



Niche voices

How do you get *Winterreise*, hip-hop, Berlin cabaret and Walton's *Façade* in a long weekend? Start a festival, of course. David Kettle investigates a brave new venture on Scotland's east coast

These are not the easiest of times to launch a brand new music festival, with sponsorship increasingly thin on the ground and audiences with less money in their pockets for tickets. But that is exactly what young arts administrator Sonia Stevenson and academic Michael Downes have done – and they think they've found a niche.

St Andrews Voices, which gets its first outing in October, brings a long weekend of music to the Scottish east-coast town. 'I thought St Andrews would be a fantastic place for a festival,' explains Downes, director of music at the university. 'It's got lovely old buildings and the sea, and it's very manageable on foot. And it's slightly off the beaten track, which is one of the

reasons it appeals.' As its name suggests, the festival sets its sights specifically on the voice. 'We knew from the start that we needed some sort of theme,' says St Andrews-born Stevenson, 'and vocal music stood out for both of us – it's quite defined, but it also allows us to explore all sorts of different styles.' Which means classical concerts in the early evening, and late-evening concerts exploring beatboxing, cabaret and folk music, among others. There's soul and hip-hop from London-based all-female cappella group the Boxettes; Scottish company Cabaret Chordelia offers an evening inspired by 1930s Berlin; and Edinburgh folk duo the Cast mix storytelling and music in their Chinese-themed show 'The Red Earth'.

'The broad programme came partly from wanting to be different, and partly from the feeling that it was essential that a festival happening in a university town during term time wasn't exclusively focused on classical music,' explains Downes.

And indeed, this university connection is key to the pair's thinking about the festival. There's an unusual relationship between academia and town in St Andrews, caused not least by the fact that while students are there, they number around 8,000 to the town's 16,000 permanent residents – in other words, a third of the population. 'Obviously this can lead to some bad press for the university,' admits Downes, 'so it's important that there are positive things that the university does for the community.'

Downes's role as director of music at St Andrew University is also unusual, in that there's no music degree on offer. But as well as providing stand-alone courses for other degrees, part of his remit is to foster links between town

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St Andrew's Younger Hall hosts five festival concerts, starting with Ian Bostridge's *Winterreise* on 18 October



and gown. 'Music is actually one of the most significant ways in which the university can contribute to town life,' he asserts. And to that end, he has set up a community orchestra, as well as an opera company and a choral society: 'We reckon the St Andrew Chorus is probably the largest choir in Scotland, and it's made up pretty much of half students and half townspeople – which is great, both musically and socially,' he says.

Bringing students and townspeople together is also central to the pair's programming in the St Andrews Voices festival. 'We wanted to appeal to the different audiences within St Andrews – right from the start, we knew we

wanted to cover a broad range of vocal music,' explains Stevenson. 'Outside the festival, there's a lot on for students, and higher-brow stuff for the locals, but we wanted to cross that divide.'

But it's not just a case of convincing reluctant students that they might like a classical recital. 'Our intention is to get audience crossover in all directions,' says Downes. 'So hopefully we might be able to persuade someone who comes along to see Ian Bostridge singing *Winterreise* that they might want to try something completely different later on.'


Bostridge's Schubert cycle is the festival's flagship event, and there's a connection with St Andrews even there. 'Ian Bostridge received an honorary degree from the university a few years back, so he was very happy to come back,' says Stevenson. Also giving a recital is St Andrews alumnus Ben McAteer. 'He did a chemistry degree at St Andrews and graduated two years ago, but now he's doing fantastically well as a singer,' enthuses Downes. And this, he explains, is typical of the university's musical output – and another connection with the new festival's theme.

'My theory is that the university will end up being stronger in vocal music than in instrumental music – if young people are serious about being instrumental performers, they would probably go to a conservatoire or a university that offers a music degree. Singers tend to develop later, so we get people studying for other degrees, but with an interest in music and who later focus on singing.'

Scottish groups also feature heavily in the festival's programmes, from a trio of singers from Scottish Opera to the Scottish Ensemble performing Britten's *Phaedra* and period

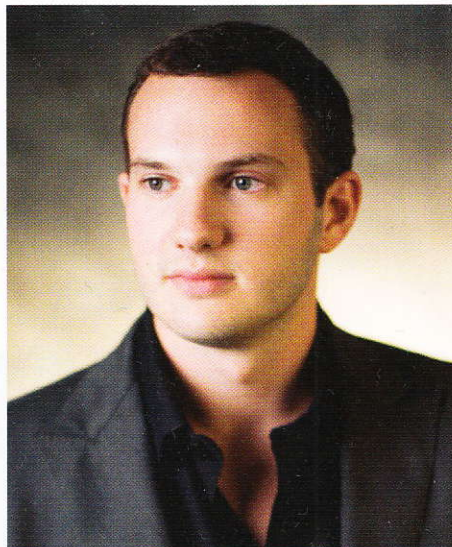
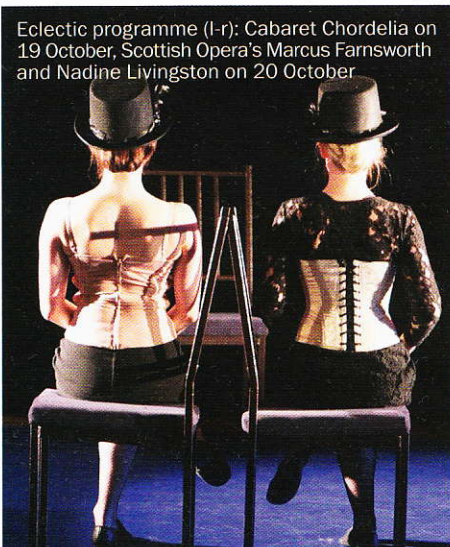
specialists Ludus Baroque in Handel's oratorio *The Triumph of Time and Truth*. How important is it to reflect Scotland's performing arts in the event? 'We want this to feel like a Scottish festival,' says Downes. 'Obviously we're a small country, so giving our own groups the chance to perform is vital as there are fewer opportunities than elsewhere. But we also want to give people the chance to hear things they wouldn't normally get in Scotland.'

Which, of course, includes Ian Bostridge, London-based a cappella hip-hop, and also chamber group Counterpoise who bring an arrangement of Walton's *Façade* with Eleanor Bron as narrator. 'We want to carry on bringing international stars to the town in future,' says Stevenson. 'We've got all kinds of idea for future festivals – we'd really like to explore more educational projects as well.' Downes agrees: 'We're talking to some groups in France and the Netherlands about participating in future. And I'd love to have some staged opera before too long.'

What about those economic conditions? How easy has it been to find funding for the event? 'We've had a lot of support,' says Downes. 'Audiences are very keen to have more events to go to, and businesses recognise that bringing people into the town outside the golf season is a good thing – the local business community has been very supportive.' It seems that with its clear programming focus and its level-headed understanding of its audience, St Andrews Voices has found an elegant way of dodging any economic difficulties. 

www.standrewsvoices.com/

Eclectic programme (l-r): Cabaret Chordelia on 19 October, Scottish Opera's Marcus Farnsworth and Nadine Livingston on 20 October



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