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**SUSAN McKEOWN
AND LORIN SKLAMBERG**
Saints and Tzadiks
World Village 468089

About a year ago, I attended a concert by the seemingly unlikely duo of Irish singer Susan McKeown and Lorin Sklamberg, lead singer and accordionist with the Klezmatics. The concert was fantastic; McKeown and Sklamberg proved to have an excellent rapport. Now we have this studio recording, with the principals backed by a small group of session musicians on electric and acoustic guitars, tres, violin and bass.

This is not an obvious fusion of Irish/Celtic and klezmer traditions – there are songs from both sides, rendered pretty straight. What’s remarkable about this collection is how comfortable McKeown is singing in Yiddish, and Sklamberg in Gaelic. (They both always have, and still do, sound just fine singing in English.) I’ve listened to the CD several times, and neither singer has altered their regular style much, if at all. And that doesn’t matter. They harmonize perfectly, whether singing in Yiddish, Gaelic or English. They also sing solo parts in each language, and do just fine; neither vocalist sounds forced or artificial.

One of the selections here, “Prayer for the Dead,” is actually a mini-suite that groups together three pieces on the theme of death: the Irish anti-war song “Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye,” a Yiddish lament (based on a Ukrainian song from World War I, according to the CD notes) and a dirge written in Latin by an 11th-Century Irish poet. While each of these pieces has little in common musically with the others, they do share a somber mood. McKeown and Sklamberg’s treatment of the Latin piece reminds me of Steeleye Span’s version of “Gaudete.”

I certainly hope that McKeown and Sklamberg continue to explore their mutual heritages together. They have a surprisingly natural rapport, and I’m really curious to see where this collaboration might go.

Maybe it really is true that the Celts are one of the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel!” — KR