

In January 2010, the following report appeared in the *West Highland Free Press*.

The young musicians of Plockton took Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall by storm when the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music (Sgoil Chiùil na Gàidhealtachd) made its first official appearance at Celtic Connections.

There was hardly an empty seat in the Strathclyde Suite for the final concert of the TMSA Young Trad Tour, where Plockton's ten senior pupils had been allocated the first half of the programme. The seven-strong Young Trads' line up included three winners of the BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year as well as two graduates of Sgoil Chiùil. Ewan Robertson (guitar and vocals) was one of the Centre's very first intake in 2000, and won the Young Traditional Musician of the Year award in 2008. Daniel Thorpe (fiddle) went on to claim the 2010 title, the day after the concert! Prestigious company indeed for the teenagers.

Undaunted, they took to the stage like old hands. After the long, wintry journey from the north – with their fiddles and pipes and whistles and guitars and even a cello – they were going to make the most of the occasion. Three young pipers swept on to the stage, and within a few notes had the full attention of 500 people. Whoops and cheers met this fine start by Ewan Duncan, Catriona Gibb and Alexander Levack, setting the pattern for the rest of the show.

A fiddle and piano duet from Mhairi MacKinnon and Heather Shelley started slow and gentle, the two instruments singing as one. The set blossomed into a whirl of reels that demonstrated the formidable talent of these two young musicians. What's more, they were clearly enjoying the experience. And so it continued, with songs from Amy Cameron, fine guitar accompaniment from Callum Forsyth, Jayne Paterson joining Mhairi on fiddle, and Duncan Bullivant bringing out his cello.

Without doubt the real show stopper was Natalie Chalmers, singing "The Alford Cattle Show". Her performance was a delight of words, music and mime as she conjured up the bothy loon proudly taking his beloved old mare to the fair, removing his sark to join in the games, drinking too much, dancing too much, falling into the arms of a girl.... As chorus followed chorus, voices from the floor gradually joined in, until by the time the poor lad was finally caught and "merrit", Natalie had the whole audience singing along. A real tradition bearer in full voice – and still under 18!

It was astonishing to see such mature, confident performances from such young players. Through reels and slow airs, dances and laments, not a note fell out of place. They might have missed Burns Night, said the students, but they'd sing "Auld Lang Syne" anyway – and their new, refreshing arrangement met with noisy approval.

The Young Trads, having spun their own amazing magic through the second half, called the Plockton group back on stage for a "big band" set. In a white-knuckle performance, Ruairidh MacMillan – fiddler and 2009 Young Traditional Musician of the Year – kept cranking up the pace. The youngsters rose superbly to the challenge, fingers flying right to the very last note. At the final bow there was a broad grin on every face. We've come to expect technical brilliance and musical excellence from the students of Sgoil Chiùil, but this concert has taken them to a new level. The Celtic Connections success is a real milestone and couldn't be better timed, as the Centre approaches its tenth anniversary.

It was an emotional occasion for Dougie Pincock, Director since the launch of the project in 2000.

"I felt as if the whole ten years was distilled into that one 50 minute set," he said. "Everything we do with and for them was there on that day. They were organised, professional...just perfect. The only twinge was I wanted to be up there playing with them!"