

Pursuing music and arts goals on the Canadian Prairies

Conservatory of Performing Arts, Saskatchewan

ALTHOUGH many Saskatchewan communities were named to reflect the interests and origins of early Scots settlers — St Andrews, Saltcoats, Govan, Colonsay — Saskatchewan is not known as a centre of Scottish culture.

Pipe bands and Highland societies struggle for survival, and many cope with small numbers of participants. However some local players thought they could improve the situation by getting pipe bands linked with a local university.

In 2003, three pipe band enthusiasts marched into the University of Regina with the idea to have the university sponsor the City of Regina Pipe Band.

The university administration turned them down, but referred them to the Conservatory of Performing Arts at the University of Regina, because they thought there might be some interest in the well-developed teaching program the band had established. A bit surprised by their enthusiastic presence, Gerry Folk, Head of the Conservatory of Performing Arts, sat down with them to hear their proposal to launch a bagpipe program at the Conservatory.

These three men, Dr Bruce Cooke, passionate piper and former Dean of Engineering at the university, Ken McMillan, drummer and a former member of the university Board of Governors, and Duncan Fisher, long-time pipe major of the local Shrine Pipe Band and former NHL ice hockey player, were instrumental in founding the program. Since then, both Dr Cooke and Mr McMillan have passed away, but they both got to see the Conservatory Pipe Band in action, and win a number of Saskatchewan Championships at the grade four level.

Shortly after their attempt to start a bagpipe program at the university, Iain MacDonald, pipe major of the City of Regina Pipe Band, and the main instructor for the Kinsmen Junior Pipe Band, met with Gerry Folk and the Conserva-



The MacDonald family pictured July 2009: Eilidh, Duncan [front], Ruaridh, Iain and Barbara. Two former Conservatory students, two instructors, and a future student!

tory to plan the piping program. As a result of their meeting, the Conservatory of Performing Arts Pipe Band was born.

Iain leads the pipe band program, teaches a number of private students, and also runs group classes for adult bagpipers at various levels. Iain has been piping since his mother convinced him to join a local band in 1965. He learned from local teachers Tom Ireland, Andrew McAnsh, Angus Spence and George Crawford, who all worked with local bands in Regina.

Every summer from the time Iain was about 10 years old, he had the privilege of attending the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts at Fort San. This is where he met the legendary Pipe Major Donald MacLeod, MBE, and was exposed to his teaching every summer for a number of years. Iain's piping career and

success is partly due to Pipe Major MacLeod's encouragement.

Iain spent a year in Scotland in 1978 studying with him in his bagpipe workshop at Grainger and Campbell, and returned for a second year in 1981. During both years in Scotland, Iain played with the Babcock-Renfrew Pipe Band under pipe major Iain McLeod.

Iain's piping career has included stints with grade one bands Babcock-Renfrew, Simon Fraser University, and ScottishPower, and for 18 years he has been pipe major of the grade two City of Regina Pipe Band. As well, Iain holds the Institute of Piping Advanced Certificate, Senior Teacher Certificate, and is a Member of the Board of examiners for the current examination process managed through Scotland's National Piping Centre.

“Iain is the real deal,” said Gerry Folk, Head of the Conservatory of Performing Arts. “He has 30 years of experience as well as a teaching degree, which makes him invaluable to this program.”

The Conservatory program engages a number of very dedicated instructors, including Iain’s wife Barbara MacDonald. Barbara also played in the SFU Pipe Band, plays a key role in the City of Regina Pipe Band, and for many years has been starting new pipers. The rumming staff includes long-time grade one mid-section player Kenna Whelan. Drumming instructors Brett Stinson and Bryde Whelan are both experienced snare drummers and instructors who are great with the band kids. Piping instructor Garth Neel is a former winner of the Marches at Inverness and also a former student of Donald MacLeod.

The depth of experience and teaching skills of the instructors, plus the great support and drive for the program from the Conservatory, has established a popular and high-quality pipe band program for kids and adults in Regina. The scheme has also expanded outside the city to include students from other communities within Saskatchewan.

The Conservatory Pipe Band has been taking advantage of online communications software to reach students living outside of Regina. There have been students who cannot be physically in the classroom, and they join using Skype.



Conservatory students are able to sit piping exams. Eilidh MacDonald, Eva Rennie, Carly Phillips and Sarah Yeo show off their success in 2005

This allows them to participate in some elements of band, and receive instruction on their playing, without attending band each week.

The pipe band has added great value and something different to the Conservatory’s already strong performing arts programming of private lessons in a wide range of instruments, group music lessons, kids and adults programs, kids camps, theatre school and dance programs.

The pipe band program has students ranging from ages eight to 20 learning pipes, snare, tenor, and bass drums. Iain said: “Students start out on the chanter or drum pad

and move on to the pipes and drums when they’re ready. Then we integrate them into the band for performances and competitions, and also prepare them for solo competitions.”

The program has expanded to offer adult group lessons in beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels, which have grown in popularity. “There are about 12 new people who join each fall,” said Iain. “There’s a lot of enthusiasm at all levels, and we do everything we can to make it fun and engaging for adults and children.”

Iain’s future plan is to focus on the growth of the program. “The challenge is getting more new students. School-age children are busier than ever, and learning to be a really good piper or drummer is a big commitment. It takes a few seasons to get a student to the piping level where they can compete,” Iain said. “The Conservatory has been a great place to build this kind of program. Pipe band students are surrounded by other people pursuing music and arts goals, and it helps to feel like you are part of the mainstream.”

That was the original reason for bringing piping and drumming to the University of Regina. ●

The Conservatory Pipe Band has been grade four Saskatchewan Champions several times in recent years, including 2008, when this photo was taken.

