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Seal Maiden: A Celtic Musical. Karan Casey and Friends.

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“Once, and not too long ago at all, a great grey seal called Solanna gave birth to a girl calf seal. She named her Solanna the Younger, and no seal was ever so proud of its calf.” <p> So begins this innovative modern retelling of the ancient Celtic legends of the silkies (also known as selkies, selchies, kelpies, roane, and seal people), creatures who could shift between seal and human form by removing their sealskins. Stories about the silkies are known from Cornwall, Ireland (especially from the far northwestern county of Donegal), and Scotland (especially from the west coast and the northern islands of the Orkneys, Shetlands, and Hebrides). [1] <p> Male silkies were said to have nearly magical powers to seduce human women, whom they often left with child when the silkies returned to the sea. One popular ballad that Francis J. Child collected from the Orkney Islands tells of one such, “The Great [or Grey] Silkie of Sule Skerry,” who returned after seven years to claim his child and prophesy that the mother’s new husband would kill both silkie father and child. [2] <p> Female silkies, with their long, dark hair, deep, soulful brown eyes, and enchanting singing, were also said to be nearly irresistible to mortal men. Many tales relate the stories of young fishermen who steal a silkie’s skin to force her to marry them (for without it she could not return to seal form). And while the silkies make attentive and loving wives, they can never forget the sea that is in their blood, and when they find their skins—often with the accidental help of their children—they go back to the sea, leaving their husbands bereft. [3] <p> Karan Casey’s <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> introduces a whole new generation of little ones to these classic tales, and places them in a musical setting so wondrous that many adult fans of Irish music will fall in love with them as well. Former lead singer of the Irish traditional group Solas, Casey has one of the most beautiful, expressive voices of any folksinger

I know, and she uses it to full effect here on both the songs she sings and the narration interspersed between them. [4] She’s backed up by some of the finest Irish traditional musicians recording today, including her partner Niall Vallely, concertina and flute player for Nomos, who also plays keyboards on this CD and composed all the incidental music that plays behind the narrations; Iarla O Lionaird, brilliant unaccompanied sean nos singer and member of the Afro-Celt Sound System; Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh of Altan; master fiddlers Martin Hayes and Dezi Donnelly; Michael McGoldrick on flute, whistle, and uilleann pipes; and guitarist Dennis Cahill. <p> With words and music, <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> tells the story of Solanna the Younger, a girl seal who loses her skin and is doomed to live on land as a human, forever separated from the ocean that she loves. Raised by a kindly fisherman, Solanna grows into a beautiful young woman. She marries and spends many happy years with her husband and their boy, who is also a silkie. When the boy discovers his sealskin, which his mother had hidden at his birth, he realizes his true nature, and leaves for the sea. But soon enough he returns to their door, carrying both his own and his mother’s sealskin, and the two of them run back to the ocean together. In the years to come, Solanna stays at sea, but her son returns often to the land to spend time with his father. And everyone lived happily ever after. <p> For parents and teachers, <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> offers a treasure trove of material to entertain and educate young minds. Kids will learn not only about the myths of the silkies, but also a lot about how seals live, including the way bulls fight over female seals, what they eat, where they sleep, and more. And the best part of it is, they won’t even know they’re learning, because the CD is so much fun. I could easily hear children singing along with the chorus of young voices on “The Wriggly Eels”: “She bites the

heads of the wriggly eels / And drops them down into her belly / Wriggly, wriggly, wriggly eels / Hmmm, but they're smelly" (lyrics by Karan Casey), or "The Waves Down in the Ocean" (lyrics by Leib Ostrow): "Oh ro the salty waves / The waves down in the ocean oh/ ... / And in those waves there was a whale / A rare whale and a salty whale...." And there are plenty of places throughout the disc where teachers could introduce supplemental materials or craft projects on sea life, Irish culture, or other mythical creatures for more in-depth classes. About the only problem I can see with this disc from a teacher's point of view is that the Gaelic on two songs is not translated in the liner notes (all but three of the songs are in English, though). <p> For folklorists and storytellers, <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> offers a new silkie tale, that of Solanna the Younger and her son. Although it's not as true to the more traditional versions of tales of female silkies, in that a fisherman did not steal Solanna's skin to make her his wife in <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> (she lost it accidentally by beaching herself when the tide was turning), it does provide an alternative that may be more approachable and appropriate for modern youngsters. <p> And for fans of Irish traditional music, <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> contains a number of rare gems. As far as I'm concerned, Karan Casey could read the phone book and I'd be spellbound by the warmth of her voice and the creativity of her phrasing, so the songs she sings here all earn high marks from me. But for sheer magic and mystery, Iarla O Lionaird's unaccompanied sean nos singing on "Taim Cortha O Bheith Im' Aonar Im' Lui" ("I'm Weary of Lying Alone") and "Maidin Aiseach" (not translated in the liner notes) is beyond compare. <p> It's often harder to be an accompanist than to perform on your own, and both Dezi Donnelly and Martin Hayes impressed me with their ability to play interesting, beautiful fiddle melodies that don't overshadow the lyrics they accompany on "We're Going Sailing" and "The Song of the Seal," respectively. McGoldrick's flutes and pip-

ing are impressive as usual on every track to which he contributes, and Valley's keyboard textures complement the narration perfectly, painting a wonderfully atmospheric backdrop of misty seas and ragged cliffs, salty air and smoky peat fires. <p> All in all, <cite>Seal Maiden</cite> is a fine addition to the Irish silkie traditions. I hope Karan Casey and Niall Vallely's little girl Muireann, to whom the album is dedicated, enjoys it half as much as I did. <p> Footnotes <p> [1]. One excellent recent collection of silkie tales I can heartily recommend is Duncan Williamson's <cite>Tales of the Seal People: Scottish Folk Tales</cite> (Interlink, 1992). I have also heard good things about, but have not read, David Thomson's <cite>The People of the Sea: A Journey in Search of the Seal Legend</cite>, originally published in 1954 but rereleased this fall by Counterpoint Press. <p> [2]. This ballad was popularized in the 1960s through the singing of Joan Baez and Judy Collins, and was revived in the 1980s by Jean Redpath, upon whose arrangement Karan Casey based the version she recorded a couple years ago with Solas on their Shanachie album <cite>The Words That Remain</cite>. For details on all versions except Casey's, see the entry for this song in the <cite>Folk Music Index</cite> at <http://muse.mse.jhu.edu:8001/research/folkindex/G10.htm#Gresi>. <p> [3]. A lovely retelling of a legend along these lines, combined with the tale of a boy who went back to the sea, can be found in the movie <cite>The Secret of Roan Inish</cite> (1994), which was based on a book by Rosalie K. Fry. You can read more about this film at the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com>. <p> [4] If you want to hear more of Casey's lovely voice, you might want to check out her solo album <cite>Songlines</cite>, or any of the three albums she recorded with Solas, all available on the Shanachie label, <http://www.shanachie.com>. <p>

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