

“Pipes of Christmas”
Saturday, December 16, 2006
By Paul M. Somers

The Pipes of Christmas. Kevin Ray Blandford Memorial Pipe Band, Jeffrey H. Rickard (solo piper); Local Hero: Christopher Layer (pipes of various sorts), Susie Petrov (piano), Paul Woodiel (fiddle); Solid Brass; Jennifer Port (harp), Mark Delavan (bass-baritone), with Andrew Weir, Susan Currie, and Evan Thomson Cattanach (speakers). Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City. (Also performed on Sunday, December 17, in Central Presbyterian Church, Summit, NJ.)

The inimitable “The Pipes of Christmas” concert came to New York City for the first time. After seven years in Summit, producer Robert Currie decided that the eighth year was the time for such a special concert to be offered in the Big Apple as well as to the old New Jersey constituency.

Venerable Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church at 73rd Street in Manhattan is not as long as Central Presbyterian in Summit. It is wood and plaster, while Central is stone, so the acoustic is different. Madison Avenue has balconies on three sides which allow for comparable seating numbers as Central’s long nave. Madison Avenue feels warmer with its woody closeness, while Central feels more majestic and stonily monumental. Both work well, if differently, in support of the widely varied music of the concert.

The opening of the program traditionally features solo piper Matt Nonnemacher processing down the aisle while playing *Highland Cathedral*. The gradual inclusion of the pipe corps with drums, the organ, and finally Solid Brass raised the adrenalin level immediately. In Summit this is a longish walk with the incremental additions begun well before Rickard has reached the altar, while in New York the drama was lessened by his early arrival down the shorter aisle. But for those in the audience who had never been to Summit, it was dramatic enough to leave a grand impression.

Every year that he can be part of the concert, Metropolitan Opera bass Mark Delavan, wearing his Mackenzie tartan, sings *Baloo, Lammy*. This time he had the support of Local Hero, the combination of uilleann pipes, fiddle, and piano. He floated the final note with an ethereal *pianissimo. He performed *O Holy Night* with just as emotional effect later in the concert.

Another high point was harpist Jennifer Port playing the famous Welsh carol *Suo gan* on the harp. The resulting silence was filled with more approbation than the loudest applause.

When she and Delavan sang together in *Silent Night* he backed off so as not to overwhelm Ms. Port and they created one of the most exquisite moments of the evening. That Paul Woodiel’s fiddle joined in only raised the effectiveness.

Those pipes fans that came to see pipes and drums certainly got their fill. The second half of the program began with a lengthy medley which not only was musically satisfying, but showy. The lead drummer juggled his sticks while playing, and the bass drummers had their beaters whirling around in front and above them, all the while missing not one stroke. After the concert a host of adults and kids flocked forward to ask about all the tricks.

Another annual favorite is the so-called "Hymn to the Savior." Every year it begins with some fairly meditative and pastorate sounding music played by fiddler Woodiel and uilleann piper/penny-whistler/recorder player Chris Layer, this year including pianist Susie Petrov (who is Scottish on her mother's side) — in short, Local Hero. But within a minute or two they up the tempo and kick the beat into gear, and the rest is a foot-stomping romp, which on this occasion (as in the past) resulted in cheers from the crowd when it ended.

Another Local Hero tradition has become their performance of the American song *I Wonder as I Wander*. Woodiel's slow fiddle solo playing the haunting melody on *harmonics is the one passage that leaves the musicians on stage and in the audience gasping. One old timer mentioned to me that hearing that every year is alone worth the price of admission.

Though put forward as a concert, and here described as one, the evening is actually quite religious. This was no secular Christmas being celebrated; Santa Claus, Frosty, et al., were nowhere to be seen or heard. Susan Currie's sweet voice and descriptive words flowed serenely, drawing us into the mystery of the birth of Jesus. And Evan Cattanach's dialect reading of the Lukean Christmas story was as delicious as ever. Andrew Weir read the opening and closing pages of Welshman Dylan Thomas's classic *A Child's Christmas in Wales* as well as I've ever heard it read.

Many other selections combined the musical forces: the fist Act's finale of *Amazing Grace* raised the roof a few inches, and the solo sleigh bells opening *Angels We Have Heard On High* suggested that a Mahler Fourth was about the break out.

But no matter how fantastic *O Come All Ye Faithful*, the final carol of the evening, was — and it was — old hands knew that the next word — "Finale" — was the real rabble-rouser of the evening. Already it was a Scottish event with many attendees in kilts representing many clans in addition to Currie. So when the whole ensemble lit into *Scotland the Brave* the audience understandably went wild. This was no longer a religious Christmas celebration! One bar of that tune got the juices of rampant nationalism flowing and raised the end of the concert to a hootin' and hollerin' height of excitement.

This did not pay off in great enthusiasm among the assembled throng when I informally polled them about the possibilities for Scottish independence as they left. It is currently a very big issue in the old country. There were a few chuckles, there were those who were for it in principal but didn't believe it would happen, and there were many who simply said they hoped for economic reasons that it would not happen. Only a very few were unabashedly for independence.

But everyone, no matter their opinion on independence, raved about the great feeling of Scottish pride imported from New Jersey to New York by the Clan Currie and its rousing concert.