

# Festival is perfectly in tune with ancient and modern

## CELTIC CONNECTIONS

ence on "Pedagogies, Practices and the Future of Folk Music in Higher Education", at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) – home to the UK's first ever trad-based degree programme, founded over 20 years ago.

Everyone involved through-out – audiences, artists, organisers – was palpably tickled pink to be celebrating the 25th Celtic, Scotland's biggest musical success-story of recent decades, and a world-renowned jewel in its cultural crown. Artistic director Donald Shaw – who's also performing in numerous concerts – may already have lost his voice, but he's still smiling regardless.

Compared to the lavish casts performing elsewhere in the line-up, the duo double bill of Orkney's Saltfishforty and Michigan pairing Red Tail Ring (★★★★★) may have appeared somewhat minimal, personnel-wise, but proved a veritable masterclass in heart of less being more.

Making a memorable festival debut, the latter, Laurel Premo and Michael Beauchamp, cast an instant spell with their uncannily attuned, spine-tingling vocal harmonies, further adorned with feather-light touches of fiddle, banjo and guitar. Old-timey starkness alchemised into timeless expressive eloquence, as they affirmed and explored the close Celtic connections with traditional Americana, while one particularly stunning, all-but a capella ballad, incorporating slow, reverberant fiddle drones as a third voice, also evoked distinctly Nordic origins.

In Saltfishforty's case, it's maybe not so much less as more is more: more styles and genres, rooted in Orkney music past and present but also taking in blues, pop, gypsy jazz, country, funk and heavy metal attack; more force and volume than seems feasible from just two people, cen-

trally channelled through Brian Cromarty's custom-strung mandola, alongside Douglas Montgomery's fiddle pyrotechnics and inexorably deployed stomp-board. With Cromarty also on vocals and guitar, and a song repertoire increasingly focused on his excellent originals, they may like to play on the wide-eyed-island-boys-in-the-big-city shtick, but there's nothing remotely parochial about their sound, creative synergy or live prowess. Both acts were immaculately complemented by a similarly five-star job at the sound desk.

Most if not all of the two dozen or so musicians assembled the next afternoon, for the now-annual Celtic Connections showcase (★★★★★) by students and recent graduates of the aforementioned RCS BMus (Traditional Music) degree, won't even have been born when Celtic Connections started, but there could hardly be better or more inspiring proof of the festival's health and impact than their performance here, which was absolutely brimful of talent, commitment and brio. Playing mainly as a unitary ensemble (akin to a baby Unusual Suspects, minus the brass), with arrangements expertly spotlighting and trading off different instrumental sections – fiddles, bagpipes, harps and accordions – they spanned a sparkingly diverse sweep of tunes and songs, from Gaelic ballads to Bram Taylor's I'll Lay You Down, Love, graceful semi-classical stylings to fiery folk-rock workouts, all as well-drilled and polished as it was exuberantly vivacious.

In the same auditorium that night, but at the other end of the generational spectrum, those great Scottish folk survivors The Tannahill Weavers (★★★★★) celebrated a remarkable 50 years since they first got together at a Paisley pub

session, naming themselves after that town's premier poet and historic primary trade. To focus on just one aspect of the band's importance over that time, those same young pipers onstage earlier would not have been playing the notes or the tunes they did without the Tannies, Scotland's first professional folk act ever to feature the great Highland bagpipes, at a time – back in the 1970s – when such fraternisation was severely frowned upon by the piping world.

Starting with legendary wild-man Alan MacLeod – who featured in the show via a film segment from his living-room in Canada, once again wearing his iconic leather trousers – they introduced the pipes to rock'n'roll rebellion, a distinction seminally continued by the late great Gordon Duncan, whose formative years included a spell with the band, as commemorated on this occasion with a resplendent medley of his jigs, delivered by current incumbent Lorne MacDougall and four guest pipers, with Duncan's son Gordy Jr on percussion.

Dougie Maclean is another ex-member, in his original guise as a fiddler, and reprised this role when he swung by the show early on, while other alumni and friends taking part included Hudson Swan, Les Wilson, Iain MacInnes and Mike Ward. Besides the group's pioneering instrumental work, their other main stock-in-trade remains classic old-school chorus songs, both traditional and self-penned (by founding lead singer Roy Gullane), in the proud and honourable tradition of The Corries et al, richly buoyed by Phil Smillie and John Martin's seasoned harmonies – and here by plenty of audience singing, too, further augmenting the quantity of love in the room.

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