

Ensemble Galilei, NPR's Neal Conan and Lily Knight in *First Person: Stories From the Edge of the World*

PalmBeachDailyNews.com
THE SHINY SHEET

Neal Conan, Lily Knight, Ensemble Galilei create perfect 'Stories' at Four Arts

By JOSEPH YOUNGBLOOD
Special to the Daily News

Monday, January 19, 2009

Images breathtaking in their beauty and grandeur filled the stage of The Society of the Four Arts Sunday afternoon, as NPR's Neal Conan hosted "Stories from the Edge of the World," a multi-media presentation featuring pictures, music and the spoken word. The pictures are from the collection of National Geographic, who also underwrote the program's creation. The music is by Ensemble Galilei, a Celtic/early music crossover sextet. And the words are spoken by Conan and actress Lily Knight.

The focus is on exploration, with a subtext of adventure. We follow Matthew Henson, who accompanied Robert Peary to the North Pole in 1909. We listen to Charles Darwin's doubts during his five-year sea voyage. We hear Robert Ballard's description of new life forms deep in the Galápagos Rift, and we follow Jacques Cousteau as he experiences "rapture" at a depth of 50 fathoms. Clarence Maynard reports from Peru, and Allen Villiers is aboard a windjammer off of Cape Horn. George Mallory's last letter to his wife is read, written just before the ill-fated expedition up Mt. Everest. Gretel Ehrlich visits Greenland, and Ibn Battuta travels through 14th-century Iraq. And there is illustrated poetry: Constantine Cavafy's Ithaka, Jim Harrison's Waves, and Sara Vial's The Albatross, inscribed on the Cape Horn Monument. Scenes of outer and inner space are seen as we hear Michael S. Glaser's Galileo's Telescope and A Blessing for the Woods.

The views of the sea, of the snow, of the mountains, of the jungles, of the desert are just what one would expect from the photographers of National Geographic: spectacular in scope, and intimate, as in the closest you will ever get to a polar bear's face.

Journalist Conan (many may remember him from his appearance in the crossword-puzzle movie World Play) and Knight are accustomed to speaking publicly, and they deliver these first-person reports clearly and dramatically. However, although most concert-goers hear music well, they do not always hear speech so well, especially when that speech is competing with musical underscoring.

Annapolis-based Ensemble Galilei is comprised of Ryan McKasson (fiddle), Allison Guest Edberg (Baroque violin), Kathryn Montoya (oboe, shawm, recorder, pennywhistle), Sue Richards (Celtic harp), and Carolyn Anderson Surrick (viola da gamba). They were joined for this performance by percussionist Danny Mallon, who played a wide array of instruments, including bodhran, darbuka, tar, Arabic tambourine and Persian drum. He also contributed vocal sounds, most remarkably multiphonics, that is, two vocal pitches at one time.

For this concert, the ensemble performed original works by Richards and Surrick as well as traditional Irish, Scottish and Swedish airs. They also included some early classical music: pieces by Diego Ortiz, Heinrich Isaac, J.S. Bach and Turlough O'Carolan. All of the playing was clean, stylistic, well balanced, and accurate. Except for the overtures to the two parts of the program, everything they played was in support of the projected images. For this reason, it is not possible, nor would it be fair, to evaluate the group as if it were giving a concert.

"Stories from the Edge of the World" is a thoroughly enjoyable program, especially the pictures. It is, however, melodrama, and as such it will never replace straight-forward musical performances