

# Nevis Ensemble take music to the people – wherever they may be



David Kettle

Our motto is music for everyone, everywhere. To me, it's like projectile music making."

Conductor and co-artistic director Jon Hargreaves is talking about the remarkable 40-member Nevis Ensemble, established only a year ago but already making serious musical waves right across Scotland.

Its philosophy is simple, as chief executive Jamie Munn explains: "Rather than trying to persuade people into concert halls, we're going to people where they are, and when they're there." So far that's meant community centres, shopping streets, libraries and museums – as well as care homes, homeless shelters, prisons and more – in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and plenty of smaller locations. And if you're anywhere in the Hebrides during the next couple of weeks – or indeed Skye, Oban, Fort William or Glasgow – that might mean you, as the Ensemble embarks on a hugely ambitious tour, giving 36 performances across ten days.

In among the community locations and public spaces, there are plenty of quirky venues too. "Last summer we played on the top of Ben Nevis," Munn explains, "and we did a concert at a life drawing class in Glasgow, for example, one in an allotment, another at a swimming pool." At one of their first gigs, at last year's European Championships in Glasgow, they even had Nicola Sturgeon up and conducting.

Nevis's co-artistic director and co-conductor Holly Mathieson has strong memories of the Ben Nevis experience, not only for its physical challenges. "We were accompanied by a posse of people from Glasgow refugee charity Refuweegee who helped us carry the instruments. I remember saying it was a long walk up, and one of them replied that the last walk they'd done was from Algeria to Croatia, which put things in perspective a bit."

One of Nevis's stated aims is to take music to marginalised groups, but



Nevis Ensemble are determined to take classical music 'off its pedestal'

its audiences come from right across all Scottish communities. "At the life drawing class in Glasgow," Mathieson continues, "we played for well over an hour with two naked models in front of us. Leading up to the concert we did wonder whether we'd all have to strip off, but luckily not."

Underlying all of Nevis's activities is the belief in the power of music to change people – to bring smiles to their faces, to offer solace, to encourage communication and engagement. "Sometimes you're playing to people who have never

team, and musicians introduce the pieces. Listeners, too, are free to respond however they see fit – whether that's singing and dancing, wandering around the players, or even being blunt with their criticisms.

Nevis has already given five tours across Scotland in its brief life, and next year takes its inclusive message to Europe, travelling through the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and France. Munn is also keen to establish a network of like-minded groups. "We're talking to organisations such as Paragon, Live Music Now and Tinderbox, so that musicians can see there's a viable career option in community arts."

There's nothing else quite like the Nevis Ensemble in Scotland, or indeed in the UK, and what it's achieved in only its first year of existence is nothing short of astonishing. Most importantly for Munn, Mathieson and Hargreaves, though, there's no compromise on the group's musical ambitions. "Nothing changes in the seriousness with which you approach your work," says Mathieson. "But it's nice to take down a few of those pedestals that we've put classical music on, and to think, actually it's folk music, it's dance music, it's music to grieve to, to get bored to, to love, to dislike, to have sex to – not that that's happened yet!" ■

*"We played on top of Ben Nevis, in a swimming pool, at a life drawing class and a night shelter"*

seen a clarinet or a trumpet before," explains Hargreaves, "and it makes you realise what a sheltered life you've led. We played one gig in a night shelter in Glasgow, and I was just in bits afterwards – you realise this is just a drop in the ocean compared to what these people really need."

To achieve its goals, Nevis has jettisoned a lot of the baggage associated with a traditional orchestral ensemble. Concerts are free to everyone, and freely mix pop, folk, classical and hardcore contemporary music, sometimes even chosen on the spot. Its two conductors are simply part of the

**The Nevis Ensemble's Hebrides tour runs from 19 to 28 August. For more details visit [nevisensemble.org/hebrides-tour](http://nevisensemble.org/hebrides-tour)**