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MUSIC



THE MAGIC LUTE

Rob MacKillop is setting out to trace the roots of Scottish music – and in the case of his chosen instrument, they are far more exotic than you might think. *Jim Gilchrist* talks to him

Amid the elaborately wrought vaults of Rosslyn Chapel, ensconced in the carved ranks of an angelic orchestra, are three lute players, one of whom is wearing what might be a turban. The heavenly lutenists caught Rob MacKillop's eye in 1996 when, with other musicians, he was recording *Greysteil*, an album of medieval and Renaissance Scottish music.

To MacKillop, Rosslyn's stone angels were particularly intriguing: "They suggest clearly that the techniques being used then were pretty much the same as what is still used in the Middle East. You can see the curvature round the edge of the instruments, the angle the hands are coming in, and the fact that plectrums are being used."

Rosslyn was once a major pilgrimage site on a route from Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Now MacKillop is about to embark on a pilgrimage of his own, to trace the roots of the Scottish lute and its music in the instrument's historical heartland in the Middle East. He has just been awarded a Churchill Travelling Fellowship which will take him to Turkey and Morocco, where the ancestor of the lute, the oud, is still widely played, both in "classical" and contemporary music.

During his travels he will study with masters such as Necati Celik in Istanbul, and Omar Metiou in Tangiers, as well as listening to players on the concert platform and in the souks and bars. "I'm going to tap into what is still a living tradition, using an instrument which is basically 1,000 years old – 2,000-3,000 years old, some argue; but which provides a medium for contemporary music."

While the medieval period saw plenty of to-ing and fro-ing between Scotland and the Middle East, through pilgrims and the crusades, MacKillop believes the lute established itself here via France and the *trouvere* minstrels who came to the Scottish court. However, the instrument's earliest origins are in Persia, whence it spread, not only to the Middle East then Europe, but as far east as China and Japan, where lute-like instruments are still played. Which is perhaps why MacKillop's fine album of Scottish lute and guitar music, *Flowers of the Forest* (Greentrax), has sold so well in Japan. Next month, before his Churchill Fellowship trip to Turkey, he will perform in Tokyo.

His ears may be attuned to exotic influences, but he sees it all as part of a "minor identity crisis" Scottish music is undergoing: "Lots of our assumptions are being overturned. Rather than embracing American or even Irish styles of playing, I prefer to try and look at the more exotic elements of Scottish music. If you listen to Turkish singers, for instance, the way they ornament their tunes is very similar to Gaelic singing."

He regards the resonance and depth of the lute as particularly suitable for micro-tonal playing. But while MacKillop is fascinated by the historical aspect, he is just as interested in the oud's contemporary use. "I see my journey as being symbolic, in terms of trying to reproduce what Scottish lutes did in the 14th century. An unfretted modern Arabic oud is being made for me and when I bring it back, I want to try and compose contemporary music in a Scottish style, so I can emulate in many ways how the instrument got here, and then take it to the limit." He grins: "At least, that's the dream."

ABOVE: Rob MacKillop playing in Rosslyn Chapel, where stone carvings of a lute-player hint at a musical history he is about to explore on a journey to Turkey, Morocco and Spain. Picture: Ian Rutherford

'I prefer to try and look at the more varied elements of Scottish music'

contemporary Scottish folk guitarists – "and I was one of them" – seem unaware of their fretted, plucked string heritage. While the guitar is widely regarded as a 1950s American import, Robert Bremner published his tutor for guitar, full of Scots tunes, in Edinburgh in 1758 and his Crail-born contemporary, James Oswald, produced a wealth of "classical" material, some of which features on MacKillop's latest CD, *Twelve Divertimenti for Guitar* by James Oswald, to be released in May on the ASV Gaudeamus label.

While we tend to suffer from compulsive pigeonholing disorder when it comes to music, "the great thing about the Middle East is that there is a folk and a classical culture, but they use the same instrument and are interrelated, which makes for a much healthier culture."

The Dundonian lutar, who also teaches at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in Glasgow, rejects labelling, describing himself purely as "a Scottish musician, playing instruments that have been in Scotland for hundreds of years. I don't do the usual lute-player thing of Italian music one day, French the next and so on. For me it's all about getting to the roots of Scottish music."

"So do I play for folk clubs, or for classical music societies? The disparity between the two in terms of funding was brought home to me once when over two consecutive evenings I played at a folk club and got £60, then the next night played exactly the same programme for a 'classical' concert and got £450."

The labelling problem crops up in the outlets, too – "classical", "folk", "early music"? One record store manager asked MacKillop where he should file his *Flowers of the Forest*.