

# Perth Festival of Arts

A Gannochy Trust #CharityStory



  
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As we look to build on the legacy of our founder A.K Bell - one of the great philanthropists of his time – The Gannochy Trust continues to invest in a wide range of local projects that not only address poverty and disadvantage, but also seek to improve wellbeing, health and opportunity, especially for young people. Our latest #CharityStory is about one of The Gannochy Trust’s more recent funding beneficiaries, the Perth Festival of Arts, who overcame adversity to create the City’s first digital Perth Festival event during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Perth Festival is an annual event celebrating local music, literature, theatre, and art. The festival supports local artists, attracts visitors to Perth and provides an annual source of income for a wide range of businesses across the city. However, as for many businesses in the events and entertainment sector, the Covid-19 pandemic created havoc in 2020 when the first lockdown was announced.

Helen MacKinnon, Perth Festival of Arts said: “Soon after going on sale in early 2020, Covid hit and we had to act very quickly. It was a massive job dealing with all the cancellations for the festival that May, then over the summer and autumn we had to make new plans for delivering in 2021. By the autumn, we came up with the idea of creating a hybrid event, combining digital and live performances that would reach a global audience.”

For the first time in the festival’s long history, digital streaming and online communications was used as the primary means of delivering performances and connecting with audiences. Almost overnight, new skill sets had to be learnt, from digitising the box office system, to online streaming and all aspects of digital audio-visual production. Despite the challenges, 37 public events were delivered both live and online through May and into summer 2021, with over 12,000 online ‘attendances’ at ticketed and free festival events and concerts. These including classical concerts, ‘Scotland trending’ concerts featuring rising stars in Scottish music, school plays, artist talks, zoom workshops, online visual arts exhibitions and a popular ‘drive in cinema’ that hosted eight screenings.

Helen continued: “Our aim was to deliver an online celebration of the arts, helping artists to promote their work and provide a platform for artists and audiences to connect online. Looking back on it, it is amazing what we achieved under challenging circumstances, not just for us as event organisers, but the artists and performers. For some acts, this was the first time they had performed since the beginning of the pandemic, and certainly the first time they had delivered digital performances. To give them the opportunity was hugely gratifying, and I think we have all learnt something.”

One of the positive outcomes of the new format, was Perth Festival of Arts has been able to reach a global audience, thereby exposing Perth’s cultural talent to people across the world. Historically, two thirds of the festival’s audience has been local, with a third coming from across Scotland, and just 5% outside of Scotland. In 2021, this turned on its head, with 35% of the audience for the online festival coming from outside Scotland, including audiences tuning in from as far away as Mexico, Australia, Singapore, and Canada.

Perth Festival of Arts have also used the change in format to continue to promote Perth as a cultural destination, as well as support young people to achieve their dream of making a career in the arts.

Helen continues: “A key mission of ours is to promote the City of Perth, as well as Scottish art, music, literature and theatre. The digital space has allowed us to do this on a global scale, and we will use what we have learnt to deliver content across a broader range of communications platforms for future festivals, both live and online.

Streaming has also allowed us to reach and inspire the younger generations and this year 1800 children and young people took part in our festival activities. For example, we had children’s author Abi Elphinstone as a speaker at one of our online book clubs, delivered via zoom to 15 local schools. Children could interact

with Abi and ask questions which we hope has inspired the next generation of children's authors. Digital has helped us reach a new and more diverse audience and this is something we cannot ignore for the future."

Feedback following the festival has been very positive, with both performers and audience members embracing the new format and the quality of the events delivered.

In response to the 'Wonderland – children's classic concert,' one audience member commented: "I just wanted to say I absolutely loved your concert today. It was the best kids concert I've seen online since last March and I've watched most of them! I loved the costumes, props, storytelling, Owen's presentation, music, filming - everything. I properly laughed out loud quite a lot."

In response to the school's concert series, Kilgraston's Director of Music Jason McAuley commented: "So much has already been cancelled, so for our Covid Christmas Show, I felt it was so important for the girls to keep going and have something to aim for. I couldn't be prouder of their continued application towards practice and performance. Being part of the festival, performing with several other Perth schools, has been a such a valuable experience for everyone."

Abi Elphinstone's speaker event was also extremely popular. A teacher from Goodlyburn Primary School said: "P6/7 enjoyed watching Abi Elphinstone author event as part of the Perth Festival. We were inspired and interested by her ideas. The perfect event for our budding readers and writers. Thank you."

Helen commented: "I think people really embraced the changes and were happy to be part of a collective cultural event under very difficult circumstances. The digital shift has enabled us to connect artists to their audiences and allowed us to deliver a range of cultural events in new and interesting ways. Next year we are celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> year, a milestone that we are incredibly proud of. I've no doubt the Perth Festival has a bright future."

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