



Newsletter

October 2023 – No. 97

All Things Great and Small

We are in the midst of an SFO Concert Season which has the Music of Scotland's Northern Isles – Orkney and Shetland – as its theme.

In this edition of the Newsletter, we're going to have a look at the links between 'little people' and fiddle music in these islands.

But we begin with something a bit larger – Titanic, in fact. In our June 2023 Newsletter, we reported on the historic Titanic violin. This time, our Titanic reference is appropriate given that a group from the SFO had a recent stint at the Belfast International Tattoo.



Fifteen members of the SFO spent five days in Belfast taking part in three Tattoo performances and also giving a number of pop-up concerts at various locations in the city.



The Tattoo featured performers from as far away as Germany, Canada and New Zealand.



Hilary Winslet of the SFO

Hilary diligently practised her bow pose at Titanic Belfast, knowing that she would be in the city once again very soon - with the full orchestra, over the weekend of 6th to 8th October 2023.

The SFO's second Belfast visit in a month, focused on a Saturday night concert at the wonderful Ulster Hall.

Players travelled mainly by means of a coach which left from Perth at 2pm on the Friday and picked up folks along the way through Stirlingshire, Glasgow and Ayrshire. But others arrived under their own steam from as far away as Aberdeen, Inverness and London.

It was a weekend when much of Scotland took a pasting from the weather and there was considerable

travel disruption. Fortunately, there weren't the same problems in Northern Ireland, though the return journey through Scotland was interesting for many.

Spare a thought for our principal Cellist, Rona Porter, whose Friday flight from Inverness was first delayed then cancelled. Rona managed to book another flight for Saturday at 1.30pm but it too was delayed, with the result that she arrived at the Ulster Hall at 4.15pm just as the rehearsal was finishing.



Setting up the pop-up in Victoria Square

She had missed the first of two nights staying at the Jordanstown Student Residences, just outside Belfast,



Rona finally boards her flight to Belfast

and a Saturday morning pop-up concert in Victoria Square Shopping Centre in aid of the RNLI Bangor lifeboat. Happily, Rona did not miss the lovely pre-concert meal at Belfast Boating Club or the successful concert, compered by Radio Ulster's Helen Mark.

SFO pipers Catriona Norman and Martin Duncan were joined by local pipers, Jack McGowan and

Dave Verner, for the showpiece performances of *The Old Man of Hoy* and *Highland Cathedral*.

These weekends always pass too quickly but they are a great opportunity for team building and catching up on the news of more than just a few colleagues, which is what tends to happen at our "one-day" concerts.



Alan, Fred and Fiona at the pop-up concert



Waiting for the concert to begin





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We're very proud of our Schomberg Academy Pipe Band Tutor Jack McGowan who was performing last night along with the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra in the Ulster Hall! 🏆

Jack was joined by another piper from Drumlough Pipe Band, Dave Verner and together they put on an absolutely fantastic performance with the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra! 🎵 🎶

Pictured below is Jack and Dave with the Conductor of the Scottish Fiddle Orchestra! 🙌



Blair Parham, SFO Musical Director, flanked by Jack and Dave.

The topic of “time speeding by unnaturally fast” (see above, back 3 pages!) leads us neatly (?) into stories about fiddlers and little people, sometimes referred to as Trolls or Trows.

Rip Van Winkle - with Fiddles?

The short story "Rip Van Winkle", by American author Washington Irving was published in 1819. Set in the Catskill Mountains, it tells the tale of a Dutch-American villager in colonial times. Rip meets enigmatic Dutchmen and shares their strong liquor, falling deeply asleep as a result. When he awakes - 20 years later - the world has immeasurably changed. He has also managed to miss the American Revolution.

What does this have to do with fiddle music?

Trolls and Trows are said to have particular fondness for fiddle music. A significant minority of Shetland's traditional music is reckoned to have been learned from the Trows through people who were taken by them or heard the music emitting from their underground communities.

It's claimed that Trows have often taken fiddlers "hostage". Usually this would be when the musician was travelling to or returning from a musical engagement, such as a ceilidh or wedding.



Detail from Trow drawing by Debi Giori

Here we see the Rip Van Winkle similarities most starkly.

Trows would take the fiddler away to play at a Trowie party. They might be gone for days, months or years. On their release, the fiddler would believe their absence to have been no longer than a few hours. But the truth might be that more than a generation had elapsed.

Some people who returned from an encounter with the Trows were left with the gift of a whole tune (or maybe just a musical snippet) they had heard being played. In this category, in Shetland, we have tunes such as Garster's Dream, Haltadans, Winyadepla, and Hjogrovoltar.

Sceptics have been heard to say that these tunes were compositions of fiddlers who were simply too modest (or drunk, at the time) to reveal the true source. But evidence to the contrary comes from a wide variety of compelling sources.

Peter Maxwell Davies composed his children's opera "The Two Fiddlers" for performance at the second St. Magnus Festival, held in Orkney in the Summer of

1978. He wrote the music and the words for it. It's based both on Orcadian legend and on an idea by Orkney poet, George Mackay Brown.

The opera tells the story of two young fiddlers, Storm and Gavin, returning home after playing at a wedding dance. Storm is captured by Trolls and, to their delight, he performs for them. As a reward, they grant his wish that men will no longer have to work – which does not have the positive consequences Storm had hoped for.

Ultimately (over 20 years having passed for all but him), a fiddle solo from Storm is required to break the Trolls' spell and the islanders celebrate:

"The spell is lifted. The Trolls have gone. We can work again. With music we have won. With work we shall win, whatever troubles we are in. Helped by the healing power of music. We are freed from our plight. So we bid you goodnight. But watch out for the tricks of the Trolls!"

Around the same time that Peter Maxwell Davies was inspired by Orkney legend to salute the Trolls and their musical influence, the SFO's own John Mason was apparently drinking from the same well. His fiddle duet in waltz time, "The Trow Fiddlers" – composed for Betty Henderson and Reesa McGinn to perform – has a melody and arrangement sweet enough to entrance the grumpiest of Trolls. Given the title of the piece, and despite John's own Orkney connections, it's not clear whether he had Orkney or Shetland (or both) in mind in naming it.

To bring things right up to date, we now move on to consider recent evidence from Shetland, with particular reference to the mysterious Haltadans stone circle.

Visiting the Haltadans

Maurice Henderson is a Shetland fiddler who was a founding member of the band, Fiddlers' Bid. These days, he plays much more often with a band called Haltadans and they performed as part of Shetland's "Folk Frenzy" Festival in Mareel, Lerwick on 11 August 2023.

During the concert, Maurice introduced one of the sets of tunes they were going to play, as follows (Editor's notes in italics):



Haltadans stone circle, Vord Hill, Fetlar

“We’ll play a medley of old Shetland tunes. The name of this band is Haltadans and the name of the first tune is Haltadans.”

“It's a very old tune from (*the Shetland island of*) Fetlar. Some of you have maybe been to the Haltadans. I recognise a few faces here! A few years back (*in fact, almost 10 years ago to the day*), we were up in Fetlar with Fiddle Frenzy and Andrew Gifford (*fellow fiddler and member of Fiddlers’ Bid*) had taught lots of Trowie tunes in the afternoon and we decided that it would be best to go and play the Trowie tunes at the old stone circle called Haltadans. It's a stone circle in the middle of the hill.”

“The story goes that way back – and we are talking a few hundred years ago – there was a man walking back, taking a shortcut through the hills, and he heard music. He went and hid down behind a peerie bruck (*a small mound*). He could see there, dancing around, were the Trows. And in the middle was a fiddler and his wife. And the fiddler was having to keep playing and keep playing in order to keep the Trows dancing - in order to keep them back. As soon as he stopped fiddling, they would close in and show their claws. So he kept playing!”

“A bit of the tune – the melody – that the fiddler was playing stuck in the man's head. Unfortunately, he only got the first half of the tune because the sun rose and the Trows, the fiddler and his wife all turned to stone. That's how you get (*left behind*) the stone circle with the two stones in the middle.”

“And, if you go there, you can see on the inside of the stone ring that there is a gaet (*footpath*) which has been jiggled out by the feet. So there's obviously been folk dancing there...”



06 August 2013 - 50 fiddlers head for Vord Hill.

The visit to the Haltadans which Maurice refers to involved about 50 fiddlers. They had to walk across about a mile of boggy moorland to reach the Haltadans.

Haltadans

Traditional Shetland



Maurice in the centre of the Haltadans circle

Once there, Maurice and the group played a few Trowie tunes, including the tune Haltadans, before squelching back the way they had had come (many with wet feet by now).

Maurice explained that he later worried that the “invasion” of the Haltadans by so many fiddlers might have upset the Trows. He feared that he wouldn't be able to walk safely through the hills in Fetlar again - especially carrying a fiddle.

His nagging doubts caused him to compose a tune with the intention of returning to the Haltadans himself, in order to play it and appease the Trows (a tune called “Return to the Haltadans”).

In the early hours one morning, he set up his fiddle with the AEAE tuning commonly used in the past in Shetland and found his way up to the Haltadans. Once out of its case, the wind blew through the fiddle's strings and made them resonate. That set off Snipe and other birds in the hills and all sorts of other weird noises. Things got worse, as he saw apparitions and what appeared to be red eyes watching him. Having quickly played through his tune, he lost no time in getting the fiddle back in its case and heading for home.

He hoped the Trows had enjoyed the music and noted that he had “not had any bother with them since”. He also reflected on how he had been back to the Haltadans on one other occasion since 2013, with some family and friends, and had decided that the “trick” to avoid concerns about what might happen if you mix Trows and fiddlers was to take an accordion player along with you.

No one has ever heard of an accordionist being taken by the Trows...



"The 50 Fiddlers"

Further notes:

- Haltadans (the band) will be in live in concert at the [Scots Fiddle Festival](#) - a charity which has been supported in the past by the SFO and which is a popular event among SFO members - in Edinburgh on 18 November 2023.
- Edinburgh Shetland Fiddlers' [recently unveiled website](#) contains a wealth of free sheet music and some wonderful drawings of Trows by author and illustrator (and ESF member), [Debi Gliori](#) – see the excerpt above.
- Peter Maxwell Davies' "Dances from The Two Fiddlers, for violin and instrumental ensemble Op.78b (1978)" (i.e. the best of the music) [can be heard on YouTube](#) or purchased from all good record shops.

From the archives: The SFO's 'Northern Nights' Tour (2018)

It's just over 5 years since the SFO beat a path through Northern Scotland, then crossed to Orkney and Shetland. The following excerpt is from Newsletter 77 (August 2018):

"DAY TWO – Glenmorangie, Tain and the Pentland Firth

After a night where the touring party was split between the Laichmoray Hotel and the Royal Hotel, we left Elgin around 10am on 22 July to travel via Inverness to Glenmorangie Distillery at Tain.



Ready for the performance; Performance; Reward.

This was for a planned "drop-in" concert on the narrow tarmac area between the Visitor Centre and the Distillery itself. We played an open-air concert of about one hour's duration to a group of locals and tourists. The concert was in aid of RNLI Invergordon Lifeboat and the bucket collection raised a total of £230. Our founder, John Mason, regularly referred to a ceilidh as "a distillery set to music". Our ceilidh had plenty of dancing. Annette MacKenzie and her staff in the Visitor Centre made sure that there was no shortage of whisky, shortbread and clothes pegs to stop our music blowing away.

We were on our way again by 2pm and we completed the journey to Scrabster in time to catch the ferry to Orkney at 7pm. Passing a misty Old Man of Hoy en route to Stromness, the coach took us onwards across the Orkney mainland to Kirkwall and Papdale Halls of Residence. This was our accommodation for two nights. Danielle Leslie and her team looked after us in very comfortable state-of-the-art facilities."



The SFO at Papdale Halls of Residence, Kirkwall, Orkney

SFO Merchandise



Here's your periodic reminder about the SFO's merchandise - SFO caps, buffs, bags, mugs, CDs and more. These are all available for postal purchase using the details in the "Contacts" table below and also [via the SFO website](#).

Forthcoming concerts

Date	Concert Venue	Status
30 December 2023	Edinburgh Usher Hall	Tickets on sale
24 February 2024	Perth Concert Hall	Tickets on sale
21 April 2024	Aberdeen Beach Ballroom	Tickets not yet on sale
01 June 2024	Reid Hall, Forfar	Tickets on sale

Contacts

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Treasurer	SFO Treasurer, 0/1 162 Hill Street, Glasgow G3 6US
Patrons/Friends	SFO Patrons/Friends, 24 Golf Crescent, Troon, Ayrshire KA10 6JZ
Postal Sales	SFO Merchandise, 3 Crummieholm Gardens, Troon, Ayrshire, KA10 7HZ



SFO and public dancing to the SFO outside St. Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall, Orkney - 23 July 2018

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