

Making media connections

Jane Donald reflects on the personal character of the Celtic Connections festival



From humble beginnings the Celtic Connections festival has grown from a single-venue event to a network of performances by an impressive array of international and local artists in 14 venues across Glasgow. In its first year the festival had its critics, several in the media, who predicted failure. Fifteen years on they have been proved wrong and indeed many of them are now established allies and supporters. In January 1994, 35,000 people gathered to celebrate Celtic culture during the first Celtic Connections festival in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. In January 2008 total attendances reached 120,000, demonstrating an economic benefit of £7.9 million to the Scottish economy. So it's big and it's visible in Glasgow, Scotland and beyond.

The fundamental aim of the festival is to build connections, networks and relationships through traditional music and culture. This ethos of connecting networks is also reflected in the management of the event. As a team we carefully nurture sets of varied relationships and develop networks that include artists, audiences, school children, teachers, journalists, broadcasters, workshop leaders, venue managers, stage crew, drivers, festival friends, sponsors, funders, tourists, government bodies and volunteers.

For those of us who work on the festival, understanding these relationships has been central to developing audiences, attracting artists, satisfying sponsors, stimulating the local economy and interesting the media. It is our relationship with the

media that I have been most continuously involved with since joining Glasgow's Concert Halls in 1998.

During the first six years of the festival the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall's own staff developed the press office in-house. Building personal contacts, using word of mouth and ensuring excellent knowledge of the music was a tactic that resulted in friendly local press coverage and formed an important basis for what is now considered a tradition and part of the annual calendar for key members of the Scottish arts media. This approach left an important legacy, which the festival team maintain to this day.

Partly as a result of circumstance and partly as a strategic move, in 2000 the festival employed two professional PR consultants to review, manage and develop the press office function for that year. Over the next few years we improved our communications, upgraded systems and became increasingly hungry to achieve coverage across a wider range of media. Introduction of nightly e-mailed press releases, proactive feeding of stories and photo opportunities, the early adoption of a virtual press office and an increasing confidence within the team of our growing expertise resulted in a steady rise in newspaper and broadcast coverage.

By 2005 we had successfully coordinated our media relations with our marketing, promotions and performances. We established relationships with formal media partners who we continue to work with to our mutual benefit, including sharing print costs, offering

discounted advertising and jointly promoting strands of programming – newly commissioned works being the most obvious example. Significant numbers of local, national and international journalists are accredited every year. Our post-event media analysis demonstrated that we were obtaining placements well beyond our traditional core arts coverage. We were achieving mentions in letters, travel supplements, news pages and even featured in a newspaper cartoon.

In July 2006 Donald Shaw, a prominent promoter, musician and established authority within traditional music, became festival director and brought not only a new ambitious artistic vision but also a working knowledge of media relations. Donald's addition to the team, and other significant changes in the management structure of the festival, are leading to increasing integration between the core functions of artistic programming, operational planning, marketing, PR and sponsorship. This is resulting in a move towards a greater synthesis of our ideas across teams: Donald discusses programming with trusted members of the media; broadcasts are co-created with artists and audiences in mind; and the artistic team contribute practical ideas towards enhancing mutual benefits with our media partners. In turn the festival press team interact more closely with artists and agents, at an earlier stage, to understand the diverse strands and ensure the programme is communicated authentically and with integrity.

These diverse approaches and

different tactics have contributed to the ways in which the festival's media relations have advanced and flourished: from word of mouth, to professional media engagement, to an ever-evolving understanding of the advantages of colliding our musical and media interactions. Geoff Lakeman, *Daily Mirror* man and fiddler Seth Lakeman's dad, summed up his own connections when he reported from our late-night club last year: 'It's 2am at a hotel in the heart of Glasgow and there's only one way to describe the musical mayhem around me – it's a wild HOOLEY! For three weeks every year, a thousand musicians from 20 different countries are drawn, almost mystically, to this Scottish city, to celebrate their musical links at the Celtic Connections festival. Visit Glasgow any time of the year, but take my advice and book early for next year's Celtic Connections festival in January. If, like me, you have even the smallest drop of Celtic blood inside you (I'm a proud Cornishman), you'll feel right at home here.'



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