



Aud the Deep Minded

Joanna Nicholson - composer, clarinet
Stephanie Lamprea – soprano
Andy Saunders - horn
Alistair MacDonald - electronics
Trent Kim - projection art

Tuesday 22nd October 2024, 8pm

The Anatomy Rooms, Aberdeen

*Co-commissioned by **sound** and funded by the Vaughan Williams Foundation
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Programme notes

The history The woman known as Aud the Deep Minded was a real person, however there is less extensive historical documentation of her than of her male counterparts – which is a gift in terms of creative liberty. Accounts conflict on when exactly she lived, and to whom she was married. We can be pretty sure she was the daughter of Ketil Flatnose, a Norwegian military commander who came to oversee areas we now know as the Scottish Western Isles and Orkneys on behalf of Harald Fairhair, and that after her husband and son Thorstein the Red were killed she commissioned a boat to be built in secret in the Caithness woods, which she then captained to Iceland, crewed by members of her family and high ranking thralls. On reaching new lands in the west, she gave the thralls their freedom and parcels of land to farm, forming a community where she lived until her natural death

as an old woman. This seems to me a remarkable CV, made even more intriguing by Aud being a Christian at a time when most Vikings were still worshipping pagan gods.

The plot

Scene 1: Dublin. Aud has just learned that her husband Olaf the White, King of Dublin, is dead. However, she is on her way to a night out. She makes plans to seek protection for her son from her father, Ketil Flatnose, in Orkney.

Scene 2: a burial ground in the Caithness forest. Aud is talking to a corpse we at first think is her husband, then learn is her son. She makes an incantation in a strange form of Gaelic, then sings Christian funeral rites and a keening song that blends influences from Ireland and her Viking heritage. She experiences a strange episode, which might be psychosis, or might reveal that she is in fact the Morrigan, a tripartite phantom queen and seer of Irish folklore. In an intense surge of grief and revenge, she commands the thralls to build her boat.

3: on the boat. She comes to understand that she has become what she despises, an oppressor. She appeals to God to help her transcend this state, and offers the thralls their freedom.

Source material

The musical material is derived from two existing melodies which represent the ancient nature of the story – the responsorium *Media Vita* (In the midst of life we are in death) attributed to Notker the Stammerer, a Benedictine monk, and a Norwegian folk song.

Early on in workshopping sessions, the performers struggled to pronounce “Aud” – our instinctive English-speaker handling of the vowel became a source of distress to the Norwegian language coach, as we couldn’t get it in the right place on the palate. And that’s just the Norwegian pronunciation, what about the Icelandic, and Gaelic (Irish and Scots versions), and wouldn’t it have been in Old Norse anyway……? I have used different ways of pronouncing Aud’s name to reflect on her multifaceted identity as an immigrant, as well as her dual Christian and Viking religious and spiritual influences. She speaks to us in English, to God in Latin, is possessed by her ancient, mystic self in a fantasy Gaelic, and swears in Norwegian.

All of the electronic material is generated from samples of the musicians – with the exception of the birdsong.

The three instruments – voice, horn and clarinet – represent Aud’s tripartite nature as the Morrigan (I like to think of the horn and clarinet as the conflicting voices each of us hears on our different shoulders).

I would definitely want Aud the Deep Minded on my fantasy dinner party guest list, even though she'd be over 1000 years old. The qualities she displayed – strategic thinking, daring, compassionate and intelligent leadership – make her a role model in any era. So I started playing around with where I was going to locate her in time, were we sticking in the Viking age, or presenting her as a contemporary woman. The real Aud is so far back in time she's blurred by storytelling, embellishment and omission, she feels like a mystic character and I wondered, what if she's reincarnated, if she's a supernatural being present through time. This is my imagining of her story, or what might be her story, and how she might tell it.

Many thanks to Jeanette Mikkola (Norwegian adviser) and Margaret MacIver (Gaelic adviser).

The set is created by Trent Kim, using images of the Viking age Govan hogback stones to create 3D projection art that plays onto the bodies of the performers, responsive in real time to the music, therefore appearing differently every time.




Biographies

Joanna Nicholson is a contemporary music clarinettist and composer based in Scotland. Standout recent projects include her solo album *Gyre*, and *No Trees to Whisper*, a multi-composer song cycle for soprano and clarinet, both shortlisted for a Scottish New Music Award 2023.

<https://joannanicholsonclarinet.co.uk/>

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