

Jan Fairley on the Scottish festival which is the hottest place to be in January



A fire eater outside Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall, opening ceremony 2004

Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr... a festival in the middle of January in Glasgow? Few believed it could succeed. After Hogmanay in Scotland when people traditionally spend most of their energy and money partying, the beginning of the year is normally a time for hibernating, re-charging the batteries with maybe a wee fling on the 25th for Burns Night. And what about the weather? The received wisdom was that no one would turn out in the wind, rain or whatever Glasgow had to throw at them. How wrong the sceptics proved to be. Celtic Connections has not looked back since it kicked off on Sunday January 9 1994 with enthusiastic audiences turning out for the first five acts: Scotland's Wolfstone, Dick Gaughan, Sileus, Four Men and a Dog and Dhais from Galicia.

So how did it happen? Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall wanted to turn its lights on mid-winter and become a popular centre-piece at the heart of the city. Glasgow had shifted its industrial image by becoming European Capital of Culture in 1990 while the previous decade had seen a growing cultural energy appearing particularly from Gaelic groups like Runrig and Capercaillie who were part of a broader creative dynamism accompanying the struggle for Scottish independence. As today's director Colin Hynd remembers, "It was all down to Colin McNicol at the Concert Hall, encouraged by BBC Radio Scotland who decided to move their music programming in a more Celtic direction." Scotland has two strong cultural traditions to draw on – the Gaelic and the Scots – and yet until Celtic Connections, artists rarely shared the same event, never mind the same stage. Modelling Celtic Connections on Brittany's Lorient Festival, the original team have never looked back.

An inspired Hynd who was then working in the box office, soon graduated to programming. "In the first year we had the large auditorium which was 1,800 seats and the small one which was 350. But it was obvious there were lots of artists who could draw audiences needing different atmospheres, so we began to include places like The Arches and Fruitmarket which are funkier, and The Tron Theatre which is more intimate, as is The Piping Centre. We also use the Cathedral and St Andrews in the Square, as well as Tramway, King Tut's Wah Wah Hut and the City Halls. It's not a single ticket festival: it's ticketed concerts taking place all over the city." By its tenth anniversary year in 2003, a 19-day-long Celtic Connections proudly declared itself the biggest winter music festival in the world, breaking its own record with 102,753 'bums on seats'. It now ranks alongside the world's top folk events like Vancouver, Cambridge, Tönder in Denmark and Lorient in Brittany.

From the beginning its musical definition has been all-embracing. As Hynd says, "No one has ever closely defined celtic to this day and to a certain extent it's any connection any Celt wants to make." Mining the rich seam of 'local' musicians from both Gaelic and Scottish traditions, the city has invited in artists from all over: notably Ireland, Wales, Brittany, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Quebec, as well as Spain's Basque country, Galicia and Asturias and latterly Portugal. Hynd has worked to break unknown names and Glasgow audiences trust his judgement. "The first time we brought Carlos Nuñez [Galician piper], he came as a guest in a number of other people's gigs. He's very charismatic and was a huge hit and within a year or so he was headlining and now regularly sells out."



"It's any connection any Celt wants to make"



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Celtic pipers Finlay MacDonald, Rory Campbell, and Annie Grace

Unless they are masochists, people obviously don't come to Glasgow for the weather nor indeed for the architecture of the Royal Concert Hall which, while warm and welcoming with plenty of socialising space, is fairly functional. Strangely enough the mid-winter period has worked in its favour. It's a time of the year when many artists are not busy and musicians warmed to the idea of meeting up and all staying (Scottish musicians as well) in the same giant Station Hotel. The crucible of the festivals' reputation for risk taking and collaborative music-making is the Festival Club that goes on from midnight until late. "It really got going with the help of people like Sheena Wellington who kept inviting others up. Suddenly it took off and there was this buzz between artists and audience so by the final weekend I had to take EmmyLou Harris in through a backdoor as there was a queue right round the block." With the inveterate Gibb Todd returning every year from Australia to be the host, the club has enormous appeal. Many of the more unusual musical friendships and cross-pollinations between Scots, Basques, Irish,

Galicians and Danes have begun at this after-hours heartbeat which next year moves venue to the Holiday Inn. Those lucky to go every year have seen Kepa Junkera, the Basque trikitixa accordionist extraordinaire, gradually metamorphose from someone rather shy to an irresistible magnet with a keen following turning him from an unknown into a festival headliner.

Many who performed at the first festival returned for the ten year anniversary and some have missed few in between. Each year the amiable Hynd manages both to entice new people over and, despite a tiny budget, fund an influential number of annual commissions and innovative projects involving artists from different countries creating music together. My personal thrill was Alasdair Fraser's *Skyedance* involving Galician's Xosé Manuel Budiño, Susana Seivane, Kepa Junkera and Txalaparta with Mikel Laboa, veteran icon of the Basque country who came to sing one historic political song which brought the house down. One of the most innovative projects has been the 'Musical Ark' which sees a changing combination of on the hoof pairings moving around to play various venues without stopping.

The festival not only mines a golden vein of music, it plays its part in encouraging a new generation. With The Scottish Academy of Music and Drama close by, students are heavily involved in events, and new talent finds its way in through the daily free Open Stage (started by the late Danny Kyle, stalwart of the Glasgow folk scene). School children attend free morning concerts and there are numerous workshops from mouth-organ to *bodhrán*.

Perhaps most importantly the beautiful music heard every day all over the city rejuvenates the spirits and souls of all concerned – musicians and audiences – at a time when everyone would normally be at their lowest ebb, making Glasgow the hottest place to be in January.

Next year's festival runs from January 12-30 2005. Artists confirmed so far include Alasdair Fraser, Natalie Haas, Bellowhead and Kathryn Tickell. www.celticconnections.co.uk



Kepa Junkera: Basque trikitixa accordionist extraordinaire