

Traditional Fiddle Workshop

Newsletter
January/February 2017

@ Strachur

Registered Scottish Charity No. SCO33935



Dates for your Diary:

Amy Geddes

Mixed Workshop:

Sat 4th March

10:30 - 4 p.m.

Strachur

Memorial Hall

Piano Trio:

6:00 p.m.

Sun 26th March

Ardkinglas

House

(Info on Page 9)

April Break:

No classes on

April 3/5, 10/12,

17/19.

Restart: 24/26

No Class May 1/3

Classes on May 8/9
and 15/17

May 24th PARTY

Next newsletter

around end of
April.

Your input welcome!

Editor's Musings.

First of all my thanks to those of you who have provided copy for this edition. We have managed to increase our pages considerably thanks to your efforts, and the newsletter will be all the more interesting for having materials from several sources rather than being filled with my naturally elegant and beautifully-crafted prose.

On March 4th we have a great day in prospect with the mixed workshop run by Amy Geddes. It was the last workshop that Amy ran for LFW which got me interested in coming along as a member, as I had so much fun that day. I was, if I remember, the only person there who did not bring a fiddle but this year I believe there are going to be other instruments too, including accordions, guitar, mandolins and viola.

As several of us recently attended a mixed workshop with Nigel Gatherer at Celtic Connections (see Page 3), I am looking forward to getting together with a good mix of instruments here on 4th March and maybe we might even see the start of some wee groups being formed from those who attend on the day. There is nothing to beat playing with other musicians to bring on our own playing and to put into practice all we learn from both of our tutors. With the Royal National Mod coming to Lochaber in 2017 and Dunoon in 2018 now might be the time to think about forming suitable groups to get LFW into the public eye. We have been at Oban in 2015 (Regional and National Mods) and those of us who competed had a great day out and certainly did not disgrace ourselves, getting very positive adjudications from both competitions.

Just before I was putting the newsletter to bed (as they say in the trade) I got word of an event which looks really interesting and which is being organised by our very own Mairi Voinot! Mairi has organised a workshop under the title "The String School" in Glasgow on Saturday and Sunday 1st and 2nd of April for fiddle, cello and guitar players of all abilities. The fiddle tutors are Mairi, Gillian Frame and Sarah Von Racknitz (nee Naylor); Seylan Baxter is taking the cello classes and guitar will be taken by Christopher Ferrie. This is a first-rate collection of tutors. As well as classes there will be the opportunity to join in ensemble sessions with other members and tutors, and you are encouraged to bring along whatever instruments you play along with your fiddles!

All details are available at the website Mairi has set up which can be accessed at: <http://www.thestringschool.co.uk/home>

John K

Christmas Party

A successful end-of-term party was held in the Sports Pavilion on Monday 12th December. Both tutors, Kathryn and Mairi, and more than half of our active membership were present and a good evening's entertainment was enjoyed by all who attended. The Christmas hats and Kathy's brightly-flashing Christmas brooch were worthy of special mention!

Two informal sessions allowed us all to try out many of the tunes that had been taught during the term as well as the many old favourites which were offered; the carols for the Youth Club Christmas Party on the following night were also given an airing. Ishbel and John had brought their trusty moothies (known in Scotland by the very descriptive term "spittle traps") with them to add some Gaelic waltzes to the musical extravaganza.

In the interval between the sessions a well-stocked buffet was on offer. There was also the traditional Secret Santa gift sack and a chance to donate articles for the Dunoon Food Bank.

Youth Club Christmas Party

The evening of Tuesday 13th December saw some of our fiddlers going along to the Strachur Youth and Drama Club Christmas Party to provide music for the carol-singing and also to play a few of our favourite tune sets. A big thanks to Kathy, Teresa, Evie, Maggie, Ishbel and Val, and especially to Kathryn for going along to keep order (and tempo)!



Celtic Connections Workshop

Several of the LFW fiddlers travelled to Glasgow on Saturday 21st January to attend a mixed instrument workshop being run by top Scottish tutor Nigel Gatherer in the Royal Concert Hall.

Maggie, Ishbel, Evie, Maureen, Teresa and John joined the other members of the workshop for an hour-and-a-half's fun and music-making. Maureen and John had mandolin and octave mandolin respectively while the others had their fiddles. Maggie takes up the story with her thoughts on the day:

Absolutely wonderful! An assembly of 80+ mixed instruments including fiddles, accordions, guitars, mandolins, whistles, clarsach and a bass was led by Nigel on penny whistle and he took each and every player, from beginner to experienced performer, under his sheltering and encouraging wing. He managed with ease and humour to teach us three tunes which we all played back to him by the end of the session. Personally, I had my confidence raised as I felt so much part of it all. My thanks too to my LFW colleagues on the day who made me feel "I can do this". And you know, I could at that moment!

Roll on next year's Celtic Connections – I shall have my name down as soon as possible.



And you've now played in The Royal Concert Hall, Maggie!

The Niel Gow Scottish Fiddle Awards

In the last newsletter I included an article about the final year of the Glenfiddich Fiddle Masters at Blair Castle. After 27 years of sponsorship The Grant family decided to call it a day and to look at other ways of promoting Scottish music and culture. Fortunately a group has come forward under the banner of The Niel Gow Scottish Fiddle Awards to continue the great work of promoting the best in Scottish Fiddling and on Sunday 26th March the finals of this new competition will take place in the Ballroom of Blair Castle, Blair Atholl.

Whereas the Glenfiddich was a by-invitation event, this new competition will hold auditions in the two classes of entry – Open and Junior (Aged 15 and under) – and finalists will be chosen who will be invited on the Sunday in Blair Castle. The scope of the music will be considerably widened to encompass all styles of Scottish fiddling, including Borders, North-east, Shetland, West Coast, Highland and any other variation of Scottish playing. Players will be expected to have a selection of tunes which in the Junior category will comprise Slow Air, March, Strathspey and Reel with a total of 5 minutes; Open players will have three elements to perform: 1. Slow Air, March Strathspey and Reel. 2. Slow Strathspey, Hornpipe and Jig and 3. Own Choice, with a total of 15 minutes. Each performer will also be expected to pay tribute musically to the Gow fiddling family.

The auditions will require entrants to submit an mp3 music file showcasing their playing (unaccompanied though accompanists will be allowed at the actual event should players wish this). From those recordings judges will select 8 Junior and 8 Open players who will be invited to perform live on the day of the competition.

Details at the website: <http://gowfiddleawards.scot/index.html>



Lauder Memorial/Battle of the Somme



It is 100 years since the Battle of the Somme and the death of Sir Harry Lauder's son John on 28th December 1916. Poignantly, the only casualties reported on that day in that sector of the front were John Lauder and one OR (other rank).

Many of you may be aware of the recent work on upgrading and improving the access path to the Lauder Memorial Monument at Invernoaden, near Glenbranter. This work was initiated by FOLLAT (Friends of Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park) who wish to encourage communities within Cowal to commemorate this anniversary. As part of the celebration the Workshop has been asked to organise and participate in a Lauder Variety Show. The event will take place in Strachur Memorial Hall on the **12th May 2017**. The proceeds will go towards hall funds.

Most of our members are participating in the show; playing Harry Lauder and Scottish traditional tunes. I have also invited Jean-Ann Callender, tutor of Cowal Fiddle Workshop (who arranged the Lauder Medley we are playing) and two CFW members to join us.

Alison Duncan is busy gathering information and articles to help set the scene on the night. There will be singing, sketches, information display boards and more. Tell your family and friends to put the date in their calendar!

Evie

Postscript to Lauder feature – Alison Diamond, one of our newer fiddlers who is currently undertaking the role of Archivist at Inveraray Castle, sent me the following note:

The current focus on Harry Lauder tunes for the May extravaganza led me to search the Argyll Papers at Inveraray Castle for references to the man himself. I was delighted to discover that he wrote two notes to Niall, 10th Duke of Argyll in March 1911 from Athole House in Tooting, London. The first letter acknowledges that Harry Lauder has received a manuscript from the Duke, but has been unwell and therefore has not read it yet. He clearly recovered quickly though, as he writes just a few days later to say 'I have now read your play through. It is very funny & original. If you wish me to put it before any of the London managers let me know & I will see what can be done.' Sadly I have not yet been able to discover the name of the play which the Duke wrote. The 10th Duke is remembered for his later life of almost monastic seclusion, so it would be wonderful to discover the funny script that he sent Lauder in his younger days. (Ed)

BBC Radio Scotland **Young Traditional Musician of the Year**

On Sunday 5th February Les and I survived the trauma of finding and paying for a parking place in the Merchant City area of Glasgow, and attended the BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician 2017 event, broadcast live from the City Halls as part of Celtic Connections.

The show was compered by Bruce MacGregor, who introduced the finalists and warned us to keep smiling in case of cameras. This is the same Bruce who wrote the tune Stra- Chur for LFW not so long back and which some of us performed at the Oban Mod in 2015.

This year there were three girl singers: Ella Munro from Skye and Iona Fyfe from Huntly performed Scots songs while Kim Carnie from Glasgow (and originally Oban) sang in Gaelic (which caused some slight confusion to the piano accompanist at one point). Instrumentally we had Grant McFarlane of Paisley, an accordion player; Dougie McCance of Erskine on bagpipes ("hot Dougie" of the Red Hot Chilli Pipers) and a fiddler from Glenfarg in Perthshire, Charlie Stewart. At the end of the day it was Charlie Stewart whose brilliant fiery performance won the day and he was voted Young Traditional Musician of the Year.

On a personal note I was delighted that one of the singers sang "Baltic Street" - a poem by Violet Jacob about a street in Montrose where I grew up. All the performers were quite excellent, and barely let their nerves show. A great evening altogether.

Here is a YouTube link to Iona Fyfe performing her song, Baltic Street, at the competition: <https://youtu.be/-vd91pNQ7ew> - **Teresa H-E**

Musings from a Slow Improver

(Peter Ellwood shares some frustrations and some triumphs while highlighting just what is involved in taking up a musical instrument – especially one as frustrating as the fiddle).

Fiddle technique is something you learn from day one. Ideally you never stop.

For **Beginners**, technique began the moment we first wrestled with the correct way to hold our new instrument—at the proper angle with only our chins and left shoulders. And “no support from left-hand thumbs and first fingers, please”, insisted our tutors. Getting the right chin rest and shoulder rest and setting them for maximum comfort can take a long time and lots of trial-and-error experimentation.

Then there was the technique of holding the bow (“No, not with your right hand fingers pointing forwards and upwards—just the opposite in fact”). Where to place the bow for loud and soft passages was easy in theory; keeping it parallel to the bridge while moving it up and down at the correct angles and from string to string was something else again (“Think of the elbow as a suspended hinge”, they urged). Practising at home in front of a mirror is encouraged too.

Finally, where exactly on the A string do you press your third finger down (finger tip only, remember) onto that fretless fingerboard so it's a real D natural you hear and not something vaguely nearby? Technique, we learned, except for the specially gifted, meant practice.

Next, as **Mixed Ability/Improvers** we spent much time with techniques for good tone, playing slurs and mastering ever-faster tunes.

Good tone, we all knew by then, is crucial whatever the piece, but nowhere more crucial than with a slow air like Willie Hunter's “*The Love O' Da Isles*” (featured in last year's Mixed Instrument Workshop with Graham Mackenzie). Bow technique essentials include keeping the right hand thumb bent and relaxed—important not to let tension creep into the bowing arm. Use the thumb as a pivot, and add a little pressure on the little finger (our pinkie). This takes some bow weight off the fiddle, tutors explained, especially when we're playing on the E string. Apply pressure on the bow with the first finger to accent a note. At all times, keep the bow perpendicular to the strings throughout the stroke. Keep it close to the bridge. Finally, when lifting the bow, bring it back down onto the strings close to its heel. The down bow should be moving in the down direction before it hits the string.

Compared to all that, simple slurs were a doddle—adding a finger in the right place, or taking one off, while at the same time keeping that bow straight and at all the correct angles. “*Over the Hills to Ardentenny*”, the first Harry Lauder song in our upcoming concert, is nearly all one-bar slurs. But there were also the straight slurs: two up or two down bows in a row. Mastering them for “*Coming Thro’ The Rye*” and “*Captain Horne*” proved an amazing challenge.

“*Captain Horne*” also introduced us to techniques for playing non-slurred triplets well: having a relaxed hold on the bow and using movement in the wrist and fingers to produce the triplet—rather than upper arm movement. The three notes are very short, tutors pointed out. So you only use a tiny bit of the bow for the down-up-down bowing for each one. A good triplet needs a short strong down bow on the first down note, bringing it to an abrupt stop. The bow should judder up and down for the second and third notes.

Improvers this year moved on to slurs relying on simple double-stopping (one finger tip holding down two strings at the same time). B to E slurs in the Irish reel “*Drowsy Maggie*” would be impossible without the first finger double-stopping the A and D strings. Last year's more advanced class faced an even bigger double-stop challenge: the Canadian reel “*Bowing the Strings*” has two bars of semiquavers sequencing B's over G sharps, E's over B's and E's over C sharps.

To be honest, only the tutors ever played “*Drowsy Maggie*” at the proper speed for a reel (200 beats per minute - bpm). But there was plenty of encouragement and advice on the techniques for achieving it: use short bow strokes, think about bowing patterns, keep the bow close to the strings when crossing from one string to another, minimise the vertical movement in the tip of the bow, use a circular wrist action to help with crossing from one string to another, keep the fingers close to the strings when lifting them off and, if we are coming back to the same note, keep the fingers on the strings where possible.

So far, so violin. Fiddle music, we all know, is different. Playing it well calls for a load of different techniques. Hence the experimental class this year focusing - not on tunes, although there are some - but on some of the techniques that make Scottish fiddle music uniquely Scottish: ornamentation (embellishments), really using that pinkie, third position playing and unexpected rhythms.

Peter Ellwood

(In a second instalment in the next newsletter Peter will continue his musings. They certainly strike a chord with me and I'm sure he's put into words many of the feelings we all have while trying to coax reasonable sounds out of our instruments. We welcome any comments/feedback from this article – Ed)

Useful Websites

Many of you may already be subscribed to other websites which deal with fiddle or traditional music in general, and here are some I go to quite a lot.

Hands Up For Trad: run by Simon Thoumire. Very informative on many aspects of the folk scene. Weekly newsletter free to subscribers.

<http://www.handsupfortrad.co.uk>

The Gathering: hosted by Nigel Gatherer, one of the busiest teachers in Scotland and with lots of good tunes available for a variety of instruments

<http://www.nigelgatherer.com>

The Session: Great source of traditional music, in abc and standard notation formats, with strong emphasis on Irish tunes, but lots of Scottish stuff too:

<https://thesession.org/>

Scottish Fiddle Music.com: Interesting Site and blog on Scottish Fiddle topics run by Ronnie Gibson.

<https://scottishfiddlemusic.com/>

Fiddling Around The World: Interesting information on the various styles of Scottish fiddling and much more besides.

<http://www.fiddlingaround.co.uk/>

Box and Fiddle: website of the Box and Fiddle magazine, for all Scottish Music enthusiasts:

<http://www.boxandfiddle.com/>

Ardkinglas Event

Piano Trio

Edward Cohen (piano), Aisling O'Dea (Violin), Sonia Cromarty (Cello)

Ardkinglas House, Loch Fyne

6:00 p.m. Sunday 26th March 2017
Tickets £15 (Students £7.50)

Places must be booked in advance.

Phone 01499 600261
Or e-mail: info@ardkinglas.com

Regular Mixed Session

Each Thursday there is an impromptu session in the back room of MacClure's Bar in Ferry Brae in Dunoon, courtesy of Martin Donovan, landlord and LFW member. There is a mix of fiddles, accordions, small pipes, guitars and other stringed instruments and all levels are welcome. From about 8 p.m. till around 10.30 or till you get tired!

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