

REVIEWS

NORTHLANDS FESTIVAL

Vesterled

Waterfront, Wick

Christopher Bowen

PRESENTING the traditional dance and music of the Celts in a contemporary context is hardly an original idea; ever since that seminal routine at the Eurovision Song Contest, promoters and practitioners alike have scrambled to tap into the *Riverdance* stream. Most of these efforts have been so ghastly that one despairs at the thought of yet another attempt. But the marriage of tradition and innovation can be a happy one, as Mats Melin has demonstrated in *Vesterled* (Journey) which received its world premiere in a packed Wick nightclub on Sunday.

Of course, it does no harm to have a musician of Evelyn Glennie's calibre in the line-up, and her contribution, in the form of some richly textured and thrillingly atmospheric links (a commissioned score by Henning Sommerro) cannot be underestimated. But not even Glennie's exquisite phrasing or refined Marimba technique in these musical "comments" on traditional themes was allowed to dominate in a beautifully structured programme.

Melin got the balance right, shifting the dance from the gentle reels and lively polkas of Norway to the confined patterns of Shetland styles and robust formations of the Scottish Northlands. With the eight Scandinavian dancers dressed in traditional costume (long skirts and woollen shawls for the women, colourful waistcoats for the men) and the hard-shoe quartet in relaxed contemporary dress, Melin was able to demonstrate dance development without labouring too many points. The music shift-



In harmony: *Vesterled's* Keren Stephen and Andrew Gifford

ed ground in a similarly gentle, understated way; Hazel Wrigley's lovely violin air given a contemporary twist with syncopated accompaniment from her sister, Jennifer, on guitar.

It is in juxtaposing and, in some cases, melding these elements to that Melin has been so successful. Knowing exactly how the dance should flow and where to place Glennie's links, he had taken us – as the title of his piece promises – on a wonderful journey of discovery.

A joyous celebration of a shared culture

IN previous years, the organisers of the Northlands Festival seemed to struggle to strike a balance between the classical and the traditional.

They found themselves subjected to criticism that the festival was elitist, with any concession to the more grassroots music being seen to be just that — a concession that smacked of tokenism.

So congratulations to the organisers for getting it right this year with a production which confirmed that the musical heritage of communities in Scotland and Scandinavia truly deserves its place.

Sunday's performance of *Vesterled* was a triumph. The combination of world-class percussion from Evelyn Glennie, accomplished fiddle, pipe and guitar music and

enthusiastic traditional dancing proved an irresistible and heady mix which left a delighted audience eager for more.

Commissioned by the Northlands Festival, *Vesterled* is the work of Norwegian composer Henning Sommerro, who wrote the piece especially for Evelyn Glennie and brought together her incredible skills with those of musicians from Sutherland, Caithness, Orkney and Shetland to wonderful effect.

Caithness was represented by fiddle player Karen Steven, from John O'Groats. She was joined on stage at the Waterfront by piper Carol-Ann Mackay from Strathy, Orkney sisters Jennifer Wrigley (fiddle) and Hazel Wrigley (guitar) and fiddler Andrew Gifford, from Shetland.

Vesterled is old Norse for "journeys" and Sommerro's score linked the traditional Nordic and Scottish tunes to lead the audience on a journey through Scandinavia and the North of Scotland.

Evelyn Glennie was, as one would expect from a professional musician of her standing, superb. She played the marimba with real style — subtle and teasing one second, frenetic the next.

Her drum solos were riveting and on the occasions when she and the other musicians played together the effect really was breathtaking.

The fiddlers, piper and guitarist played the arrangements of traditional Nordic and Scottish tunes with great skill and confidence and their efforts both complemented and contrasted with Glennie's expressive percussion pieces.

The dancers, too, were excellent. Enthusiastic and accomplished, they looked like

Karen Steven savours a breathtaking performance by Evelyn Glennie in 'Vesterled', a fine example of how traditional music can be used to link the cultures of Scottish and Scandinavia.

they enjoyed every minute of the performance as they danced the traditional steps which at one time would have been within the ken of everyone who attended social functions in both Scotland and Scandinavia.

The percussive step dancing, which sounded similar to the Irish dancing currently in vogue, was very impressive.

Hailing from Sweden and Shetland, the dancers gathered under the direction of Swedish-born choreographer Mats Melin and their enthusiasm was infectious.

And well done also to the two youngest dancers, Darren Stewart and Kelly Wood, who stayed in step with the adults at all times.

Vesterled was a wonderful example of how the indigenous traditional music can be used to link the Scottish and Scandinavian cultures, not only on a level which is common to them both, but on one which is acceptable within the context of the Northlands Festival.

Sunday's event didn't feel like it was a poor relation of "the arts". It was a joyous celebration of a shared culture given form by Sommerro and Melin, and performed by an internationally acclaimed percussionist, some accomplished local musicians and a troupe of very watchable dancers.

The audience could happily have sat through it a second time — an indication of just how well received it was.

Let's hope there's more of the same imagination and standard to come in the future.

Cultural heartbeats

JOHN FOWLER salutes the talent and imagination of this year's Northlanders

Evelyn Glennie also featured in another new work performed in – of all places – a nightclub on the Wick quayside called the Waterfront. The work was entitled *Vesterled*, Nordic for “western bound”. Defying classification, it blended percussion (scored by the Norwegian composer Henning Sommerro) tunes for fiddle and small pipes, and reels, polkas, and step dances from the Scandinavian and Scots traditions. Logically it should not have worked, yet magically it did.

The audience that spilled over from the Waterfront's disco floor to the surrounding gallery (on a Sunday night in Wick!) warmed to the occasion and in the end was reluctant to let the performers go.

Yet it all came together in less than two days. Of course, two days is not the whole story. The idea originated when Miller heard the collaboration between Sommerro and the Shetland fiddler Aly Bain on the album *Follow The Moonstone*. At her request, Sommerro undertook to write music that would not merely showcase Glennie's talent but provide a framework for the whole performance. The

conception of a journey in time and place, from dawn in Norway, through Shetland, Orkney, and on to a sunset climax on the shores of the Pentland Firth, drawing on traditional elements from all these places, was choreographer Mats Melin's.

Melin, who fell in love with Scottish dancing at the age of 10 in his native Sweden and has been dancing, studying, and teaching it since, drew on performers he knew from his own journeyings. People like “the wonderful Wrigleys” from Orkney, twin sisters who play fiddle and guitar, whom he asked to contribute ideas of their own for the Orkney section.

Enthusiastic collaboration was the essence. No kilts, no tartan sashes, but true folk dance in a seamless movement from one set piece to another, with Glennie the presiding genius, gliding like a Silkie, coaxing haunting sounds from marimba and drums.