

Harp and fiddle duo playing from Leith to Linlithgow

Catriona McKay and Chris Stout play intimate acoustic concerts in Leith and Linlithgow this month ahead of their involvement in the massive Celtic Connections opening spectacular at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall in January.

The harp-fiddle duo from Dundee and Shetland respectively are both members of the Grit Orchestra, which was formed to celebrate the electro-folk music of multi-instrumentalist-composer Martyn Bennett, and each of them has also been commissioned to compose one of the six pieces that will form The Declaration, marking the 700th anniversary of the Declaration of Arbroath.

Moving between duo gigs and large-scale performances has become the norm for Catriona and Chris, whose schedule can include include concerts with the Scottish Ensemble, recordings with a Norwegian folk singer or a traditional musician from Mozambique, or in Chris's case, a gig at a jazz festival with guitarist Graeme Stephen.

Their latest album, Bare Knuckle features compositions that were inspired by trips to Russia and time spent in Brazil, two more in a series of adventures that neither of them could possibly have foreseen when they met at the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama some twenty years ago.

It was a far from promising introduction and Catriona likes to tease Chris by remembering that, back then, he didn't know

what a clarsach, the Scottish small harp that she has taken as far musically as she has geographically, was. Chris' pat response is that, in Shetland with its rich fiddle legacy, they didn't need so many strings to play tunes.

"I'd trained on the classical, or pedal harp and because my dad was always playing Scottish music at home, I was interested in exploring traditional music," says Catriona. "Someone at the RSAMD suggested that I approach this fiddle player from Shetland because he knew loads of tunes, so I introduced myself to Chris and he was a bit, let's say, non-committal."

Just before approaching Chris, Catriona had read a quote from a music lecturer that described the harp as a limited instrument. This was like a red rag to a bull and it turned out that Chris felt as strongly about the fiddle's perceived limitations. So from strained beginnings the pair struck up a sympathetic understanding. Chris invited Catriona to join the band he'd formed at school, Fiddler's Bid and her harp soon became a fixture alongside the Bid's four-fiddle front-line. Their duo also thrived, becoming a regular attraction at Edinburgh International Harp Festival and at Celtic Connections, as well as developing international links.

They've now made five albums, including one with the Scottish Ensemble and another with Irish singer-accordionist Seamus Begley, and have won recognition including Best Duo at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards 2018 and a Herald Angel award during the Edinburgh Festival in 2014.

"Catriona and I discovered quite early on that we both love colour," says Chris, partly explaining their longevity as a musical partnership.

"In music, colour can trigger emotion even before you choose notes or harmony and if you touch someone with colour you can draw them into your music and tell them a story."

They're both looking forward to playing at St Peter's Church in Linlithgow on Thursday 28 November and at Adventfest, St James' Episcopal Church in Leith's annual pre-Christmas celebration, on Saturday 30 November 2019.

"We're particularly happy to be playing acoustically in both venues," said Chris. "We've nothing against using a PA system if its necessary, in a big hall, say, but there's something special about playing with just the natural sounds of the two instruments. It's a more direct way of communicating with the audience."