

Scots Music Group
Annual General Meeting January 2023
Report from the Chair

This is my fourth Annual General Meeting since I became Chair of SMG. The first AGM was in-person and the next two were online and the Chair's Report was recorded. This year as find ourselves managing the lingering effects of the pandemic, although it has definitely not gone away, we are able to have the AGM in person once again.

It feels like we are in a state of constant change at the moment, both in SMG and wider society but what has stayed the same in SMG? Sarah Northcott is still our Interim Development Worker and Helen Reid continues as our Co-ordinator. Our Board has the same membership as last year.

Activities over the past year - June 2021 to June 2022 and beyond

Our classes were online in the academic year September 2021 to June 2022. This was the second year of online classes and by the Summer Term I think it is fair to say that students were generally becoming rather jaded with this format. Of course some of our members never really took to the online classes for various reasons. Thankfully we were able to restart in-person classes in September 2022, although not in our usual and preferred evening venue of James Gillespie High School. We were not even under one roof, some classes at Tollcross Community Centre and others at The Music Box in Sighthill and one at the Storytelling Centre. This Term from January 2023 we are back in James Gillespie High School and it is clear that returning students are delighted at this return, as seen by their smiles and greetings on the first week. Two classes have remained online - Banjo, because the tutor moved away, and the Slow Session Class which allows students from further away to take part.

In the year 2021-22 our instrument and song classes were Fiddle (8 classes offering a progression from Fiddle 1 to advanced); Piano Accordion (2 classes); Guitar (4 classes in Term 1, 2 in Term 2 reducing to 1 class in Term 3); Whistle (2 classes); Smallpipes (3 classes); Ukulele (1 class); 5-String Banjo (1 class). There were 5 Mixed Instrument classes. We held 2 Singing classes – Scottish Song and Beyond and Sing Together.

Over the year we organised three workshops with external tutors. An online song workshop was held on 16 October 2021 to coincide with the COP 26 international climate change conference held in Glasgow. We also held a Day of Tunes 3 online workshop on 19 March 2022 for instrumentalists which looked at traditional music from both sides of the Scottish/English Border. Both these workshops featured hour-long sessions over a half day with high quality tutors, many of whom were only able to work with us because they were held online. In addition, on 28 May 2022 we held an in-person Waulking Songs workshop that we hope to repeat in the future. The feedback from attendees at these workshops was very positive.

A new event for SMG was the opportunity to play together in person, albeit with social distancing built in, when we organised a Come and Play afternoon in George Watson School on 19 March 2022. This proved so popular that we organised another: this time at Binks Hall in the Charteris Centre to coincide with Make Music Day on 21 June. We held a third just before Christmas, again at the Binks Hall. Sarah Northcott prepared the music and arrangements for the various instruments and led the sessions, except for the last one when she was stymied by a snowstorm. However, the event still went ahead with Board members stepping in to lead the tunes.

Our online classes and workshops have continued to draw interest beyond Edinburgh and have attracted students from all over the UK and further afield, including Europe, Canada and USA – around 30 participants in our classes. As a result, we have brought Scottish music and song to people who would perhaps otherwise not have had the opportunity.

SMG has been instrumental in fostering the recent resurgence of interest in traditional music, song and dance, particularly in the Edinburgh and Lothian geographic area. The commitment and enthusiasm of our tutors has encouraged our members to join together and share their love of traditional music with the wider community by means of sessions, ceilidhs and other performances.

Sessions are an important part of traditional music-making but are often difficult and daunting for newcomers to join. As the impact of the pandemic receded and the pubs reopened many of our students ventured out to play together in person, leading the way back to a more traditional community music making. Several of our students have organised new sessions and other opportunities to play music together through their own initiatives, e.g. in local parks and private gardens.

The main income for our organisation comes from class fees and our policy is that normally our charges should cover tutor's fees, some travel expenses and venue costs. However, as part of a prudent financial strategy, our usual policy is to only continue with classes that cover their costs, except in limited circumstances where other factors would justify a short-term loss-making situation, e.g. an investment in the future strategy for a particular class. This year we have tried as far as possible to maintain classes with only a few participants as a way of building for the future and encouraging the continued participation of our students. Where appropriate and with the agreement of tutors and students who have signed up for particular classes, we have sought to combine classes with very low numbers.

On the whole our total student numbers have been encouraging although somewhat lower compared to previous years. In Year 2021 -22 student numbers dropped significantly in Terms 2 and 3. The actual figures were -Term 1: 351 (464 in 2019), Term 2: 310, Term 3: 251. Some potential students were not able to commit to online teaching and were waiting for the in-person classes to recommence, but many more have taken well to learning on Zoom despite its difficulties and limitations. However, by the end of 2021-22 year our student questionnaire showed that there was strong support for returning to in-person classes. The transition was difficult to plan, as we would not know whether our evening class venue, James Gillespie's High School, would be able to accommodate us until the beginning of the new school year in mid-August. This necessitated having a backup plan, which we have since had to implement as James Gillespie HS was not available in Autumn 2022.

Scots Music Group in the Community

Sangstream

Sangstream is linked with SMG and all Sangstreamers are members. It is a busy and well-known folk choir which performed several engagements during the period covered by this report.

It was a challenging time coming out of Covid restrictions and the difficulties around singing together over Zoom. Even after official guidance started to ease, some activities were constrained. The fact that the choir had continued to meet over Zoom had been much appreciated by members as providing vital social contact. In June 2021 the choir sang together for the first time since start of Covid, at a community event to mark the unveiling of the Colinton Tunnel murals. In September 2021 the choir started meeting weekly together again in person, initially with the option for Zoom access. This was a great relief for many members as the communal singing experience tends to be fundamental to them. In March 2022 they enjoyed a social weekend in Stirling. In May 2022 they performed their first high profile concert for 2½ years, in the wonderful venue of St. Giles Cathedral to a packed, highly appreciative audience. They also hosted a visiting choir from the Lofoten Islands in Norway who were on a trip to Edinburgh.

Generally, membership numbers have been sustained at around 55. Because of difficulties over the availability of rehearsal spaces at council premises they have had to incur extra expense to hire space elsewhere, which has meant having to manage the choir's finances especially carefully.

Ceilidh Caleerie

Ceilidh Caleerie is a Scots Music Group (SMG) dance band that started in 2006 as Sarah Northcott's 'Playing for Ceilidh Dancing' class. Until Covid19 restrictions began in March 2020 they played for charitable ceilidhs and events in return for a modest fee, most of which was donated to SMG. Since 2011 the band has been self-organised with help from an elected management committee and, until the lockdown due to Covid, they had a monthly band rehearsal at Dean Bowling Club

During Covid-19 lockdowns, members Paul and Christine McIntosh kept the band's spirits up by organising fortnightly tune and chat sessions on Zoom. Finally, in September 2021 after nineteen months, they were able to return to live monthly rehearsals at Dean Bowling Club on the last Sunday of each month, typically having from ten to fifteen people each time. Coming out of lockdowns, two of their more confident players had to retire (fully or partially) from the band and so remaining members have been concentrating on learning from their handed-down skills to count in and start tune sets at the 'right' tempo - vital skills for playing for dancing. This has taken precedence over learning new sets but has helped to build confidence for all. Hopefully, they will be able to attract some more playing dates into the diary. In the meantime, around ten of the band members spent a very happy August afternoon playing from the band's repertoire for a staff summer party at the Western General Infirmary.

The Ceilidh Caleerie website is: <https://ceilidhcaleeriedanceband.wordpress.com>

Balerno Buskers

Balerno Buskers are mainly SMG members who volunteer to play at the monthly Balerno Farmers' Market which takes place on the pedestrianised Main Street. On average they have between 6-10 players each time, mainly drawn from Sarah Northcott's Tuesday Mixed Instrument Class and Ceilidh Caleerie, but open to all. There is a fair overlap between the various playing groups.

Owing to the Covid situation, Balerno Buskers had not done any live performing together since March 2020, until they had a very enjoyable return to Balerno Farmers' Market in April 2022. They have continued to play most months since. During lockdown, many members had taken part in Zoom sessions, which they hoped had kept their playing standards up to scratch, and introduced a lot of new tunes.

On Friday May 20th 2022, a small group of Buskers took part in "Flotilla 200" - a celebration of the bicentenary of the Union Canal - and played on board "The Lochrin Belle" all the way from Fountainbridge to Wester Hailes. It was a most enjoyable day with excellent hospitality from the Fountainbridge Canalside Community Trust.

A few weeks later, this time on dry but very windy land, they played at the Edinburgh Canal Festival on Saturday 18th June, at Fountainbridge Green, near the new Boroughmuir High School.

Other SMG students who wish to be included in the busking group can contact the group via the SMG office. The group is open to anyone, and there is a set of scores available on Google Drive.

Nigel's Allstars

Nigel's Allstars grew out of a mixed instrument class led by Nigel Gatherer, a long-standing SMG tutor. A number of the students wanted to share their love of traditional Scottish music with the wider community. Since 2010 they have played in day-care centres, hospitals and for isolated groups in the community. The resulting proceeds are donated to Scots Music Group. The group played at a number of events and places in the past year, including the Eric Liddell Centre and local care-homes and centres.

St Bride's Ceilidhs

Prior to the advent of Covid restrictions in Spring 2020 SMG ran a regular ceilidh programme at the St Bride's Centre, often selling out prior to the event. By the start of summer 2022 the main hall at St. Bride's Centre had not re-opened, so in July we held our first Ceilidh in the Binks Hall, at the Charteris Centre. It was popular with our dancers and supported financially in part by the Covid Recovery Grant from Creative Scotland.

Subsequently we have been able to organise a number of ceilidhs for the rest of 2022. As St Bride's has now re-opened some of the ceilidhs have been booked for that venue which has the benefit of a bar run by the Centre and a larger capacity. Our ceilidhs depend for success on support of the venue staff but especially on the dedicated SMG team of ceilidh volunteers who manage the door, ticket sales and the raffle, ensuring that these events run smoothly and safely on the night.

Holding regular, well attended ceilidhs is very important to the future viability and success of the Scots Music Group as they enable us to have the funding to be able to support classes with low numbers, keep the price of classes affordable and employ our hard-working staff. The cancellation of our ceilidhs from March 2020 had a considerable impact on our fundraising income.

Café Ceilidh

Café Ceilidh sessions are held in the Storytelling Centre and are normally well supported, with attendees making generous donations towards SMG funds. These events run because of the dedicated support of a core of committed students and friends who play in the Café Ceilidh band, sing and MC the session. For the past two years, since the start of the pandemic Café Ceilidh events had been in abeyance. However, the Café Ceilidh band has reformed and returned to playing in person, holding successful events in May (TradFest) and June 2022 (Make Music Day).

Tutors, Staff and Members

We are extremely fortunate to have tutors who are musicians and singers of the highest quality who choose to come and work with us teaching classes and leading workshops. They provide real inspiration and encouragement to our students at all levels, setting appropriate and achievable standards, and developing an awareness of the wide range of musical styles and traditions within Scottish music, dance and song.

Despite lockdowns and self-isolation etc, SMG staff have remained in post. Sarah Northcott is still our Interim Development Worker and Helen Reid continues as our Coordinator. Both are keeping the organisation moving forward efficiently and making sure the office at the Eric Liddell Centre continues to service our membership and ensuring our systems for payment, newsletters and multiple office tasks are effective and user friendly. The Board is thankful for their loyalty and dedication to SMG and traditional music.

The SMG Board has retained the same membership over the past year, meeting approximately monthly to see the organisation continuation – our 33rd year. It has been a difficult few years – Sarah described it recently as “Fire Fighting!” We would like more people to work with us in developing our organisation for the future. Please do consider joining the Board.

We are grateful to all our members who have stood with us over these very difficult years. Many have returned to our classes and others are cautious but we hope to see them all as soon as they feel confident and it is safe to do so.

Thank You

Liz Blair was our book keeper for many years and I mentioned last year that she had indicated a wish to retire and we were looking for someone to replace her. Eventually we managed to find someone with suitable experience. Calum Galleitch has begun work on entering financial data into our system under the guidance of Paul McIntosh our Treasurer. So many thanks to Liz for her support and dedication over the years, and welcome to Calum – thank you for stepping forward.

Thank you to Mac Walker for his ongoing and invaluable support with our website and IT system. As a modern organisation we are dependent on our online presence and systems to keep us going and Mac always responds to our calls and continues to give us effective advice.

Thank you to Mary McCann who has created and run a number of song workshops, especially over the past few years when opportunities for singing have been limited. Mary has been involved with SMG since its inception and we are grateful for her support both in running the courses and raising funds.

Thank you to the volunteers who help make our fundraising ceilidhs successful. The ceilidhs only recently started again and it has been encouraging that a number of people have put themselves forward as regular volunteers. We are also grateful to members who deliver leaflets around Edinburgh that advertise what we do – both classes and ceilidhs.

Thank you to all those who organised events as part of our May Music Hooley fundraising drive. Also to our members and friends who have donated generously to SMG funds since the start of the pandemic. Donations large and small are welcome and we are able to receive additional funds on top of this through Gift Aid.

Departed Friends

Ken Fallas passed away in 2022. Ken was in our fiddle classes over many years, with his wife Denise. He was always good fun in both in-person classes and online and a pleasure to play alongside. Ken was a keen supporter of the Scots Fiddle Festival and volunteered to help out at a number of Fiddle Festival weekends.

You can find out about some of our departed friends on the Book of Remembrance page on our website.

Planning for the Future

During the year 2022-23 and beyond the Board will continue developing and reviewing our business strategies to ensure that our financial position is not unduly compromised by the effects of the ongoing pandemic and its aftermath. We will review our courses to ensure they are viable at the start of each term and we will continue to hold some classes online where this is the best way forward, while encouraging a return to in person classes where possible and appropriate in the short and medium term. We are grateful to have been awarded a Covid Recovery Grant by Creative Scotland to enable us to initiate and re-establish activities that we hope will return us, eventually, to our position, both financially and culturally, prior to the onset of the pandemic. We have decided to target the re-establishment of Beginners Classes in various instruments as these had to be curtailed at the start of the pandemic and we need to have new students flowing through. We also decided use some of the grant to support our fundraising Ceilidhs, as we will need time to build up attendance to former levels, while keeping participants safe. Overall SMG still needs to build up student numbers in classes and other activities to be viable in the long term, although we are optimistic going forward.

We are still intending to produce a new SMG Tune Book, our fourth. The tunes have been selected by our students and tutors already but the pressures of the past few years have not allowed the time to actually produce the book. We hope to finish this project soon.

We would like to encourage more students to be more closely involved in our organisation through volunteering in various roles, projects etc. This will take time to plan and deliver as it will require a significant investment in staff time.

We intend to organise a Board Study Day to look at possible ways forward for the organisation and hope to engage a traditional music expert to look at both SMG and the wider traditional music community and to indicate possibilities for the future that will fit in with our traditions and our charitable purposes.

Despite current limitations, SMG is always looking for ways to improve the quality and depth of its core programme of music classes, regular events and workshops. However, this needs to be financially sustainable in the short and long term through canvassing views via student questionnaires to elicit potential engagement and interest in new ventures. We will offer taster classes and workshops where appropriate to allow students to try out new aspects of traditional music. We hope this will offer a way of developing the broad range of SMG activities and attract new participants.

Edna Wilson
Chair
Scots Music Group