

# MUSIC

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## A kinship of vocal, cultural richness

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Picture three women, born and raised thousands of miles from each other, but each steeped in the singing of their homelands. Nowadays, they each sing their traditional music to non-traditional audiences, people of other cultures and countries.

This spring, the three -- Mah Damba from Mali, Yungchen Lhamo from Tibet and Susan McKeown from Ireland -- are performing on the same stage in the same program; and they began their tour at Meany Hall Saturday night on the UW World Music and Theatre Series.

There was almost no attempt to merge their music. Each woman performed alone and unaccompanied, except for one occasion when McKeown sang and Lhamo improvised above it.

The music of Tibet, as Lhamo sang it, is serene and peaceful, without set rhythm, and she sang many words melismatically, in long meandering phrases. Extraordinary breath control allowed her to hold a tone for what seemed an unconscionable length of time, and toward the end, rather than petering out, she would increase the volume and complete the musical phrase with a beautiful little twist of notes.

After she finished, one could still hear the sound resonating in the air. Lhamo's voice was a pure, warm, and clear soprano, though she could reach some very low notes as needed; and while her tonality was mostly quite familiar to Westerners, she frequently used -- to us -- exotic vocal techniques which changed timbres and added accents.

Lhamo introduced her songs in a voice so quiet that it was often hard to hear, but her songs were imbued with spirituality. She wore a white silk brocaded robe with a simple headdress from which her black hair fell in a slim river almost to her knees, and as she sang her body swayed in crescent curves and her arms flowed expressively.

It seemed all three singers wore the clothes as they would be worn where their songs were sung at home. Ireland's McKeown had on a plain brown long-sleeved calf-length dress and plain flat shoes. (Lhamo wore thick boots.)

McKeown's voice had definite kinship to Lhamo's, the same warmth and straightforwardness, though richer, and her songs, the ballads of Ireland sung in both Irish and English, were the most familiar to us in style.

Mah Damba, in lime green robes and turban and gold bracelets, is a consummate storyteller. Her songs, which sounded like narratives and conversations, seemed to come from the marketplace, but we were not given any interpretations. She too used fascinating and different timbres and vocalizations, but Damba sang only a few songs, after a trying voyage from Paris which had her arriving straight from the airport with the concert already under way. Under the circumstances, it was a privilege to hear her at all.

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