

Fifield takes The Secret Path to musical expression

Fraser Fifield, the University of Edinburgh's current traditional musician in residence, releases a new album this month, The Secret Path, demonstrating his skills on one of traditional music's simplest and most portable instruments, the low D whistle.

Fifield is a virtuoso who can deliver infinite, deeply felt personal expression on the whistle, which on *The Secret Path* assumes the role that a saxophone might take as the lead instrument in a jazz group.

Schooled in both the Highland bagpipe tradition and the soprano saxophone, Fifield has developed a technique on the whistle that borrows from those and other instruments but is all his own voice. He is aided by the addition of one extra tone hole on the underside of the whistle that opens up possibilities for a greater musical range.

"I see the whistle as a blank canvas," said Fifield, who is one year into a three-year tenure in his role at the University's School of Scottish Studies. "It has its associations but to me it's a universal instrument. I think all musicians ultimately want to play the music they would like to hear, and it's been my goal to be able to play music on the whistle that isn't constrained by a diatonic

structure.”

Over the past ten years Fifield has worked on achieving this aim, helped by his domestic situation. Living in a flat in Edinburgh for much of that time, he felt sure his neighbours would be unimpressed by the sound of the pipes or a saxophone intruding into their day or night. The low D whistle, as well as requiring little physical work, unlike the pipes and saxophone, is an instrument that can be picked up at any time and played quietly so that ideas can be explored into unsociable hours if the muse strikes.

“It’s been a gradual process of experimentation and that continues,” said Fifield, whose determination to take the whistle out of its comfort zone has led to him working across the world. Indian, Eastern European, Spanish and South American music have all presented challenges that he has met successfully.

On *The Secret Path* he is joined by two musicians with a similarly adventurous approach. Paul Harrison, on Wurlitzer piano, is most often associated with jazz but is equally at home in Brazilian and electronic music. Meanwhile, drummer Tom Bancroft, also from the jazz world, has wider experience in African and Indian music and with the Grit Orchestra, which was formed to celebrate the work of Scottish folk-dance music pioneer Martyn Bennett.

“Paul and Tom are both fantastic musicians,” said Fifield. “I knew that they would respond and make the music come alive. I wrote arrangements that gave them enough detail without providing too much information so that there was space for the three of us to express ourselves.”

The Secret Path is released on June 30 and before that, as part of his Traditional Musician in Residence programme, Fifield presents *Piobaireachd*, an evening of film, music and discussion, at 50 George Square on Wednesday, June 14.

“I’ll be sharing the stage with my first bagpipe teacher, Dr Jack Taylor,” said Fifield. “Jack is an acknowledged and prize-winning master of Piobaireachd, the ancient music of the Highland pipes. So, there’s no pressure!”

