



Youngstars

The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland
Newsletter No.7

Have a good summer

Paul Warren, Director, The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland

THE busy spell at Celtic Connections is now well behind us, the winter is over, and the competitions season is well under way for soloists and bands.

I have already bumped into many of you at some of the competitions. Many of the NYPBoS pipers and drummers have already featured in the prize lists in the solo contests, and I do hope all your bands are doing well and perhaps this is a good time to wish you all the best of luck for the season ahead.

I'd appreciate it if you all let me know of your results so that I can give you the credit you deserve — please keep me posted.

We have held a run of piping audition courses and will soon be announcing the newly selected members of the pipe corps.

We have still to confirm exactly how many new members we can take into the NYPBoS, and this will be influenced by the availability of existing members.

It's very important that you read carefully the information that has been mailed to you, and — if you haven't already done so — complete and return the enclosed form to me as soon as possible. I will have to assume that forms that are not returned are an indication of termination of membership and go ahead with recruiting replacements.

On these pages is a round-up of what is happening and coming up for the NYPBoS, and an interesting interview with the Canadian piper Rob Crabtree. He raises a number of issues that we all should all be thinking about, and I'd encourage you to give the questions he raises some attention.

I am sure you will agree that we have a very challenging and fun programme ahead, so get back to me with your availability and let's make some great music.

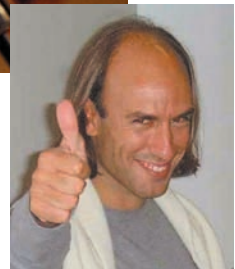
If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to call me or send an email.

Piping Hot: opening concert

The PIPING Hot Glasgow International Piping Festival will be opened with a concert by the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland in the Royal Glasgow Concert Hall on Monday, 9 August.

The festival runs through the week leading up to the World Pipe Band Championships.

For NYPBoS members, the build-up to this concert will be much the same as for the band's highly successful launch concert last year.



PERFORMING with Carlos Nuñez (right) at Celtic Connections has opened doors for the NYPBoS in Galicia, Spain.

The main rehearsals will be held on the Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, 6-9 August with the concert on the Saturday evening.

Paul Warren, director of the NYPBoS said he needs to know which members of the band will be able and keen to take part in the concert and rehearsals. Members who have not already let him know if they want to be there should contact him immediately. Failure to do so may result in members being replaced, and excluded from taking part in further NYPBoS activities.

More information about the concert will follow as details are confirmed. Music for the concert is being selected and the presentation planned.

Volunteers

THE Piping Hot festival will be a week full of fun, but organisers are looking for volunteers to help keep the show on the road and running smoothly.

NYPBoS members who are off school and interested in a closer involvement with the festival should contact Paul Warren, and he will add their names to the list.

Free tickets are promised for those who help.

Spain beckons

AS a result of its performance with star Galician piper Carlos Nunez at the Celtic Connections

festival in Glasgow earlier this year, the NYPBoS has been invited by the Mayor of Ortiguera to perform at his town's International Celtic Music Festival, 8-12 July.

Ortiguera is on Spain's north west coast, in the Galician district of A Coruña.

At press time, this trip had still to be confirmed but, if it goes ahead, it will be for a band of 25 members.

NYPBoS director Paul Warren said he needed to know as soon as possible who would be available to go. Members are advised to let him know as soon as possible if they would be available for this trip.

Once he has this information and has selected the team for the trip, and the arrangements have been confirmed, Paul Warren will send out full information directly.

As a part of the Ortiguera tour, the NYPBoS has also been asked to perform as guest artists with Carlos Nunez in a concert that is to be filmed for Galician TV.

The venue holds 40,000 people and the organisers expect it to be full for this concert.

KELTOI FESTIVAL

FIVE members of the NYPBoS have meanwhile been selected for a separate engagement in Spain, at the Keltoi Festival in Galicia, 10-16 July.

It is not an official NYPBoS engagement but came about through the band's tour in China last year.

A small mini-band and a couple of dancers will attend the Keltoi Festival. The pipers are Alasdair Henderson, Kyle Warren and Fraser Wylie; the two drummers are Scott Birrell and David Henderson

Drumming courses

DRUMMING is still the weaker section of the band, said NYPBoS director Paul Warren — “and I have to think about how best to improve things.”

Once he has confirmed drumming members' availability for the coming summer and selected material for the Piping Hot Glasgow International Piping Festival concert in August, he will call drummers in for rehearsals.

His intention is to schedule these 20-22 July at the National Piping Centre in Glasgow. “Members will all be on school holidays at this point so I'm asking them to get back to me and let me know if they are going to be available so I can plan and confirm the details for this,” he said.

“Members really need to try to make these dates if they are to play in the concert.

“Those who were there for last year's launch concert will remember just how much work was involved — and this concert will involve a larger repertoire again.”

NEW DRUMMERS

THE NYPBoS is still looking to build up its drum corps.

Members and others who know youngsters who might be good recruits for the band are asked to suggest that they get in touch with Paul Warren.

“They would need to be able to attend the scheduled rehearsal and training days and be able to perform in the concert,” he said. “But do suggest to people that they get in touch with us.”

Watch this space

THE NATIONAL Youth Pipe Band of Scotland has been invited to take part in the 11th William Kennedy Piping Festival in Armagh Northern Ireland in November.

“This engagement is still in the planning stage but would involve a full programme and give the band a very high profile,” said NYPBoS director Paul Warren.

A proposed highlight of this booking is for the NYPBoS to perform in concert alongside the grade 1 Field Marshall Montgomery Pipe Band.

The William Kennedy Festival of Piping, organised by the Armagh Pipers Club, has become a leading international piping event, and has attracted prominent players from Spain, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary, Belarus, Canada, the United States, England, Scotland, and Wales to Armagh, to play alongside the best of Irish pipers.

The annual event commemorates the life and work of the 18th Century piper and pipe maker William Kennedy.

The challenge of winning audiences in Canada

ROB CRABTREE

ROB CRABTREE of Ontario, Canada, believes that, to help reach and attract non-piping audiences, it's time for pipers to learn from more popular musical conventions and come up with some fresh approaches to composition.

“We are good at coming up with melodies but we don't know what to do with them,” he says.

Rob Crabtree is a Braemar gold medallist and experienced grade 1 band piper who now makes a living from his piping and piping-related projects.

He is not “down” on traditional Highland pipe repertoire but, since taking the step of making music his full time profession, has thought deeply and learned a lot about audience development.

In 2002, his piping album *The Piper's Legacy* went “gold” in Canada, surpassing sales of 50,000 units. It had already been nominated for a Canadian Juno award as one of the top top-selling instrumental albums in Canada in its year of release.

The album offers “easy listening” tracks of great Highland bagpipes or smallpipes with instrumental arrangements. It was released on Somerset Entertainment's *Avalon* label as part of a series of “Celtic” albums. It opens with seashore sounds and an arrangement of *Morning Has Broken* that moves into an Irish jig, *Lark in the Morning*.

The extent to which the album represents an authentic piping “legacy” may be arguable — “I didn't pick the name, the label did,” says Rob Crabtree — but there are lessons to be learned from its production values, its identification and targeting of a market and the packaging of genuinely good performances of some genuine Highland bagpipe light music repertoire in wrappings that were calculated to appeal to a target market.

That success led to three further albums for Rob Crabtree and indicates that sustainable wider markets for the bagpipe are conceivable.

But, he feels, he has so far been merely scratching the surface.

He is busy enough. He teaches, is involved in running a summer schools in Ontario, playing gigs, making recordings... and is working on a theatrical project and a novel, both with piping themes.

About 18 months ago, he approached Marilyn Gilbert Artist Management with a proposal for a style of show he had devised involving a bagpipes-driven four-piece band, with songs. “It's a long process,” he said, “but I had my first booking through them in February in Florida as part of a local tour.

“I also did a live concert series, *Spiritwind*, working with vocalist Patricia Murray from Prince Edward Island. The shows were seasonally themed — the first was centred on Celtic fall (autumn) traditions, the next around Beltane. They were very well received but involved tons of work and costs like travel expenses, so they were only marginally profitable. For the hours



I was putting in, I really couldn't justify it. It's not dead, but it's shelved.”

Currently, he is in demand for pub and small venue gigs, presenting the pipes in an orchestrated setting. “That's heated up again after a couple of shows I did in the Fergus (Ontario) area: one for St Andrew's Day and one for Robert Burns' Day. They generated some real interest in the way I presented the pipes.”

But, he says, “I have a lot of things going that are too small, and not enough that are big.”

A new approach to writing bagpipe music and arrangements is one of the things he believes would help the instrument to widen its market.

“If you take our marches, reels, strathspeys, jigs, hornpipes, waltzes and odd song type tunes, like *Amazing Grace*, then look at how other instrumentalists view things, you find that they're not so wedded to six or seven rigid form of music. We need to create new forms.

“Also, if you listen to pop or show music, you get the theme given to you once and when it comes back something new has happened. It's not a single-line instrument that creates pop; it's percussion, and the textures laid down on top of that.

“Pop songs are written with a verse-chorus-bridge-instrumental-bridge-verse-chorus kind of structure, with alternate melodies and layering; instrumental numbers tend to work that way too: a low part, a high part, a bridge (an alternate melody relating to the first) then back into the original thing, and so on. When you do all that, you find there's no shortage of places for the pipes,” he says.

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“And there are things you can play on the pipes that are in the pop idiom: *The Clumsy Lover* is a good tune that way: it works on a 1:4:5 chord progression which is what rock and roll is if often built around — people get that. And the material Chris Armstrong is writing, for example, is great. It’s stuff that gets people relating to the pipes.

“You have to read your audience and comb your repertoire for the most exciting, interesting and accessible material you can play.”

Raised in Ottawa, Ontario, piping was a part of Rob Crabtree’s life from the age of 10, when his interest switched from the recorder to a practice chanter.

After first lessons with Jeff Thorpe — “he was uncompromising on technique,” Rob Crabtree recalls — he joined the Sons of Scotland Pipe band run by Morag Jamieson.

“This was the late 1970s — she ran the band, taught and played professional gigs. It was a good environment to be in,” he says. With sponsorship from a department store, the band became the Ogilvy’s Pipe Band. “And the store featured us in their advertising so we got a little local fame out of it.”

Rob Crabtree was then in his early teens, playing in grade 4 competitions with the band and gaining a taste for solo competition.

“They were very fun years. Piping was huge in Ontario.

“In my teens, band members were my best friends and we got up to crazy stuff — these were the people I was hanging out with on Friday nights and Saturdays.

“My brother, John, was involved as well, as a drummer, and the band was where we went through all that adolescent stuff. One of my first girl friends was from the band; I probably drank my first beer with guys from the band. It was a big source of friendship. And the thing is with a band is that there are limits: you have to be able to play or compete the next day.”

Morag Jamieson insisted that the young pipers get out and compete as soloists.

“There were a lot of contests around,” says Rob Crabtree. “We could pretty much have half a dozen events in a year in the greater Ottawa area. I was getting good results, though it wasn’t a big field in those days.”

When he returned from a year away on a student exchange programme, Rob Crabtree, then 19, stepped into a different scene. “Scott MacAulay had moved to the Ottawa area and started the Dunvegan Pipe Band. I got a call and started getting out to practise. I’d been competing as a grade 1 player and was at a level where I could handle a grade 1 band.

“As well as Scott, we had Colin MacLellan as our alternate pipe major; Ed Bush, a very musical and talented open player; Amy Garson, a silver medallist; Brian Williamson, a good open player — the best people in the area — It was a great environment and I got to improve very quickly.”

But it was short-lived and, after only three seasons, the band folded.

As an open-grade soloist in Canada, Rob Crabtree made his way to Scotland where he won the B grade strathspey and reel and placed third in the B march at the Argyllshire Gathering, Oban, second in the strathspey and reel at the Northern Meeting, and played in the silver medal piobaireachd: “a really great first experience of Scotland.”

Having graduated from university in mechanical

engineering, he moved to Toronto to take a job with an engineering firm, then moved to a company that had been contracted to design an external arm for the international space station.

“Working in aerospace on the design of ‘Canadarm 2’ sounds like a pretty cool project but I found it very bureaucratic,” he says.

He played with the grade 1 78th Fraser Highlanders for the 1991 season. “Then I married, did a part time Masters degree and got busy with other things...”

“In 1990 and ‘91, I was probably playing better than I thought. Scott MacAulay had been my mentor but he was very busy with the College of Piping in Prince Edward Island. I probably should have stuck to it more but I had other interests, my career was heating up... I remember, sitting on the plane coming home after 1991, after spending all that time and money and thinking maybe I’d really get back into my career and set solos aside for a while.

“Over the next two seasons, I played much better because I was more laid back, but I played less. In 1994, I made a career switch into management consulting — a job that monopolises your existence. I was on the road a lot, working on big projects and I only made three or four games that summer.

“But the pendulum started to swing the other way. I decided to go back to Scotland and play in the silver medal and the light music but in 1996 I didn’t get entry into the silver medal so played at some small games in July. I got some prizes at the Uists’ games and Dingwall, and was able to put together a resume that got me back into the silver medal for 1997.”

In 1997, Rob Crabtree was invited to join the Toronto Police Band. “I’d known the pipe major, Ian MacDonald, since I was 11 or 12. It was a teaching organisation, a worthwhile pillar in the local piping scene, so I supported it for three seasons. But my focus hasn’t been that strongly towards pipe bands. The time commitment is a big thing, and you’re ultimately subject to somebody else’s musical visions and that’s not as thrilling as when you control it.

1997 was also the year Rob Crabtree left what he calls “the suit and tie world” and embarked full time on a career as a writer and musician — “and the core of that business has been piping,” he says.

The next summer, Rob Crabtree won the Braemar Gold medal and, with it, entry into the gold medal.

But he was feeling the pressure and losing his enthusiasm for top level competition. “Nerves became an increasing problem. I’d start out in Canada at the little games feeling comfortable and winning prizes then, as it got closer to going to Scotland, my playing would get edgy and I’d be imagining problems.

“By the time I got to Scotland, I wasn’t turning out performances I was happy with — and that gets discouraging when you are putting out that kind of money and effort.

“Outside of that, I would win enough prizes (he placed second in the Metro Cup in New York 2002, for example) to parlay into my competitive curriculum and be accepted for the gold medal. But I’d arrive there and disappoint myself.

“It takes a certain kind of person to succeed in solo competition in the long run, a person whose commitment to solo piping is unwavering.

“My commitment to solo piping is not so unwavering. If I’m practiced up, it’s a nice day, it’s not

too far to go and all the rest of it, I’ll play quite well. If I have to focus for five years on going after the gold medal and make all of the sacrifices that involves, my enthusiasm starts to wilt. I’m at a stage where I’ve decided to hang up the competitive side to pursue other ambitions. I have three kids and some major creative ambitions... that’s why I’ve made the choices I have. You can’t do everything.”

The theatrical project he is currently developing — *The Lost Gate* — sees him working alongside Highland dance choreographer Shelagh O’Brien, an award-winning television director, as associate producer. A backers’ audition is planned late this year. “If that’s successful, the show would hopefully open in the fall of 2005 or the spring of 2006,” says Rob Crabtree.

His hope is that it will enrich the contexts through which non-piping audiences are able to identify with piping.

“Reaching ‘hip’ new audiences... that’s hard,” he says. “If you think of just about any recent or current music stars, they connected with their audiences through contexts of celebrity, sex, money and, often, controversy... that’s what catches people’s attention and makes the music attractive. I’m not saying it’s laudable, but at least it’s a context.

“In the case of our instrument, the older Canadian contexts for piping are rapidly disappearing. The military is more or less gone; the old time cultural thing is dwindling.

“So, when you stand in front of the multicultural, non-military, non-traditional audience, pull your pipes out and have a tune, they can’t relate to it.

“It’s not that they have anything against you, it’s that they don’t see anything in what you’re doing that they relate to.”

They are left clutching at straws.

In the 1993 movie *So I Married an Axe Murderer*, one of Canadian actor Mike Myers’ characters — when a piper drops unconscious from drink at a wedding — repeatedly says: “we got a piper down... can we get some help over here... got a piper down.”

For five or six years afterwards, Rob Crabtree was approached by people who would say: “huh-huh-huh, piper down, huh-huh-huh, piper down.” Occasionally, it still happens.

“That’s just how they could relate to it — something happened, somebody reacted to it, it was funny... so ‘funny’ was how you responded to the pipes.

“With that single link, some people were happy to come up and talk more deeply about the pipes,” he says. “When military and Scottish cultural activity were around, they gave people the link. Now, for a lot of people, it’s a blank sheet of paper.”

It is this issue of establishing contexts that Rob Crabtree sees driving his efforts to create and present stories that feature the pipes and pipers as integral elements, woven naturally into the narrative’s development.

“If you take almost any other musician — a pianist, say, or a guitarist — as a character in a film or novel, almost everybody accepts that. We need stories that are so compelling that piping is accepted without question or surprise.

“It’s something that’s important for the pipes. It’s a serious lack.”

Of the audiences that he finds himself generally playing to, he estimates that as many as 90 per cent

have no real preconceptions about how the pipes should be presented.

"If I come out backed by guitars, piano, fiddle and so on, they're not going to have a problem with that," he says. "Within that audience, I find people who are predisposed to liking the pipes because either they have Scottish or Irish backgrounds, or they are romantic-nostalgic types, or into Celtic music. Those people make up the audiences I do best with.

"They're maybe not going to Highland games and hearing solo or pipe band competitions and so on, but they're open to Celtic music whether it's led by the pipes or the fiddle or whatever, and they'll take it in a pub or a medium-sized soft-seat venue.

"This audience got big when the Celtic wave came through in the mid-1990s and began tailing off here a couple of years ago."

To better connect with general, non-piping audiences, Rob Crabtree is with those who believe that pipers need no longer regard the kilt as an essential accoutrement.

"Musicianship is the big thing," he says. "And setting up your instrument to sound good is very important. Pipers need to choose their acoustics very carefully — so you're not standing in a small live room deafening everyone. It's important to talk to audiences as well.

"It's become almost mandatory to play smallpipes and whistle as well as the great Highland bagpipe. I think a couple of keys could be very helpful on the chanter: one to give you an upper B and one to close the vent holes and give you low E — it'd be easy to do

and extend the instrument.

"And I think we also should be taking the electronic bagpipe — like the Deger — and turning it into a real performance instrument.

It could be incredibly helpful if we used it creatively: pedals for different sounds and effects, octave pedals, a drone pedal...

"The fingering system of the bagpipe — like the fingering system of the piano or guitar — is interesting, rhythmical, fast and intricate and, if we put it through the sorts of media that guitar and keyboard musicians have at their disposal, who knows where we could take things. And that's what electronic music has been all about," he says.

Rob Crabtree says he used to think that pipers should force the pipes on people more, to familiarise them with the instrument.

"But I've come to realise that you have to read your audience and, if they're not used to consuming music in the way you're presenting it, they're not going to be happy.

"The length of time you play can be a turn-off. Often when somebody asks a piper to 'give us a tune', the guy stands up and plays for 20 minutes straight.

"Another thing pipers do which puts people off, is play too much in minor and mixolydian modes. Tonally, people find that dreary and, if 80 per cent of your material is that, you'll lose people."

Pipe bands in concert have generally tended to take piping's tune-based approach and create entertainment by simply adding layers to it, he says.

"The concert bands tend to say our medley's going

to be pipes, start to finish, and we'll add all kinds of layers. And, to get really creative, we'll have a little gap in the middle where the pipes are out. Then we'll have a drum salute.

"It does attract a new audience to an extent — but get out and listen to the music that's really packing them in and you'll see that the tune-based approach isn't doing that. It's a whole different emotional line that the music is delivering on.

"In music for mass consumption, the lead is almost never kept by one single instrument for more than once through the melody, then it gets handed on.

"Some players go in for very fast, flashy playing, but the problems I'm talking about are still there.

"I find that, if you stand on stage with an instrumental show, it's nice to be able to switch to a song or two: people love songs, people relate. We're in a song-driven musical world these days, and it's fun."

Much of it comes back to basic professionalism, he says: "You are there for your audience, not the other way round.

"We need to remember that our instrument doesn't have dynamic effects and it has a saturation quality to it in that it's totally sustained. That's a challenge for us.

"But other instruments have their challenges too, and making it work is fascinating.

"What we're doing is a lot better than what we did, and I don't pretend to know how to get beyond that... I've tried.

"But I do know that there is something more, and we need to move further than we have." ●

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