

***THE SOUND FESTIVAL 2011***  
***STAVANGER VOCALENSEMBLE***  
***With GAUTE VIKDAL Trombone***  
***And ELISABETH KRISTENSEN EIDE Flutes***  
***St MARY'S CATHEDRAL***  
***Friday, 11 November 2011***

Stavanger Vocalensemble presented a startlingly varied programme for their first sound festival Concert on Friday. They are due to make a second appearance on Saturday morning in Aberdeen Art Gallery.

Friday's concert opened with a dramatically staged performance of a piece by the Norwegian composer Bodvar Drotninghaug Moe (b. 1951) entitled Bukkehornlåt (Goat's Horn Song). The first sound we heard was a Norwegian ram's horn played by trombonist Gaute Vikdal who processed from the back of the Cathedral while the choir singers gradually came in from the side to fill the front of the church, their voices gradually building in strength as they came. The attractive folk-inspired song grew out of this dramatic introduction but its visual and musical impact still had another surprise when Gaute Vikdal produced another instrument to accompany the singers. This was the "lur" a long thin tapered trumpet-like instrument rather like those played by angels in early paintings. I was reminded of some of the native inspired performances given by some of the groups who have delighted audiences over the years at the International Youth Festival by giving us a taste of their own special national cultures.

The next piece provided a leap backwards in time and from Norway to Elizabethan England with a fine vocal performance of the motet Salvator Mundi by Thomas Tallis. Lovely clear sopranos and resonant basses provided the outer parts of the harmonies which were nicely completed by the altos and tenors – a well balanced example of choral singing conducted by the ensemble's director Jørn Snorre Andersen.

From Tallis, the programme took another astonishing leap with a piece for bass trombone and prepared recording, The Return of the Snark, a Scottish premiere by another Norwegian composer Arne Nordheim (1931-2010) This was the second piece that Nordheim based on the Lewis Carroll poem, The Hunting of the Snark. Its sound world certainly conjured up the strange creatures and landscapes of Lewis Carroll's imagination, monstrous but humorous too. Trombonist Gaute Vikdal gave a marvellously skilled performance contriving to make his instrument sound exactly like the one on the prepared recording. As a result there were moments when it sounded as if live electronic delay was being used, something for which the technology did not exist when the piece was composed. This was therefore a kind of leap into the future with the presentation of this piece. I was reminded too of an earlier concert in this year's sound festival series when we heard pieces for four bass clarinets. I was surprised by the extensive upper range of these instruments and here too, Gaute Vikdal could achieve a remarkable upper range on the bass trombone. The more growly sounds in the piece were nicely offset by rather sweet bell sounds. It was back to the choir and Arvo Pärt's Magnificat which did have just the merest touch of his minimalist style but was closer to traditional diatonic choral writing.

The Ensemble had brought another fine instrumentalist with them. Elisabeth Kristensen Eide played Kazuo Fukushima's Mei (2008) a solo flute piece that had something of the meditative nature of a Japanese Zen Garden about it. The harmonic writing of Knut Nystedt's, Peace I leave with you, seemed to fit in nicely with the work that followed immediately after, Eric Whitacre's Water Night. Once again beautifully balanced choral singing brought out the warmth of these two pieces.

To conclude the concert and to bring all the performers together we had the Scottish premiere of Highland Haiku by Sally Beamish. Haiku is also the plural of the word and there were in fact four of them written by the Dunblane poet Chris Powici. Both he and Sally Beamish were in the audience to hear this performance of their work. The flute opened the work and then the trombone entered, first doubling the flute at a lower pitch before the instruments diverged in fine counterpoint and the voices entered with the opening poem Oak Shadow.

Like much of Sally Beamish's output, this music had a powerful atmospheric impact. The word Ptarmigan in the second poem was exploited for its rhythmic possibilities mirrored in the almost percussive writing for flute and trombone. This was further explored by flutter tonguing on the flute and incisive yet light trombone notes when the Ptarmigan poem was part reprised as the fourth section. Here the choir dwelled on the word which itself became a percussive element in the music. In the third section, Ditch, sighing downward swoops initiated by the tenors were picked up by others along with muted trombone colourfully expressing the idea of a Ditch where "Mountains stand no chance".

The final poem concluded with the words "a gull's cry" and once again the musical possibilities of these words were extensively developed. Before that, this stanza included a lovely rich rounded flute solo underpinned by a gently repeated note on trombone. This was a beautifully accomplished poetic and musical painting of different aspects of a Highland landscape. At first glance, the idea of a piece bringing together flute, choir and bass trombone might seem like a musical joke – the disparate elements do not sound as if they would fit together at all, but Sally Beamish combines them with such a feeling for instrumental and vocal colour so that you can believe these musical forces were always meant to be together.

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