

THE DUPLETS @ Glen Urquhart Public Hall, 13 April 2007

Article Published - 18th of April 2007

SUSAN SZYMBORSKI enjoys a fresh contemporary take on the traditional clarsach.

I DROVE to Drumnadrochit through the wilds of Kiltarlity, seeing the sun set from high above Loch Ness. It was a beautiful spring evening, the sort that makes you glad to live in the Highlands.

When I finally arrived at Glen Urquhart Public Hall, I was in line for another Scottish treat. Local harp duo, The Duplets, had stopped by as part of their 13-date tour.

Made up of Fraya Thomsen and Gillian Fleetwood, The Duplets is the official name for two long-standing “harp buddies.” Having both recently completed music degrees, the girls decided to formalise their playing and take it to public ears.

An intimate audience settled down in the candle-lit hall with BYOB alcohol (another fine Scots tradition!) intrigued to hear an act that has been described as having a “fresh” approach to clarsach playing.

The Duplets more than surpassed expectation. They played a varied set which included old favourites as well as modern compositions, many of which were written by the girls. Traditional waltzes, airs and reels were played with note-perfect flair, while contemporary songs showed just how versatile this ancient instrument can be, with bluesy sliding notes and a rendition of Wolfstone’s “Queen of Argyll” [originally an Andy M. Stewart classic from the Silly Wizard days - Ed.]

The Duplets’ laid-back and friendly stage presence also helped to bring the clarsach firmly into the present. The girls explained (and often laughed at) the meaning of old Gaelic song titles, translating them to be relevant to a 21st century audience. “Put the knee into the old man” was a particular source of merriment!

But more than being good friends, Fraya and Gillian have an even better claim: they compliment each other. Gillian’s competent, expressive vocals were only strengthened when Fraya joined in, the pair creating haunting Celtic harmonies. Meanwhile, basal plucks and high-end ripples created a full, vibrant clarsach sound.

With a positive attitude, real talent and a fresh approach to traditional music, The Duplets are certainly flying the flag for modern harp playing, challenging the perception that this instrument has had its day.

Seeing The Duplets is definitely recommended, but if you're not yet convinced, you could take a look at the requirement for any truly up-to-the-minute band: their MySpace page!

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