Where are they now? The First Graduates of the BA (Scottish Music) degree.

Jo Miller and Peggy Duesenberry


Featuring three of the first RSAMD graduates in Scottish Music in the band, Dochas. They describe this as ‘one of our most popular live sets’.

**INTRODUCTION**

The BA (Scottish Music) degree began at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow in 1996, following 2 years of a consultation and validation process. The course was the first of its kind at a UK conservatoire, training performers of Scottish traditional music not only for careers in performance and teaching, but also opening the way to postgraduate study and further research. The first ten students – 6 women and 4 men – graduated from the then 3-year course in 1999, and this paper examines their careers in the 10 years since their first academic session.

**Methodology**

We sent graduates this questionnaire and structured interviews around it:

**Where are they now? The first graduates of the RSAMD’s BA (Scottish Music) degree.**

**Questions for BA (SM) graduates to elicit location of earnings and range of current work, to be sent in advance of interview**

1. Estimate roughly what percentage of your earnings presently have come from musical work (100% or less?)
   a) 1 year after graduation (2000)
   b) 5 years after (2005)
   c) now (2007)
2. What percentage of time do you spend on the following musical activities:

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<tr>
<th>activity</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2007</th>
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<tr>
<td>Performing (solo or group)</td>
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<td>Teaching</td>
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<td>Community Projects</td>
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<td>Other (e.g.)</td>
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*Please provide a discography of the recordings you have contributed to since your graduation.

3. What is the geographical extent of your work: local, national (Scottish), Western Europe, international?
   a) 1 year after graduation (2000)
   b) 5 years after (2005)
   c) now (2007).

4. What styles of music are you engaged in (i) as performer and (ii) as teacher?
   a) 1 year after graduation (2000)
   b) 5 years after (2005)
   c) now (2007).

5. What do you think has been the impact of your BA (Scottish Music) qualification on your subsequent career?

6. What aspects of the course do you think you have drawn on most in your work since leaving the RSAMD?

7. What has been your career highlight since graduation?

8. After RSAMD did you return to your home area, or stay on in Glasgow, or move elsewhere?
   a) 1 year after graduation (2000)
   b) 5 years after (2005)
   c) now (2007).

9. Have you pursued any further education or training of any kind since RSAMD?
10. How much of your performance life has been in bands formed either during or after the course, with other RSAMD students or graduates?
   a) 1 year after graduation (2000)
   b) 5 years after (2005)
   c) now (2007).

11. Comment on any other aspects of the above.

The results presented here are not a statistical analysis of the data, but rather an examination of the interviewees’ own assessment of their experience, illustrated by their comments and their music.

Background
A Scottish Arts Council report in 1984 recommended that the RSAMD and University Music Departments “consider their responsibilities” towards the teaching of indigenous music, and in the 1990s the SAC considered it had played an advocacy role in establishing the BA (Scottish Music) at RSAMD. Scottish music courses were taught in the Academy from the late 1980s, and from 1990 these became focused on traditional. It became clear that there was the potential to create a tailor-made course for traditional musicians. A consultation exercise from 1994 established demand for such a course from a wide range of individuals and organisations, and discovered their views about what its content should be.

At this time a number of factors were increasing the status of traditional music in the wider community. While the study of this music had been institutionalised since the 1950s and taught through a ‘Scottish ethnology’ approach by the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, there was little in the way of formal practitioner-based qualifications, and none of the now familiar annual media-sponsored awards. Various titles for the BA (Scottish Music) were considered, including some using the terms ‘folk’ and ‘traditional’ often associated with the musicians we hoped to attract. However, we wanted to keep the appeal as broad as possible, hoping that the course content and staff would speak for themselves. The ethos was intended to be one where talented performers on the principal instruments (pipes, accordion, harp, fiddle, Gaelic & Scots song) would together study the breadth of these and related traditions through practical and academic classes…Most classes were compulsory ‘core’ subjects, and
the first version of the course offered options only in Year III. The original course components were:

**BA (SCOTTISH MUSIC)**  
**COURSE COMPONENTS 1996-97**

Principal performance study  
Second Study  
Singing  
Groupwork  
Workshops with visiting musicians  
Technology (PA, notation software, web-pages, studio recording)  
Techniques of Teaching (including placements)  
Business Studies  
Work Placements  
Traditions, Contexts and Analysis  
(Scottish Musical Studies, Topic Seminars II & III)  
Listening Skills  
Transcription & Analysis II & III  
Folklore  
Fieldwork Techniques  
Year III project  
Language Studies (Scots and Gaelic, including week at Sabhal Mor)  
Music & Related Arts (dance & theatre)

From 2000, the course expanded to include an Honours Year, a piping specialism and an optional route for classroom music teachers. The musicians discussed here, however, did not have these options available.

**Original course ethos**

- Educate performers in regional traditions while developing own style  
- Access to more than one principal study tutor  
- interaction and sharing knowledge between traditions (an especially radical departure for the piping community)  
- learning of notational skills, though they were not required at entrance
- practical experience of variety of performance contexts (eg dance)
- importance of singing and language skills
- access to historical/archival resources and skills to use them
- Fieldwork, folklore and history
- Building team of staff – most had an interest in and taught on more than one area of the course. Not only performers, but had historical and research interests, as well as composition skills
- Business skills
- Critical thinking taught through components such as the Traditions & Contexts sequence mentioned in the list above, transcription & analysis, projects and techniques of teaching.

Drawing on the discipline of ethnomusicology fundamental to our own training, we sought to teach the students to think about their music in a wider cultural context, to explore its past and speculate about its future while making music in the present.

**Trends in data**
- 9/10 graduates are earning a good living 100% from music (the one remaining is active as both performer and pharmacist)
- Performance opportunities have increased as musicians become better known, allowing them to be more selective about how and where they play
- Feis and other occasional teaching decreases for some – too busy/less viable financially. On the other hand, most have built up local teaching – regular income, suits family commitments
- Though most have been involved in experimenting with other styles of music as performers, continue to teach almost all trad music (Sc/Irish/other trad)
- All are composing or “making tunes” though little earnings from this

**Performing and Composing**

Since graduation, these musicians have done both solo and band work, and performed at events ranging from local weddings, dances and ceildhhs to festivals with audiences in the thousands, TV and radio broadcasts, and international tours. These students attended Groupwork classes weekly throughout their time at the Academy. We took
particular steps to increase their awareness of the myriad ensemble possibilities, and
to encourage imaginative groupings and arrangements. This included a variety of
Groupwork arrangements, extensive listening in many academic components and,
also in academic studies, critical engagement with contemporary trends such as jazz
crossovers and fusion bands.

Dochas and Back of the Moon are the two groups most closely related to the course in
its early days. Dochas was formed by 5 women on the course while they were
students. Here is a track to highlight some points about repertoire and about
fieldwork.

**AUDIO EX. 2 Dochas. (2005) “Dinny’s Set: Tribute to Eamonn Coyne, Kilty Town
(Charlie Lennon), Charlie Lennon’s (Charlie Lennon)” An Darna Umhail…the
second glance, track 3. Macmeanna SKYEDC 34.**

According to the CD liner notes, Dochas’ accordion player learned these tunes “from
Dinny Boyle and Danny Duffy, two great musicians originally from Donegal, who
moved to Glasgow in the 1960s.” One important part of the ethos of the course, right
from the start, was to give attention and value to non-commercial performance. This
was accomplished through principal study lessons, fieldwork techniques classes and
in contextual studies requiring students to listen widely. The result of this ethos is
fundamental to several of our graduates’ performing persona and also appears, as in
the example just heard, in occasional tributes to great musicians known only in their
own communities.

I also want to raise the issue of repertoire here. This set of Irish tunes, brought
to Glasgow from Donegal and now performed by of the daughters of that community,
raises the question “What is Scottish”? Rather than laying down any firm dictum on
this subject, we felt it more important that students engage with that debate and
consider, in the context of their own background, their various audiences’
understanding of Scottishness, and how they wish to present themselves. This may be
a controversial position for those of a more purist tendency, but our aim was to foster
both open minds and critical thinking on the subject.

Back of the Moon started out as ‘Gillian Frame and Back of the Moon’ and involved
students a year behind this group, as well as our first Scots Song student.
This band was formed in September 2000, but owes its career launch to the Young Traditional Musician of the Year competition. They, of all the musicians discussed here, have followed most closely what we might call a pop-music work template: they work up new material, produce it on CD, and take it on tour.

Blazin’ Fiddles began while 2 members were still studying at RSAMD. The size of the band has had an impact on their professional activities in that they need big audiences to make it pay. They have recorded four CDs, toured the Highlands, and in Europe, and played at prestige events such as Cambridge Folk Festival. As you will hear in the next example, they combine an infectious swing with astonishing virtuosity.

Blazin’ Fiddles’ members have supreme confidence in their ability to communicate with their audiences, and to make their music meaningful without relying on complicated arrangements. One of the members, in talking about the impact of the BA (Scottish Music) course, spoke about the significant boost to confidence – both for students personally, and for Scottish traditional music – that the course provides: “I think the course is good at making people aware of what they can do….and you know the Academy definitely does that.”

This confidence can be observed, as well, in Blazin’ Fiddles approach to the Shetland fiddle tradition. In the next example, they make a modern interpretation of the older Shetland tradition of fiddles playing without other instruments:
The last band discussed here is completely different. The Finlay MacDonald Band, unsurprisingly, features Finlay MacDonald, a piper who, along with his band, has done a great deal to push the boundaries of Scottish Highland piping. We are going to listen to a track from the most recent CD from The Finlay MacDonald Band, and in it he plays with musicians from other musical worlds, including jazz guitarist Kevin Mackenzie.


Finlay said “I wouldn’t say I play jazz, no. But I play with a lot of jazz musicians, cross-over kind of style.” “It was more to do with the accompaniment, and the style of accompaniment.” “I don’t think you could say I played jazz bagpipes or whatever.” Finlay also reported a big change in his attitude to solo competition piping: “I enjoy playing that now more, but it also helps my contemporary playing, if you want to call it that, because I feel technically more secure in it.”

**Beyond Bands**

The first graduates of the BA (Scottish Music) have also done a significant amount of performing and recording as soloists. In practice, this often involves calling on other musicians to provide some backing, and several have commented that Academy now has a community of musicians they know and can call on. This extends to students and graduates of other courses, particularly Strathclyde’s. When Aonghas MacNeacail wanted to produce a CD of sung Gaelic poetry, RSAMD graduates were ready to participate. Here is our first Gaelic song graduate, singing ‘Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh’, a lament from the late 17th century or early 18th century, by Sileas na Keppoch.

Composing

Virtually all said firstly that they were doing little composing, and that it wasn’t contributing to their earnings, but admitted to making “100s of tunes” and “only for myself”. The personal aspect of tune-making is reflected in the comment: “I do quite a lot, but I’ve never really pushed them on people…If you give them to other people they don’t have the same meaning… I’m not one of these people that goes to a Feis and teaches my tunes all week.” One graduate has recently sought commissions to gain income from composing and has invested in computer equipment for this purpose.

Several have produced solo CDs, and some of these emphasize their own tunes. Our Scots song graduate renewed an interest in song-writing after starting to work with a partner. They have now produced a CD that perhaps owes as much to the Beatles’ arranging style as anything learned on the BA (Scottish Music) course:

**AUDIO EX 8** Queen Anne’s Revenge (2006) “Plastic Jesus” Queen Anne’s Revenge, track 9, Watercolour Music WC CD031

Notation

RSAMD decided not to require musical literacy at entrance to this course. Some of our most talented traditional-music students arrived with weak or practically non-existent music reading skills and worse music writing ability. Others were fluent, and still another group had good literacy in pipe-music notation but little or no experience of the standard Western staff. All had to engage with notation and a particularly analytical, ethnomusicological approach to transcription was taught. This led to critical discussion of historical collections and the meaning of notation in different periods, to lively discussions of what information traditional musicians need on the page, and practice in transcribing from sound recordings and from each other’s playing. Most students found this work very challenging. Several of the graduates interviewed mentioned transcription skills as among the most important things learned during their degree and are now using this skill for writing down their own tunes, in band arrangements, in teaching, and for doing research in historical collections and in sound archives.
We conclude this section by posing a question, and beginning to explore some possible answers. How does all of this wonderful performance work relate to the RSAMD’s curriculum in Scottish Music? More provocatively, one could ask how much of this performance work would they have done without the course. For instance, one of these students played with the Boys of the Lough when he first started the course; another was invited to join Battlefield Band while he was studying, but chose to finish his degree instead. So it is not unreasonable to ask what was the role of studying at the Academy in forming their performance careers.

Some of the answers are obvious: as already mentioned, they met and played with each other: “I lived in Glasgow and didn’t know anyone my age who played traditional music…this course provided me with a social scene I never knew existed.” As Ann Dhu McLucas has noted the Academy created a new community of traditional musicians within its building (McLucas, 2003). There is an obvious lineage from this community to Dochas, to Back of the Moon, and to the first incarnation of the Finlay MacDonald Band. The next point that we might expect to near about is the principal study lessons, conspicuous by its absence in our interviews. The reasons for this absence might include: it’s too obvious to mention, or too personal (individual tutor relations might have to be brought out), or too embedded in their musical selves to consider separately now. Hard for us teachers as it is to believe, we also have to consider the possibility that these lessons were not career-changing. This is an area that needs further research.

Teaching
All our BA (SM) graduates have done teaching as part or all of their music work. Highland Region Local Authority have been a significant employer, and has also committed much of its Youth Music Initiative funding to traditional music projects. Of the 6 graduates now living and working in the Highlands, all but one have some level of employment as instructors with the LA. Graduates have also had teaching work through other organisations such as Feisean, the Gordon Gaitherin in Aberdeenshire, and Glasgow groups such as the Bridgeton Music Project and Glasgow Fiddle Workshop. Two graduates are in posts with substantial organisational responsibilities, one as project manager for Youthworks at RSAMD and another as a
Piping Centre tutor and organiser of the Piping Live festival. Two more have had employment at RSAMD as part-time tutors.

One significant issue which emerged, and which warrants further research, concerns the overlap between teaching and what we called on our questionnaire ‘community projects’ - the kind of activities many musicians engage in which support and develop music-making in the wider community. This might include organisational/administrative roles, teaching/performing, fundraising and so on, and the work is often unpaid. One graduate pointed out that Feis teaching was not really economic in professional terms, but an important ‘service’ to the community and the wider aims of the movement: “People get the impression you’re probably too busy doing other things…it gets to the point where maybe you can’t afford to go and do a week at a Feis. But the other side of it is I like doing that because I know how important it is to put something back in.” Often such efforts encourage great loyalty: a piping instructor said her pipe band pupils who have left school stay in touch: “Any ceilidh we’ve got they still appear with their pipes and have a tune with the band.”

**AUDIO EX 9** Charleston & Nairn Pipes and Drums (2007) “Steamtrain to Mallaig”

*Charleston & Nairn Pipes and Drums & Friends - Debut*, track 8 SCO33489

While musicians may have professional careers and audiences which take them far afield, home is an important marker of identity. A Gaelic singer commented – “It’s satisfying to [perform locally] because what I do is very linked to the Highlands and if people in the Highlands are willing to listen to it it’s quite a compliment really”. This link between community and education studies was reflected in the content of the BA (Scottish Music) from the start, with teaching placements offered in a variety of settings, and encouraged students to think about teaching and learning contexts for traditional music past and present, drawing on pedagogical research. These first BA (Scottish Music) graduates are continuing to reflect on and develop their teaching. One said: ”I’m not really that way inclined, but I see the importance of passing things on…It’s amazing the amount of kids that are wanting to learn now”. However, he has reservations about the ‘packaging’ of lessons possibly disempowering learners: ”The way I was taught [by my fiddle teacher] inspired me. Now the whole responsibility
for learning things is attributed to somebody else…It’s almost like putting an official stamp on things now…you should never be afraid to teach yourself things.”

Further Education and Training
Several graduates went on to take Gaelic Language courses after their first degree, perhaps reflecting the predominance of Highland students in this year of the course, and wider policies supporting Gaelic language development. Those working for local education authorities have taken part in a variety of in-service training. Some have pursued further tutor training or trained as adjudicators or examiners. One benefited from the government’s ‘New Deal’ for musicians, discussed in several articles by Martin Cloonan (Cloonan 2003, 2004). He says: “It gives you that breathing space. They got me loads of wee gigs…lots of background music gigs…we did everything – there was no shame!” Other further study has included private lessons, particularly for competing pipers.

Impact of course

1. Critical skills
The more ‘academic’ course components seem to have had a lasting impact: many commented on the usefulness of course components such as fieldwork and folklore, and have continued to use these, the fruits being visible in a wide range of their activities. One musician, best known for his international performing career, and teaching, said - “Academically it has helped me…the way I think”, and said given another chance, he would make even more of the academic side of the course. Another said “fieldwork opened my eyes up to lots of things I’d taken for granted”. I learned “different attitudes to music”. Viewing one’s own music through the eyes and ears of the ‘other’, as the course set out to show, could give musicians the ability to step outside as well as carry forward their own traditions.

2. Open doors
All feel that being the first BA (SM) graduates has brought prestige, and that the course is now widely recognised. A number commented that it had helped ‘open doors’ at various points. For some, simply having a degree gave them the confidence to seek work – “Because I had the qualification I did that helped me to get the job that
I wanted…there’s still something special about having that particular degree”. Another said it had been a good calling card early in their careers: promoters would say “Why should we book you?” We’d say “We did the BA SM” they’d say “You must be a certain standard”.

3. Employers/professionalism
Formal qualification seems to have been most directly influential for employment in teaching posts with formal bodies. All respondents said they felt their degree had been less necessary to their careers as performers. However, many found the variety of performance practice amongst other students and staff illuminating. For one piper, a “professional” training had helped him cope with the unexpected when working with other musicians, and aided his communication skills. He felt he had learned to listen, to respect others’ music, and to get ‘beyond piping’. For others, it was endorsement of their music: “If we want the music to be carried on and taken seriously for the decades to come, it’s got to be…presented professionally, you know?” Almost all mentioned Techniques of Teaching as a useful element of the course; notational skills have been passed on to pupils and used in arranging music; fieldwork and historical research have been used to source material and provide performance contexts for pupils; Gaelic language skills have given access to repertoire, and as a medium for teaching.

4. The Future?
The course is now well established, and as one graduate said of BASM and Strathclyde Applied Music degree, for young traditional musicians “it’s very much the done thing now”. While benefiting from the wider cultural and political initiatives in Scotland, it seems that graduates may themselves be creating opportunities within institutions. This includes the future of the RSAMD as an employer. Since the BA (Scottish Music) began, the RSAMD has also created a Research Dept whose work has contributed to shaping cultural policy and not least, the experience of traditional music students inside the institution itself.

5. Connections with Popular Music Studies in Higher Education
A few points of connection with Popular Music courses in HE:

- plethora of names for courses
- balance of practitioner/contextual studies within courses
- issues of Scottishness
- previously informally learned traditions being incorporated into formal education and the consequences of this for the musicians and their music, and for institutions

Final 2 musical examples to illustrate interface of trad/popular music:


References

