

Concert Review
Tauranga Musica
Featuring John Rae's Celtic Roots
Friday, 2 October at Graham Young Youth Theatre

Tauranga Musica wrapped up its 2026 chamber music season in style on Friday night in a concert featuring John Rae's Celtic Roots ensemble. Comprised of drummer, John Rae; pianist, Ben Wilcock; bassist, Jack Harris; and saxophonist, Oscar Lavën; the quartet has all the appearance of a jazz ensemble but performs none of the repertoire one would expect from such a collection of musicians. Rather, Celtic Roots explores the traditional music of leader Rae's native Scotland, infusing it with the rhythmic and harmonic soundscape of the world of jazz. It is the marriage of two distinct styles and traditions which couldn't be more disparate and diverse - yet, nevertheless, this marriage is a happy one.

The concert opened with Donald MacLeod's pipe tune, *Borve Castle*, as each of the musicians made their way onto the stage individually, introducing themselves with an improvisation. Rae was first, providing an exciting and colourful solo on the drums. He was then joined by bassist, Harris, then Wilcock on piano. After some vamping, the three moved into a very clear rendition of MacLeod's melody. The three were eventually joined by Lavën on saxophone who demonstrated the remarkable breadth and width of his talent and instrument before he, too, settled into the melody.

The Earl of Seaforth began with a rather moving arpeggio-like introduction by Wilcock at the piano which was perhaps tinged with a bit of melancholy and sadness. The tune and variations were most ably and capably delivered by Lavën whose instrument managed to capture many of the characteristics of highland piping, including the generous use of ornamentation and grace note. More traditionalist lovers of pipe music might, however, have found the rich dynamic palette employed by Lavën to be a tad indulgent considering highland pipes are incapable of achieving such dynamic depth.

Freddy's Tune, performed very much in jazz's 1930's stride (or Boston) style, began with a tune played in unison by both Wilcock and Lavën. Each musician would then go on to deliver thrilling and electrifying improvised solos on the tune. Lavën pushed his instrument in every which direction demonstrating his truly remarkable ability and mastery. Wilcock's solo also didn't fail to excite and entertain. Harris also took his turn to improvise a solo, all the time supported colourfully by Rae on the drums before the quartet all returned to the tune for one final satisfying romp.

Ye Banks and Braes was perhaps one of the most recognisable melodies on the evening's programme. Performed as a soft and gentle ballad, the "jazzy" treatment did little to stray from the original melody with only a few minor deviations. This was a lovely moment in the evening's musical journey and Lavën performed with tremendous beauty and sensitivity.

The ballad was then followed by a "set" of tunes (a march, a strathspey, and a reel) under the title of *Uncouth and Without Form*. The result was a truly remarkable journey through the various forms found in highland piping. The individual and unique rhythm of each tune was distinct and somehow wonderfully preserved, yet the jazzy treatment was unmistakable, refreshing, new and just as stirring as any pipe band.

The quartet followed this up with perhaps the most sultry and smokey version of the Irish tune, *Londonderry Air* ever heard. Again, Lavën did not fail to disappoint in his moving delivery and stylised interpretation of this famous air. It was made all the more enjoyable by the beautiful and sensitive support of the accompanying ensemble.

Jock and Sioux explored the various rhythmic figures found in the tradition of highland drumming - to which Rae kept fairly strict adherence. The improvisation over top by Lavën was truly impressive and even dizzying at moments.

I'm Waulking is an arrangement of a Scot's "waulking" song - a call and response song traditionally sung by women while working wool. Rae arranged the work cleverly to have Lavën introduce the call on the sax to which Rae and Wilcock would respond vocally while seated and playing their respective instruments. Ethnomusicologists will attest that a great many world cultures have similar call and response "working songs" precisely because they bring an otherwise mundane and repetitive yet necessary daily task into a

single, unifying, streamlining rhythm. The resulting effect is and was infectious. It was difficult to restrain one's self from joining in from their seats in the audience.

Rae opened the next work, a cheeky Dundee song, *No Regrets*, by singing the tune from the stage before taking up his position at the drums, after which the ensemble played an improvisation on the melody before Rae returned to singing once more at the end.

From the comedy of *No Regrets*, the quartet then moved to the more somber *Mo Rùn Gael Òg*, a Scot's Gaelic ballad sung from the perspective of a woman whose husband was killed in the devastating Battle of Culloden. The lament-like tune began with a sorrowful and stark introduction by Wilcock at the piano before being taken over by Lavën. Their delivery was haunting and brimmed with anguish and devastation - a poignant moment in the evening's concert.

The audience was then treated to a tune that which was not printed in the programme, but which provided much relief and revelry following the ballad. *Jock Steam à la Supreme* was a devilishly fast tune which offered saxophonist, Lavën one final opportunity to convince the audience of his seemingly superhuman musical abilities. Here, his playing was perhaps the most virtuosic of the evening as he again demonstrated the remarkable versatility of his instrument and his unquestionable command over it.

To close, pianist Wilcock introduced their final number, *Wild Mountain Time*, from his seat at the piano. By the song's end, all the instruments had fallen silent, and the only sound to be heard in the Graham Young Auditorium were of the voices on stage mixing with those of our own in the audience.

Disclaimer: This reviewer is the proud son of a highland piper. My father was a piper in the local regimental pipe band. He's also half Irish (as is evidenced by the incomprehensible Irish Gaelic spelling of my names), so, I also grew up accustomed to the more mellow strains of his Irish uilleann pipes filling the house. And because two different types of bagpipes just aren't enough for one man, he also played the lesser-known Northumbrian small pipes. Musically, I was teethered on jigs, reels, slip jigs, strathspeys, marches, and a veritable library of laments for good measure. Celtic music forms an integral part of my early musical DNA. It was difficult and challenging to review this concert with an open mind - to hear the music of my formative years presented so differently. I didn't know what to expect and it was with a certain degree of trepidation that I took my seat in the audience.

But, within minutes, my toes were twitching and before I knew it, my legs were bouncing as the unmistakable and infectious melodies of the celtic musical soundscape touched my spirit. What Rae, and his extremely talented cohort of musical colleagues have done is undeniably new, refreshing and different. For some traditionalists, it might be considered a step too far. But, on Friday night I became a staunch convert. For the first time in my almost twenty years in New Zealand, I felt homesick. Such is the overwhelming effect of any music when presented by a truly skilled, talented, and charismatic collection of musicians.

Thank you to John Rae and friends for an amazing evening - a night to remember! And an enormous motion of thanks to Tauranga Musica for a truly amazing year of chamber music offerings. The Tauranga music scene is all the richer for your unflagging efforts to provide local music-lovers with a steady diet of entertaining and inspiring concerts year after year.

Chalium Poppy
October 2026
Mount Maunganui