

Piras opens up in style at village concert

Scalloway Hall

You might say Elena Piras had the highest mountain to climb at the Scalloway Hall on Thursday night.

After all, it can't be an easy task – being the first to go on stage on the first night of your first ever folk festival.

But if the Sardinian-born singer – who lives in Lerwick – was feeling on edge she certainly kept her nerves in check.

The talented Piras had the onerous task of warming up the crowd, but her deeply impressive voice was enough to grab hold of – and keep – their attention.

She described having quietened the crowds in The Lounge, which must take some doing. Her visual impairment is no handicap when it comes to holding an audience's attention.

Piras is said to have inherited her father's love of singing and folk music. In her youth she sang in church choirs and appeared on Italian television.

Nowadays she draws on inspiration from old Scottish songs, a number of which she has brought new life to. A speaker of six languages, she is now learning Gaelic and even performed a number in the mother tongue – “we'll get to that in a peerie while”.

Shetland, of course, is not the natural habitat for Gaelic tunes, but Piras – who may yet give the likes of Karen Matheson a run for her money – insists music has no boundaries. There certainly seemed



MANDolinMAN were in fine fettle at the festival.

to be no quarrel from the appreciative audience.

Next up is MANDolinMAN. It was, at first, a bit wary that four men playing mandolins might prove to be too much – if you are not a particular fan of mandolins there is nowhere for you to go, after all.

But the quartet of talented Belgians insisted they “come in peace”, and soon found friends in Scalloway with their Flemish folk tunes that offered a taste of their special sounds.

MANDolinMAN was formed in 2011 by Andries Boone to dedicate music to the work of his father, Hubert. He was joined by fellow mandolinists Peter-Jan Daems, Dirk Naessens and Maarten Decombel.

Their timeless tunes were original and easy to listen to, and the men held interest with their range of polkas and waltzes. It is not clear, however, if their promise that the CD vendor would “date” whoever bought all their albums in one fell swoop bore fruit.

All that might have given the Isbister Leaper String Collective a hard act to follow.

But the local ensemble – who played their first gig in the Fetlar Hall – received a warm response from the crowd.

However, it is fair to say the majority turned out for Madison Violet. The award-winning Canadian roots duo were making a welcome comeback after their debut festival appearance five years ago.

Brenley MacEachern and Lisa

Maclsaac did not disappoint this time round, either. They were joined by bassist Adrian Lawryshyn and multi-instrumentalist Christine Bougie.

Songs like *Tennessee* – written after an impromptu purchase from a vintage guitar shop – and *Las Vegas*, sung in tribute to folk festival stalwart Davie Henderson, filled the hall and grabbed the crowd's attention.

There was a noble attempt to get the audience singing – always

a difficult ask – with the news Shetlanders can sing better than anywhere else in the entire globe. Apparently it says so in Wikipedia.

Their songs spoke of love that was lost, with their sign-off tune *No Fool for Trying* featuring the heartfelt lyrics – You don't know what you miss until it's gone.

Still in evidence, though, is the duo's distinct take on iconic up-tempo melodies which contrasts nicely with their beautiful lyrics. Hopefully, it won't be another five years before they come back.

If Piras had the challenge of getting the crowd going at the beginning of the night, it was down to FullSet to give the audience a memorable finish.

They are quickly becoming one of the most well known bands in the Irish music scene.

FullSet offered an energetic sound that remained true to their traditional roots.

The band features Michael Harrison on fiddle, Martino Vacca on uilleann pipes, Janine Redmond on button accordion, Eamonn Moloney on bodhrán and Andy Meaney on guitar.

There were the usual foot-stomping jigs and reels, but highlight for me was the wonderfully emotive singing of Marianne Knight – although the band's banter with the crowd also gave plenty to smile about.

Ryan Taylor

Photo: Peter Johnson