

Jackie Lewis is a Grade 1 piper in good standing with the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association, with prior experience of bands in Grades 1-5 in the United States. She is now a second year in the Piping Degree programme at The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and lives in Glasgow with her husband Brad.

Jackie is also a New York State licenced and nationally certified massage therapist, certified clinical aromatherapist and certified kripalu yoga teacher and still works in the United States as well as Scotland.



by Jackie Lewis

# A week in the life of a piping degree student

BA Hons (Scottish Music—Piping)

**L**ET me begin by saying I'm not your typical university student. I'm not even your typical student attending The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland — I'll briefly explain.

In 2003, at age 18, I was accepted into the piping degree programme at what was then the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. I was unable to attend due to a debilitating automobile accident which occurred mere days after my audition, not only shattering my dream of studying music in Scotland, but eliminating my ability to play Highland pipes to any standard for what turned out to be several years.

Meanwhile, I had to then decide what to do with my life while managing a chronic injury. I chose to go into the field of alternative medicine (which had been my only relief during the worst times of my recovery). This process involved two years of depression and decisions, one-year of full time training, and then almost seven years of continuing education and running a self-sufficient practice in clinical massage therapy, aromatherapy and yoga.

I was fortunate that just before the start of my new career, I met and married my biggest sounding board and supporter, my husband and this stability meant that in 2008, I was able to start playing pipes again competitively. It wasn't easy; my injury meant that some days I played very well, and some days I played quite badly. I am quite fortunate in my piping support system and so I persevered.

My hard work eventually paid off with the opportunity to play in the World Pipe Band Championships twice (once in the Grade 1 circle) and also progress to the top of the amateur solo competitive grades in the Eastern United States Pipe Band Association. My successes and the feeling of burnout from my career led me to wonder... could I perhaps study music full-time as I had once hoped?

To bring you up to date, I'm 28, married and American. What business had I going to get a music degree, let alone moving my husband and life overseas? After much soul searching, financial planning and massive amounts of



An impromptu session with Sabhal Mòr students during a trip to Skye

paperwork, I was once again accepted into the piping degree programme and found myself and my husband in the bustling city of Glasgow in July 2012, nearly ten years later. And I was in for quite a surprise!

The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (renamed from the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama in 2011) is so named for its diversity in disciplines — dance, drama, production, screen, education and of course, music. A constantly evolving entity, this year saw the implementation of a new timetable and curriculum across all departments, which meant for a busy schedule for the first year Scottish Music degree students. Because of this, the schedule is still under development and as time passes will be optimised. Until then — we had quite the timetable!

MONDAYS saw us in Gaelic class first thing in the morning. We learned basic conversational Gaelic as well as how to say our instruments, places of origin and our names (if applicable).

Then Music Theory followed, with the entire afternoon dedicated to a new module, Introduction to Collaborative Practice. All first year students across all disciplines were divided into groups and over the course of the year had to present first a research project, and then a performance. It was an interesting opportunity to work with students in other disciplines such as production, dance, acting and musical theatre.

TUESDAYS were dedicated solely to Professional Practice or our three-hour group work class. All the Scottish Music first years worked together as a folk group to arrange music for the many concerts throughout the year. The afternoons were spent in personal practice, group practice or working on one of the many written assignments that would inevitably be due. On Mondays and Tuesdays, all classes were at the Conservatoire.

WEDNESDAY mornings started at The National Piping Centre with our History and

Repertoire class, exploring music as well as the geographical, political and military history of the bagpipe. Following that, it was back to the Conservatoire for a few weeks of Keyboard classes. First term also had us experiencing two hours of Dance (set dancing) every Wednesday, along with the second year Scottish Music degree students learning to play for dancing. The day ended for the pipers with another Music Theory class.

THURSDAYS were the marathon days of the week, starting with another Gaelic class, immediately followed by Folklore (an interesting introduction to what constitutes folklore and how it pertains to music), then a class in Scots language. After lunch, we would have either Performance class (where everyone signs up for one 10-minute slot over the course of the year to play for the entire Scottish Music Department for critique) or Principal Study Group (where everyone playing your principal instrument gets together). After that would be Singing (first term was Scots song and second term focused on Gaelic song) and the day ended with Integrative Seminar, a class which provided a general overview of the history and function of different instruments, genres and music included within the heading of Scottish Music.

THE non-pipers looked forward to Fridays, as they were quite quiet for them. However, the first year pipers had Principal Study Group and it was a popular day for one of the two piping one-to-one lessons required of the course. In addition to the two piping lessons, all Scottish Music degree students are required to take a second study instrument which means another one-to-one lesson every week. At different points throughout the year, Fridays also hosted Masterclasses, where different artists would come in and speak about their career, music, history, give advice and teach tunes.

Speaking for myself, I really benefited from having piping one-to-one lessons twice every week — it builds momentum and expedites improvement. One lesson a week is in more classic competitive style Highland piping; we learn piobaireachd, marches, strathspeys and reels while continuously working on tune idioms, bagpipe maintenance and sound production. The other lesson focused mainly on 19th century light music and Gaelic song-style piobaireachd, which is fascinating to see where classic tunes started before they evolved into the style we play today.

In addition to all the weekly course work and practice, twice a year in the autumn and spring is *An Evening of Scottish Music*, a concert featuring the Scottish Music department, as well as the department concert for Celtic Connections in January and the end of year extravaganza. Other smaller, year or class specific concerts happen throughout the year, such as those for the Composition classes. For the first years, one of the concerts we alone were responsible for was the culmination of a Gaelic Intensive week during spring break, where we had Gaelic language class in the morning and Gaelic singing and group work classes in the afternoon. The concert focused mostly on Gaelic and Scots songs, with a few instrumental pieces and invited guests. Following the Gaelic Intensive week was a trip to Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye for a few days of Gaelic classes, group work and interaction with Sabhal Mòr's students and instructors.

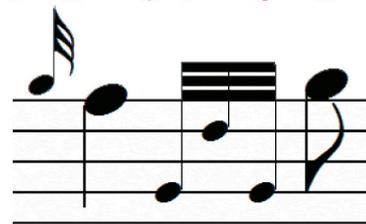
But I found out from my classmates that being a student isn't all about work, of course. Many of my fellow classmates play in their own folk bands, pipe bands or gig solo, and some also work more basic em-

ployment. Being in Glasgow (and a short distance by train to Edinburgh) means there is always something going on, whether it's a session, concert, workshop or festival. There is also the more mundane offerings of the many museums, art galleries/exhibitions and performance theatres — or just a pint at one of the many pubs and restaurants in town.

While the piping degree is challenging, through my experiences this year I believe that it was the best choice for me. As an older student, I try to make the most of the opportunities offered and because of that I am very vocal about what does and doesn't work for me. This hopefully benefits everyone as the course evolves and improves — as with most higher education, it also has its challenges which are addressed as they come up. Attending the Conservatoire and The National Piping Centre allows ready availability of knowledgeable people, valuable resources and priceless experiences to which I may never have had access to, being an ocean away.

What a person gets out of higher education is what they put into it, which is just as true with this course as any other degree programme. The course's aim is to allow pipers to study piping within the context of Scottish traditional music to the highest level. To me, this means producing well rounded, marketable musicians who can make a living doing what they love. That means a multitude of skills, including the ability to play a good tune and to perform at the highest level of their abilities. ●

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