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## Tap, step, fiddle, phew! Group's energy dazzles

By Nancy Sheehan TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

There was Celtic thunder on the stage at Mechanics Hall last night. The StepCrew, a new tap-dancing, fiddle-wielding performance group from Canada, shuffled, step danced, jigged, clogged, bowed and beguiled its way to a standing ovation.

They didn't just deserve it. They *earned* it. The youthful troupe worked at a ceaselessly frenetic pace, expending enough energy to light up a small city. The group is made up of seven dancers, three of whom also fiddle like the wind, and a five-piece band. The repertoire included Irish step dancing and a variation of it from Canada's Ottawa Valley that allows for more upper-body movement than the traditional style. Individual performers were impeccable with those classic forms. Red-haired Cara Butler not only looks perfectly cast in the Irish step dance role but is a world-class competitor in the genre, and it showed last night. She teamed up on a few numbers with Joe Dwyer, whose dancing skill has landed him dancing gigs all over the world for performances, including at the White House.

But the group was at its very best in the ensemble numbers that it readily tossed off with nary a misstep. Dancers' synchronization was a wonder, their stop-on-a-dime-finishes a delight. It seemed as if they were all made from the same mold and, as it turns out, they kind of were. The StepCrew dancers are longtime friends who learned from the same tap teacher. Perhaps that is one reason for their almost sibling-like cohesiveness.

All of them, too, have performed with other top acts. Butler was principal dancer for The Chieftains, for example, while fiddler/dancers Jon Pilatzke and Stephanie Cadman hail from Bowfire. The group of friends came together only recently to form The StepCrew.

It is a small company, but it makes a lot of noise. The walls at Mechanics Hall fairly reverberated with the rhythmic slapping of tap shoes plied at an absolutely aerobic pace. Many dance forms are defined by grace and elegance. The StepCrew's style of tap and traditional dance is noteworthy for its sheer physicality. Then, between dance numbers they would "rest" by fiddling like fiends.

Some highlights included shuffle runs by Sarah Uddin that seemed to extend, flawlessly, into infinity; dance duels among the males that sent the tapping speed to seemingly impossible heights; inventive choreography on ensemble numbers that had the group running in a circle, arms waving wildly overhead like Gypsies dancing around a campfire, then, the next instant, marching in tight formation like a well-drilled soldier with 14 legs.

The entire cast was outstanding, but Cadman seemed to shine even a bit brighter than the rest. It was her dancing and fiddling talent, of course, but also an incandescent stage presence that bumped the energy up a notch whenever she took the stage.

At the close of the show, the seven dancers sat down in chairs all in a row. Yes, anyone would need a rest after all that heavy hoofing — but they didn't get one. The chronically happy feet of the seated cast immediately started dancing again. The charming chair dance sent the audience shuffling home on a high note.