

23|24 SEASON



presents

## **A CELTIC FAMILY CHRISTMAS with NATALIE MACMASTER and DONNELL LEAHY**

WED, DEC 6, 7:30 pm  
Hodgson Concert Hall

The program will be announced from the stage.

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#ugapresents

John Davis



**NATALIE MACMASTER  
DONNELL LEAHY  
MARY FRANCES LEAHY  
MICHAEL LEAHY  
CLARE LEAHY**

**JULIA LEAHY  
ALEC LEAHY  
SADIE LEAHY  
MARIA LEAHY**

## ABOUT THE ARTISTS

### NATALIE MACMASTER AND DONNELL LEAHY

Hearing Natalie MacMaster and Donnell Leahy speak reverentially about the fiddle, which has propelled their dazzling careers since childhood while cementing their status as Canada's reigning couple of Celtic music, is almost as electrifying as hearing them play it.

Indeed, when MacMaster and Leahy married in 2002 — both were already stars in their own right — they could not have predicted their merger would recast what contemporary musical success looks like. Or that they would produce a large family and ensure their mantelpiece was jammed with JUNO and East Coast Music Awards while creating an inventory of achievements spanning the globe.

They certainly couldn't have imagined capping off what they jokingly refer to as their combined 83 years as performers with milestones including another hotly



anticipated Christmas tour, an accompanying TV special, a pending third instalment of their Greenbridge Celtic Folk Fest, a recent Road Gold Award from the Canadian Independent Music Association, and last but certainly not least, the arrival of Maria, newest sib to Mary Frances, Michael, Clare, Julia, Alec and Sadie.

“I’m continually amazed by what the fiddle has brought to my life,” MacMaster says. “It has carried me through my childhood, through my teens, my young adult life, my married life, and now motherhood.

“And I still love it as much as ever. Same with Donnell. It’s unexpected and awesome.”

Though MacMaster and Leahy followed different trajectories to this point—she a Cape Breton native who could step-dance before she could walk, he the oldest brother of acclaimed family group Leahy—both have confidently crested the traditional music peak.

Their synergy was brilliantly showcased on the pair’s first recorded collaboration, 2015’s Bob Ezrin-produced album *One*, a crowning achievement complementing combined album sales of over one million, a CV listing cellist Yo-Yo Ma, bluegrass star Alison Krauss, and banjo ace Béla Fleck as past collaborators (and Shania Twain and The Chieftains as fans), plus a devoted audience stretching from Sydney, Nova Scotia to Sydney, Australia.

“The fiddle was definitely common ground for us when we first got together,” MacMaster, a Member of Order of Canada since 2006, recalls with a chuckle. “But I was so in awe of Donnell’s family, of 11 siblings who could play and had a family band. And here I am now doing almost exactly the same thing. Well, kind of.”

MacMaster is referring to her and Leahy’s seven gifted children. The pair realized early on that being on the road without their kids was infinitely harder than touring with them. That the children were already being home-schooled (MacMaster has a teaching degree) made enacting that decision easier.

“Initially we were reluctant to let the kids perform. We worried the expectations might be too much,” Leahy says. “But then one night we put Mary Frances on stage. Soon after that Michael wanted to play. And you must reward practice.”

When vintage comedian W.C. Fields famously quipped, “Never work with animals or children,” he clearly hadn’t seen the MacMaster/Leahy clan fiddling, step-dancing, and positively delighting audiences, something a Christmas TV special, titled *A Celtic Family Christmas* (after their 2016 album of the same name) highlights.

As Leahy explains, the family was initially pondering participation in a 13-episode docuseries. “Although we are public people, we are also very private and we were unsure about having cameras in our home and following us around. So the Christmas special is a kind of test run.”

In it, a spirited performance anchors a wider narrative chronicling the family at home, in their community, and “doing what we normally do around Christmas-time.” The TV special is also a fitting bookend to *The Leahys: Music Most of All*,

a short by filmmaker Peter Weyman, whose vivid depiction of the touring musical sibs won an Academy Award for Best Foreign Student Film in 1985.

It’s easy to understand why Weyman—and later MacMaster—were so enchanted with the Leahys. Their rich familial history is the stuff of lore. Except it’s absolutely true.

“My father’s people came to Canada in 1825 from County Cork, Ireland where they were farmers before settling in a little town called Douro,” Leahy explains. “My father was a beef farmer, we grew up on a beef farm and it’s in our blood. Myself and two of my brothers continue to run and grow the farm.”

MacMaster and Leahy point to the 120-acres of ancestral lands in Lakefield, Ontario, as yet another key component of their children’s education and development. “Teaching can take many forms,” MacMaster says.

Of course, the globe-trotting Leahys aren’t exactly like every other cattle farmer out there. “We put our bulls out with the cows based on our tour schedules so we can have people home for calving!” Leahy says. “Running the farm is a great counterpoint to life on the road. Plus, we believe in work and the farm is a wonderful place for the kids to learn through their chores.”

But there’s always room for more music. Ergo, the couple’s launch in 2017 of the successful Greenbridge Celtic Folk Fest, which, for an August weekend each year, transforms the bucolic agricultural hub of Keene, Ontario into a foot-stomping, fist-pumping, string-shredding Celtic *ceilidh*.

“We’ve been talking about the kinds of shows we can do since we got married. We finally decided to start something in our backyard,” says MacMaster, who with Leahy both headlines and curates the Fest. “Plus, we wanted to bring this multi-generational, big-picture celebration of this music to an environment that would really appreciate it. The reception so far has surpassed all our expectations.”

MacMaster continues: “I started playing the fiddle when I was 9, and I never intended to make a career out of it, mostly because I didn’t think it was possible. Even the most adored fiddlers in Cape Breton had day jobs. And yet here I am.

“This whole thing—first playing music by myself, then playing music with Donnell, then touring with Donnell and the children and all of us playing music together—has evolved in a very natural way. We feel incredibly lucky to be together as a family and to be letting our children develop their musical talent.”

Adds Leahy, “The only downside is that we can’t do all we’re asked to do and might like to do in other circumstances because we are parents first. You think about touring Australia and Ireland and The Netherlands, where we’ve been invited to play. But then you remember the kids’ math homework has to get done!”

All because of fiddles. Unexpected and awesome indeed.