



# The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra

## Scotland's National Fiddle Orchestra

# NEWSLETTER

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Anyone signing up to receive our email newsletter receives a welcome email which refers to the editors of the newsletter as Campbell, Douglas and Peter.

We have to begin by owning up to the fact the last edition of our "quarterly" newsletter came out in December 2017 - even though that one contained an extended amount of content compared to previous versions. (We will keep trying to achieve the correct frequency of issues...).

## Campbell W. Smith



Campbell wrote the bulk of the material in that last newsletter, including the introduction and his reminiscences about playing piano for SFO legend, Gerry Crean.

We're very sad to report that, on 4th August 2017, Campbell lost his battle with what he had characteristically described as "a wee touch of cancer", something with which he had several run-ins over many years. Campbell never seemed to let anything get him down. He always had a positive outlook, which he communicated to everyone with whom he came in contact. He always had words of reassurance or encouragement.

In the context of the SFO, he was a larger-than-life character. On stage, he was literally "larger" because, as the orchestra's only left-handed fiddler, he immediately stood out to audiences.

He loved sport and played tennis, squash and rugby to a high standard. He was a naturally-gifted multi-instrumentalist: apart from the fiddle, he could play piano, organ, bagpipes and accordion.

He was also a crucial part of the SFO's board of management, as Marketing Director - a hands-on job which he relished and excelled in over many years.

On 15th August 2017, a full house at Almondbank St Serfs Parish Church heard eulogies from the minister, from family and - on behalf of the musical fraternity - a tribute from the SFO's Jim Brodlie on Campbell's musical life. Jim's tribute can be read at online [www.sfo.org.uk/campbell-smith/](http://www.sfo.org.uk/campbell-smith/) The music included an introductory recital - and hymn accompaniment - from members of the SFO and Dunkeld & District Strathspey & Reel Society; also, a solo performance of John Mason's Slow Air "The Flower of Portencross" by Elisabeth McLay. Ross Ainslie and Ali Hutton played Gordon Duncan's moving "Sleeping Tune" and then delivered a masterclass in harmony bagpiping outside the church as everyone was leaving, which brought the traffic to a standstill.

Campbell leaves so many gaps to fill, even just within the SFO, that it's hard to know where to start. Still, we all feel privileged and inspired to have known such a generous and talented man. As Campbell's brother, Duncan, said in the church, "Campbell would not have wanted us to be sad - AND SO WE WON'T! Cheers, Campbell".

## Concert Diary

<b>Glasgow</b>	Royal Concert Hall	2 <sup>nd</sup> September 2017	0141 353 8000	<a href="http://www.glasgowconcerthalls.com">www.glasgowconcerthalls.com</a>
<b>Belfast</b>	Waterfront	7 <sup>th</sup> October 2017	02890 334455	<a href="http://www.waterfront.co.uk">www.waterfront.co.uk</a>
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Usher Hall	30 <sup>th</sup> December 2017	0131 228 1155	<a href="http://www.usherhall.co.uk">www.usherhall.co.uk</a>
<b>Perth</b>	Concert Hall	24 <sup>th</sup> February 2018	01738 621031	<a href="http://www.horsecross.co.uk">www.horsecross.co.uk</a>
<b>Aberdeen</b>	Beach Ballroom	17 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	01224 641122	<a href="http://www.aberdeenperformingarts.com">www.aberdeenperformingarts.com</a>
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Usher Hall	9 <sup>th</sup> June 2018	0131 228 1155	<a href="http://www.usherhall.co.uk">www.usherhall.co.uk</a>

Earlier in the year Campbell had been working on two articles for the newsletter and although not finalised we include them below. The first one is about the SFO's former piper and ceilidh master, founder-member John McCulloch and the second about the SFO's current organist Iain McGlinchey.

## **John McCulloch - An Appreciation**



When our orchestra was first inaugurated there were a significant number of founder members who gave the new 'baby' many of the characteristics it enjoys today. As the years have passed this number has dwindled, one of those was a real stalwart of the Orchestra, John McCulloch.

Although born in Alexandra Parade in Glasgow in 1937, John and his family moved to the mining town of Muirkirk when he was an infant, and it was there that his musical talents as piper and fiddler were developed, talents which were to serve him and the SFO in good stead throughout the following years.

He first was employed as a fencer to the coal board, and his first pipe band was the Barony Colliery Pipe Band where he played until he joined the Cameron Highlanders to complete his National Service. Needless to say he became a prominent piper in the regiment, being based at the Cameron Barracks in Inverness, where his piping over the coming years took him to many interesting spots both at home and around the world.

On coming out of the army he joined the Ayrshire County Constabulary as a constable, rising through the ranks to end his police career as a much respected and popular sergeant. It was during his time in the force that he developed an interest in bowling which was to see him win numerous awards both within the police force as well as at club and county level. He maintained this keen association with the sport until his health took a hand and curtailed his activities. Those who knew John in the SFO will recall with fondness a man of strong views who was never afraid to shake the foundations of a debate he considered trivial. But it was his pawky humour and superb skills as a compère and storyteller which endeared him to so many. These were used to great effect when he spoke at Burns Suppers where he was in great demand. Indeed Burns was an integral part of John's life and he left behind a legacy which will not be easily forgotten.

We have not enjoyed his company for a few years now, but there remains a raft of great memories, like prancing round the floor at ceilidhs, John playing the chanter of a set of pipes while Keith Easdale supplied the puff! Truly a pantomime horse gone wild! But it used to bring the house down.

In the later years of his life John's health began to take its toll on his activities, forcing him to give up his many interests, and confining him to his home where he was cared for by his wife Helen. John passed peacefully and his funeral was marked with the music of his beloved SFO played by a small group of players from the orchestra.

Survived by his wife Helen and three children there is a gap in the orchestra and he is sadly missed.

## **Iain McGlinchey - Keys, Buttons and Pedals**

One of the many features of the Usher Hall is its pipe organ. Regarded as one of the finest in the country it always stirs the blood when its mighty sound joins with the orchestra and the pipe band in epic pieces like 'Highland Cathedral'.

The orchestra is very fortunate in having Iain McGlinchey as its principal organist. A Helensburgh man, Iain lives down by the Clyde with his wife, family and collection of classic cars. He plies his trade as a consultant anaesthetist in Paisley, but has had a lifelong interest in organs of another kind, namely church ones. He has played many of the great instruments around the country but is perhaps happiest when giving his Saturday recitals at the great organ in Glasgow's Kelvingrove Art Galleries.

There can be few audiences who are given a private exhibition of superb musicianship before an actual concert and then again during the interval. But with Iain on the keyboard ('manual' to those cognoscenti) listeners are treated to a wide range of classical and popular melodies and songs, played entirely without music and all with Iain's instinct for what his audience wants. Truly a tremendous asset and never needed more than at a recent Edinburgh concert when he had to play for an extra twenty minutes at the interval owing to a medical emergency.

So next time there is organ music at the venue, look out for the man sitting up at the array of keys, buttons and pedals ready to entertain and thrill with the sheer power of the instrument.



## Stradivarius Secrets Uncovered

Strad violins are famous for their exquisite craftsmanship and beautiful tone – and their price tag.

Stuff You Should Know is an award-winning podcast which is consistently ranked in the Top 10 on iTunes. It is one of the most popular podcasts in the world and is downloaded millions of times each month.

In September 2016, the Stuff You Should Know podcast devoted an episode ('What's the deal with Stradivarius violins?') to the cream of Cremona's crop. The show's hosts, Josh and Chuck, discussed the rise of Italian instrument maker, Antoni Stradivari, and analysed some of the many theories as to why his instruments sound so great.

They pointed out that fiddles are the same as violins (apart from the pronunciation) – which is true. Their analysis then got a bit more controversial. According to them, hillbillies play fiddles and 'other people' play violins; and during the initial period after their invention in the 16th century, fiddles were regarded as cheap, tavern instruments – you'd play the fiddle only after getting drunk, whereupon you would hop up on the table at the pub and 'beat out a little Irish jig' (ouch).

In 1564, Catherine De Medici helped the instrument's image and respectability by ordering 38 of them from violin-maker, Andrea Amati, who was based in Cremona. It was the Amatis who developed the violin (and other family members such as the cello and viola) to the general appearance we recognise today. The peculiar - though beautiful - shape is functional because it allows all notes to resonate to the same extent; if it was more basically shaped, some notes would sound better than others. The cut-out C-bouts halfway down the body of the violin provide the practical benefit that you can play the 2 outside strings (E and G on a standard-tuned E-A-D-G fiddle) without the bow hitting the body of the violin. Neither Josh nor Chuck had previously played violin so they found it difficult in the same way anyone finds it difficult to co-ordinate pedals, gearstick and steering wheel when first learning to drive. Even just from the perspective of bowing, in their analysis, you needed to co-ordinate a combination of pressure on the bow, angle of the bow, placement of the bow in the area between the bridge and the fingerboard, and speed of the bow.

Turning back to the main focus of their discussion, they looked at theories as to how the violins of Antonio Stradivari – who was possibly a student of the Amatis – came to have such perfect tone.

One theory relates to the varnish used. Another refers to the nature and quality of the wood he employed. This a subject which our previous editor, Robert Clark, covered in an article in the SFO Newsletter from 10 years ago (July 2007; No. 37), in the following way: "Did you know that an amazing sunspot activity happens every 11 years when the sun experiences a peak in solar activity and the reversal of the magnetic field? This peak is known as the Solar Max and a great violence occurs both within the sun and out from its surface activity. Edward Maunder made his name famous with his theories of the sunspot cycle and has a 70 year period of history named after himself known as "The Maunder Minimum". Well, another individual benefited from this unusual period of time between 1645 and 1715. It would appear that the famous Italian violin maker Stradivarius made perfect sounding violins because he used perfect trees grown during the Maunder Minimum.



Climatologists have come up with an interesting theory. They are suggesting that climatic cooling over many decades affected rates of tree growth and may have contributed to the wonderful acoustic quality of the violins produced by Stradivarius and his contemporaries of this period. Dense wood with narrow growth rings have helped to produce a superior tone and brilliance in his violins. It would appear that wood grown under fast conditions is less resonant and unlikely to survive the stresses placed on a violin.

Much of Europe was gripped by the Little Ice Age between 1400 and 1800 and the period of cold weather and long winters peaked between 1645 and 1715. Trees grown during that peak period, the so-called Maunder Minimum, showed the slowest growth rates of the entire last 500 years.

Stradivarius was born one year before the start of the Maunder Minimum. He produced violins from 1666 until his death in 1737. Other studies have shown that Stradivarius used violins built from spruce wood contemporary to his lifetime which would have been locally obtained. However, we must not discount the unique talent Stradivarius brought to producing wonderful sounding violins. He not only had better materials but the skills of his hands and design of the instrument will have contributed to the effect on the tonal quality of the finished instrument."

Antonio Stradivari (1644 - 1737) made about 1,200 violins during his life. About 600 of them remain today.



## New 'fiddles' on the block

After a recent round of auditions in Stirling the orchestra numbers are growing and 8 successful applicants will be joining us to play their first SFO concert on Saturday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2017 at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

We welcome into the 1<sup>st</sup> violin section Alexander Davidson, Alastair Buchanan, Sarah-Louise Kelly, Rhiannon McGibbon, David Nicholson, Judith Semple, Hilary Turbayne and Ross Whitehouse.

## When you don't need to worry if your next concert will be a sell-out ...

The SFO's Board meets every 2-3 months and one issue that comes up for discussion every time is ticket sales.

The committee look at how well we've performed in selling our most recent concerts, as well as brainstorming ideas to maximise future audience numbers.

What if there was a way to guarantee a full house for every concert? Well, we are still searching for that secret recipe as far as the SFO is concerned. However, as I discovered recently while on holiday with my family, there is at least one concert hall in Europe where a sell-out seems to be guaranteed every time, at least for the foreseeable future.

Here are some "interesting" facts about this particular concert hall.

- Work on it commenced in 2007 but the official opening concert was not until 11 January 2017.
- It was originally estimated to cost about €75 million but ended up costing over 10 times that amount.
- The build was in fact a partial renovation of a warehouse, of red brick construction. A glass top, with wave-like roof line has been added, giving the building a total of 26 storeys - 108m tall, at its highest.
- From the entrance hall, you reach a public Plaza at the 8th floor, via the longest curved escalator in the world. It's 82m long and the travel time is about 2 ½ minutes. It takes you as far as the 6th floor, with a shorter, 2nd escalator up to the 8th floor after that.
- The building has three concert venues. The Great Concert Hall is one of the largest and most acoustically advanced concert halls in the world. It holds 2,100. The stage is in the centre, with the audience terraced around it, vineyard-style. No seat is more than 30m from the stage. The Recital Hall has a capacity of 550 and the Kaistudio holds up to 170.
- The building also houses a substantial parking garage, a hotel, private apartments, conference rooms, bars, restaurants and a spa.

We're talking about the Elbphilharmonie (Elbe Philharmonic Hall) in Hamburg, Germany. It's now affectionately known as the "Elphi".

On the tour we had of the building (which, unfortunately, did not include any of the concert venues) our guide, Jan, explained that the venues are basically sold out until October 2019. This must be very good news indeed for the NDR Elbphilharmonie Orchestra, which is based there.

Jan explained to us that his elderly parents had been so desperate to experience at least one of the concert halls that they went to a performance of electronic music in the Recital Hall, even though it did not fit with their taste in music at all. But it was a rare occasion when a few spare tickets were available, so they felt they had to take the opportunity.

It is early days for the Elphi but, at the time we visited (10am on a Saturday in July 2017), with the queuing crowds in attendance just to see the "boring" bits of the structure, even then it looked like there must be some massive musical event taking place.



**TICKETS ARE ON SALE NOW FOR: Glasgow, Belfast, Edinburgh, Perth (See page 1 for dates)**

### Contacts

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