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'Bowfire' more than just fiddle playing

By JANUARY HOLMES

jholmes@bradenton.com

"Bowfire" isn't your typical gathering of the world's finest string musicians sitting conservatively on a stage behind a music stand.

Instead, these top virtuoso violinists and fiddlers are known world wide for electrifying performances, tasteful outfits and colorful dancing.

The company, which will return to the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall for two new shows on Wednesday, plays nearly every music style under the sun. They can blend classic music with bluegrass and Celtic music with hip-hop.

"People come in expecting to hear one type of music but the doors open and they're introduced to something new," said Shane Cook, a 26-year-old fiddler whose been with "Bowfire" since its inception in 2000.

Back then, when it debuted as a group of string musicians performing in a semi-circle at the World's Fair in Hannover, Germany, it was known "World on a String."

People quickly latched on to the novelty of a company that energetically merged different music styles.

"The response was so strong with the show," Cook recalled. "It just kept growing ever since."

Choreography emerged with the show, along with special lighting and sound design to make "Bowfire" much more than ordinary string concert.

Being a part of a show like this has been hard to top for Cook.

"I'd never seen anything like this," said the Canadian and U.S. National Fiddle Champion. "It's really a dream gig."

"Bowfire" was founded by artistic director Lenny Solomon, a classically trained jazz violinist. In meeting many different types of string players while on tour, Solomon thought it would be great idea to get them together on-stage to showcase a wide range of music, including country, jazz, rock and more. About 15 nationally-known musicians make up the company, such as classical violinist Yi-Jia Susanne Hou and George Gao, virtuoso of the Chinese erhu - a Chinese-style violin.

The experience is of being in the show has been two-fold for the musicians. Not only do they enjoy entertaining audiences, but they learn a lot about other music styles.

"We love to play in 'Bowfire'," Solomon, who has several original composition in the show, said. "It's really a gratifying experience in that it forces us to expand our horizons."

The show often inspires the company with new ways of playing an instrument, especially when it comes to improvising, Cook said. Each night, when each player or dancer performs their solo, they always do something a little new, he said.

While Cook enjoys diving into various types of music, his favorite style remains the traditional fiddler music he grew up playing in Canada - passed down to him from a long line of fiddlers in his family.

With all "Bowfire" has to offer, Solomon hopes audiences will be pleased with what they hear and see. Cook believes the show will continue to broaden people's view of string musicians.

"This certainly is an opportunity to see what a violin can do," he said. "It's an instrument you see in so many musical traditions throughout the world. In this, you get to see the flexibility of the instrument."

January Holmes, features writer, can be reached at 745-7057.

If you go

What: "Bowfire"

When: 2 and 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, 777 N. Tamiami Trail

Tickets: \$40-\$50. Tickets are almost sold out for the 8 p.m. performance.

Information: 953-3368