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The Pipeline

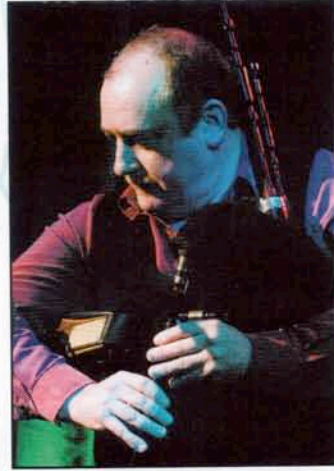
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by Chris MacKenzie

Nothing, apart from the words Drum Fanfare, fills me with dread more than the word fusion. When applied to restaurants it inevitably means that two world class cuisines will be shorn of their subtleties and flung together in some ridiculous tower of food that does not do justice to either. The same applies to music. Generally fusion music is not actually anything of the sort but is instead a forced marriage of two, or more, musical genres with little thought to actually producing anything remotely listenable. Instead the aim seems to be to give each player an extended opportunity to show off before melting back into the general stew of sound. Thankfully the above is a generalisation and when the fusion works both in cuisine and music the result can be intense and invigorating.

One such case is the strangely named Homebound Concerts. This is a curious collaboration of Scottish, Indian, Classical and Medieval music brought together by a German. Marrying any two of these genres would be a challenging task to bring the four together and make something coherent, and importantly listenable, is nothing short of miraculous. To be fair Thomas Zoller and his crew don't throw everything into the mix on each track but instead mix and merge them over the course of the CD, producing a complex and varied sound that surprises at every turn. At the heart of this collaboration is the twin pipes of Thomas, an RSAMD graduate, and Allan MacDonald (he of the brothers of Glenuig). Whether on one of Thomas's tunes or one rescued from the archives, Thomas and Allan provide the melodic drive that the others relate to. And how they relate! Ute Meck on harp, Vijay Kangutar and Sascha Gotowschikow on assorted drums, Joachim Schieffer on cello and Pedro Aibeo on guitar all bring something unique and delicious to the party.

Sunset on Rishikesh, a piece penned by Thomas, reflects on Rishikesh in northern India and



Photos by John Slavin @ designfolk.com

Thomas Zoller and Allan MacDonald perform at Celtic Connections 2009 with the cross-cultural ensemble, Homebound.

has a relaxed Indian vibe (as you'd expect) to which the tabla and surprisingly the jew's harp, played by Allan MacDonald, are added. As the piece comes to a crescendo, Joachim's resonant Cello closes it out beautifully. Indeed Joachim's cello is the backbone of the ensemble with its vibrant tones adding depth and producing a sumptuous backdrop for the stridency of the pipes. Joachim does get to take centre stage when he plays the middle section of Paul Hindemith's Sonate for Violincello Solo Op, 25/3. Strange as it might seem, and even as I write this, it still feels strange to have a classical piece slap bang in the middle of gaelic songs and pipe tunes. It works brilliantly both because it just seems to be a natural continuation from having the cello in the background and also because it is a passionately played and deeply moving passage of music.

In Fhir A Chinn Duibh, an old gaelic song (Oh man of the black head) and arguably the best piobaireachd ever written, The lament for the Children, are segued together because - as the notes point out - many feel they are related. Allan's authoritative vocals lead the song with the others joining in to create a sound that has echo's of church presenting in the highlands of Scotland. The piece that follows Fhir A Chinn Duibh, The Healing, moves the musical landscape to India yet, as Thomas plays the intro in the style of an 'alap' (a piece played before Indian music to

introduce the audience to the scale), it is the similarities with the previous piece that resonate across the continents and centuries.

Those similarities continue as Thomas and the crew play with a couple of well known medieval tunes, Pavane and Skudrinka (for those of you well up on your medieval tunes). This gets more of a Jazzy treatment with Joachim's Cello taking on a more urgent and almost brassy tone. With other sets including tunes from the William Dixon manuscript and a gaelic waulking song (Latha Bha Ridire Ag Ol), the music inspirations for this CD are wide and varied. Yet this is no rag bag of styles - Thomas and the band have created a vibrant and coherent body of work that has a common thread running through it whether it has a medieval, gaelic, or Indian root. With consummate musicianship the band have created a sound that draws the listener in and rewards with every listen as the subtle contributions from each of the players slowly reveal themselves. All that said perhaps the key point for me is that Homebound Concerts have melody at the heart of everything they do, the tune is slap bang in the middle here and while it gets all the support it needs, it never gets lost in a fog of instruments. That makes all the difference.

Now some of you will be thinking why am I banging on about a CD that was released in 2006. Well the reason is that for some reason I completely missed Homebound

Concerts until very recently. My reasoning goes that if I missed them some of you may have to (although I admit I could be in a minority of one here). They played at Celtic Connections in January so more of you may have already had the chance to check them out, but they definitely deserve not to be missed.

On the recent release front check out new CD's from Canadian piper Jori Chisholm, Bagpipe Revolution, and Niall Matheson, The Shores of Loch Ness. These are two very different CDs. Jori brings an army of musicians to his revolution including Gerry O'Beirne on guitar and ukulele and Orville Johnson on guitar and steel guitar - something that works surprisingly well with the pipes. Niall on the other hand eschews all accompaniment and has produced something more akin to the piping albums of old. With this album, Alasdair Gillies' cracking album Lochbroom and Stuart Liddell's equally cracking Inveroran all being released on Macmeanna and all being unaccompanied, clearly a resurgence is taking place. Also in what is rapidly turning into a Christmas tradition the Red Hot Chilli Pipers released a new CD. Blast sees the boys recorded live in concert in the Old Fruitmarket in Glasgow. They are in cracking form as they blitz through their sets and have the audience in rapture. Not only can you hear this but you can also see it on the accompanying DVD. The other Christmas issue that is becoming a regular is a release from the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards. This year they released a follow on to last years Spirit of the Glen called Journey to the Line. Partially recorded in Basra, this CD sees the band tackle tunes such as Abide with Me, Dawning of the Day, Greensleeves, Auld Lang Syne and Flowers of the Forest.

Finally, in Scotland, 2009 is the year of the Homecoming. There will be many different events over the course of the year with a lot of them having a musical flavour. One that definitely will have music is the Tattoo Hebrides taking place in Stornoway in the Western Isles on the 7th and 8th of August. The 78th Fraser Highlanders from Canada will be leading a Tattoo of local and not so local pipe bands on the Friday night, with a concert featuring them and Dougie Maclean following on the Saturday night. As they have moved the Stornoway Carnival to be on the Saturday (with all the bands taking part) it promises to be a special weekend. If you have Lewis connections, or even if you don't but want to hear some great music and enjoy a cracking party then head to Lewis for that weekend. □