

TAS Weekend, Dundee – 4th to 6th September 2026

Report for Saturday Afternoon - 5th September

Ian Muir - My Life in Music

Ian Muir, RSCDS Music Director, started off his talk with a few Burns tunes. This proved very relevant when the audience discovered that Ian was “born and raised” in Ayrshire. His first introduction to playing a musical instrument was playing the cornet in a Silver Band in Dalmellington – germs clearly weren’t considered important in those days as he says he had to share the mouthpiece with someone else!

Ian’s grandfather bought a 32 bass Royal Standard accordion and booked lessons in Ayr for 8-year-old Ian. Surprisingly, he did not however play any Scottish tunes for 8 years but was tutored in classical and continental music by jazz player Jim Hutchieson who was friendly with Jack Embrow of *Sing Something Simple*. After 8 years practising scales, arpeggios and the left hand on the accordion and working his way up the grades, Ian sat the British College of Accordionists final grade examination.

As in most Scottish homes at the time, Ian’s family listened to 45 rpm and 78 rpm records of the Alexander Brothers, Andy Stewart, Calum Kennedy and through this Ian developed a love of Scottish music. He remembers at the age of 14 buying cassette recordings of Jimmy Shand Jnr and Jim Johnstone and this sparked his interest in Scottish country dance music. He says that started his interest in big band music. “

Ian spoke about playing with Kenny Thomson (the late leader of the Wardlaw Band who was married to Ian’s cousin). When the accordionist Ronnie Easton, one of the band members, moved away to Tyneside Kenny asked Ian to join the band. Ian had reached the final music grade by then. He recalls that Kenny invited him to play in Ronnie Easton’s Band for a recording of BBC Radio Scotland’s *Take the Floor* at Dunblane Hydro. Kenny suggested Ian come with him to Gordon Simpson’s house in Bearsden where the six-piece band was to rehearse. He remembers that wonderful “sound of a six-piece band in a sitting room” and took fright thinking he’d never emulate this as he had just turned 17.

Ian played in the Wardlaw Band for five years and took part in broadcasts on Radio Scotland, Radio Forth and West Sound. Ian recalls that Kenny was meticulous in life not just his musical arrangements and this gave Ian a fantastic grounding in a “discipline”. Ian feels that young people today do not have this “discipline”, so he appreciated that grounding.

He remembers taking part in a *Take the Floor* recording at Ardrossan Civic Centre. In those days two bands took part in the recordings and Ian Holmes was the other band that night. The next day he says he “got sacked” as Kenny felt that Ian had not practised very much! A few weeks later Gordon Simpson, who played in Ian’s band for many years, phoned Ian up and admitted that he had probably made the mistakes at that recording.

Living near Ayr he was able to play at the Gaiety (one of the Scottish Variety Theatres) being the accompanist for Andy Stewart, Kenneth McKellar, Peter Morrison, Alastair McDonald and then he made a number of TV appearances.

Ian secured a job as a civil servant but, because of music commitments, decided to go forward with music and became a private music teacher.

Freeland Barbour, from the Wallochmor Ceilidh Band, was the senior tutor of the Scottish Traditional Music Course at what was the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (now the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland - RCS) and he asked Ian if he would like to be one of the tutors. When Freeland left the RSAMD Ian took over as senior tutor and was there for the next 29 years retiring recently at the age of 60.

Ian developed a partnership with Mats Melin, the dance director at the RSAMD who was originally from Sweden, and he co-wrote the dance component of the RSAMD course. He delivered a block of teaching dancing, and playing for dancing, every Monday so that students could learn dancing to appreciate the music accompaniment.

Ian was invited to play the part of The Accordionist in the musical play *Piaf*. Rehearsals started at the Dundee Rep and then the play toured Scotland and England finishing the tour in London.

Musical interlude - Ian then played a medley of tunes from the play.

He said he really enjoyed accompaniment and working with other musicians and singers. He then mentioned that William Williamson and himself go back a long way.

Musical interlude – Ian accompanied William Williamson singing *The Dancing in Kyle*.

He says he feels that in the context of playing in a band it is important to relate to the audience when playing and show that you are enjoying what you're doing. He enjoys working with a band and building up a rapport with the audience.

Ian explained that there is a skill in being an accompanist. It is “an art form in itself”. It is important to follow the soloist and not play what the singer is singing - the melody. It's about using your ears and working on that accompaniment skill if you don't have music.

Musical interlude - Ian then accompanied William Williamson who sang *Down in the Glen*.

A question-and-answer session followed.

Di Rooney: When you play for a softer singer, do you play quieter?

Ian: Accompanists should “listen”.

Janet Johnston: In SCD a teacher often coaches over the music. How can a class musician help?

Ian: I use a single reed when playing for a class so that teachers can coach over the top on the music. I usually only open up and use all the reeds when playing the full 32 bars.

Muriel Bone: Orin Simpson recently attended the RSCDS Summer School Musicians' Course. How can we encourage musicians at the RCS Trad Course to play for SCD classes?

Ian: Students want to play “fast and furious”; discipline is the stumbling block. They don’t appreciate the full nuances of playing for Scottish country dancing. Currently Marie Fielding is senior fiddle tutor at the RCS so he will make enquiries.

Anne Robertson: Often less experienced musicians have problems with barring e.g. a teacher asking for bars 9-16.

Ian: The more experienced player should be able to count the bars especially if they have the music in front of them. I find when playing for a dance it’s important to know what the last figure is for the last eight bars of the dance. This helps the band finish the dance the 8th time through. It’s important for a band leader to be looking at the dancers and not to “have their head down”. In a 40-bar dance like *Lochalsh Reel* for instance this is very important.

Ian then talked about the role of other instruments in a band and gave an anecdote about playing in Asilomar where fiddles are the more dominant instrument in a band whereas in Scotland it is the accordion. Historically a six-piece band had instruments like two accordions, double bass, piano, fiddle and drums. In North America bands like Bobby Brown had a cello, recorder, flute and fiddle. The style of music is slightly different but they’re still keeping dancing alive.

He said that tunes go through phases; sometimes tunes which were once popular with dancers are now unpopular.

In the RSCDS recordings they use a traditional Scottish dance band style and this is a challenge for the RSCDS Music Director. He personally does not use drums in his band as he likes the pure sound of the accordion, fiddle and piano but it’s good to get variety and as long as there is a solid rhythm there is no need for drums. With regard to the dancers dancing a more complicated dance he says the dancers tend to concentrate more on the dance than on the music.

Musical interlude - Ian then played a selection of his more well-known tunes: *Dunaskin Glen* which was composed in 1978; *Mr and Mrs McShane of Houston* which was composed in 1978 and *Gordon and Andrea* which was composed for the wedding of Gordon Robertson.

George Watt: What do you look for in an MC?

Ian: Not too long-winded recaps or walk throughs as the band “lose their sparkle”.

Brian Rose: Do you play ‘the box’ for fun?

Ian: Yes, I play a wee box at home - a Manfrini wooden accordion which we bought when Jack Delaney passed. I did stop playing during Covid from March 2020 to June 2020, but my son said, “If you don’t play you won’t be able to play”. It was a kind of therapy.

Anne Thorn: What type of accordion do you prefer playing and have you tried playing the button box?

Ian: I prefer Italian accordions like the Scandalli. I started off playing an Excelsior but was advised by Kenny Thomson to sell it and buy a Hohner Morino. I didn’t like playing it and

regret selling the Excelsior but at that time I couldn't afford to have both accordions. Then when I started playing in the George Fleming Band in 1984, I played the Borsini. When playing abroad I use the Manfrini as it is more compact and can be taken on as hand luggage. I also use this accordion when I play for cruise ships as it's much lighter to carry onboard. I tried David Ross's three row button box and Gordon Shand's five row button box but prefer the piano accordion.

Janet Johnston then brought the afternoon to a close thanking Ian for his most interesting talk and also William Williamson for singing a few songs.

Report by Anne Thorn