



Katherine Williams (soprano) & Ben Marsden (piano)

Friday 28th October 2022, 1.10pm

St Machar's Cathedral

James MacMillan *Three Scottish Songs*

Roger Bevan Williams *Animal Verses (world premiere)*

Judith Weir *The song of a girl ravished away by the fairies in
South Uist from Songs from the Exotic*

Programme

James MacMillan *Three Scottish Songs*

Three Scottish Songs by James MacMillan (b 1959) were composed for separate occasions in the 1990s but published as a set in 2007. All the texts are by the Scottish poet William Soutar (1898-1943), well-known for his advocacy of the Scots language and 'bairn rhymes'.

Scot's Song. Originally called The Tryst, this haunting melody was originally accompanied by 2 clarinets, viola, cello and double bass in 1991 for a commission by the Composers Ensemble.

The Ballad written by Soutar in the year of his death, tells of a lassie searching for her lover amongst the local fisher folk on the shoreline. A traditional lilting melody with a bare accompaniment mirrors the sadness of her quest.

The Children was penned by Soutar in response to the bombing at Guernica, Spain in 1937. It is a bleak disturbing piece which resonates powerfully the consequences of war to us today. The voice part is marked 'cold, numb, childlike-naïve' and the piano alternates between providing a drum-like beat and a rocking rhythm out of sync with the voice. The piano ends the piece with an explosive conclusion.

Roger Bevan Williams *Animal Verses*

Sea-hawk (Richard Eberhart 1904-2005)

A Riddle (Williams Cowper 1731-1800)

The Sloth (Theodore Roethke 1908-1963)

To Mrs Reynold's Cat (John Keats 1795-1821)

The Blackbird (Alfred Lord Tennyson 1809-1892)

Roger Bevan Williams (b 1943): I wrote these songs as an intended cycle during 2020. Some years ago, I acquired *The Penguin Book of Animal Verse* (edited George MacBeth, 1965), which was a veritable treasure trove of the unexpected. I have always been fascinated by the reaction of animals to human beings, and in particular, the very special instinctive relationship that domestic pets often develop with their immediate family members.

Although there have been many musical settings of animals and birds, in this cycle I have only incidentally reflected a physical depiction – the opening of the *Sea-Hawk* and the setting of *The Sloth* being two of the exceptions. Rather, I have developed the concept of character associated with the various topics – as, for example, the physical activity of the dog in no.2, and the stealthy, sinuous movement of a cat in no.4.

Throughout the set there are certain unifying musical gestures. The opening, which is reflected at various points but completed for the closing of the set, is intended to take a listener from a present-day reality to another world, organised but fantastical, and with points of reference only partially governed by the mind. The opening, twelve-note introduction, is not subsequently used for a serial composition, but rather as a source for melodies, intervals and harmonies. The frequent references to this introduction are used as elements to join together the various disparate musical characters. The musical language – or vocabulary – is designed to be of our time, but not out of touch with a basic tonal organisation. There are certain passages that are written with a sense of background tonality, whereas others contrast by being textures with little other tonal references. This mix enabled me to quote Michael Head in his wonderfully evocative opening of the final song, without sounding at all tautologous.

The relationship of voice and piano is something that has often intrigued me, with the wonderfully expressivity of a voice set against the piano – essentially a percussion instrument, but often used in these songs as a melodic counterpart. The role of each is independent but also interdependent – as a true partnership. The choice of texts was made by my wife, Katherine, to whom I dedicate this small cycle of songs with all my love. c. (RBW. Jan.2021)

Judith Weir *The song of a girl ravished away by the fairies in South Uist* from *Songs from the Exotic*

Judith Weir (b 1954), although the Master of the King's Music, has her roots in Aberdeenshire. She writes in her composer's note for this cycle that, 'the songs were inspired by the vernacular traditions of Serbia, Spain and Scotland with the texts coming from folksong sources but the music being entirely invented.' This programme concludes with the last piece in the cycle which is a Scottish-Gaelic folksong to take us back to where it all started with the *Scottish Songs* of James MacMillan.

Biographies

Roger B. Williams is the Master of Chapel and Ceremonial Music and Organist to the University of Aberdeen. Born in Swansea, he received his first musical education at Huddersfield School of Music (now part of the University) before graduating B Mus. Hons from Cardiff University. After researching the early works of Arnold Schoenberg at King's College Cambridge, he had a freelance career in London as an organist, harpsichordist, conductor, composer and singer. For five years he was Chorus Master to the Scottish National Orchestra. His researches into collections of music at country houses and castles in the North East have yielded many CDs and a performance for the late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother.

He has several made CDs by Chandos, Hyperion, Alpha, Top Note, and Cantoris Records. Recent recitals have been at King's College Cambridge, Durham and Guildford Cathedrals. He was awarded MBE in 2009 for his services to music and an honorary D Mus. from the University of Aberdeen in 2011.

Katherine Williams was born in Stoke-on-Trent and whilst at Kingswood School, Bath learnt singing, piano and organ. She studied music education at Warwick University singing with Warwick University Chamber Choir under Simon Halsey and then gained an MA (Hons) in History of Art at Aberdeen University in 1990. She was a choral scholar in King's College Chapel Choir and studied with Raimund Herinx at NESMS and Kate Hughes. She did a post graduate year at Trinity College of Music, London studying voice with Sally Le Sage. After getting married in 1992 she moved back to Aberdeen and combined raising 3 children with teaching piano and singing around Aberdeen and the shire. She recorded *The Brass Kettle* in 1992 – a collection of Victorian parlour songs and piano duets with Roger Williams and Graeme Stevenson. She has sung many oratorio roles and specialises in Lieder, French art song and works by contemporary composers.

Ben Marsden studied mathematics at Cambridge, piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama (with Claudio Arrau's student Brigitte Wild), and history of science at the University of Kent at Canterbury. He is currently the Head of History at the University of Aberdeen. Since coming to Aberdeen in 1999 he has been heavily involved in the musical culture of the city, the shire, and further afield, working as an accompanist, repetiteur, orchestral pianist, chamber musician and occasional soloist in association with groups including: the Aberdeen Chamber Orchestra, the Aberdeen Friends of Scottish Opera, the Aberdeen International Youth Festival, the Bach Choir, the Banchory Singers, Con Anima, Concordia, the Deeside Festival, the Deeside Orchestra, the Edinburgh Fringe, the Grampian Concert Orchestra, the Grampian Youth Orchestra, Haddo Arts, Haddo House Choral & Operatic Society, Opera Uploaded, Spectrum New Music Ensemble, the University of Aberdeen Symphony Orchestra, the University of Aberdeen Choral Society and the

University of Aberdeen Opera Society. As an accompanist he has performed at the Cowdray Hall, regularly in the 'Cathedral at Noon' series at St Andrew's Cathedral (Aberdeen), at St Machar's Cathedral, at the Pheonix Centre (Newton Dee), in the University of Aberdeen's Ogston Prize, and in masterclasses at NESMS (North East of Scotland Music School), including with Donald Maxwell.

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