

Youngstars

The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland
Newsletter No.17

The Young Tradition

By ANDREW WARREN



•The 3 Degrees

•The NYPBoS in rehearsals



•The Jiggy Thistles

SATURDAY 14 January 2006 saw the **National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland** take to the stage at **Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall**.

The band performed their show in the Strathclyde Suite as a part of this year's **Celtic Connections** festival programme of afternoon events.

As a prelude to the concert, the group's director, Paul Warren, explained the audition process and structure of Scotland's premiere young concert pipe band to an enthusiastic audience.

Under the direction of the show's co-producer, Calum McCrimmon, the supporting musicians took to the stage to begin the afternoon's eagerly anticipated show.

The accompaniment on guitar, bouzouki, low whistle, percussion and double bass wove a web of interesting rhythms and textures throughout the afternoon's performance.

Making The Change, the opening selection, was led by the band's senior members — Kyle Warren, Ali Henderson, Ben Duncan and Keith Bowes.

With a powerful and stirring start the concert programme moved on to a set of jigs, enabling dance troupe Jiggy Thistles to take the floor. Well-choreographed routines, consisting of an exciting blend of traditional Highland and contemporary dance delighted the audience throughout the sell-out concert.

Unfortunately, due to stage restrictions many of

the dance routines were performed at floor level, in front of the stage, leaving much of the audience unable to view the full extent of their marvellous routines and footwork.

With the audience fully warmed up and in need of some 'down time' the band went on to perform a stirring Gaelic air with pipes and low whistle.

Having recently been accepted for the BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree at the RSAMD and the National piping centre, three senior members of the group then took to the stage as their alter egos: The Three Degrees. The trio, dressed in fashion from the street, played some dazzling pipe music from the 'new generation, complemented by visually stimulating dance moves from Jiggy Thistles that were both current and reminiscent of the disco era.

Other performances during the show included traditional march, strathspey and reel sets, jigs, hornpipes, cutting edge reels, waltzes and, not least, the superb drum fanfare led by junior world champion Davey Ross.

A Scots ballad played by the 'Drysdale twins' led the ensemble into the second segment of the concert. Following in the same vein as the first half, the performance included such works as *The Frustration Suite* composed by the band's pipe major, Ben Duncan.

Continuing an interesting and varied presentation, the group performed a waulking song under the tal-

ented direction of Gaelic singer Darren MacLean.

The afternoon's show was brought to a close with rapturous applause and a standing ovation as the band played its crowd-pleasing signature piece, *Queen's We Will Rock You*.

Appreciated by the full house of predominantly young people and families, the show was a feast of musical and visual delight from the first note to the last.

With such a large and talented group performing, the cast adapted well to the confines of their environment, displaying excellent stagecraft.

However, to enable this group to perform at its best, the main auditorium must surely be the venue of choice.

For much of the concert, the balance of sound was second to none — between pipe and drum corps, and lead and harmony lines, with the mid section adding that extra sparkle to the sound and visual display.

As with all pipe band concerts, a listener could deliberate on such areas as expression, execution, pitch, tuning and blowing issues which varied throughout the performance but, in presenting a spectacle of good piping and showmanship, this is a group that is hard to rival.

It is this professionalism that has earned the young musicians the right to stand on stage under the banner of The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland. ●

Young Folk piper on course

GILLIAN CHALMERS & BODEGA

IN DECEMBER a six-piece Scottish ensemble called **Bodega** won the **2005-2006 BBC Radio 2 Young Folk Award for 2006**.

The coveted award carried with it bookings to play for crowds of 35,000 people at the BBC Radio 2 Cambridge and Cropredy Festivals, two of the biggest summer gatherings in folk's live music calendar, the Towersey and Fylde Festivals in England, and a session for Radio 2's *Mike Harding Show*. Other engagements for the group include festivals in Orkney and Fife... and more.

Competition for the 2005-2006 award attracted entries from 47 acts involving 79 musicians from around Britain. Fourteen acts were selected to go through to the semi-final – a weekend of workshops, sessions and a Saturday evening competition concert, 14-16 October, at Kendal's Brewery Arts Centre. Six acts went through to the final, held at The Sage, Gateshead, on 9 December.

Bodega's win reflects handsomely on the strength of Scotland's National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music, which was established at Plockton High School in Wester Ross in 2000.

The group consists wholly of students and former students from the Centre: Gillian Chalmers from Fraserburgh, who turned 18 in January (pipes, fiddle and whistles); Ross Couper, 18, from Shetland (fiddle); Tia Files, 16, from Oban (acoustic guitar and bass); Sandie Forbes, 18, from Kirkcaldy (fiddle and vocals); Norrie Maclver, 18, from Lewis (vocals, accordion, guitar and djembe); and June Naylor, 18, from Skye (clarsach and piano).

When Bodega was called forward to receive the trophy from Northumbrian piper Katherine Tickell, "we just looked at each other and didn't really know what to do at first," Gillian Chalmers told *BBC Folk and Acoustic*. "We were all just hugging ... it was such a big rush hearing the name, and then you had to go straight on ... I was almost crying with all the emotion!"

Gillian Chalmers, who is now embarked on the first year of the BA (Scottish Music -- Piping) degree programme at the RSAMD and the National Piping Centre in Glasgow, auditioned and was accepted into the founding intake for the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music at the age of 12 and spent five valuable, formative years in residence at Plockton High School.

Admission to the programme, which is fully funded by the Scottish Executive in partnership with the Highland Council, is open to any secondary school age student resident in Scotland "who already plays to a high standard and would like to improve". Places are allocated on the basis of audition.

Specialist tuition is given in accordion, bagpipes, clarsach, fiddle, guitar, piano, whistle, flute, and Gaelic and Scots song.

"I had a great time there; I grew up there really. It gave me a great opportunity to develop musically, meeting and having regular tuition from some of the best musicians and teachers in their fields," she said.

"I'd see people coming in for their fifth and sixth



BODEGA are presented with their BBC Radio 2 Young Folk Award by Northumbrian piper Kathryn Tickell. Pictured left to right: Sandie Forbes; Gillian Chalmers; Norrie Maclver, June Naylor; Ross Couper; Tia Files and Kathryn Tickell.

years and I'd get to know them, then they'd be off to Glasgow to the RSAMD and I was so jealous. I always wanted to come down to Glasgow and do the course. It's a natural step from Plockton, on to the Scottish Music degrees.

"Doing the piping degree, it's really interesting.

"I'm not sure if I'm going to be a full-time musician, it's difficult to get into and make a decent living. I'd like

to see more piping tuition in the schools: although the National Piping Centre has been working to improve the situation, there are still areas such as Aberdeenshire where pipes — or, in fact, any traditional music — are not taught in schools. There's no reason why there shouldn't be and, if younger people had opportunities to experience it and get involved, they could enjoy and learn a lot about their heritage and culture.

There's no reason why piping couldn't be extremely popular. But it's growing all the time.

"I'm doing the teaching elective on the degree course so I'll have teaching there as something I can do in the future. But I'd love to be in a band and tour for a few years after I finish the course.

"I definitely want to keep playing and performing, and I love travelling. But I'd like to find a base somewhere. There are more opportunities now on the business side; like being involved in the festivals, so I'll just see what comes up later on."

THE path from her home town of Fraserburgh, where Gillian Chalmers spent her early childhood and made her first connections with Scottish music, was less clear.

"There were no pipes in my family: I was the first," she said. "But, since I started playing and going to all the competitions and festivals, my younger sister, Natalie, who got a bit bored sitting around waiting for me, has become quite well known around the north-east as a bothy ballads singer and Doric verse reciter and takes part in a lot of the singing competitions and festivals in Aberdeenshire. She's 13 now."

Gillian Chalmers had wanted to learn music -- "but I wanted something a bit different. Everyone else was doing piano and violin and things but I remember hearing a pipe band, loving it and being determined to learn," she said. When, about 10 years ago, an advertisement appeared in a local paper offering tuition with the local Fraserburgh band, her mother took her along.

"I was delighted."

Her first instructor was Pamela Smith (now Pamela White) who, at that time, was with the Fraserburgh band.

"Then I took private lessons with Pamela and started competing when I was about nine. And by then had moved with Pamela to the Buckie Buchan Pipe Band."

Gillian Chalmers' competition successes came quickly and, more recently, she has won prizes at the Northern Meeting, contests held by the Lochaber and Inverness Piping Societies, Dunrobin Castle, the Nairn Young Piper of the Year competition, the Carnoustie Scottish Junior Championship and numerous Highland Games.

She also has won several fiddle and whistle competitions.

"I was about 10 when I started the fiddle at school but at school it was only classical violin that was offered," she said.

She also has long been a Highland dancer. "I was quite into competing when I was young," she said. "I loved the pipes when it was a live piper playing and I enjoy playing for dancing now... I love watching Highland dance. But I haven't had time to keep it up.

"And, for the last few years, I'm afraid I've let the piping competition slip a bit -- I'd choose a concert gig over a competition, but I'm hoping to get back into competing this year and have got graded so I can get into it again.

"I feel it's important to do both. Obviously, I'd like to be successful and I'm aiming to win the silver medal. I find Simon McKerrell inspirational because he's been so successful, not only with Back of the Moon and his folk music, but also in the solo piping competitive scene.

"I love being involved in traditional music and



would love to go on to promote and develop our culture and heritage through music. I now play fiddle, small pipes and border pipes, piano and whistle -- but my main love has always been the great Highland bagpipes."

She was following that first love when she heard about the opportunity that changed her life.

"I got down to Glasgow for some lessons at the National Piping Centre and was in a music shop where the salesman mentioned the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music which was about to open in Plockton. He didn't manage to sell me a piano but he certainly sold me the idea of going to Plockton," she said. "My mum wasn't very keen to let me go 200 miles away to school while I was still only 12 but I'd always been jealous of kids who were at private schools and getting to learn pipes at school, and I really was very determined to go there.

"Mum worried a bit about whether I'd be able to handle it but it all worked out fine.

"You work quite hard on the music at Plockton, but it's a small place and there's not really a lot else to do anyway. Coming from Fraserburgh, where I was one of the few musicians around, then being able to go into a place where I had all these other musicians around me, learning and being able to play with other people... it was great: I loved the group work," she said. "There's nothing like the feeling you have playing a gig with other people.

"Gaelic is quite a big thing... I had to learn Gaelic. A lot of the people around you, most of the people in Plockton, are native Gaelic speakers -- but I took to it, I went on to enjoy it and I don't regret it at all.

"Plockton really introduced me to folk music. I hadn't taken so much interest in my fiddle before but when, I started learning Scottish music with Ian MacFarlane, I got a lot more excited and came to love playing fiddle, too.

In her first year at the school, she travelled to Bressuire in the Poitou-Charentes region of France to perform. "Bressuire is twinned with Fraserburgh and my fiddle teacher from Fraserburgh who, just before I left for Plockton, was involved with the twinning association kindly invited a group of us from Plockton on our first foreign trip and asked if I could go over. They hold a great Highland games there and I went back again to this a couple of years later, once on my own, just piping.

With the school, she got to the *Celtic Colours* festival in Nova Scotia -- "that was a great experience", she said, as was her visit to South Africa last

year. She took her pipes, of course -- but the priority was distributing and helping to set up computers in schools, an aid project undertaken by Plockton and Lochaber High Schools.

**Since its inception at Plockton High School in 1995, Computers for Africa has distributed more than 5000 computers to nearly 800 schools in six countries in Africa.

"We collect 200-300 used computers each year, then repair and re-programme them," said Gillian Chalmers. "And we hold fund raising events throughout the year, such as a sale of African goods, ceilidhs, raffles, teas and barbeques at various events, to finance a group of 10 to travel to Africa for a few weeks each summer to distribute the computers in schools and teach pupils how to use them."

She raised a significant contribution to the cause through busking with her pipes at Eileen Donan Castle and providing a free band for the dances and ceilidhs.

"Last summer, I made the trip and it was a fantastic experience. I took my pipes and played them everywhere we went. One place was Rustler's Valley, and they have music festivals there. There is a big stage and the view all around is amazing: playing my pipes on the stage there was quite an experience.

"In the schools, the kids found the pipes looked really very strange. But they loved it. When we were leaving, I played and we taught them to dance the *Strip the Willow*.

"We were able to take five computers for each of 36 schools. A ministry of education person said the government had a target of providing at least one computer at every school by 2014, and we were giving five.

"I was a great thing to be involved with. I'm still in touch with Terry Heavyside, the leader, who says we can always go back. But this year we're all in first year at university and it's difficult to afford the trip... but I'd definitely love to again."

And, from Plockton, Gillian successfully auditioned for the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland, and played at the William Kennedy Festival in Armagh, Northern Ireland, in 2004 -- "it's great that the NYP-BoS is integrating pipes with other instruments: it's a difficult thing to do. And I like that it's not competing and is a performance band. Performing on a stage for people is such a buzz."

Gillian Chalmers also had exposure at Plockton to stage management and sound production techniques, and completed a Scottish Qualifications Authority



The year's up — and running

CELTIC Connections! It was — a number of people told me — the best show we've done yet. Congratulations.

We started the New Year on 7-8 January with a band camp. We had been provisionally booked to play with Carlos Nuñez at the opening concert on the Wednesday night (11 January) and had the tunes for that in our hands.

The camp, focussed on our new show was great: we had everyone from new junior members to our most experienced seniors, and worked hard with the other musicians.

The Wednesday night concert was cancelled, as we'd pretty much expected but, on the Friday, we were together again to prepare for our own Saturday afternoon show.

It was great to have the Strathclyde Suite at the Royal Glasgow Concert Hall but it again proved too small for us: we had a full house audience with people turned away, and the stage was cramped for a band our size. I'm very reluctant to not play a full band if everybody turns up. But we may have to think about putting a ceiling on numbers for some of our shows in future.

We met at 10.30 a.m. on the Saturday with a massive amount of work to be done. We had new members, new tunes, some new backing musicians and we hadn't had a chance to pull the whole show together. And we still couldn't do it; sound checks took a long time then we did what we could until 1p.m. when we had to stop.

It was a bit worrying, to be honest. But you all worked like true professionals and I'm in genuine awe of you all. Alison Buchanan revealed herself as a superb singer, Davey Ross did a great job as leading tip and won a lot of acclaim for his fanfare, and our three BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree course students came up with a wonderful piece.

The show went phenomenally well: there are parts of it that we need to refine further and, of course, some details to attend to, but the next concert will be a whole lot easier.

And, with our own show behind us, some of us were immediately back into rehearsals with Donald Shaw for his big *Harvest* show — and that was great fun, working with some very talented musicians from

outside the piping world. Our senior players there distinguished themselves, and worked very slickly, very professionally.

NOW it's time to develop things further, bringing in new members and further develop the skills of existing membership, especially the more junior members.

So we're holding a series of courses. The first two are 12-14 and 19-21 February.

These are open to anyone who's interested — they're personal development courses aimed at widening musical skills and introducing non-members to the ways of the NYPBoS with the idea that those who fancy it, might want to come back later for an audition. These weekends are also for junior members to polish things up to move on into full membership.

So — if you've a friend who's interested, these are good opportunities to tell them about.

LOOKING back to the end of last year, I realise that I also should congratulate the team who made such a success of *Making the Change* at the Partick Burgh Hall on 4 December as part of an amazing band camp focussed primarily on leadership development.

In fact, we ran three courses that weekend, including an audition course for those looking to gain entry into the NYPBoS. This was a tough course that introduced candidates to the kind of performance pressure that is to be expected as a NYPBoS member along with assessing their ability to meet the standard and handle the pressure. They came in on the Saturday morning having not seen the music and quite blind to what lay ahead. On the Sunday evening, they were expected to perform as part of a full show and play for a place in the band. I was very pleased with their effort.

Gaining membership into the NYPBoS were Gordon McCance, Finlay Caird, Daniel Cairns and James Gore.

But so impressed was I by the work of those not quite ready for full membership that I introduced a "Junior Membership".

This is entry into the NYPBoS on the first rung of the ladder, not as full members but considered for

inclusion in performances and expected to further their training, raising their level of membership when they are ready.

Junior Members of the NYPBoS are: Colin Jamieson, Mark Berry, Edward Seaman, Mathew Kidd, Kirsten Sharpe, Colin Greaves and Andrew Gray.

The development course that weekend saw four members take the lead on stage and having to perform repertoire that previously only been played by our senior members. This was quite a challenge and they all did very well but I would like to make special mention of James Craig and Craig Muirhead who achieved senior membership.

Keith Bowes, Scott Giffen and Callum McCaig all attended the band leader course and all worked well — but Keith Bowes did a sterling job of pipe majoring the band on stage and in rehearsals, and earned his "Advanced Musician" membership.

Talking of coming through the system, three members of the NYPBoS successfully auditioned for and have taken places on the BA (Scottish Music) courses in Glasgow: congratulations to Keith Bowes, Ally Henderson and Kyle Warren who are now referred to in the NYPBoS as the "3 Degrees".

On stage, Davey Ross our "world champion" lead tip gave a fantastic drum solo and our mid section looked spectacular thanks to the great coaching of Sharleen Donaldson of the House of Edgar Shotts and Dykehead corps. Jim Collins was also there to steer the drum corps in the right direction and Calum MacCrimmon again did a great job of producing the show and pulling all the strands together. Fergus Muirhead was also in full swing as our compere as he topped and tailed each set.

The feedback has been good as the festival now having heard us wish to have us back and make more of the event.

Also there is interest in taking the show to Forfar. This would be an outreach concert to which we would intend to invite the local bands and schools.

It is desirable to have the band perform outside the central belt to let people in remoter areas hear what is out there and what opportunities exist... more on this as arrangements are confirmed.

In the meantime, all the very best for the months ahead as the season comes round again... ●

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module in sound engineering and production, and continued with Board examinations in classical violin and theory. She also has had the experience of recording five CDs, thanks to Plockton's recording studio and annual album releases.

"It's one of the great things about Plockton," she said. "There are so many opportunities that come out of it. I am so glad I went there."

And it was at Plockton that Bodega was formed: a group of friends who enjoyed playing together and called themselves Fiddle Dee Fiddle Dum: the name they recorded under for the latest CD of the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music, *Duck!*, which available from Dougie Pincock at the Centre or from Footstompin' Records.

Said Dougie Pincock, director of the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music: "We're immensely proud of their achievement. This band was something they put together themselves, with very little direct input from me or the Centre's tutors. They are a great example of our philosophy of empowering young musicians to create their own sounds and bring their own ideas to fruition. Everybody at this Centre wishes them every success for the future."

Bodega's members are now fairly widely scattered around the country, but intend to keep playing together. Guitarist Tia Files is still at Plockton this year. In January, she was involved in Donald Shaw's *Harvest* for the *Celtic Connections* festival in Glasgow. Ross Couper from Shetland is studying at Newcastle University on the B.A. Folk and Traditional Music

course there and has been playing with Fiddler's Bid. Sandie Forbes and June Naylor are studying for their B.A. degrees in Applied Music at Strathclyde University, and Norrie MacIver, who has won Gaelic singing prizes at the National Mod and Seo Seinn, is studying for a B.A. in Scottish Music at the RSAMD.

"So Glasgow is where we tend to meet quite a bit," said Gillian Chalmers. "Fridays are the big time for us to rehearse and work up new sets and things."

"In January, we recorded for *Dè a-nis?*, a BBC2 Alba Gaelic tv show, we had a couple of gigs and we were all quite busy with *Celtic Connections*, so February was the time when got together as much as possible."

"The summer's looking to be very exciting," said Gillian Chalmers.

Bodega will be busy. ●