



# The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra

Scotland's National Fiddle Orchestra

## NEWSLETTER

Patron: HRH The Princess Royal

Scottish Registered Charity No. SC010753

December 2020 / No. 86

### *The SFO gets a new hairdo*

We know by now that, by the time the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra plays another concert, we will have been out of action for over a year.

Sadly, we won't be performing at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh on 30 December 2020 and our Perth Concert scheduled for 27 February 2021 has had to be put off too. Our hopes are on Aberdeen in April 2021 and we are looking at several different possible concert options at the moment.

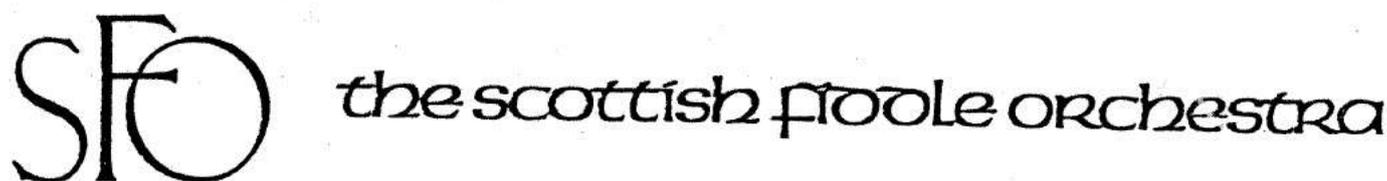
When we get back to mass fiddling, in the words of one of our Board members, you'll still know that: "We are the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra. Nothing has changed. Our music is the same. Our concerts are the same (in terms of energy). We've just chosen a new hairstyle."

What's the new hairstyle, I hear you ask?

Well, one benefit of an enforced lay-off has been the chance for the SFO Board to look to refresh the SFO's image. Although we are not paid musicians, we would like our professional approach to the music to be reflected in all SFO media, from posters, programmes and website to mugs and tote bags.

Over the last few months, with the assistance and guidance of Edinburgh's Touch Agency, we have reviewed the SFO's brand. We're excited about the results of this exercise - which we expect to be able to reveal to you early in the New Year. We're remaining true to our roots and there will be much visible continuity of features which have taken us to our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

But we hope you'll like our "new hairstyle", which will include an enhanced mixture of colours, a new website and (we hope) a greater consistency of appearance across all SFO-related media.



*SFO Letterhead 1984*

This edition of the Newsletter contains: some reflections on 2020 from a few orchestra members; a look at concerts we've done over the years around New Year time; and a dip into the archives in the shape of our Newsletter of December 2008.



## *Reflections on 2020 from Louise Norman...*

Like the rest of the population when lockdown was announced back in March, it was a very difficult time and a very surreal experience.

As a member of the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra, as well as the Stirling Caledonia Strathspey and Reel Society – and occasional fiddler at sessions down at our local – to suddenly be deprived of these sources of weekly stress relief at a time when I needed the distraction more than ever was particularly hard.

Music, however, had a way to continue to permeate my everyday life and provide a backdrop and expression for how life was going. Whilst loving classical and popular music, it is traditional Scottish music which has captivated me over the past few years.

Living with a young piper and trad musician has fostered a new energy to explore new artistes and attend live events. Ever present in the background of those early days was the sound of fiddles, pipes, whistles, guitars and song. Social media played its part in helping to connect with artistes we would otherwise have seen perform live and keep track of how life was going for them. Instead of the excitement of a live event, I eagerly awaited the arrival of a new tune book or CD.

One particular CD which was great to receive and fascinating to listen to was Ross Ainslie's new album *Vana*. [Note: Ross's Mum, Aileen, is a fiddler in the First Violin section of the SFO). In particular, [Wisdom in the Chaos](#), which brings in John Wilson, explaining about the old oral tradition of canntaireachd for teaching tunes. Having heard a little of John's singing alongside Ross's piping from an overseas piping school in Germany, to hear this connection now performed as a fully-fledged part of Ross's composition was fascinating and brilliantly atmospheric.

Music has also permeated into my year through my involvement in producing short videos for the SFO. Initially a bit of fun and distraction, it seems to have grown arms and legs as the months have gone on. In some of these videos which have gone out for public viewing we have used tunes performed and recorded by the SFO.

Going through old recordings has been part of the highlight of the process, finding wee gems that I had perhaps forgotten about. Some reminded me of particular events and concerts. For example, the *Conundrum Hornpipes* and our past president Gerry Crean, whose catchphrase was "T'anks for comin'" and our grand concerts in the Royal Albert Hall in London.

*Willie Kidd's Welcome to Orkney* reminded me of our fantastic tour to the Northern Isles in 2018 and some of the great audiences and people we met. Some tunes were just a pleasure to play: particularly a good foot-tapping set of reels or jigs, with Shetland Reels being my favourite.

In addition to videos for public viewing, as a group, we have also made some collaborations for our own enjoyment – having fun with new compositions by members of the SFO. There have also been one or two fun creations, including a birthday greeting for one of our founder members, Norma Kidd.

Out of everything there are perhaps two tunes which have been ever-present on my playlist this year.

The first is a melancholy piece – [The White Bird](#) – performed by Duncan Chisholm. Beautifully played and – although slow and ever so sad – at the same time uplifting. The perfect antidote to a long day. At the other end of the spectrum I particularly love Saltfishforty's [Breadbin Blues](#) when I'm in need of a pick me up. Funnily enough, it reminds me of SFO weekends away and some great post-concert sessions which generally lasted well into the next morning. Reminders of happy times with a wonderful group of friends and fellow musicians. I sincerely hope that before long we can be together performing live music again, enjoying that unique connection with live audiences and creating many more memories.



*... and from David Nicholson...*

2020 has been, without a shadow of a doubt, a hugely challenging year for us all.

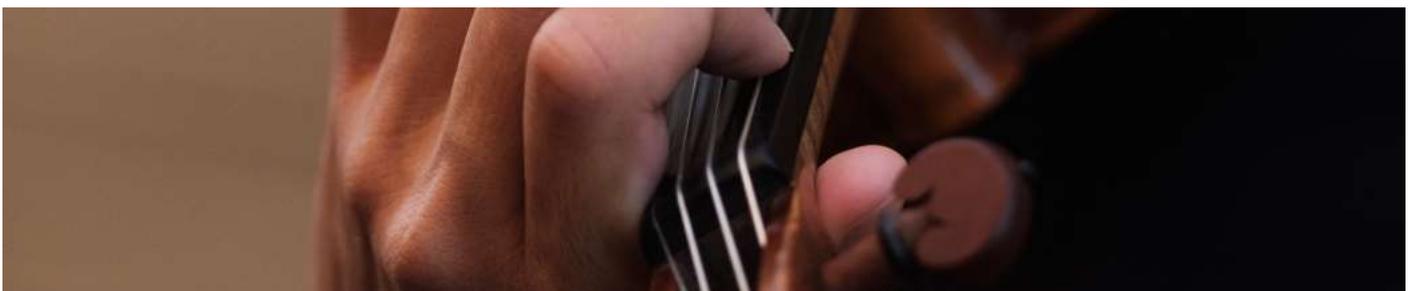
The pandemic has affected every area of society and all parts of the country.

For me, music has provided a real comfort during these very testing times. It has enabled me to explore old tunes and play tunes that I find help me to relax.

One such tune is a fine Cape Breton (Nova Scotia) march written by Dan Hughie MacEachern, [The Trip to Mabou Ridge](#). I discovered this tune from the playing of the late, great Buddy MacMaster and it is wonderful tune to play. It helps me to feel uplifted and more positive.

Another tune is the gorgeous Gaelic air [Sine Bhan](#) or "Fair Jean". A beautiful yet simple air that evokes memories of the Outer Hebrides for me.

Lastly, another old tune that I have rediscovered has been the old pipe Strathspey called [Maggie Cameron](#). Again, I heard this tune played by notable Cape Breton fiddlers, including Troy MacGillivray, Dawn Beaton, Andrea Beaton and many others. It is a tune full of lively spirit. It really has helped to energise me and to put a smile on my face whilst I have been playing it.



## ... and from Peter Brash...

2020 was a year when I found time to listen to old cassette recordings I had of the SFO and put them into an accessible form for anyone who wants to get at them – via podcasts on the SFO website. I doubt that would have happened otherwise.

The oldest of these recordings were, firstly, of the orchestra on Radio Scotland at Hogmanay 1981 and, secondly, a 'version' of the orchestra at the Motherwell Mod on 08 October 1983 – a concert that went out live on BBC Scotland (TV).

I would encourage you to have a listen to these recordings, especially if you remember the early 80s and television programmes such as *Hi-de-Hi!* and *Pebble Mill at One*.

[The Rally at the 1983 Mod](#) had an electric atmosphere.

Donny MacLeod comperes and John Mason also does some introductions.

Perhaps because it had to be packed into a 40-minute slot, the faster tune sets seem to be played very fast indeed. You can hear the audience singing along during the singalong waltz selection. And the highlight, for me, is Mary Sandeman singing Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water* in Gaelic. I don't know of any other recording of that version of it and John Mason's arrangement was always fun to play – with the heavy drum part and big string crescendo towards the end of a piece which is only voice and piano most of the way through.

The [live radio recording on 31 December 1981](#) was introduced by John Carmichael of Islay. It includes a solo March, Strathspey and Reel from Yla Steven and also a performance by fiddle duettists, Betty Henderson and Reesa McGinn, of John Mason's composition, *The Hardanger*.

An [article about the SFO for \*The Scots Magazine\*](#) in the mid-1980s, contained the following information about performances the orchestra had given around the New Year period during its early years.

“The Scottish Fiddle Orchestra was less than a year old when first invited to play in the New Year on Radio Scotland's Hogmanay Show on 31 December 1980. By the following year, the SFO was part of our Hogmanay celebrations on television and, in 1982, a tricky situation developed when BBC Radio and STV both asked for its services.

In the final hour of that year, as Glasgow revellers were heading home for the bells, stragglers were astonished to see coaches carrying the entire orchestra and instruments proceeding at top speed through the city centre flanked by police vehicles with flashing blue lights and wailing sirens.

The high-speed dash was unavoidable because BBC Radio had over-run to four minutes past eleven and STV had the orchestra scheduled for an 11.30 start on their show.”



## No ushering in of 2021 with the SFO in Edinburgh

“We always look forward to meeting in Edinburgh after Christmas, and to playing for a full Usher Hall, but, like so many other events this year, our show won't be going ahead as we'd hoped. Although tickets hadn't gone on sale, it's now clear we won't be kicking off the Hogmanay celebrations or bidding farewell to 2020 with you all. We thank you all for your unwavering support this year.” – Susie Donlevy, Edinburgh Administrator.



We have had an Usher Hall concert on 30 December for quite a few years and it is a shame to see that run come to an end.

We've been checking back our records to see when 30 December became a 'fixed' date for the SFO at the Usher Hall. In the earlier years of the SFO, we played one concert in Edinburgh per year, usually on the last Saturday in October. As you'll see, 2000 seems to have been the first 30 December Usher Hall concert but the consecutive run dates from more recently – 2010 or so.

Our collective memory is that, during the 1990s, the SFO played at least 2 concerts at the Ross Bandstand in Princes Street Gardens on 31 December. In the 1990s Edinburgh began doing Hogmanay concerts there, working up to and rehearsing for the millennium.

In 1999, the SFO took part in a concert at Holyrood Palace on 30<sup>th</sup> December: “Beating the Retreat of the Twentieth Century”.

It was one of the major events programmed for the millennium celebrations during Edinburgh's Hogmanay. It began with 1,000 pipers marching down the Royal Mile to the front of the stage area where the orchestra was to be performing. This was at the side of Holyrood Palace, in the Queen's Park.

The orchestra played for about 30 minutes and joined in *Auld Lang Syne* with the Millennium Piper at the end of the performance.

The regular members' Newsletter – which in those days was posted out – noted that players should “wear warm clothing; usual concert dress; ladies – white blouse and/or warm white woolly jumper and long tartan skirts; men – highland dress (kilt) or evening suit but kilt is much preferred.”

The members' Newsletter of December 2000 begins: “Herewith the programme for the concert in the Usher Hall on December 30 – almost but not quite the same as in Glasgow.”

In 2001, however, the SFO reverted to an October concert, on Saturday, 27 October. This pattern continued for 2002. For 2003, there was an Usher Hall concert on 30 December but there was not a full rehearsal from 2pm as normal: only a short practice from 5:45 to 6:45pm. The 30 December date was maintained in 2004 and 2006 (and probably 2005 too).

In 2007 and 2008, the SFO played at Birmingham Town Hall in late December each year. This was because the Usher Hall was closed for refurbishment works. The SFO's Edinburgh concerts in 2008 and 2009 took place in Summer at the Festival Theatre.

We can confirm that, all being well, the SFO will have concerts in the Usher Hall, Edinburgh, on 12 June and 30 December 2021.

***Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!***

From everyone in the SFO.

We hope that 2021 will soon see us return to a concert hall near you, so we can entertain you again face-to-face with music to put a song in your heart and dancing in your soul. ☺



## SFO Contacts

Secretary	SFO Secretary, 44 Roman Road, Almondbank, Perth PH1 3LQ
Treasurer	SFO Treasurer, 0/1 162 Hill Street, Glasgow G3 6US
Patrons/Friends	SFO Patrons/Friends, 24 Golf Crescent, Troon, Ayrshire KA10 6JZ
Postal Sales	SFO Merchandise, 3 Crummieholm Gardens, Troon, Ayrshire, KA10 7HZ

## Forthcoming concerts

Edinburgh	Usher Hall	30 December 2020	CANCELLED
Perth	Concert Hall	27 February 2021	CANCELLED
Aberdeen	Beach Ballroom	24 April 2021	Tickets not yet on sale
Edinburgh	Usher Hall	12 June 2021	Tickets not yet on sale
Glasgow	Royal Concert Hall	21 August 2021	Tickets not yet on sale
Edinburgh	Usher Hall	30 December 2021	Tickets not yet on sale

Clickable links to the ticket booking pages for the various concerts above (when tickets go on sale!) can be found on the SFO's home page at <http://sfo.org.uk/> - [HERE](#)

