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GAELIC MUSIC FROM SCOTLAND

When you think of Scotland, what comes to mind? Maybe the Loch Ness monster, maybe a kilt or bagpipes or Harris Tweed? You may be surprised to know that many of the icons of Scotland come from our Gaelic and Highland culture. The Scottish Gaelic language is the oldest surviving indigenous language of Scotland. At one time, it was spoken throughout almost the entire country. However, it is only spoken by approximately

58 000 people presently, according to the last census in 2011. Half of the speakers use Gaelic in the Highlands and Islands to the northwest, and the rest use it in mostly urban centres to the south and east or else online or overseas. Our National Gaelic Language Plan 2018–2023 aims for Gaelic to be used more often, by more people and in a wider range of situations. It focusses on increasing the use, learning and promoting a positive image of the language. While Gaelic is spoken by only about 1.6% of the population, the impact of Gaelic culture is still strong and particularly vibrant in our music scene at the local, national and international levels. In this article, I aim to give you an indication of where Gaelic music comes from, how it is appreciated in Scotland and where it can be heard.



The road to Lochinver in the beautiful west coast region of Assynt (Asainte).

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Traditional Gaelic music and songs are extremely rich in folklore, folklife and mostly tell stories of the everyday people, usually living an agrarian or seafaring life. There are songs and tunes for every act, every bit of work, every belief. Music was an essential part of everyday life for the Gaels, and the bards or storytellers within society maintained a high status indeed. Of course, there are various external influences on Gaelic music which is only to be expected considering that Scotland sits between the Irish Gaels to the southeast, the

Anglo/Franco/Germanic peoples to the south and west and the Nordic people to the north.

Traditionally, Gaelic songs, stories and verses could be heard morning, noon and night; whether it was milking the cow, waulking the tweed (a process of beating the rough tweed by a group on a table to make it softer), military marching in formation or at ease with friends and family in front of a fire at a *cèilidh* (pronounced kay-lee). The *cèilidh* is still the heart of our tradition and can manifest in various formats. The most traditional *cèilidh* was when neighbours or friends came to visit, and songs, stories, tunes and dances are performed in the kitchen. All members of the household and friends participate in it and it was an excellent way to pass the time, especially over long winter nights. Of course, these days things are a bit different. We still have house *cèilidh*'s, but they are less frequent and usually organised among friends beforehand.

As society has changed, the *cèilidh* has altered to adapt to greater numbers of people getting together, in both rural and urban settings. Many people now think of a *cèilidh* as a large dance in a village hall or hotel which is often held to celebrate an event, such as a wedding or a birthday, or special holidays, such as Christmas or *Hogmanay* (New Year's Eve). Songs may still be sung but the emphasis is generally on group or couple dancing. If, or when you visit Scotland, try to attend a *cèilidh*. They are great *craic* (fun) and all are welcome.

Of course, we wouldn't have such a strong legacy of tradition if our young people weren't engaged



A house cèilidh in the Highland capital, Inverness (Inbhir Nis).



Photos by Brian Ó hEadhra ©2018.

and interested in Gaelic music, song and dance. The song tradition is often strong within families who may have multiple generations of singers and musicians who carry the tradition at a local level but which also sometimes sees the artists eventually reaching international audiences.

Many families attend events called a *Mòd*. A mòd happens at a local and national level. There are 18 local mòds that are usually held in the community school or hall, where young people and adults take part in Gaelic singing, music, dance, spoken word, art and choral competitions. The *Royal National Mòd* takes place in a different town or city every October and draws competitors and audiences from all across Scotland as well as internationally. A great deal of the mòd activity happens through the medium of Gaelic, and it offers an opportunity for thousands of Gaelic speakers and learners to gather together to celebrate their language and culture in both formal and informal settings. Roughly 10 000 young people attend local mòds and 10 000 people attend the *Royal National Mòd*. This year (2019), the *Royal National Mòd* is in Glasgow between 11–19 October.

A *féis* (pronounced faysh) is another type of event which draws thousands of young people to Gaelic arts across the country. The umbrella body, *Fèisean nan Gàidheal*, helps support local fèisean held in communities across Scotland. Run mostly by a committee of volunteers, a fèis sees young people being tutored in Gaelic music, song, dance, art and sports, usually over a week or a few days. It culminates in a big cèilidh concert at the end of the course where the young folk perform their newly learned pieces in front of their families and community. There are 47 fèisean in total and roughly 6000 young people receive tuition each year. David Francis, Director of the *Traditional Music Forum* (Scotland) states:

“Developing skills in Gaelic music is a huge part of musical practice in contemporary Scotland courtesy of the Fèis movement, and it’s interesting to see that music is a key part of the life of Gaelic-medium schools, a recognition of how important a component of Gaelic culture it is. That so many musicians working professionally in Scotland are alumni of the Fèisean is an indication of how powerful a cultural force the Fèis movement has become.”

Fèisean nan Gàidheal, *Fèis Rois* and others not only support one-off or ongoing tuition, but they also host other programmes for young adults who seek to become more professional in their musical careers. An example of this is

called a *Cèilidh Trail* which takes place in the summer months and offers 6–10 young people work experience in the cultural tourism sector. *Fèis Rois* describes a cèilidh trail as follows:

“The Ceilidh Trail provides visitors to Scotland with the opportunity to experience authentic traditional Scottish music in a wide range of settings. We invite you to come and join us for a ceilidh dance in a village hall, a concert at a historic site, or a performance in one of Scotland’s leading theatres. You will hear beautifully crafted songs in both the Gaelic and Scots languages and lively folk tunes played on fiddles, accordions and other traditional musical instruments.”

Some of the young cèilidh trail musicians (16–25 years) study at music schools, such as *Sgoil Chiuil na Gàidhealtachd*/The National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music in Plockton, or at third-level institutions, such as the University of the Highlands and Island or at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland in Glasgow.

Many young people are now learning and speaking Gaelic outside of the traditional Gaelic heartlands of the Highlands and Hebrides. The numbers of students attending Gaelic medium schools and units are growing, particularly in urban centres such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Inverness. Gaelic Medium Education is available in 14 out of 32 Scottish local authority areas to all children and young people. It is available in about 60 primary schools and their associated secondaries in Scotland, including five dedicated Gaelic Medium schools. There are currently 4890 Gaelic medium students in school in Scotland. An increasing number of early learning and childcare centres, secondary schools and further education centres also provide learning through the medium of Gaelic.

As they are geographically removed from local tradition bearers, many aspiring and professional musicians now use online resources to access folkloric recordings for inspiration and to get new material to perform. Possibly, the most widely used and respected online resource is called *Tobar an Dualchais* or *Kist o Riches*. Based out of *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig*, Scotland’s Gaelic College on Skye, *Tobar an Dualchais*, is described as follows:

“A collaborative project which has been set up to preserve, digitise, catalogue and make available online several thousand hours of Gaelic

and Scots recordings. The website contains a wealth of material such as folklore, songs, music, history, poetry, traditions, stories and other information. The material has been collected from all over Scotland and beyond, from the 1930s onwards.

The recordings come from the *School of Scottish Studies (University of Edinburgh)*, *BBC Scotland* and the *National Trust for Scotland's Canna Collection*.”

We are fortunate to have an excellent Gaelic language television and radio service provided through *BBC ALBA* (TV) and *BBC Radio Nan Gàidheal* (radio). Gaelic music draws some of the strongest audiences to the stations who offer a global platform for both professional and up-and-coming artists. Many of our top music festivals are featured on Gaelic media, and these too are platforms where our Gaelic artists shine.

Scotland is a nation of festivals. From the world's largest arts festival – *The Edinburgh International Fringe* – to the smallest of festivals in our rural island communities, Gaelic music, song and dance can be heard. There are some key festivals where you can find Gaelic being sung and spoken. The largest is *Celtic Connections* which is held in Glasgow over three weeks every January/February with about 2100 musicians performing at 300 concerts and events to over 25 000 people. This brings together many genres of music which relate to Gaelic/Celtic music and draws artists and audiences from across the globe to celebrate our Celtic music, both traditional and contemporary. Lisa Whytock who delivers the Showcase Scotland artist export conference at *Celtic Connections* says: “We have found in particular that international audiences are open to artists performing in Gaelic and often find it refreshing that they are not singing in English. It's certainly not been a barrier to artists' development and in some cases has been a benefit.”

If you are seeking a trip to the Highlands of Scotland, then you might check out the *Blas Festival* which happens over nine days every September. Concerts take place in communities across the whole region, and Gaelic language and culture are at the heart of the programme. If you want to immerse yourself in the culture and language of the Gaelic heartlands, then book your tickets for the *Hebridean Celtic Festival* which takes place every July in Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis. This award-winning, family-friendly festival showcases the best of local acts mixed with national and international bands which fit under the Celtic banner. For a deeper

community emersion experience, the *Ceòlas* summer school which takes place in South Uist every July is highly recommended.

Many of our biggest selling bands incorporate Gaelic into their sets, including *Capercaille*, *Niteworks*, *Shooglenifty*, *Julie Fowlis*, *Skipinnish*. While many of the Gaelic acts draw upon our rich traditions, they also work on new material and experiment with more contemporary musical genres. For example, the Isle of Skye based singer/musician Griogair Labhruidh can be found singing Gaelic with the cross-cultural band *Afro Celt Sound System*, singing a solo ancient local song on his croft or performing a newly written Gaelic hip-hop/jazz/funk/soul song on television.

Over the past few years, Gaelic song has also started reaching new audiences through large budget films, TV shows and video games. The *Ama-zon Prime* series *Outlander* is partly set in the Highlands during the late 1700s and features Gaelic language and song. The singer-songwriter Gil-lebrìde MacMillan who plays the Bard on the series has won over new audiences, especially in North America where he sometimes performs and teaches Gaelic. The hit film *The Outlaw King*, telling the story of the famous Scottish King Robert the Bruce, was released on *Netflix* last year and featured Gaelic songs at various times throughout the picture. The video game *The Bard's Tale IV* was also released last year and featured a slew of Gaelic singers across the game's soundtrack, which included Eilidh Cormack, Kathleen MacInnes, Kim Carnie and the trio Mackenzie. These major productions allow the Gaelic language and music to reach audiences who may have never even known its existence, and there is evidence to suggest that some of these audiences have started learning the language and engaging with Scottish culture on multiple levels. Tourism in Scotland is growing every year, and it is thought that the success of these shows and the interest in Gaelic/Highland Scotland is one of the factors behind this growth.

There is growing interest in Gaelic music and song in Scotland and around the world. However, like all minority languages, Gaelic needs to be used by more people to ensure its survival. Distance learning courses are becoming increasingly popular, and many people across the globe choose to learn through the courses offered by *Sabhal Mòr Ostaig* Gaelic college. Additionally, the college also has short courses in the Gaelic language and arts during the Easter and summer holidays which has drawn thousands of enthusiasts to the language and culture over the years.

I hope that this article has helped you gain more insight into our beautiful Gaelic music and culture and that you visit Scotland soon to experience it first-hand.

Websites

Glasgow Mòd – www.modghlaschu2019.com

Fèisean nan Gàidheal – www.fèisean.org

Fèis Rois – www.feisrois.org

Tobar an Dualchais/Kist o Riches – www.tobarandualchais.co.uk

Celtic Connections – www.celticconnections.com

Blas Festival – www.blas-festival.com

Hebridean Celtic Festival – www.hebceltfest.com

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – www.smo.uhi.ac.uk

Ceòlas – www.ceolas.co.uk

Bòrd na Gàidhlig – www.gaidhlig.scot

Learn Gaelic – www.learnghaelic.scot