

Degrees of challenge and diversity

BA (Scottish Music — Piping)

ONE student on the BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree programme is leading the revival of a community pipe band in the Renfrewshire village of Kilbarchan, several are touring and recording with other musicians, one has successfully produced an album for a schools pipe band and others are making their mark as keen solo competitors.

All of this is extracurricular activity, but it is helping to further the students' pursuit of the diverse aspirations that led them to apply for the programme in the first place.

The course, taught jointly by The National Piping Centre and the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD), is now embarking on its important third year: a final year for its first graduates.

Brian McNeill, director of the Scottish Music programme at RSAMD, admitted to having been "skeptical at first about having a separate BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degree.

"I've always worked very hard, and with the Battlefield Band (of which he was a co-founder) we fought for 30 years, to get the pipes accepted as another Scottish instrument which was not separate.

"But I've converted since then. What the National Piping Centre does is so good that I feel a concentration on piping has been a beneficial thing.

"The fact that it is more specialised than our general degree is good, and it may well be a model, a template, for future degrees for fiddle, clarsach and accordion, so students will have a choice between one of the specific degrees or the general degree. I think that's interesting and important.

"It has helped a lot that Scottish piping has a considerable academic history," he said. "Watching students being examined playing 19th century tunes from the collections, for example, it's obvious that there are different areas of piping which are being investigated, and a lot of serious academic work is going into piping now.

"The piping sector of Scottish music is very healthy. Standards are very high and pipers have maintained their own internal discipline about the way they teach the instrument very, very well.



Photo: Derek Maxwell

"There are important issues about how they join in with the rest of us, what their influence should be on the rest of us and what our influence should be on them. But I take my hat off to the staff at the National Piping Centre because I don't think they shirk from any of that.

"We want to produce top notch players who are also articulate about their instrument, who can do developmental research on their instrument, who know the history of their instrument, who can go out and spread the word in serious academic ways. In this degree we have serious research in fieldwork and folklore and third-year students must complete a fieldwork project.

"It's a three-year degree and it's very hard to get everything in that we feel is necessary, but the gaps are resource gaps rather than intellectual gaps," said Brian McNeill.

"Jimmy Banks (the Centre's degree programme administrator) and I spend a lot of time working on the right ways to make the piping and general Scottish music degrees dovetail in ways that are good for both courses.

"I'm very pleased with the condition of piping at the moment. In fact I have just ordered for the first time in my life a set of bagpipes and am about to learn Scottish smallpipes, or at least try. Finally I'm going to join the piping community."

Said, Pipe Major Jimmy Banks, who this year is joined in his role by Major Gavin Stoddart, former Director of Army Bagpipe Music: "The new students settled in well, the more advanced students have been making good progress and we will have our first graduates this year.

"With two full year's experience behind us, things are going well.

"We are getting great support from guest

Said Alan Paterson of his composition, a four-part strathspey: On the first year of the degree course, there were the four of us — myself, Stuart Cassells, Alastair Hutton and Lorne — and I thought because it was the first year we deserved a tune."

lecturers and workshop leaders from the wider piping community, and the course has attracted interest from Japan, North America and elsewhere, as well as Scotland — even from the Singapore Police Pipe Band."

If some of the students were initially taken aback by the challenges of essay writing and the programme's academic demands, all are making gains with their piping and find their courses' breadth, depth and interest of value. They also say they are enjoying opportunities to meet, hear and play with other musicians in the conservatoire atmosphere of the Academy.

Said Erin McCarthy, a rising solo competitor from Hartford, New York: "The course is excellent. I found it striking that we are learning different types of music, not just competition repertoire.

"We are getting 19th century music from Allan MacDonald, which is very rare — and competition style performance, with background and research information."

Planning a future in teaching, she came to the course referred by her piping instructor in Troy, New York, Donald Lindsay. "It seemed to have everything I was looking for: the piping instruction and the academic content."

In the summer of 2002, Erin McCarthy made her debut in the silver medal competition. "I didn't do anything, — it was a very daunting experience the first time — but to be able to go in there and get that out of the way, and go back knowing exactly what to expect and play a lot better the next time was a real achievement for me."

Alan Paterson of Kilbarchan near Paisley,

beginning his third year on the course, is at 35 the oldest student the course.

"I started playing in the local Boys Brigade band, joined the Army and spent four years with the Royal Scottish Dragoon Guards," he said. "I kept playing when I came out of the Army but it was just for fun.

"I'd always wanted to do a degree in something and when I heard about this, I thought 'it's got to be the one to do'.

"I want to teach — primary school teaching — and introduce traditional music there. We did a workshop at a primary school in Paisley — myself, a fiddler, a box player and a few others — and the kids loved it. They clearly didn't get traditional music in primary school and had never been exposed to it.

"I thought this is the place to get them interested, and start them off."

Last year, Alan Paterson led the re-establishment of his local Kilbarchin Pipe Band, which had been defunct for a quarter of a century.

Lorne MacDougall, from Carradale near Campbeltown in Kintyre, joined the programme in its first year directly from school.

"To be honest I wasn't terribly confident," he said, "but I've had a nice surprise. My playing has improved a lot, and my general understanding of the music. And the other subjects, like the Gaelic and Scots, and sound recording have been really useful... the group work, the people who've visited us for workshops, both here and at the Academy."

He was the producer of the Kintyre Schools Pipe Band's recently-released *Making the Grade*

album and, with guitarist Ross Kennedy from Campbeltown, he has been performing gigs as the duo Canterach.

"I'm doing the teaching elective so, hopefully, after I finish the course, I'll go on and do my PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education)."

Former Vale of Atholl piper Alastair Hutton from Perth has his sights set on a performing career and, playing Highland and Border pipes and whistles, has already been touring and performing concerts with groups including Brolum and Rinwud (with Dougie Maclean).

"Keeping things going, keeping up with the tunes, that's the challenge," he said of the degree programme. "I've got more into the piobaireachd with Allan MacDonald. I'd played a few before but wasn't crazy about it. Now I quite enjoy it."

Ross Ainslie of Perth, who also has a background with the Vale of Atholl Pipe Band and with folk groups, is already beginning to realise his aspirations as a professional musician.

His second instrument is bouzouki and he also plays whistles and "a bit of busking guitar". A finalist in the Young Musician of the Year awards at Celtic Connections in 2002, he backs singer Emily Smith and plays with piper Gordon Duncan, featuring on the recent albums of both: the Emily Smith band's *A Day like Today* (Foot Stompin' Records) and Gordon Duncan's *Thunderstruck* (Greentax Recordings). "I'm getting quite a few gigs and session musician jobs," he said.

"The course? The piping's great, but all these essays took a little getting used to. I enjoy the

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Gaelic and Scots components. It’s good being over at the Academy too — you get to mix with the fiddlers and other musicians and play with them as well.”

Thomas Zöller, from Mein, near Frankfurt in Germany, was already a teacher and professional musician when he joined the degree programme. “The interest in Celtic music in Germany is growing steadily and there is a big interest there in Celtic culture in general,” he said.

“People are also interested in, and performing, a lot of medieval music, and I am interested in that very much as well.”

Thomas Zöller plays Border pipes, Highland pipes, small pipes and the organistrum (a form of hurdy gurdy) with the large, popular and long-established Munich-based band Estampie, flying back to Germany for concert bookings.

“I wanted to improve my skills on the pipes and get a broader view in music in general,” he said of the course. “I am enjoying the lessons, especially the lessons with Allan MacDonald, and the other subjects like Gaelic and second and third instruments.

His second choice instrument is piano, “but I am doing tabla as well which is interesting,” he said. “When I have finished I will probably go back to Germany and continue what I was doing before. The idea is to improve my skills and get into the whole culture more, learn more tunes... .

“And I think I am going to get a set of traditional German pipes, dudelsak — duday, hümmelchen, schäfferpfeife or bok.”

Chris Gibb, of Edinburgh, came back from Canada to take the degree. The former Drumbuie Kirkliston Pipe Band piper went to Canada to pursue his piping interests and spent six months in Prince Edward Island at the College of Piping with Scott MacAulay.

“I went out to study and wound up with a few students of my own which was good experience,” he said. “Then I moved down to Nova Scotia to do some work with Bruce Gandy and play with the Halifax Police Pipe Band there (now the 78th Highlanders Citadel of Halifax Pipes and Drums).

“Canada was fantastic,” he said. “I went out for a year and ended up staying for two. Good people, a good music scene: everything’s going on there... any kind of music, all live.”

The degree course was going well for him, he said: “It’s a lot more intensive than I thought it was going to be, but it’s all very interesting, you get a lot of very good lecturers in and all of the staff, at the RSAMD and the National Piping Centre are excellent, knowledgeable and



Photo: Mike Paterson

STUDENTS pay a visit to R.T. Shepherd and Son’s Cardenden workshop. Pictured (from left) are: Thomas Zöller, Erin McCarthy, Stuart Cassells, Chris Gibb, Lorne MacDougall, Bob Shepherd, Ross Ainslie, Alastair Hutton and Alan Paterson.

willing to help out.”

Chris Gibb’s ambition is to teach at high school level. “There are not a lot of pipers in high school teaching, but I think Scottish music should be there — it should have been there for years.

“I don’t see why we don’t want to teach about our own traditions but for some reason there has been no desire for it in the systems that I’ve come across; I certainly got none of it at school. I’d like to help get Scottish music recognised in the education system in Scotland.”

Another student on the programme is Stuart Cassells, who joined the course with a strong background in solo competition.

His jobs before he joined the course included tour guiding at Stirling Castle and employment with the Royal Bank of Scotland. He then set up a piping business to pipe at weddings, functions and events.

His aspirations are for radio and promotional work. “I do some work with Visit Scotland and would like to do more work with them promoting piping and Scotland,” he said.

“It’s a good course... it’s keeping us on our toes, keeping us thinking. It’s been good to extend my playing and my piping is improving.

“It’s so varied, and you can round yourself off.”

THOSE on the course are fortunate. Applications for Scottish Music courses at RSAMD far outstrip the places available — a serious concern for Brian McNeill, the Academy’s director of the programme.

“We simply don’t have the resources, the financial resources in particular, to take in as many students as we would like,” he said. “We

are given so many places by the government — the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council — and that determines how far we can go.

“The situation changes year by year, but it is essential to appreciate that we’re not in competition with the classical courses for places, and we’ve had nothing but help, encouragement and co-operation from the classical faculties,” he said.

It is a case, not of inter-sector rivalry, but of Scottish music desperately requiring the recognition it warrants from the wider educational establishment in Scotland.

“This is our national music,” said Brain McNeill. “But it has been non-resourced — unfunded, essentially, until the start of these degrees.

“In 1968, I wanted to learn Scottish fiddle. I couldn’t find a teacher in Glasgow, a city of a million souls. You couldn’t have given traditional Scottish music away. The music was dead or dying.

“A generation of fewer than 100 players who were serious about traditional music saved Scotland’s national music. The bunch of bands who came through in the 1970s — Battlefield Band, Silly Wizard, Ossian — we put it back on the map. But now it has to be educationally funded.

“A good start has been made but we have a situation where we are turning away people who are very good because we don’t have places. We should have three, four times the number of people through the door for these degrees.

“This is a national music; it’s that before it’s a career choice, it’s that before it’s an educational module — it’s our national music and it has to be funded in a serious national way.” ●