

Elora Festival ends on a high note with cabaret, spirituals

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The Elora Festival wound down this past weekend with two different, but very exciting music events.

On Saturday at the Fergus Community Hall to celebrate both the Fergus Highland Games and the Elora Festival some 710 patrons enjoyed a rollicking program with the unlikely title A Scottish Cabaret. Hootenanny or even concert would be a more apt title, but judging from the display of tartans and thickness of on-stage burrs, it was Celtic all the way.

Popular singer Alex Beaton opened the show with a collection of familiar and historic Scottish songs. Glasgow-born Beaton is a genial raconteur who can sell a song with guitar prowess and a rich, if slightly wobbly baritone voice. His versions of sentimental tunes like Come Along, My Scotland I am Coming Home to You, Road to the Isles and the perennial Scotland the Brave invited singing along throughout the audience. Roars of laughter nearly drowned lyrics to Beaton's ribald numbers (which rely heavily on scatological matters) but his sense of timing allowed for clear delivery.

Beaton's set seemed truncated, but there was much more to follow. The music moved closer to home with Cape Breton's Bobby Brown and the Scottish Accent Band. Brown and his group are deceptively canny, hiding their stunning technical and musical talents under a cozy blanket of down-home hijinks. Brown's a whiz on keyboards, functioning as both soloist and accompanist with ease. His arrangements for



drums, bass, two guitars, keyboards, singers (various band members took turns at this) and guest fiddlers deftly capture the spirit of maritime music-making.

Brown and band are television and recording artists, adept at various styles. Brown himself is a dandy host, at his rotund best when masquerading as a hick. As a dipsomaniac hick he's hilarious, and as the bearer of telegram tidings he's a master of garbled messages.

Between the comedy there was an abundance of toe-tapping tunes. The Cape Breton Symphony Fiddlers, four musicians playing both in unison and as soloists, are the tops in old-time reels, jigs and hornpipes. Sandy McIntyre impressed as both a fiddler and clog dancer and Wilfrid Gillis snuck more lightning-speed technique into a couple of jigs than one would have thought humanly possible.

The surprise of the evening (or perhaps of the year) occurred when fiddler Jerry Pezarelo broke rank to perform his sizzling version of the gypsy classic, Zardas. Reserved usually for so-called "serious" artists (and even then, only the most sanguine) this finger-buster didn't faze Pezarelo. Not only were all the

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notes in place (and there are a lot of notes) they were expressed in the tone and shaping that many violinists would kill to be able to produce. Why Pezarelo, bursting with talent, isn't pursuing a solo career is both a mystery and a shame.

Singer John Allan Cameron, a special dignitary to the Highland Games, also took the stage for a couple of numbers. Clearly a favorite with the crowd, his easy stage presence added to the party atmosphere. Cameron performed a handful of popular numbers, including I'm My Own Grandpa and Lord of the Dance.

In direct contrast, Sunday's afternoon concert at St. Mary's Church spotlighted American spiritual and gospel singer Laura English-Robinson. Evidently highly trained in opera and possibly lieder, English-Robinson possesses a mighty voice. Although a soprano, her range is both wide and even throughout.

English-Robinson has closely studied her material and become familiar with the bends, glisses, and declamatory stylings of 19th century spirituals. This was demonstrated in the a capella A City Called Heaven. In Balm of Gilead (also unaccompanied) she explored the harmonic possibilities of a single melodic line the way an instrumentalist improvises and spins out a given theme.

With the subtle, tasteful assistance of Leslie de'Ath on piano, English-Robinson was joined by Noel Edison's Elora Festival Singers for a resounding set including Ain't got Time to Die. Edison's choir offered a lovely set of spirituals on their own, proving once again that their blend capabilities are second to none.

Special effects in the form of well-timed thunder and rain contributed to the drama of the afternoon. English-Robinson was non-plussed as were the 300 persons who added thunderous applause following the performance.