

Review: The Pipes of Christmas
By Paul Somers, Editor
January 30, 2003

Tartans Everywhere
Pipes and Much More

The solo pipes of the first star of the evening, Kevin R. Blandford, began playing "Highland Cathedral" at the rear of the nave of Summit's Central Presbyterian Church. The piper slowly processed down the aisle playing the stirring tune in a most dignified manner. About halfway down the aisle Jeffrey H. Rickard at the organ joined in. As Blandford reached the front, the full forces of Solid Brass raised the music to an even higher level of emotion.

When Blandford had reached the top of the chancel steps and turned to face the audience, we all thought that was really quite impressive. But the heart took yet another leap as the four pipes and three drums of the R.P. Blandford and Sons Pipe Band entered from both sides, hidden from view until the moment of their entrance. With that extra layer of sound, the effect was electric, and the audience was as appreciative as if it had been the finale of the evening.

Just as the beginning had been based on holding back forces until strategic musical moments, so the whole evening was constructed to introduce gem after gem and still have a finale which raised the roof. In short, it was like a well constructed fireworks show on the Glorious Fourth.

But this was winter solstice for one thing, and as for the Fourth, this annual Christmas program, presented by the Clan Currie Society, far from celebrating our Declaration of Independence, was listed as an official event in the world-wide celebration of "Her Majesty's Golden Jubilee, commemorating the 50th anniversary of "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's II's Accession to the Throne."

So important was this Royal connection that prior to intermission Blandford premiered a new pipe tune commissioned by the Society in memory of HRH Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother, who passed away during the

past year. Some Scots (and Welsh as well) may be secessionists, but this event had no overtones of that. Indeed, it reached well beyond the still United Kingdom by containing Christmas music from not only Celtic lands but Germany, Austria, England, France, and America.

Nevertheless, one activity of audience members was identifying the varied tartans worn by others in the pews as well as those of the performers. Needless to say, quite a few Currie tartans were visible. Certainly it gave my wife a chance to wear her Clan Grant ancient sash in knowledgeable company, and for those with a Scots heritage that is gratifying. But even many of those with no Scots background made sure to wear some kind of tartan design, a shirt or scarf or a blanket - something to put them in the proper spirit.

Mark Delavan was the musical star with the biggest name on the program. He is, of course, a major artist at the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, and Chicago Civic Opera (to name a few). He has appeared on previous Pipes of Christmas programs, always wearing the tartan of the Clan Johnston in honor of his Scottish heritage.

He sang "Baloo, Lammy", an annual performance, as well as other songs. The culmination of Delavan's offerings was Adolphe Adam's "O Holy Night", a song which showed off his creamy legato at its operatic finest. He also played guitar to accompany the singing of "Silent Night" by all present.

The other musical star of the evening was fiddler Paul Woodiel. Classically trained (he still works in that field); his wide range of expression was showcased in "The Christ Child Lullaby." Perhaps "fantasy" would have been more appropriate as a descriptor than "lullaby", for Woodiel's sweet melody soon gained momentum and became a lilting suggestion of Appalachian music. Not content with that he moved the piece (and

pianist Susie Petrov) up to toe-tapping speed as he used every country-fiddler device to get the audience going. The sound generated by shoe-tips of a sold-out house hitting the floor in perfect unison was surpassed only by the cheers when Woodiel and Petrov finally stopped.

But it wasn't all dancing. Many a Celtic fiddler can generate that. The full scope of his musicality and technique was shown as he played "I Wonder as I Wander," taking the final time through the melody in perfectly executed ghostly flageolet. For those who appreciate intimate music, it was a memorable moment. All the professional musicians sitting in the choir pews awaiting their next turn were visibly impressed.

Another musical highlight was a pipe- and-drum medley which cleverly combined a popular Irish march, "The Wearin' of the Green," "The Little Drummer Boy," and "Do You Hear What I Hear?"

Solid Brass, led by trumpeter Douglas Haislip, provided solid support under others, but of course they could also let loose with brilliant and forceful playing of their own. To hear them and Blandford do "Joy to the World," as only one example, was exhilarating.

All the above seems to portray a fine holiday concert and this idea would be enhanced by the presence of purchased tickets to get in (both the afternoon and evening concerts had been sold out for weeks). But for many the event was really a religious service. There were readings both sacred and secular, though the latter always had a spiritual quality. Certainly Frederick C. Clark reading the final portion of Dylan Thomas's "A Child's Christmas in Wales" was as holy as the poet says it was.

And the annual reading in full dialect of the second chapter of Luke by Scotsman Evan T. Cattanach was not just a show of Scots linguistic pride but a reverence which concluded with appropriate silence from the congregation. The connecting threads which drew the listeners through the program were supplied by narrator Susan Porterfield Currie, who has a voice one could listen to for hours. All three have been

part of the service in past years and are what turns the concert into a service.

That service concluded with all the performers singing and playing "O Come All ye Faithful" as if it were the conclusion of the evening. But there was a recession, if you will, and it was as secular and nationalistic as can be. All the musicians - five pipers, five drummers (three from Blandford and two from Solid Brass), brass and full organ - let loose with "Scotland the Brave," that grand march which is the national anthem, as it were, of Scotland.

It set the whole audience clapping rhythmically, stomping, and the uttering of the occasional "whoop". The applause at the conclusion was loud and long and came to an end only when Clan president Robert Currie wished everyone a Merry Christmas.

We'd like to think the Queen would have been pleased with the evening. We certainly were.