



Scottish **Arts** Council

ARTISTIC EVALUATION – MUSIC

Organisation: Scottish Music Centre Website

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title

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Please circle the relevant

SMC Mission Statement Excerpt

'The Scottish Music Centre aims to be a gateway to the complete national music resource and a supporter and promoter of all of Scotland's music. The Centre exists to document, promote and support Scottish music of all genres.'



FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Finding the Site

I carried out a search on Google using a various combinations of keywords. The results of this search can be found in the Appendix. The SMC site came up prominently in some cases but in others the results were fairly disappointing (see the last 6 examples, as listed in Appendix).

Layout and Design

I found the general layout a little distracting over time, as almost every page is divided into sections, containing many further links to other parts of the site.

I found the type size legible, but bordering towards small, especially in the subsection signposts immediately above the text on the page and below the eleven Section headings.

The overall look of the site could be described as conservative. The pages often appear dense, with some of the more lengthy requiring a great deal of scrolling down. Visual images and photos are mainly confined to the event promotions, which appear cyclically throughout the site on the right side of the page.

SITE CONTENT

Section One: The Home Page

The Home Page is divided into three columns;

- the left consisting of a calendar and a site search box
- the middle, a list of site highlights, with clickable links to each
- the right dedicated to promos of events and music-related projects

As described above there are very many sections and subsections and it takes a considerable amount of time to visit all of these in turn. The order of these signposts changed in the course of my visits.

The eye is drawn to the event promos at the right hand side, as they are often illustrated and colourful. Covering a wide selection of topics, from concerts, to featured composers, news items, courses etc. it's hard to miss this info when browsing. A downside, however, is that some of the information is out-of-date.

Section Two: Catalogue

This section seems to best sum up the work of SMC, emphasising as it does the Centre's vast catalogue of classical music going back 4 decades which is available to hire, or buy. A reference-only option is offered.

Four subsections help the visitor to find what they are looking for. The simplest search can be made by Artist Name or by Title of Work. However to further assist the client, there is a complex but very comprehensive advanced search facility which allows the user to key in a broad phrase ('works for string quartet', for example) and find a list of such works. There is also further search help by way of a selection of provided keywords which aid quicker navigation of this very large database.

I found extremely detailed and wide-ranging information on the catalogues of artists across all genres. Key in an artist name and a fairly full or partial history of their works is given, although only a proportion of this is available in the online shop. I did spot a glaring error, attributing a CD to the wrong artist; however this is probably inevitable from time to time in a resource as ambitious as this.

Section Three: Concerts

Another extremely large database with a fairly complex set of search options. Searching by Scottish local authority area is a bright idea. A further set of check-box options is displayed down the left hand side of the page (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Rest of Scotland).

The section 'Rest of UK' is free of listings at the time of writing, and the section 'Overseas Concerts', on the two occasions I visited, featured shows as far afield as Madrid, Milan and Buenos Aires. I could not discern any reason why these concerts were listed, as the artists were not Scottish. Perhaps artists, merely by dint of being listed in the Concert Guide on their visits to Scottish venues, have then been cross-referenced, through the mechanics of the database, into the Overseas section. However I see little purpose or benefit to site visitors in cross-referencing to this degree.

One can choose a time frame to search for concerts;

- the day you visit the site
- up to 10, or
- up to 30 days in advance.

On my first couple of visits I was mystified as to the order of the daily listings. I might have expected alphabetically by artist name, however on investigation, I discovered that the order is fixed by the show start times.

It's unclear how the Concert listings are arrived at, whether by active compilation by SMC in-house staff from other websites, listings magazines etc, or purely on a submission basis by the venues, artists or promoters involved. Perhaps a combination of both.

The listings do not appear to be completely comprehensive; if they were, one might expect certain venues (for example GRCH, SECC, The Ramshorn, King Tut's, The Carling, Queen's Hall, Rothes Hall, Lemon Tree for example) to appear several times a week in the gig guide due to their very active music programming. However, having searched on the basis of venue, the concert guide appears rather piecemeal, hence my conclusion that entries may be dependent on submissions from third parties.

As is reflected in many other sections of the site, the emphasis seems firmly on classical music, with daytime and evening recitals and workshops receiving much coverage in the

concert guide, and only occasional and seemingly random entries in folk, jazz and rock & pop categories.

The Concert section would seem to serve the classical genre very well. Meanwhile there are links to half a dozen other gig guide websites listed at the bottom of the page, which will be helpful to gig-goers of a non-classical bent.

Section Four: Directory

The opening page gives a short synopsis of the various categories of music-related companies and individuals to be found within; Artists, Organisations, Promoters, Venues, PR.Support Services, etcetera.

On random searching throughout, I found there was a lot of hard data missing, and in many cases the Company or Artist names and industry category only were listed; no postal addresses, no email addresses, no telephone or fax numbers. Often this was attributed onscreen to 'awaiting Data Protection clearance'. In other instances no reason for the lack of contact information was given.

I found the Artist Section particularly bewildering. Running to a total of nearly 1000 pages with approximately 10 names per page, one might expect to find only Scottish and Scottish-based artists in this section. However random sampling found a number of musicians listed who have no ostensible connection to the Scottish Industry. (See Appendix for examples) I assume the reason for this is that information is cross-referenced in such a way that even a single appearance in the Concert guide automatically adds the artist to the Directory. This seems overly complex and I would suggest unnecessary. The inclusion of non-Scottish artists could explain the sheer volume of this part of the site.

At the time of writing, this is more of a list than a complete directory. The continuing lack of contact information is difficult to understand, given that a research document which has been incorporated into the main directory is well known to be in the public domain, having been published by Scottish Enterprise with all the contact information included. Much of this hard data is now missing from the online resource.

I would suggest that, at the time of writing, the directory section is of limited and, in many cases, no assistance to anyone seeking hard contact information, due to its inconsistency.

Section Five: News and Features

Items of news from the Scottish music scene as culled from newspaper and other media reports, press releases and websites are posted on this page.

This section splits into a further 7 subcategories covering Trade Fairs, Summer Schools, Competitions, Courses, Workshops Industry Jobs, and various official statistical reports on the Scottish Music Industry as produced in the last couple of years by the Scottish Arts Council, Scottish Enterprise etc.

A useful and very informative section overall for those interested in the politics and general goings on around the Scottish music scene. The Industry Jobs subsection is also valuable, as it covers vacancies throughout the whole country and gives a brief synopsis of the job description, salary etc., the only possible frustration being that many jobs remain on the site for weeks and in several cases, months, after their application closing date.

Section Six: Profiles

An entire section devoted to biographical and, and in some cases, contact information for composers living and working in Scotland, or of Scottish descent. Ensembles are also covered. This section is easy to navigate, the composers being listed alphabetically by surname, and often with their photograph. An invaluable section to those seeking information on this topic.

Section Seven: Education

Another shorter, more concise section seemingly aimed at musicians, school pupils and teachers in the main, subdividing into 5 further sources of information including the new addition to the site, the Composition Chart, which is aimed at young people between 12 and 19.

Details of the company's education and outreach projects are outlined, along with a useful section containing listings of further education music courses the length and breadth of Scotland.

Section Eight: Seriously Scottish

A compilation double CD containing tracks intended to represent Scotland's contemporary music scene, across a wide and disparate range of genres. Tracks are submitted for inclusion by musicians or labels on a voluntary basis. A track listing for the CDs produced to date is given on the page.

The product is not for sale in the online shop or in any retail outlets but is manufactured and distributed purely as a promotional tool to delegates at music fairs and conferences in the UK and abroad, as well as Scottish schools. The promotional-only status of the CD is not immediately obvious from the opening page description and the ordering of copies online is restricted to members of the public employed in music promotion only.

References to SMC's 'label' could be seen as potentially misleading to those visiting the site looking for commercial label or publishing outlets for their music. Many other organisations are committed to compiling and distributing promotional CDs without giving the impression that they run a commercial label.

Section Nine: About Us

A list of staff and their responsibilities within the organisation is followed by a location map, a description of the various services provided by, and a general overview of, the company, a list of its Board Members and various press clippings. This is a helpful, straightforward page with direct links to each member of core staff.

Again divided into three columns with rotating promos on the right but this time, a Directory search box to the left. I found it a little confusing that the latter should appear with such prominence on this particular page, when there is clearly an entire separate section devoted to Directory signposted above.

Section Ten: Research

This section subdivides into 4 sub-categories, and signposts the user to sources of help and other general areas of interest, the focus being generally very much towards the historic classical scene in Scotland. There is also a list of recommended general reading. This section is easier to navigate than some and would be helpful to those with specialist interests.

Section Eleven: Shop

I spent considerable time browsing the online shop. The layout of the shop pages is again split into three columns, with the ever-rotating promos on the right.

The shop-search conditions changed in the course of my visits and now consist of a main search box for the title of the work, with additional drop-down menus containing music genres and media to choose from. Should one wish to search the catalogue by a particular artist or performer, it's now necessary to use the advanced search facility, which struck me as overly complicating matters.

Should the prospective buyer know the exact title and medium of the work they are seeking out, the search works very well. However, an incomplete knowledge of the title is a disadvantage and casual browsing is even less straightforward. In addition, such is the volume of information on each page, that an inordinate amount of scrolling down is required.

Searching by Artist Name; This, using the advanced search, results in a list of products (if any) associated with the artist, along with their record label, catalogue details, and the price and current availability of products listed. When my research began, the year of release of CDs was included in the product description but at the time of writing, in many cases reference to release dates seems to have been removed.

Searching By Genre; The results of this search can be seen in the Appendix.

Searching by Medium; Full results in the Appendix.

Searching by genre and medium, I conclude that SMC's main area of commerce is classical music scores, followed by classical CDs. Given the volume of products in the latter two genres, it's clear that SMC is offering a wide-ranging array aimed towards this particular market. A glance at the shop's Top 5 sellers section reinforces this viewpoint. (see list in Appendix)

In contrast, jazz, rock, pop and indie are notably absent from the shop. While there is evidence that a few small Scottish labels supply products to be sold on the site, one must assume by their absence that the majority of Scottish jazz, rock and pop labels and musicians do not use the shop as an outlet.

In addition, many of the rock and pop artists I looked at were listed in the shop merely for their presence on compilation CDs (Seriously Scottish, Nemis, T Break) none of which are generally available from SMC. I found these artists' appearance in the shop somewhat misleading where there was no commercial product available to buy from SMC. Again, I assume this is a result of the cross-referencing of information across the databases.

I also found that, on random sampling, many of the CDs on sale across all genres were not current releases and often consisted of back catalogue products, sometimes up to 20 years

old , and more expensive than in many retail outlets, with the general album price being £11.99. Perhaps a positive slant could be put on marketing back catalogue items, as in many cases these products may be hard to find elsewhere and could be viewed as an artists' archive where applicable.

In some instances a product appeared to be available to buy until you tried adding it to the basket. At this point a short description and track listing appears, as is also found in the catalogue section, with no price and no way of proceeding to buy. I found this very confusing. I feel there is a strong argument to limit the artists featured in the shop to only those who have product available to actually buy online. Having to go up so many blind alleys simply trying to buy product may well act as a deterrent to further shop visits.

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

This is a vast and complex website. It took me many visits to gain a proper overview and understanding of what SMC designed the site to achieve overall. Does the site fulfil the aims in the Mission Statement? A qualified yes.

- I'd very firmly conclude that the main customers for SMC's site are those engaged, or otherwise interested, in classical music and that they are well-served by the resource databases and services on offer. However the sheer volume of information on the site can be overwhelming on a first or even second visit. Perhaps some simplification, especially in the cross-referencing databases, would aid general navigation and increase clarity.
- It was surprising that there seem to be no music downloads available.
- The site promotes SMC's classical catalogue extremely well, as it does composers' profiles, and provides a useful resource for educationalists, researchers, music students, classical musicians young and old, and those interested in current news, views and employment opportunities in the Scottish industry.
- While traditional and folk genres play second fiddle to classical on the site, these genres still have a far from tokenistic showing throughout. However, rock, pop, indie and jazz are far less well-represented, with much less in-depth information, fewer products on sale, fewer examples of hard data in the contacts section, fewer news items, and fewer concerts. It would surprise me if the site receives many regular hits from musicians and others working within, or interested in, these four genres.

There are good music sites run from, and for, Scotland that provide a service to the non-classical world, displaying the in-depth knowledge to reflect their particular genre more accurately, pro-actively and comprehensively than SMC does. However, any attempt by SMC to compete with other online resources would require a further expansion of an already large and complex site plus wider specialist knowledge amongst the core staff. Such further investment, however, might produce nothing more than a duplication of information from sites that already have a strong identity and reputation in their particular marketplace.

Perhaps it would improve user-friendliness if the SMC site was to act as a portal and provide direct links to more specialist, detailed sites for each of the currently under-represented genres. The Mothership, if you will. (Links to other websites were conspicuous by their absence throughout the site)

This could be achieved without compromising the mission statement. A 'gateway ' might add value without increasing resource costs.

Gill Maxwell, December 7th 2004.

APPENDIX

1 Finding the Site

Search Results

Keywords

Position on Google

music+info+scotland	Page 1, no 1
scottish+music+centre	Page 1, no 1 (re-directed from old site)
scotland+music+scene	Page 1, no 2
scottish+music+industry	Page 1, no 3
classical+composers+Scotland	Page 1, no 5
scottish+music	Page 1, no 6
contemporary+music+scotland	Page 2, no 14
scottish+music+industry+jobs	Page 2, no 17
musicians+scotland	Page 2, no 28
music+scores+Scotland	Page 4, no 48
classical+music+Scotland	Not in first 50 sites
music+scotland	Not in first 50 sites
traditional+music+Scotland	Not in first 50 sites
pop+music+Scotland	Not in first 50 sites
Scottish+musicians	Not in first 50 sites

2 Section Four: Directory

Examples of non-Scots (or Scottish-based) Artists in the Directory resource.

James Galway
The Stereophonics
Bloc Party
Francois Eberle
The Pogues
Mercedes Peon
Kings of Leon

3 Section Eleven: The Shop

Searching by Genre; results

Electro	1 page
Jazz	1 page
Early music	1 page
Rock/Pop	2 pages
Folk & Traditional	12 pages
Classical	57 pages

N.B. All categories listed CDs only, except Classical, which is a mix of CDs and scores.

Searching by Medium: results

Books	2
CDs	800 + (estimate)
Downloads	0
DVD	3
Scores	2000+ (estimate)
VHS	0
Software	1

Top 5 Sellers

- 1 Eddie McGuire: Amazonia (score)
- 2 Aly Bain & the BT Scottish Emsemble: Follow the Moonstone (CD)
- 3 Allan Neave: The Isle is Full Of Noises (CD)
- 4 John Maxwell Geddes: Stars over Carnac (score)
- 5 Various Artists: The Robert Burns Collection - The Songs (CD)

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