

The Vancouver Fiddle Orchestra

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Scottish country dancers in Vancouver are blessed with our musicians. At balls, dances, and classes they inspire us to dance our very best. Joyful, lively dance music sounds so effortless—yet musicians put in many hours of practice. Putting together a set of tunes for a dance is a huge exercise in itself, demanding great sensitivity and knowledge of the thousands of Scottish dance tunes.

One group unique to Vancouver in the Scottish dance world is the Vancouver Fiddle Orchestra. As the Orchestra's brochure explains, "The Orchestra began in 1990 when accordion player Ian Price met fiddler Tom Scott. Price had led the Schiehallion Scottish Country Dance Band for 13 years, while Scott had organized a group of fiddlers keenly interested in playing Scottish music. Together, they saw an opportunity to continue the tradition of live dance music for Scottish Country dancers, and at the same time provide a collective performing outlet for musicians with a desire to develop their skills in a traditional genre. The Vancouver Fiddle Orchestra was the result."

Led at first by Ian Price, and for the past few years by guitarist Janet Wright, the Orchestra has steadily grown in numbers, skill, and repertoire. Today it has 28 active members: 18 fiddlers augmented by players of piano, bass, drums, cello, guitar, small pipes, and Highland pipes. The sheer power of the music is a heady experience for dancers, "like a wave rolling over the dance floor sweeping all before it and carrying the dancers along on its crest."

With such a large number of members, just meeting for practices is a logistical feat. Yet the VFO practice regularly about 22 times a year, as well as playing for dances and more recently for several concerts. Members have a lot of fun together, and enjoy a couple of social gatherings annually. The organization is run by volunteers, with gratuities from gigs paying all expenses.

The VFO has also served as a seedbed for Scottish country dance musicians in Vancouver, having contributed musicians to a variety of Scottish dance activities. Players from the VFO also play with smaller Scottish dance bands, including Scuttlebutt, The Tartan Players, and the ceilidh band Calanais, as well as numerous small bands put together for one-time events. More and more, musicians from the VFO are playing for local SCO classes, including Burnaby, Deep Cove, SFU, and the Inverary Dancers. Individual VFO musicians have also played for area workshops, including the Love to Dance Workshop, the Bellingham Workshop, the Seattle Workshop, the Victoria Workshop, and TAC Summer School.

Such activities are possible because the VFO provides a nurturing environment for new musicians to learn and practice the complex craft of playing for dancing. The orchestra welcomes new musicians at its regular practices, and it has also hosted a number of workshops with notable teachers such as Pete Ctark and Calum MacKinnon for members and other interested musicians, especially young musicians.

Tom Scott writes, "Two people deserve special mention for the success of the VFO. One is **Janet Wright**, who, besides playing her guitar, has proven to be a great leader for the group. She has maintained and updated the masterful repertoire originally

prepared by Ian Price for Scottish Country Dances, and in addition has transcribed and arranged new tunes in the music for new dances. Janet has a nice manner and is well liked by the musicians." Janet has also composed dance tunes for the Vancouver Ruby Anniversary dance book and others which she has added to the VFO repertoire.

"The other is **Iola Pagnossin**, a fiddler and our Librarian. She assembles the music books for new members and keeps all the active members supplied with changes and additions to our repertoire for (can you believe it - I've just counted them), 334 Scottish country dances. In addition, she maintains the master set of them and the index of both that repertoire and also the concert book, which she updates and re-issues at least once per year. It is a mammoth job, and is a key to the group being organized to play for any dance."