

December 20, 2003
The Pipes of Christmas Celtic Concert
By David Palladino
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It is wonderful how the fifth annual Pipes of Christmas concert event of the Clan Currie Society has not only remained fresh, new and exciting after five consecutive years, retaining the most accomplished musicians and vocalists, but even more striking, how it has managed to get better every year. It is truly a concert and an event.

This celebratory Scottish Gaelic Christmas concert is held at the Central Presbyterian Church in Summit. The mostly heavy stone and wood acoustics of this church provide the perfect background for both the intimate nature of Celtic music as well as for the grandiose pomp and circumstance of a full bagpipe, brass and organ arrangement of Highland Cathedral. This year's concert highlighted several new musicians, ensembles and musical works. These new additions were exceptional.

The New Jersey State Youth Choir, under the direction of Artistic Director and founder Patricia Joyce, graduate of Westminster Choir College, were on hand to lend a youthful and profound dimension to the concert. Mr. Phillip Steffani provided piano accompaniment.

The choir was pure pleasure. The success of ethnic cultural events such as this one requires that young people take an interest in them as well as the great stories of their heritage. In addition to several traditional carols that the Youth Choir performed, they also performed Nollaig in Gaelic. A great choral sound was achieved by Director Patricia Joyce, especially from the soprano section.

Other musicians and soloists included Jennifer Port of Golspie in Sutherland, northern Scotland, who performed on Scottish Harp, and Christopher Layer, who played the Uilleann and small pipes as well as on various flutes and whistles.

Christopher Layer was one of the great talents of the evening. Seriously versatile, he played solos on pipes, whistles and flutes and provided background accompaniment to many of the other pieces.

Metropolitan Opera heavyweight baritone Mark Delavan was on hand once again and was even joined by the rising tenor Tom Roche. Paul Woodiel returned on fiddle along with Susie Petrov who played piano. The smooth local brass ensemble Solid Brass was also on hand again as was the Redlands, California based R.P. Blandford and Son Pipe Band and organist and pianist, Jeffrey Rickard.

Mark Delavan offered several beautiful songs including Baloo Lammy and a duet with tenor Tom Roche in What Child is This? Both voices were warm, rich and unrestricted and filled the church with sound. Pristine musical phrasing was a great feature of the vocal solos.

The varied instrumentation which kept things interesting and fresh including Highland Bagpipes, Uilleann Bagpipes (an Irish variation played with bellows under the right arm), flute, whistles, violin, harp, organ, piano, harpsichord, brass, timpani, various other percussive instruments including the drum section of the pipe band, and of course solo and choir voices.

This peculiarly quaint yet powerful concert has an added intellectual atmosphere as the music is interspersed with meaningful readings from Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott and others in both English and broad Scots.

Several of the new works included were A Medieval Prologue, What Sweeter Music, Nollaig, Hymn to the Saviour and Of the Father's Love Begotten.

Excellent arrangements of music continued to be an exciting part of the entertainment. These were largely created by organist Jeffrey Rickard and the late Pipe Major Kevin Blanchard.

Tragically, Pipe Major Kevin Blandford who was instrumental in organizing the music for The Pipes of Christmas concert event lost a sudden and surprised fight with cancer this past November. Kevin's Pipe Sergeant, Matt Nonnemacher, has stepped in, and is providing excellent leadership for the band.

Fine concert narration was done by Susan Porterfield Currie of Bucks County, PA, Evan Cattanach who originally hails from Kingussie, Scotland and Frederick Clark of Summit.

Notable supporters of the Pipe of Christmas concert event included Governor James McGreevey, New Jersey Senators John S. Corzine and Frank Lautenberg and New Jersey Congressman Mike Ferguson. The Right Honorable Jack McConnell, Scotland's First Minister, also sent along his congratulations for the fifth anniversary milestone.

The Pipes of Christmas concert event of The Clan Currie Society, under the leadership of Robert Currie of Summit, is truly the most unique Christmas concert in the Metropolitan area and probably the country. This noble event was in large part, made possible by grants from The Classic Malts of Scotland and the Grand Summit Hotel.