Star quality takes the tradition forward
THE bright-sounding bellows-blown Northumbrian bagpipes, with their parallel-bore, stopped-end chanters and keys-enhanced range, have a musical voice that has been gathering growing interest, not least from folk groups and session artists.

They have a long history, surviving sometimes precariously within a local playing community, but they also have changed with the times and, most recently, have been internationally showcased on concert stages with flair and conviction by several star-quality performers, the most popular and prominent of whom continues to be the musically radiant Kathryn Derran Tickell, a piper and fiddler with more that 20 years of professional performance and 14 albums to her credit.

In 1990, she formed the four-piece Kathryn Tickell Band and, with the band or with her brother, Peter, on fiddle, or alone, has played all over Britain, and toured regularly in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and Australia. She has performed in venues ranging from small village halls to the Edinburgh Festival, Carnegie Hall, The South Bank Centre, The Barbican and at the European Parliament, and worked with performers like The Chieftains, The Boys of the Lough, and Sting.

In 1997 Kathryn Tickell founded the Young Musicians' Fund to help young people in the North East realise their musical potential. She is a part-time lecturer on Bachelor of Music (Honours) in Folk and Traditional Music programme at Newcastle University, and, since 2002, has been the artistic director of Folkestra, Sage Gateshead's youth folk ensemble, a project to help develop the talent of young musicians, aged 14-19.

In 2005, Kathryn Tickell was named “Musician of the Year” at BBC Radio 2's Folk Awards. And, in October the following year, The Sage Gateshead music centre was the venue for the premiere performance of Kettletoft Inn, a 20-minute work for Northumbrian pipes and ensemble that was written as a tribute to Kathryn Tickell by the distinguished English composer and conductor Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, Master of the Queen’s Music: “in admiration and respect for her work in making her home county come alive with a re-awakened awareness of its own musical heritage, and of inexhaustible developments and transformations of its traditions.”

In July 2007, she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by University of Northumbria for her “outstanding and inspirational achievements”. Said the citation for the award: “One of Kathryn’s most important and enduring contributions is as a composer. Her work is rooted in the musical thinking and practice of Northumberland, but it is also highly innovative in harmony, in rhythm and arrangement. Her music has been described as ‘a force for renewal, transforming traditional music from within the tradition’.”

"I think that, if I hadn't been born into the family I was, I probably wouldn't have ended up playing the pipes," she said. “My mother's maiden name is Kathleen Robson. Robson's a name that's all over the Border region, and she has a very strong identity in the valley where she was born and brought up: her family's been in that valley for 600 years and is related to everybody. She has a very strong sense of history and it's in her family that the tradition lies."

“Of course my grandad was a miner and my dad and dad's dad were shepherds,” she continued. “But my mum's parents were farmers, they had a farm at Warksburn, and she grew up with a sense of the community and the countryside."

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community as my mum’s family. Coming in from the outside, they were more aware of the tradition. They were more performers, so my dad would be singing and doing recitations and my grand-dad would be doing the same and playing the violin and accordion — and the church organ — and any chance they got to perform, they’d be up there.

“My mum’s lot would be sitting quietly at the back. But they had the tradition.

“So I got tradition from one side and performance from the other, and that was a good combination.”

Soon after Kathryn Tickell began learning the Northumbrian pipes, she joined the Northumbrian Pipers Society.

“There were a few pipers around when I started,” said Kathryn Tickell. “It felt like quite a big scene but then I was very small.

“There weren’t very many young people playing at that time, though. There was me and a lad just a few years older than me, Chris Ormiston — a fantastic piper. And it was great for me to have Chris there. He was a bit better than me and always used to beat me in the competitions and that gave me reasons to practise more. And, for Chris, he knew there was someone else hot on his heels and I think it helped to push him on as well. It was useful for both of us, I think.”

By the time she was 13, Kathryn Tickell had won all of the traditional open smallpipes competitions, and was also making a name as a fiddle player in the Shetland style she learned from the Shetland fiddle virtuoso Tom Anderson at Stirling University’s traditional folk summer school.

“At Pipers’ Society meetings and events, you’d be encouraged to play the tunes with variations that are a big part of the old Northumbrian piping repertoire: old tunes written before 1800 that used just the eight notes that were available before keys were put on the instrument. And there’d be these tunes with loads of variations. That was really encouraged within the society and it was great; they’re fantastic tunes.

“But, as well as the Pipers’ Society, I was very lucky because there’s a lot of traditional music on my mother’s side of the family, including a few pipers: not people who were going out and doing concerts but people who were more a part of the tradition and playing quite a different repertoire from the Pipers’ Society.

“They were more like what we’d call the ‘country pipers’, playing more dance tunes and it was a very different thing. They’d be playing much the same sort of music as the fiddlers. When we went to a relative’s house, my dad would always bring the conversation around to traditions and tunes and songs. And if anyone was in that house that maybe used to play the fiddle years and years ago, he would make them get the fiddle out and have a tune with me, and that was really very important.”

While her grandparents did not play the pipes, Kathryn Tickell now wonders whether she did not under-rate their knowledge. “They were brought up listening to a lot of piping and I only realised that a little too late to make the best of it,” she said.

“I’ve got this old recording that has about ten KATHRYN TICKELL in concert... “I sometimes meet old friends back home and I hear, ‘you young ‘uns, you play everything too fast apart from the slow ones and you play them too slow’. But it works in a concert setting. We do a lot of arrangement in the band and a lot of batting about of timings and harmonies. I’m not doing that as a commercial thing. I’m doing it because it’s what I really enjoy; it appeals to me and I get excited by playing the music in that way.”
different pipers on it, all recorded in the 1940s and 1950s. I played it to my grand-dad Robson and he named every single piper on it. I was amazed and asked him how did that. He said he just knew: ‘I’ve heard them; I know what they sound like’. He was saying things like, ‘that’ll be Diana’. And I’d ask, ‘who’s Diana?’, and that was Diana Blackett-Ord, one of a number of the Northumbrian gentry who’d got interested in the pipes in the post-war years, and were playing and encouraging the tradition. He knew it was her ‘because her pipes always sounded different,’ he said, ‘they always sound low, she played tunes that sounded lower’.

“I know that Diana Blackett-Ord always liked tunes in D and specialised in playing those — and my grand-dad picked all of the old pipers out like that, without any doubt and explained why. Even among the people who didn’t play in those older generations, there was a very strong awareness of the music, the tunes, the players and the differences between them.

“I didn’t have proper piping lessons to start off with, but, if ever I was doing something wrong, somebody would come out of the workshop and correct things I was just muddling along with. There were plenty of people there who would come and help if I needed it,” she said. “I was very lucky to have had connections with that generation and that older part of the community, the old hill sheep farmers; that’s where the tradition was in those days, in the ‘out-by’ areas. And I’d come in at the right time, when there were still some of the old players left alive.

“I’ve watched them go, which has been very sad; they were my friends. And there are some people who are keeping up that way of playing. But the community is so different and, even if you teach somebody to play in the same way as Joe Hutton, or the fiddle the same way as Willie Taylor, you can’t keep that going because you’re not playing it in the same situation.

“It’s really different today. You’re certainly not playing for the dancing as much. With the band, we’re playing concerts in the south of England to people who’ve never been to a proper dance. They have no idea of the context of these tunes so what we do there is kind of different; the speeds we’re playing at are different. And I sometimes meet old friends back home and I hear, ‘you young ’uns, you play everything too fast apart from the slow ones and you play them too slow’.

“But it works in a concert setting. “We do a lot of arrangement in the band and a lot of bantering about of timings and harmonies. I’m not doing that as a commercial thing. I’m doing it because it’s what I really enjoy; it appeals to me and I get excited by playing the music in that way. You do sometimes have to present the music slightly differently to people who’ve never heard it, tell them a bit about the tunes and about backgrounds and make it come alive for them.

“If I am back home playing somewhere local and traditional, I do play differently.”

Keys were first added to the Northumbrian pipes 200 years ago, four at first. By 1860 makers were adding up to 17 keys. This gave players the option of introducing more complicated variations to the old airs, and enabled them to play the popular fiddle music of the day.

The instrument Kathryn Tickell now plays has 16 keys and four drones.

“You can have more keys than that if you want,” she said. “You can have up to 21 but it’s only a little chanter and you’ve only got the thumb of the right hand and the little finger of the left hand to work all these keys. If you have too many keys, you can’t make it flow.

“I think it can become a bit of a status thing — ‘ooh I’ve got 21 keys on my chanter’ — and there are pipe makers who are varying things in other ways. I’ve seen people with regulators on the Northumbrian pipes, I’ve seen drone switches… they sound like a good idea, actually, but I’d never trust them to be fully in tune when you switched them. So I don’t have all of the new optional extras but I do have a really fantastic set of pipes.

“They were made by a man called Mike Nelson who lived in Cambridge, and they are wonderful. They’re insured but they might as well not be because the money couldn’t buy me another set of pipes out there that’s like them; in fact there isn’t another set of pipes out there like them.”

“My bellows are from my original set of pipes made by Archie Dagg — a shepherd and fiddler, piper and pipe maker in Northumberland — a bit of a character. I still have those bellows but the Archie Dagg set had only nine extra notes. When Mike Nelson was mending the Archie Dagg set, he lent me a set of his pipes with some extra keys to play with.

“They had F-naturals. I’d never had F-naturals before and immediately I had access to quite a lot of tunes I’d always wanted to play and hadn’t been able. It was great.

“Then I found a couple of other notes I hadn’t had before and started writing all these tunes with these extra notes in them and couldn’t go back to the Archie Dagg set… and that was it. So I went onto my Mike Nelson pipes which he very kindly gave me for my 21st birthday, and I’ll never need another set.”

“I began to use the keys more.

“Pipes have had keys for a long while. But I remember there was a bit of a reaction at the time from other pipers: ‘What’s she doing? What sort of pipes has she got?’ and I’d say ‘I’ve got the same sort of pipes as you… in fact you’ve got more notes than me’. ‘Yeah,’ they’d say, ‘but I don’t play tunes like that on mine.’

“The difference was that I was using a lot of the notes. Other people have the notes but choose not to use them, or use them to play fiddle tunes on the pipes.

“Andy May is one who can play fiddle tunes on the pipes and they sound great but, to my taste there are very few pipers who do it successfully. Because I play the fiddle, it’s easier for me. I choose to play the fiddle tunes on the fiddle and the pipe tunes on the pipes, but my repertoire is kind of different on the two instruments and I was writing tunes for the pipes.

“I was having a ball with all these whacky tunes and all these extra notes I’d never had before and, to be honest, some of those tunes don’t stand up now. I was just getting excited with these extra notes, but that’s fine, a stage you go through, getting to know those notes and what to do with them. I still play some of those tunes, but not very many of them,” she said.

“Personally, I love the very traditional stuff; I also like battering about with it myself. But I wish that the people who are trying the different things could also have an awareness of the old stuff… that would be my ideal.

“But, like I was saying with my tunes, I don’t think you can do any harm because, if what you do isn’t good, the traditional world rejects it. So you’ll play these things but nobody else will bother. So let people do whatever they want. If it’s good, it’ll stick and, if it isn’t, it’ll go.”

Similarly, the instrument imposes its own checks and balances, she said.

“I think people are often attracted to the pipes not purely as a musical instrument,” she said. “To play a slightly unusual instrument or an instrument that has historical connotations, that can feel a bit special. For some, though, the music never kicks in, and they keep playing the instrument because they are getting something
completely different from it, the feeling of being in a small club with like-minded people, or the satisfaction of playing something that not many other people play.

"But you can hear the people who are playing it because they think it’s a great instrument — they’re the ones I want to listen to.

"Yes, I love to play Northumbrian music but, if you hear a great tune that’s not from Northumberland, are you going to say ‘no, I’m not going to play that’? No. You’re going to nick it, and you’re going to play it. And that’s the way it should be.

"And, if you’re playing an instrument like the Northumbrian pipes, some of the tunes aren’t going to work so well. So you have to modify them a bit, and that mediates things. You’ve taken the tune from Scotland or from Sweden, or some classical piece but, by the time you’ve made it work on the Northumbrian pipes, you’ve kind of put your own stamp on it."

The Northumbrian pipes have increasingly been taken into ensembles, and along with the growth of interest in the Northumbrian pipes and of group workshops and other events that bring players together, there is a ready interest among pipers to play together. But the enthusiasm has produced its frustrations and thrown up implications for the instrument.

"When I started, it was very hard to play Northumbrian pipes together with other pipers because you were never in the same pitch," said Kathryn Tickell. "If you could get two sets of pipes that could play together it was a miracle and everybody was always battering on with their reeds. Then they kind of standardised the pitch... well, they tried to standardize the pitch. So most of it is now is kind of in F, but a few of them stayed kind of in F-sharp, which is what we started off with.

"Pipe makers are aware that pipers now want to play together and that’s led to a lot of massed pipes happening at various events... people getting together and enjoying playing with harmonies: three-part harmonies are definitely coming in. You’ll get groups of pipers playing together and there’ll be three parts going on, and it’s really nice,” she said.

"And we see mixed ensembles happening, and that can be tricky with pipes."

"In the teaching environment, with the folk and traditional music degree course at Newcastle University, for example, and at Folk Works, which is the folk development agency in the northeast of England, at summer schools and

things like that, there’ll be a pipes class, several fiddle classes — there’s always hundreds of fiddlers — with guitar, voice and so on.

"It is tricky and it’s kind of a false situation to put all of these people together to play but then you want to let them have the experience of playing with other people and different instruments.

"It’s exciting, it’s difficult and that’s the way things are going. It’s getting more ‘folksy’: ‘let’s all get in a band and play together’... pipes, fiddles, accordions, harps, everything. They love it.

"But it’s not the easiest thing in the world with the pipes. They always do a ‘band’ class and it’s always a bit of a nightmare when you’re leading the band class and you’ve got two Northumbrian pipers in F and everybody else has instruments that can play in G and D and A.

"I play the pipes virtually full time, and I find it difficult to integrate without either stopping the rest of the group from playing the tunes they want to play, or stopping the pipers from playing what they want to play. Or, when everyone else goes to A, just suggesting the pipers play along on the tambourine or something! Of course there are some people with G chanters, so that works, but I prefer the lower pitch F pipes myself.

"Although there are a lot more pipes around that play at around about F, it’s still hard to get pipes together.

"Actually, the pipes do seem to want to play just a little sharper than F.

"If I don’t play with the band for a while and play on my own, I find I’ve gone up in pitch: the pipes just naturally want to be at about F-and-a-quarter, which isn’t great when you’re playing with other instruments."

Meanwhile, the Bachelor of Music (Honours) in Folk and Traditional Music programme at Newcastle University, for which Kathryn Tickell is a lecturer, has produced several years of graduates. The course focuses on the traditions of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland set in the context of Europe and the rest of the world.

"Graduates have taken up various jobs,” she said. “They’re not all going to be professional musicians but we’re sending out great teachers, arts administrators, and some fantastic musicians.

"I was at the Sidmouth Folk Week in August and seeing the number of Newcastle folk degree graduates and students who were there in a professional capacity was quite impressive. I was quietly proud. And entrant numbers were up this year.

"It’s a broad-ranging course,” she said. “We’re not just looking at music from Northumberland, we look at what we call ‘the traditions of these islands’ and, in fact, beyond: we’ve had tutors in from Scandinavia and places and it’s an exciting course because it covers such a wide range of musicians and singers.

"And sometimes little bands come together through that course that are not quite what you might expect; the players just gravitate towards each other. So you might get one very traditional band and another that’s completely way out. And we see a bit of cross-over because we have other music degree courses in the university: there’s a popular music course, a classical composition course, an electro-acoustic stream... and some of the traditional music students have been experimenting with the free improvisation classes.

"Very interestingly, we have a lad called Paul Knox on the degree course at the moment who is actually moving towards a more traditional piping style in this environment. I think he’s been exposed to all of these things and he’s chosen to go the other way. He plays in what I have to call an ‘old fashioned’ style. That makes me sound like I’m disapproving, which I’m not. He plays beautifully, with a very nice, measured style and none of the flash stuff.

"That’s interesting for me because, in the midst of all of these influences to do something new and different, he’s decided he loves the music the way it was and he’s going to play it as well as he can. And I think the style he’s chosen works very well for him.

"And I see others coming up who might put the cat among the pigeons when they are a little older.

"There’s a young girl called Jessica Lamb, one of the most determined people I’ve ever met. She’s going to be very interesting to watch: she’s very, very good and she has that focus and determination to be the best.

"And there are others, younger again. I see them in the competitions and they look so confident — they’re smiling at the audience and they’re loving it, up there to win and enjoy themselves, and to perform.

"Things shift, it’s always been that way, it always will be that way... and it’s interesting.”