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Aw, fiddlesticks!

The S.F. Scottish Fiddlers take their living-room jam to the stage

By Emily Wilson - *Special to the Examiner*

It's not every day that you see 60 or more fiddlers on stage, along with assorted drummers, guitarists and flutists. But today at the Palace of Fine Arts that's exactly what will happen when the San Francisco Scottish Fiddlers play their concert.

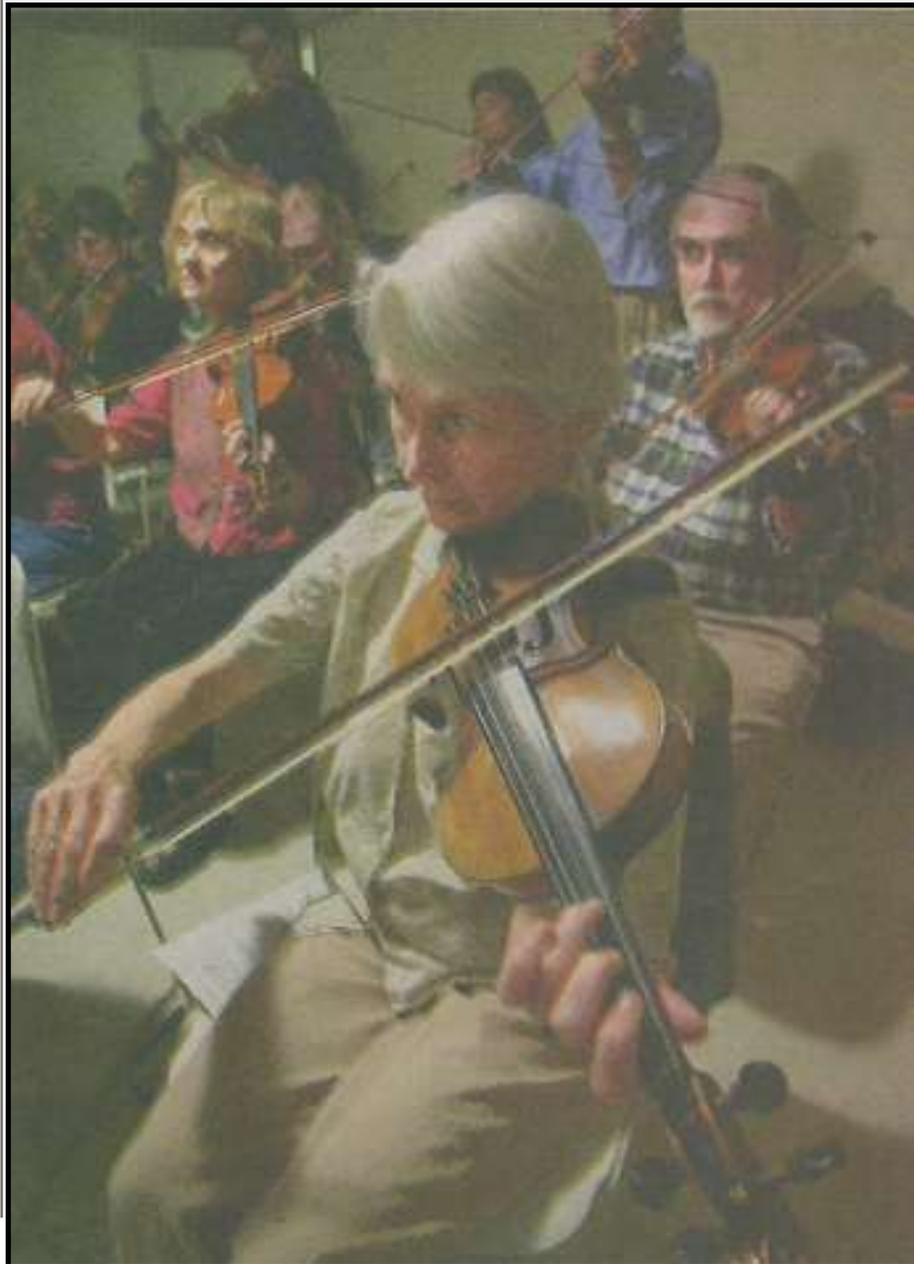


Heartstrings: Shelly Romalis feels the music as she and the San Francisco Scottish Fiddlers practice.

The concert is a product of what has become one of the Bay Area's liveliest acoustic-music traditions. On the third Sunday of every month the San Francisco Scottish Fiddlers get together in members' homes to play the jigs, reels and strathspeys the love. Everyone picks up a new musical trick at almost every meeting.

"Try the first note of every measure, try changing with the chord and try playing melody," Janette Duncan is telling the 20 or so members of the group as they sit around a living room on chairs, couches and the floor. People listen intently as Duncan teaches them to "cheat"- ways to play along with the melody even if they don't know all 31 of the tunes that they will play at the concert. Other fiddlers have taken over the rest of the house, bowing in the bedrooms, putting their potluck dishes in the kitchen, and having informal jam sessions outside. When the whole club comes together, the sound is surprisingly harmonious for such a large group. Played by so many people, the slow laments become more plaintive and the faster jams and reels more infectious. When you ask the members what makes the music Scottish, they are hard pressed to say, but they are sure it's unique. One member describes it as "like Irish music, but grittier." The strathspey, named for the valley (strath) of the River Spey, is one type of tune that is particular to Scottish music. It has long and short notes that alternate irregularly, giving it a stuttering, jagged quality.

As the group plays at the end of the day, the music starts out slowly and then picks up speed and builds as the fiddlers hit their high notes. The melody is enhanced as more players join in. A drum picks up the rhythm and encourages the fiddlers. It all comes together in a crescendo of energy, sound and cheerfulness.



A champion's inspiration

The group was formed in 1986 by students of Alasdair Fraser, the Michael Jordan of Scottish fiddling. Fraser is a national fiddling champion of Scotland, gives concerts around the world, has his own production company called Culburnie Records, teaches workshops and has played on several film soundtracks, including a little movie called "Titanic".

When members of the fiddle club talk about him they tend to throw around a lot of superlatives about his abilities as a musician, but they also gush about his warmth and charisma. Fraser returns the compliments, speaking of the fiddle club as his community and a source of pride. He says he is amazed by the group's ability to stay in unison while maintaining the individuality of each of its members.

"They come into alignment as a result of having played together and listened to each other - which is a very beautiful way to come into alignment - rather than being dictated to by the page or by an outside force like a conductor," he says. "I think there's a greater joy when it works. When it



Fiddling around: Cherry Clark and the San Francisco Scottish Fiddlers practice Thursday evening in San Rafael.

all comes together and it's coming from within, it becomes mighty."

Most members of the group have kept their day jobs, but there are some who make their living fiddling. Duncan, who is leading the workshop today, is a professional musician

who has played in Cajun and square-dance bands and for Scottish country dances. She also teaches. She says she has no problem sharing the stage with people who are less proficient. "You know in any kind of group or club the tone or the mood of the group is set by people at the top, and in this case Alasdair Fraser is our music director and he wants everybody to play."

Nervous but excited

Pat Lowers, a newer member, is nervous and thrilled at the same time. "Can you imagine? The Palace of Fine Arts! I'll probably be so awed to be on that stage I won't be able to play a note." Lowers, an engineer at Hewlett Packard, has a story similar to those of many in the group: "I heard the music in my Scottish country dance group (and) I thought I have to be able to do that."

Since the fiddlers play the tunes by heart rather than off the page, Lowers has been working hard to learn them all - listening to tapes in her car and at home to get the music in her head.

Lowers' dedication is typical of the group. A pilot, she flew from her home in Cupertino to Santa Rosa to attend the day's workshop. A few members come from as far away as Los Angeles to attend the meetings. And then there's Shelly Romalis, who used to actually leave not just her city but her country to be with fellow fiddle lovers. Romalis flew down from Toronto, Canada for years before finally giving in and just moving to Berkeley recently.

What inspires such devotion? Romalis says it isn't just the music. "The intensity of the music is wonderful, but more than anything, it's the community that matters. Music off the printed page means nothing to me. When you're together with a group of people who get such joy out of the music, that's what's exciting. This is the most welcoming, inclusive group I have ever been a part of."

Ages and backgrounds

One of the members calls the club a "polyglot group." Along with a range of playing abilities and professions - from therapists to scientists to park rangers - the players are of all ages. Thirteen-year-old Caroline McCaskey says she has no problem hanging out with people for whom the eighth grade is a distant memory. "They all act like kids. There's this winter retreat that we go to, it's called Winter Weekend, and Duncan, who's like 60-something, he had a rolling-down-the-hill contest with this 40-year-old. It was so funny."

Duncan Mackintosh, the aforementioned roller-down-the-hill, has been playing since he was 8. Mackintosh says he stopped playing classical music when he discovered the excitement of the fiddle. "People say that violin is played from the music and fiddle is played from the heart. Well, I had enough years of playing from the music." Mackintosh calls their concerts "celebrations" and is looking forward to the one today, saying that the group never plays without some members of the audience dancing in the aisles.

And this is just what Fraser wants. He believes that listening to music is not a passive activity, but wants the

audience actively involved. "I think what happens is people see the joy on the performers' faces and say 'Boy, I could be part of that, I could join that group. I gotta go buy a fiddle or a mandolin or something and join in.' Even really great classical violinists who can whip off the Brahms concerto will come up and say 'I want to play this stuff.'"