

First fiddle

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Consider the credentials: He is the pre-eminent exponent of Sligo-style fiddling in New York. He is a music teacher of proven dedication and success. He is a weekly session leader of unflagging energy and generosity. He is a founding member of a superlative quartet called the Pride of New York. He is a musician who has consciously stepped up his concerts and tours and thus gained a stronger global reputation. He is a recording artist with three outstanding albums during the past six years, including his most impressive CD to date, "Consider the Source," issued in 2008. It finished a hairsbreadth behind Billy McComiskey's "Outside the Box" for the Irish Echo's No. 1 traditional album of last year. (See last week's "Ceol" for the full top 10 list.)

He is Bronx-born Brian Conway, the Irish Echo's Traditionalist of the Year for 2008.

Conway joins previous Irish Echo honorees Charlie Lennon, James Keane, Joe Derrane, Seamus Egan, Joanie Madden, John Whelan, Mick Moloney, Liz Carroll, Kevin Crawford, Seamus Connolly, Mike Rafferty, Andy McGann (posthumous), Monsignor Charlie

Coen, Kathleen Biggins and Brian O'Donovan (co-recipients for 2006), and Micheal O'Suilleabhain.

It is fitting that Brian Conway is now in the same elite list

as his beloved friend and mentor, Andy McGann (1928-2004), who was a direct link back to Sligo fiddling legend Michael Coleman (1891-1945) in New York City.

Coleman, McGann, Martin Wynne (1913-1998), James "Lad" O'Beirne (1911-1980), James Morrison (1893-1947), Paddy Killoran (1904-1965), and Paddy Sweeney (1894-1974) are all part of a Sligo-shaped New York fiddling fraternity and represent a nexus of breathtaking scale. It would make any younger fiddler's head spin, yet the 47-year-old Conway has admirably risen to this challenge of connection while also burnishing his profile as a musician of separate, consummate skill.

All of his albums reflect esteem for those fiddling forebears without any trace of slavish imitation. They include "The Apple in Winter" with fiddler Tony DeMarco in 1981; "First Through the Gate," Conway's magnificent solo debut that was the Irish Echo's No. 1 traditional album of 2002; and "A Tribute to Andy McGann," a superb 2007 homage that Conway recorded with button accordionist Joe Burke and pianist Felix Dolan.

But "Consider the Source," a Clo Iar-Chonnachta CD in 2008, tops them all. Conway's fiddling unflinchingly finds the elusive seam binding virtuosity, vitality, risk, and invention. It is a must-have recording.

Those who can, do *and* teach, and Conway is one of the best music instructors anywhere. This busy Deputy Chief of the Public Integrity Bureau in the Westchester County District Attorney's Office in White Plains, N.Y., can claim Maeve Flanagan (his niece), Dylan Foley, Pat Mangan, Kira Jewett, Colin and Brian Lindsay, Gene

Bender, Shane Cornyn, Kathleen Parkes, and Caitlin Finley as past or present fiddle students who benefited greatly from his tutelage. Conway also uses the Internet to instruct Ceilidh Briscoe, a young girl in British Columbia, as well as other young pupils in the Detroit area. This past summer he additionally taught at the Catskills Irish Arts Week in East Durham, N.Y.

For the past 11 years Conway has organized and hosted a very popular Wednesday night session in Dunne's Pub in White Plains. His guests have included Joanie Madden, Catherine McEvoy, John Whelan, Jerry O'Sullivan, and Felix and Brendan Dolan, but the emphasis is on inclusiveness to encourage beginner, journeyman, and high-profile performers alike.

One of the most stirring concerts of 2008 took place on Jan. 5, at the Irish American Community Center in East Haven, Conn., where Conway, Joanie Madden, Billy McComiskey, and Brendan Dolan performed as the Pride of New York Band. There is no better Irish traditional instrumental quartet in America than the affectionately dubbed PONY.

Conway's own schedule of concerts and short tours in the U.S. and Ireland increased in 2008 to keep pace with his mounting acclaim.

Throughout his musical life Brian Conway has paid the highest respect to those who came before and made an enduring difference. The Irish Echo is proud to pay its highest respect to Brian Conway for making the same enduring difference by naming him the Traditionalist of the Year for 2008. It is this newspaper's most prestigious annual accolade for accomplishment in Irish traditional music.

The rest of the best: Trad albums ranked 11-30

Last week's "Ceol" column was devoted to the top 10 Irish traditional recordings of 2008. Here are the next 20 albums in order of preference:

11. "Cnoc Bui" by Conal O Grada: Eight years after "The Top of Coom," the Cork-born flutist delivers another stunner of a solo CD.
12. "Absolutely Irish" (CD and DVD): Mick Moloney helmed this multiple-performer concert in April 2007 at Manhattan's Irish Arts Center that became a PBS-TV highlight last year.
13. "Music From the Reeds" by Noel Battle: Magnetic harmonica playing from the Mullingar, Westmeath, maestro.
14. "The Sligo Indians" by Tony DeMarco: Long-awaited solo debut from a New York fiddler with prodigious technique and spirit.
15. "Humours of Highgate" by John Blake, Lamond Gillespie, and Mick Leahy: Just as riveting as their prior recording in 2003.
16. "Tuned Up" by Brendan Mulholland, Brendan Hendry, and Paul McSherry: Antrim flutist, Derry fiddler, and Belfast guitarist in delectable form.
17. "The Dusty Bridge" by Fergal Scahill:

- Corofin, Galway, native's prowess on fiddle pours from every pore.
18. "Ships in the Forest" by Karan Casey: Songs and singing often dark in texture, daring in ambition, and dazzling in execution.
19. "The Tempest" by Robbie Hannan: Staccato-style uilleann piping of indisputable impact.
20. "For Love and Laughter" by Solas: Kilkenny's Mairead Phelan makes uneven debut as new lead vocalist of a band whose instrumental imagination remains unwaveringly fresh.
21. "Heartstring Sessions" by Arty McGlynn, Chris Newman, Nollaig Casey, and Maire Ni Chathasaigh: Appealing, eclectic music from two gifted sisters and their gifted spouses.
22. "Spiccato Junction" by ConTempo Quartet with guests Mairtin O'Connor, Cathal Hayden, and Garry O Briain: Romanian string quartet based in Galway joins three Irish trad players in a bold, tasty merge of styles on such tracks as "The Bachs of Oranmore."
23. "Skins & Sins" by Neill Lyons: Sinfully skillful bodhran playing.
24. "Unearthed" by Paul McGlinchey: Omagh flutist offers further evidence of why he won three

- straight All-Ireland senior titles from 1993 to 1995.
25. "The Parish Platform" by Rattle the Boards: Rattling good fun from group led by Danu button accordionist Benny McCarthy.
26. "Fidil" by Ciaran O Maonaigh and Aidan O'Donnell: Brilliant Donegal bowing with no backing.
27. "An Cailin Rua" by Kathleen Boyle: Granddaughter of Dungloe fiddling legend Neili Boyle and member of the Scottish band Dochas, she plays piano accordion with snap and swing.
28. "Equinoxe" by Celtic Fiddle Festival: Bounty of effervescent music from Kevin Burke, Andre Brunet, Christian Lemaire, and Ged Foley.
29. "Keep on Singing" by the Sands Family: County Down siblings Tommy, Colum, Ben, and Anne captured in impassioned voice.
30. "Changing Trains" by Mozaik: Fine second album from multi-cultural quintet headed by Planxty's Andy Irvine and Donal Lunny.

Next week: *The best of archival recordings in 2008 and a review of a Connecticut concert by Altan in early 2009.*