, at his then-recently founded School of Magical Strings in Seattle. With Pam on dulcimer and Philip on Irish harp, his primary instrument, the two found they had a unique chemistry for making music and more.

Inspired by their parents’ love of music, each of the Boulding children found his or her musical niche. Brenin, the second oldest, knew when he was 3 that he wanted to play the soulful cello. When asked by his mother “why,” he exclaimed, “Because it expresses my spirit.” He’s also adept at juggling. Geoffrey, the eldest, took up violin at 6. Morgan tackled the piano, inspired by his mother, who was classically trained, and Marshall, like his “Papa”, gravitated to the Irish harp. When Brittany was old enough, she chose the violin because she wanted to “sit next to the conductor.”

Coming full circle

Each of the Boulding children has carried a love of music into adulthood.

Geoffrey is a professor of electron microscopy at Central Michigan University, yet he faithfully returns to play the Yuletide Concert. Marshall, 28, lives in Rhode Island and manages a fine home construction firm. Twin brother Morgan was his partner until his recent move to Philadelphia, where his wife Lara has taken up medical school. He will play piano and pennywhistles at the concert. Marshall will leave his one-year-old Margaret with wife Abby to join in on the harp.

Brenin, 30, is a professional musician in Seattle. He and Brittany, 22, are the children who most often join Pam and Philip to augment Magical Strings. As a quartet, the group played two sold-out tours of Japan.

As the duo Magical Strings, Pam and Philip have toured and recorded with Dan Fogelberg, appeared on Garrison Keillor’s “A Prairie Home Companion” and played at venues large and small, both in this country and abroad. Magical Strings has recorded 13 albums, including “Where Dragons Dance,” which was released on Allegro’s Alula Visions label last October.

The newest generation of Bouldings to step onto the stage includes Geoffrey’s daughter Kailey, 4, and Brenin’s daughter Rowan, also 4. Last year, the two wee girls, dressed in full Celtic costume, danced in perfect step and nearly stole the show. This year may see their debut on a small harp and dulcimer made for them by their ‘Papa’ last year. Brenin’s wife, Sarah Raney, leads the Raney Irish Dancers.

As for the School of Magical Strings, which Philip founded in 1978, it’s still going strong. Throughout the years, Philip’s harp-building and Pam’s visual art have been a vital and natural complement to the school’s work. Hundreds of children and adults have learned from the Bouldings the joy of making beautiful music, instruments and art.

A family affair ... and you’re invited

The Bouldings want their audience to “feel like part of the family,” says Pam. And they do. At one concert, a youngster with Down syndrome got up on stage during the processional and danced. Her mother said it was a major breakthrough for her daughter. One family from Utah was inspired to perform their own Christmas concerts. “We’ve gotten literally hundreds of e-mails and letters like that,” said Pam. “It’s been an incredible journey as a family. What we’re showing is not that our children are extraordinarily gifted, although Brittany is pretty amazing, but that we’re ALL on stage together, playing with love and joy in our hearts, doing something that keeps us close. We have a great time, and that’s why we are still doing it.”

“We have wanted to share our life and our journey,” Philip said, “so that people can see it’s something they can have as well.”

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