

How to grow an SCD musician

With the impending retirement of Peter Elmes, New Zealand's most senior SCD musician, it is timely to look at how we find, encourage and nurture our SCD musicians.

Where do SCD musicians come from? About 75% are already dancers, either active or in the past. They may have chosen to play rather than dance due to physical limitations, or they may still be active dancers, but they bring to the music a background of knowledge and experience. They are Gold.

Musicians from outside the SCD family are harder to categorise. They may be experienced in another genre and looking for variety, or they may belong to a similar interest group (eg the Auckland Ceilidh Club), or there may be a social connection with a local dancer or musician. These have more to learn, but if they love the music, it's not all hard work.

So, having found a musician - or preferably two who can work together – how can they be encouraged to begin playing? A comfortable path can be found when a more experienced musician mentors a beginner(s) at Club nights, playing beside them to create a safe environment to learn. This strategy has been successful in Wellington and Auckland, with beginners finding their musical feet with a minimum of stress. It's important that the dancers are supportive, but don't feel they are being "used"; so start with your musicians just playing the warm-up music, until they are ready to add a dance set. Dancing or watching the rest of the evening will keep them involved – Tutors, throw in an easy dance for those who are not already dancers.

As experience and confidence increase, your musicians can be given feedback – it's important to know if one is "doing it right". Encourage them to grab training opportunities, such as weekend and summer schools with musicians' courses.

So here is my challenge for SCD clubs: early in the new year, take a look at your community and see if you can find a fiddler, pianist or accordion (or other) player who would enjoy playing our wonderful Scottish music. As your Music Adviser, I am happy to help with finding a mentor, and may be able to visit to provide mentoring and encouragement. Do ask!

Experienced SCD musicians have their part to play too. With the approval of our clubs, we can draw in new musicians and mentor them as they learn the craft. As they grow in confidence, we can partner them in playing for classes at region level. And as our bands become more solid and experienced, we can allow new musicians to "sit in" – to play, unamplified, behind the band at a dance. It's not always comfortable, but it's a great way to provide for the next generation of SCD musicians.

Which brings us back to where we started: with Peter Elmes, whose generosity and encouragement of beginners in SCD music has formed the foundations of the current generation of musicians. Let's keep the ball rolling.



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