

Proposal – Alistair Iain Paterson

My application for the Saltire Society International Travel Bursary for Music is to assist in a research, study and cultural immersion trip to Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia in Canada.

Cape Breton Island is renowned for its thriving culture of traditional music, which was carried over to Canada predominantly by Scottish emigrants in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This mass emigration of Scots was as a direct result of the Scottish Highland Clearances, which saw thousands of people evicted from their homes by landowners and is now recognised to have impacted heavily on a decline in Scottish Highland and Gaelic culture. However due to the high number of Scottish emigrants who settled in Cape Breton during this period, many aspects of Scottish Gaelic culture were retained and established in the region. Traditional music brought over by the original settlers is one aspect that has been strongly preserved in Cape Breton culture to this day, and can be recognised in the playing of many musicians from this area, particularly fiddlers.

Cape Breton fiddle playing is synonymous with piano accompaniment however, and the characteristic style of Cape Breton piano playing is of personal interest – from both a research point of view and as a piano player working in traditional music. This style of piano playing developed predominantly throughout the 20th century and was certainly influenced by other styles from across North America (such as ragtime and early jazz). I would be interested to research the origins and development of Cape Breton piano playing. This trip would allow me to visit archives that would be useful in this research, such as The Celtic Music Interpretative Center in Judique, and specialist departments such as the Center for Cape Breton Studies at Cape Breton University in Sydney.

As part of my trip I would also propose to visit various towns and communities in Cape Breton that have strong musical legacies connected to Scotland, and to meet with descendants of the original settlers. A route across the Western side of Cape Breton known as “The Ceilidh Trail” (where many of the place-names are in Gaelic) contains hotspots for ceilidhs or informal gatherings of traditional musicians. I propose to travel across this route to find and participate in some of these gatherings, hoping to meet with local musicians to learn from and exchange ideas from both our traditions. I believe an experience like this would be an excellent opportunity to expand and share my repertoire, and to inform my own music stylistically.

This bursary would assist in funding the travel costs from Scotland to Cape Breton (economy flights) and would also contribute towards accommodation whilst on my trip. All other costs associated with the trip would be funded by myself. I am passionate about traditional music and fascinated to continue discovering how Scottish culture has been carried across the world. I believe this trip would allow me to lay foundations for future research in my career and would develop my own musical and personal horizons.

Biography – Alistair Iain Paterson

I am a 24 year old musician from the village of Bishopton, just west of Glasgow. However, most of my family are from the Outer Hebrides and Highlands of Scotland, so I grew up steeped in traditional and Gaelic music from a young age. I began learning the bagpipes when I was 10 years old and the piano at age 12.

In 2009 I won a scholarship to attend the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (then the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama) on the BA Scottish Music course studying principal study traditional piano. I graduated in 2013 with first class honours and was fortunate to win three other scholarships throughout my studies, most notably the Martyn Bennett Memorial Award in 2012 for “a student who shows both talent and creativity with a sense of adventure”. As part of my degree course, I carried out significant folklore research projects and a dissertation on recognised tradition bearers of Scottish piano playing such as Elizabeth Stewart and Duncan Morison. In 2013 I also achieved a licentiate diploma in Scottish music from the London College of Music.

Since graduating from RCS in 2013 I have been working full time as a freelance musician mainly in the fields of performance, teaching and recording. I perform regularly with various musicians and ensembles on the Scottish traditional music scene such as Barluath, Robyn Stapleton, Patsy Reid and The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland. Notable performances have included a trip to Washington DC in 2011 with Barluath as part of the Scottish Government’s St Andrews Day celebrations in the city, a trip to Olinda, Brazil with the James Mackenzie Band to perform at the MIMO Festival in 2014, and an appearance at this year’s Lorient Festival in France with the Robyn Stapleton Band.

In 2013/14 I toured throughout the Highlands and Islands with the National Theatre of Scotland production “A Little Bird Blown Off Course” which was based on the life and work of eminent American folklorist Margaret Fay-Shaw and earlier this year performed with the show “The Boy and the Bunnet” – a story written in the Scots language and set to music for children. I have recorded several times for television and recently was part of BBC Alba’s programme ‘Port’ - which looks at the musical connections between Scotland and Ireland. In 2014 I was a finalist in the BBC Radio Scotland Young Traditional Musician of the Year.

I am also a keen piper and have been a member of Johnstone Pipe Band since 2003. In both 2014 and 2015 the band won world championship titles at the annual competition in Glasgow.

I teach music privately and occasionally in schools and am passionate about passing music onto others. In 2014 I was accepted onto the Live Music Now Scotland scheme, and since joining I have particularly enjoyed the variety of performance, learning, outreach and development opportunities that have arisen from this.