



The Big Picture

*Composer Judith Weir discusses her commission for the re-opening of the
Aberdeen Art Gallery*

Saturday 24th October 2020, 2pm

Judith Weir *The Big Picture*

The Big Picture was written to celebrate the completion of a major redevelopment and refurbishment to Aberdeen Art Gallery. Wishing to examine a subject important, in different ways, to both the visual arts and music, I decided to write about Colour. Pursuing the relationship between music and colour to its logical conclusion, composers have often discussed whether musical tones and keys can be related to particular colours; the extreme form of this phenomenon is 'synaesthesia' where listeners experience musical sound visually, in colour. Although I have never sensed music this way, I realised after long reflection that I had certain clear ideas about certain keys 'belonging' to certain colours; and I have explored these personal perceptions in *The Big Picture*, a cantata for two choral groups and small instrumental ensemble, in five colour-themed movements, as follows:

1. Green is in E major. I hear this as a very bright key, with its multiple sharps, and see green as a bright, energetic colour. probably the "green" of this music is brighter than the holly described in its text "Green Groweth The Holly", written (reputedly) by King Henry VIII.
2. Blue. The D minor of this piece reminds me of a melancholy, dark blue. Wallace Stevens' poem *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (of which this movement is a setting of the first two stanzas only) is said to be inspired by Picasso's *The Old Guitarist*. Looking at some of the blues in that picture, the deep sombre ones, these are exactly the right hue for this music (!)
3. Gold is an atmosphere and an actual object as much as a colour, and for this setting of *Nothing Gold Can Stay* by Robert Frost, I invented a chord which I felt strong, metallic brightness, a combination of G and D majors, which remains in the into which the poem disappears and reappears.
4. Red, White is a setting of a love poem by the Irish poet and activist, John Boyle O'Reilly. The basic tune to which the poem is sung another red-referencing love song, by Robert Burns. In my mind the richer the red (shading the more flats in the key signature, and this movement is in the very flat key of D flat meanwhile, is suggested by an absence of musical tone; the 'white' sections of this whispered or hissed.
5. Colour. Christina Rossetti's poem moves swiftly through a band of different colours approximating somewhat to those in the visible spectrum. The recital of colours gave me the chance to revisit keycolours from the previous movements, the order Rossetti lists them, resulting in some sudden and strange modulations. The final or so allows all the colours to be 'heard' at once in a giant, extended chord. *Judith Weir*

1. Green (*Green Groweth the Holly* – attrib. King Henry VIII)

Green groweth the holly,
So doth the ivy.

Though winter blasts blow never so high, Green groweth the holly.

As the holly groweth green
And never changeth hue,
So I am, ever hath been,
Unto my lady true.

As the holly groweth green

With ivy all alone

When flowers cannot be seen And greenwood leaves be gone, Now unto my
lady

Promise to her I make

From all other only

To her I me betake.

Adieu, mine own lady,

Adieu, my special

Who hath my heart truly Be sure, and ever shall.

2. Blue (*The Man with the Blue Guitar* – Wallace Stevens - verses 1–2 only)

I. The man bent over his guitar, [A shearsman of sorts.] The day was green.

They said, "You have a blue guitar, You do not play things as they are.

The man replied, "Things as they are Are changed upon the blue guitar."

And they said then, "But play, you must, A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,

A tune upon the blue guitar

things exactly as they are

II. I cannot bring a world quite round, Although I patch it as I can.

I sing a hero's head, large eye

And bearded bronze, but not a man,

Although I patch him as I can

And reach through him almost to man.

If to serenade almost to man

Is to miss, by that, things as they are,

Say it is the serenade

Of a man that plays a blue guitar.

3. Gold (*Nothing Gold Can Stay* – Robert Frost)

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief.
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.

4. Red, White (*A White Rose* – John Boyle O'Reilly)

The red rose whispers of passion.
And the white rose breathes of love;
Oh, the red rose is a falcon,
And the white rose is a dove.
But I send you a cream-white rosebud,
With a flush on its petal tips;
For the love that is purest and sweetest
Has a kiss of desire on the lips.

5. Colour (*Colour* – Christina Rossetti)

What is pink? a rose is pink
By a fountain's brink.
What is red? a poppy's red
In its barley bed.
What is blue? the sky is blue
Where the clouds float thro'.
What is white? a swan is white
Sailing in the light.

The Big Picture was co-commissioned by sound and Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums for the re-opening of the Art Gallery. The World Premiere was 31 October 2019

Supported by The Cross Trust and the Hope Scott Trust.

Biography

Judith Weir

Judith Weir (b 1954 to Scottish parents in Cambridge, England) studied composition with John Tavener, Robin Holloway and Gunther Schuller. On leaving Cambridge University in 1976 she taught in England and Scotland, and in the mid-1990s became Associate Composer with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and Artistic Director of Spitalfields Festival. She was a Visiting Professor at Princeton (2001) Harvard (2004) and Cardiff (2006-13) and in 2014 was appointed Master of the Queen's Music. In 2015 she became Associate Composer to the BBC Singers.

She is the composer of several operas (written for Kent Opera, Scottish Opera, ENO and Bregenz) which have been widely performed. She has written orchestral music for the BBC Symphony, Boston Symphony and Minnesota Orchestras. Much of her music has been recorded, and is available on the NMC, Delphian and Signum labels. She blogs about her cultural experiences at www.judithweir.com.

Forthcoming events

Guild of Horn Players | Sat 24 October | 1600

Works by Tim Jackson, Thomas Hewitt Jones and Tippett

Ten Wee Drams | Sat 24 October | 2000

Ten specially commissioned pieces for bass and contrabass clarinet played by Sarah Watts

Gaia | Sun 25 October | 1200

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