



# The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra

Scotland's National Fiddle Orchestra

## NEWSLETTER

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June 2019 / No. 80

### *Newsletter No. 80*

It's our 80<sup>th</sup> Newsletter, published as we home in on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the SFO's first ever concert – which we will celebrate in March 2020.

Our 2019 season has seen us visit Perth and Aberdeen so far. It was fantastic to be back in the refurbished Music Hall on Aberdeen's Union Street after a few years performing in the iconic Beach Ballroom.

We look forward to our "standard" double visit to Edinburgh's Usher Hall (15<sup>th</sup> June and 30<sup>th</sup> December) and Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall (7<sup>th</sup> September) as well as special, extra concerts in Inverurie Town Hall (28<sup>th</sup> September 2019) and York Barbican (26<sup>th</sup> October 2019).

Compere Robert Lovie has guided us through our first two concerts of the year and, as our programme of concerts reaches Edinburgh in June, we welcome back Gary Innes as master of ceremonies.

As mentioned in our last Newsletter, this year's SFO concert programme has musical references to two former compères of SFO concerts, Jim McColl and Robbie Shepherd.

As will be known to many of you, Robbie Shepherd hosted BBC Radio Scotland's Scottish Dance Music "Take the Floor" programme between 1980 and 2016. On his retirement, he was succeeded by Gary Innes.

Gary's wife, Hannah, gave birth to their first child, Gracie, on 28 April 2019 and, by a lovely coincidence, she shares her birthday with none other than the great man himself, Robbie Shepherd.

In this edition of the Newsletter, we pay tribute to SFO compere, Jim McColl on his retirement from The Beechgrove Garden. We also take somewhat tongue-in-cheek looks at "fiddle disasters" and what it means to play second fiddle in the SFO. There's also a discussion of the contribution of Irish fiddler, Sean McGuire, to the development of traditional fiddle music across the world, as well as his lasting influence on many of today's well-known musicians – as highlighted in a recent BBC TV series.



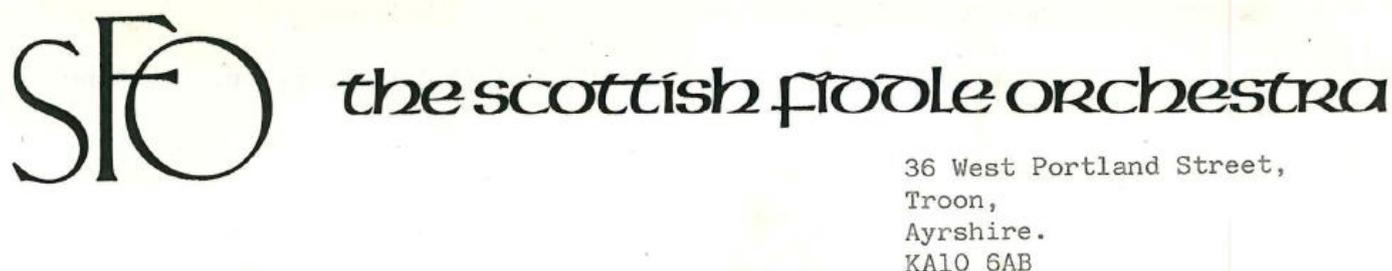
## *Who wants to play second fiddle? (A light-hearted look)*

The fiddlers in the SFO are split into two sections.

As you look at the orchestra from a point in front of the stage, the violinists to the left of conductor, Blair Parham, are First Violins. Those to the right of Blair are the Second Violins. (Sorry if this is obvious to you).

For many parts of an SFO concert, the Firsts and the Seconds play the same music – often both holding the melody line.

One of our members recently unearthed the letter they received from John Mason (at that time, Musical Director and Conductor) in August 1982, offering them a place in the SFO.



The member's name has been omitted due to the potentially controversial nature of what follows.

### Membership of Scottish Fiddle Orchestra

On behalf of the Administrators, I am very pleased to offer you a place in the Second Violin section of the Orchestra. This section is the one which requires an increase in numbers at the moment and its leader, David Smith, feels that the abilities described in your application will be of great benefit to that part of the Orchestra. It is widely held that, in our kind of orchestra, the second players have to be even better than the firsts but I do not propose to comment on that and finish up the centre of controversy.

John Mason was a solicitor in his day job and, while highlighting the possible need for members of the Second Violin section to be more versatile (i.e. "better") than their First Violin section counterparts, his training enabled him neatly to avoid expressing any direct personal opinion on the matter.

Interestingly, however, he went on to state the following:

Almost all our traditional dance material is unison and it is really only in the song arrangements, slow airs and waltzes that harmonies are used. I do hope that I can count on your support.

Yours sincerely,



JOHN M. MASON  
CONDUCTOR

Things have moved on in the SFO a lot since 1982. **Most** of the SFO's music now contains harmonies – including the “traditional dance material” such as reels and jigs.

Players throughout the SFO will continue to stake claims that their section is the most important to the SFO's sound. But those in the Second Violin section will feel this evidence from the archives adds weight to their claim to hold that position (at least, over the First Violins).

(Yes, okay, it is true to say that the Leader of the orchestra is Bill Cook and he's in the First Violins. Please don't write in to us about this article).

### *Fiddle disasters*

The expression “to come a cropper” has its origins in 18th century horse riding.

Anyone who took a headlong fall from a horse was described as falling 'neck and crop'.

We understand “come a cropper” to mean “fall heavily” or “suffer a defeat or disaster”. But originally it was just a colloquial way of describing a 'neck and crop' fall.

The kinds of disasters that can befall musicians include losing their instrument, having it stolen or breaking it.

Violinist, Peter Cropper, was one musician who met with catastrophe. Indeed, he found his second name to be unluckily appropriate.

In 1981, London's Royal Academy of Music offered Peter a 258-year-old Stradivarius for a series of concerts.

Of course, he accepted. Few fiddlers would turn down the chance to play and experience the tone of one of Antonio Stradivari's meticulously handcrafted violins.

But then, disaster.

As Peter walked onto the stage, he tripped, landed on top of the violin and snapped the neck off.

How must he have felt at that moment, thinking that a priceless masterpiece had been destroyed?

Though Peter was initially inconsolable, fortunately, the violin was repairable. After the remedial work, the break in the neck of the violin was undetectable and the exquisite sound unaffected.

The Academy graciously allowed him to continue using the violin (maybe he had to pay for the insurance?!).

There are only about 600 Stradivarius musical instruments in the world. Some of his violins have sold for US dollar amounts in excess of 10 million. With the “extra care” you’d imagine their owners would take, you might think Peter’s ‘cropper’ would be something of a unique event.

The case of David Garrett proves otherwise.

It’s maybe a wee bit more difficult to muster sympathy for his predicament, given that he enjoys the kind of music career I’m sure many men in the SFO have aspired to (perhaps – see what you think).

The cover story of “Discover Germany, Switzerland and Austria” magazine’s May 2019 edition highlighted David’s 10-year crossover-stage anniversary, marked by his greatest hits album release, entitled Unlimited (2018).



Born in Aachen, Germany, to American/German parents, he began violin lessons at age 4, became the youngest ever artist signed to the Deutsche Grammophon label at age 13, and, from age 17, studied at the Juilliard School of Music in New York. While a student, he apparently worked as a model to supplement his income. Some described him as “the David Beckham of the classical violin” (a reference to his good looks).

Between 2007 and 2017, David released 10 albums, each of which went either multi-platinum or multi-gold. He described his biggest achievement in that 10-year period as bringing “classical music closer to an entirely new audience through my crossover projects.”

The article does not mention a 2008 incident at London’s Barbican, when he slipped and landed on his violin – a 290-year-old Stradivarius.

He was packed and ready to go home, when the accident happened. He fell down a flight of steps and landed on the violin in its case. When he opened the case up, the violin was in pieces. He described the feeling as “like losing a friend”.



In a newspaper article at the time, the badly-damaged violin was estimated to be facing a £60,000 repair, taking an estimated minimum of 8 months.

Moving to the fiddle music world, Donegal’s Mairead Mooney of Altan saw her 18th century violin – a gift from her father – damaged as it was going through security at Dublin airport in 2017. Fortunately, it was also repairable.

Within the SFO, we have experienced a damaged double bass on our Northern Nights Tour in 2018 (mentioned in Newsletter 77). Elsewhere, one SFO member saw their bow broken by a falling guitar case while playing in a session on a bus. Another member endured a week of thinking their fiddle had been stolen from a music festival when in fact it had accidentally been taken home, in its case, by one of the bands performing at the festival.

If you didn’t know it already, fiddles are fragile things (even when they are in their cases) and fiddles are also among their owners’ best friends – one of the family.

## *Jim McColl tastes retirement*

Jim McColl, M.B.E., recently retired after more than 40 years with the popular TV show *The Beechgrove Garden*. His enthusiasm for plants and gardening was, he insisted, undimmed. However, he felt it was time to retire because he was “getting old” and had increasing concerns about getting up off his knees if a particular task required him to be down at ground level.

For a man for whom gardening is like breathing, it must have been a very difficult decision for him to hang up his trowel.

He will be missed by generations who knew him as a great gardener and presenter. He has always found a way to share his wealth of horticultural knowledge in a way which engaged people at all levels of gardening expertise – from beginners to professionals.

Of course, Jim has been well known to SFO audiences over many years as compere of our concerts – both in the UK and abroad. He learned to play the piano and graduated to the accordion when he realised he needed something more transportable. He describes himself as a “junkie for Scottish music”. Our leader, Bill Cook, composed a lively two-step for him – “The Horticulturalist” – in appreciation of his huge contribution to the life of the SFO.



*Jim McColl in action with the SFO.*

We got together with Jim in his potting shed to explore his musical memories.

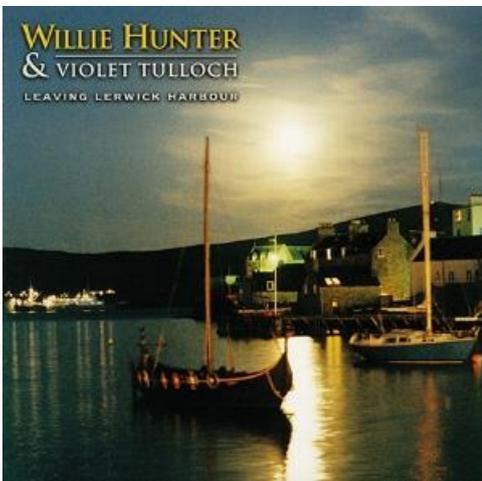
Q: Where did your love of music stem from?

A: From my parents, Tom and Jessie McColl, both musical, whether it be singing, playing (piano and guitar), dancing or simply listening to others. Their particular favourites being Traditional Scottish.

Q: What is your favourite piece of music that the SFO plays?

A: Lady Gethin [This is an arrangement by John Mason of a composition attributed to the itinerant, blind Irish harper, Turlough O’Carolan, mentioned in our last Newsletter – No.79]

Q: What is your guiltiest musical pleasure (any genre)?



*An important CD in Jim McColl's collection.*

A: To be indulged by Phil Cunningham to play along with him!

Q: What is the biggest benefit you have gained from being able to play a musical instrument?

A: Enduring friendships.

Q: If you could have a lesson from any musician, living or dead (but ‘alive’ for teaching purposes), who would you choose and why?

A: Mozart, my favourite classical composer. Just to be in his company would be ace!

Q: Tell us one thing about your taste in music which might surprise us.

A: I hate the new era of aimless, characterless Scottish traditional stuff – so-called!

Q: Which fiddle tune do you wish you had composed?

A: The Flower of Portencross [*a slow air by John Mason*]

Q: If you did not play the accordion/piano, which instrument would you most like to play?

A: The stringed dulcimer!

Q: What would be your (one) desert island disc and why?

A: Quite frankly, I am unable to answer that. It is likely that I would opt for one by Willie Hunter, accompanied by Violet Tulloch, including the tune Leaving Lerwick Harbour.



*Jim McColl backstage with SFO Conductor, Blair Parham*

Jim McColl is a major figure in The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra Hall of Fame and lang may his lum reek.

## *Onwards down the musical path*

BBC Alba recently repeated its 3-part traditional music television series, charting the shifting sands between tradition and innovation in Irish and Scottish music over the last 60 years or so.

The Musical Path (lul a Chiuil) discusses changes in the traditional Celtic music scene: for example, from (initially) musicians touring and playing their music live to (latterly) musicians recording their music for mass distribution.

Additional innovations have included: moves from analogue recording to digital recording; from LPs to CDs; from record shops to online music streaming; from Runrig to Riverdance; and from Planxty to Lau.

In episode one, Irish fiddler and broadcaster, Paddy Glackin, refers to what he calls the “spirituality” in traditional music. It’s music that has been passed from generation to generation and, to have a true knowledge of that music, you need to understand the spirituality behind it. Deep tradition, in his view, is passed on through musicians relating to one another and not simply hearing and replicating the musical notes.

He says that, on the one hand: “The tradition is very important and it’s a reference point, in a way. That is always in my head and my heart while I play.” However, on the other hand, in his view: “At the same time, you add your own stamp to the music. When old musicians would give you a reel or a jig, they always used to say: ‘Do your own thing with it.’”

Musicians who travelled to publicise their music included Scotland’s James Scott Skinner, the Strathspey King (1843 – 1927), and (more recently, in Ireland), John Doherty (1900 – 1980).

Paddy Glackin recalls a meeting with John Doherty having a profound influence on his musical development. Paddy was about 9 years old at the time. Doherty asked him if he played fiddle and, when he confirmed that he did, Doherty asked if he would play a tune for him. Afterwards, Doherty said to him: “I want you to promise me that you won’t stop playing.” In Paddy’s words: “That remained with me and was one of the most crucial things anyone ever said to me.”

Irish fiddler and singer, Mairead Ni Mhaonaigh, describes traditional music as “a heritage which is breathing all the time”. In her opinion, the music cannot be left in a vacuum; it needs to breathe to develop.

At various points in the programme, we zoom in on particular musicians whose innovations have moved the tradition forward or taken it in new directions.

It's fascinating to hear Aly Bain talk about one of his musical heroes, Irish fiddler, Sean McGuire from Belfast (1927 – 2007).

Aly got a Sean McGuire LP from his uncle and played it over and over on the radiogram. “I put it on and just thought: wow – this is fiddle music!” Aly taught himself every tune on the record, picking out the melodies and working out the bowings.

Sean McGuire was someone who had a great respect for the tradition – who understood the music's roots and history – but was not afraid of progress. He was not afraid to do his own thing with traditional music, even if it wasn't the most practical or popular thing to do at the time.

As a classically-trained violinist, it seems other Irish traditional musicians regarded him with a degree of suspicion. They saw him as “just playing classical music” – something that was “not really Irish music”. But his training and technique meant he could handle music that many fiddlers would regard as challenging – playing in the difficult flat keys, for example. “When you heard him playing in E flat, everybody stopped to listen to him in awe.”

According to Paddy Glackin, the greatest thing about Sean McGuire was his musical imagination. In Paddy's opinion, Sean is one of the most important musicians of any generation. “He had a technique that could bring that imagination to bear on the jigs and reels.”

An example of Sean McGuire bringing his imagination to bear on a reel is in his amazing version of the traditional tune, The Mason's Apron. This is a classic of the tradition in both Scotland and Ireland – it features in The Eightsome Reel set played by the SFO.

He took the basic 32-bar tune (2 sections) and added variations which extended the melody by up to another 4 or 5 sections. This takes in shuffles, syncopation and third-position playing. He also varies the harmonic structure of the tune in places. He messes with the tune but remains true to its essence at all times.

Hear Sean McGuire play The Mason's Apron [here on YouTube](#) (from 01:25).

The Sean McGuire version of The Mason's Apron lives on in the playing of fiddlers such as Aly Bain – though he has interpreted and developed the McGuire variations to put his own slant on things. Aly leads the playing of the tune on The Boys of the Lough's 1986 live recording “Far from home” and it's still in his repertoire in his duo with Phil Cunningham today.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued support of the SFO.

If you have any comments or suggestions in relation to the SFO Newsletter, we would be very pleased to hear from you.

We hope to see you at an SFO Concert sometime soon. 😊

**P.S. Though it's short notice, don't forget that tickets are still available from the SFO's next concert at Edinburgh's Usher Hall on 15 June 2019 ([bookings here](#)).**

<b>Concert Diary</b>				
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Usher Hall	15 June 2019	0131 228 1155	www.usherhall.co.uk
<b>Glasgow</b>	Royal Concert Hall	07 September 2019	0141 353 8000	www.whatsonglasgow.co.uk/event/010530-scottish-fiddle-orchestra/
<b>Inverurie</b>	Town Hall	28 September 2019		www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/the-scottish-fiddle-orchestra-tickets-62249382579?utm_term=eventurl_text
<b>York</b>	Barbican	26 October 2019	0844 854 2757	yorkbarbican.co.uk
<b>Edinburgh</b>	Usher Hall	30 December 2019		Tickets not yet on sale
<b>Perth</b>	Concert Hall	22 February 2020		Tickets on sale 01 September 2019

<b>Contacts</b>	
<b>Secretary</b>	SFO Secretary, Karen Egerton, 44 Roman Road, Almondbank, Perth PH1 3LQ
<b>Treasurer</b>	SFO Treasurer, Jim Kerr, 21 Forres Avenue, Giffnock, Glasgow G46 6LH
<b>Patrons / Friends</b>	SFO Patrons, 24 Golf Crescent, Troon, Ayrshire KA10 6JZ
<b>Postal Sales</b>	SFO Postal Sales, 24 Golf Crescent, Troon, Ayrshire KA10 6JZ

