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Dulcimer player hammers out new, old styles

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

A man recently told Glenn McClure how deeply he had been moved after hearing music for a Mass that McClure had written. It incorporated traditional music from Africa, the United States, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean.

The Kyrie — the opening penitential prayer with the response "Lord have mercy" — was set to a meditative steel drum accompaniment that picks up in tempo as a chorus sings in Greek and Italian.

"He said if he had heard that Kyrie 10 years ago, he would have never left the church," recalled McClure, a highly respected folk musician based in Geneseo who has played with such artists as Pete Seeger, Holly Near and Mitzie Collins.

The Kyrie exemplified the musically eclectic nature of McClure's Mass titled "St. Francis in the Americas," which he wrote in 1992 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World.

McClure, 32, has already performed the Mass on a number of occasions with the Panloco Steel Band, a regional act, as well as a chorus. His most recent presentation of the piece took place at St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Geneseo on Nov. 9. (See accompanying sidebar for upcoming concerts.)

The Mass primarily has a Caribbean feel that undergirds traditional music from the continents' European settlers, African slaves, Native Americans, and the descendants of each group. McClure, who plays hammer dulcimer in the Mass, plans to release a recording of it in March 1998, on his own label, McClure Productions, he said.

In a phone interview with the *Catholic Courier*, McClure noted that he wrote the lively Mass because he felt that TV documentaries exploring Columbus' arrival concentrated mostly on the negative aspects of the European presence in the Americas. Yet, he commented, the cultural clashes that took place produced mixed results, and gave all peoples on the continents the benefits of new foods, forms of art, expressions of faith and people of mixed ethnic backgrounds.

He said he chose to tie the Mass together with the words of St. Francis of Assisi since Franciscan missionaries played a crucial role in the European settlement of the Americas. The Franciscans themselves represent the mixed legacy of Europe's encounter with the New World, he said, adding that some missionaries supported European mistreatment of native peoples while others opposed such actions.

McClure stressed that he did not want to downplay the horrors of diseases the Europeans brought to the natives of the Americas, nor the effects of warfare against or enslavement of native peoples. However, the meeting of Europeans, Africans and Native Americans in the New World yielded positive legacies as well, he said.

"The reality in 1992 is that we were listening to music that is a combination of European and African music," he said.

He added that he paid tribute to Native Americans by using a traditional Seneca canoning song as the musical basis for the Lord's Prayer in the Mass.

McClure, who with his wife, Paula, has a 3-year-old son, said he has long been interested in how different ethnic groups and cultures choose to pray through music. He noted that he has performed in several Catholic monasteries, including Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City.

A graduate of the State University of New York at Geneseo, McClure grew up in York, Livingston County, and went to the college to study jazz saxophone. Of Scotch and Welsh origin, McClure said music is in his blood, and that his late grandfather, Charlie, was a well-known fiddler and vaudevillian in the region.

"I older I get, the more people I meet that knew Charlie say there's a straight



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Glen McClure plays the four hammer dulcimer during a performance of his Mass, "Saint Francis in the Americas," at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Geneseo Nov. 9. Performing with him are the Panloco Steel Band and an ecumenical community choir.

line from him to me," McClure said.

While at Geneseo, McClure said he met a professor, Jim Kimball, who introduced him to the hammer dulcimer. Primarily known for its use in Irish-American music, the dulcimer has attained new heights in McClure's hands — which, by the way, hold four hammers, or mallets, instead of the traditional two. It was an idea he and his friend and business partner, Ted Canning, a percussionist from Cleveland,

came up with "over a plate of pasta one night," McClure recalled.

Using two mallets only allows dulcimer players to play straight melodies that need accompaniment, McClure said, whereas his four-hammer technique gives him the freedom to play chords and melodies and accompany himself.

"It makes the instrument a better solo instrument," he said of his technique. "I tend to do more solo-playing now because of this technique."

McClure's pioneering techniques have allowed him to play jazz, chamber and orchestra music, and earned him second place in a national dulcimer competition in Kansas in 1993. He has since been a featured performer at several festivals and gives four-hammer dulcimer workshops throughout the country, he said.

McClure also plays several other instruments, including guitar and steel drums. He performs about 200 concerts a year, including several in schools, and has long been a featured performer with Young Audiences Rochester, which books artists in schools.

A few years back, he was well-known in the area for his concerts for children that promoted recycling in which he would play an instrument he invented called the "garbaphone." The garbaphone is a 7-foot-long pile of musical trash made up of pipes, brake drums and old saw blades. McClure played it on the album "The Great Garbage Concert."

McClure is also supporting the careers of several budding young musicians and visual artists, including Minhng Huynh, a painter whose 12-foot crucifixion scene was unveiled this year in Geneseo. The painting is touring churches throughout the United States, and reproductions of it are available on postcards through McClure Productions.

McClure converted to Catholicism while living in Italy more than a decade ago, and said he has adopted the Italian culture as his own, even teaching his young son, Matthew, the Italian language. Despite his fondness for things Italian, he noted that his chief desire is to make Western New Yorkers proud of their local musical heritage, one rich in all types of ethnic music, he said.

"There is a vibrant and very supportive audience for lots of things here in Western New York," he concluded. "I'm awfully excited about where music is going in western New York."

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McClure set for concerts

Folk musician Glenn McClure will be performing a number of concerts during the Christmas season. They include:

• **Friday, Dec. 5, 7:30 p.m.:** "Healing the Hurts of the Human Heart": a concert/lecture in Notre Dame High School cafeteria, Elmira. For ticket information, call the high school at 607/734-2267. This concert is in celebration of National Human Rights Week, and is sponsored, in part, by the Diocese of Rochester's Consistent Life Ethic Fund as well as the regional chapters of Pax Christi USA, the Catholic peace group.

• **Saturday, Dec. 13, midnight:** Midnight Mass at Newman Catholic Community at the State University of New York at Geneseo, Wadsworth Auditorium. McClure will lead a choir of students, alumni and area residents in a Christmas celebration. Caroling will take place at 11 p.m. There is still time to join the choir. Call Jill Birch at 716/243-5433.

• **Tuesday, Dec. 16, 7:30 p.m.:** "Holiday Music on the Dulcimer" at Borders Books & Music, 1000 Hylan Drive, Rochester. Admission: Free.

• **Wednesday, Dec. 17, 7:30 p.m.:** "Christmas Music from Around the World" at Lakeville United Church of Christ, Lakeville. McClure will perform on dulcimer, cello and steel drums with the Panloco Steel Band.

Information is available from McClure Productions, which may be reached at 716/243-0324, or through <http://www.frontiernet.net/~mcprod> on the Internet.

- Rob Cullivan