

John Purser

Dreaming of Islands

Dreaming of islands is something I have been doing since childhood days in Scotland and Ireland, and I am now living on an island – the spectacular Island of Skye with its own mountain ranges, stunning coastline and, above all, its Gaelic culture.

It is that culture and environment which inspire much of my music and, particularly, the music on this disc. I had the privilege of knowing two of the greatest of Gaelic poets, Ian Crichton Smith and Sorley MacLean, and this CD features my settings of their poetry to music in which the Gaelic language inspires its own sound world.

Two of the pieces on this disc are based on *piobaireachd* – a form of Gaelic pipe music which is both musically and technically demanding. *Piobaireachd* moves with the rhythms of nature, rather than those of man. The rhythms of nature also dictate the music of the *Clavier Sonata* and *Skyelines*, though they are in a different idiom.

The opening and closing tracks were composed for dear friends who have shared the same dreams.

This is one of three CDs of my music, making up a kind of retrospective. Of the three, *Dreaming of Islands* is the most obviously influenced by Scottish traditional music. However, I studied composition within a classical tradition at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama with Dr. Frank Spedding and, with the help of a Caird scholarship, with Sir Michael Tippett and Dr. Hans Gál. Their teaching remains an inspiration to this day. But I have learnt much from many others, including some of the musicians featured here, who have honoured my music with their amazing dedication and skill. To them also, my heartfelt thanks.

Musicians:

Cheyenne Brown - Clàrsach
Jean Hutchison - Piano
Neil Johnstone - Cello
Mary Ann Kennedy - Vocal
John Kenny - Trombone
John Kitchen - Organ
Simon O'Dwyer - Dord Iseal
Naomi Pavri - Cello
John Purser - Cello
Bonnie Rideout - Violin, Viola
Alexa Still - Flute
Fraya Thomson - Clàrsach

Total running time: 59'17"

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Sleeve Notes:

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Producer:

John Purser

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My grateful thanks to all the musicians who have given so much of themselves, and in particular to those who have commissioned or accepted pieces from me, most notably Bonnie Rideout, who has been an inspiring, and extraordinarily patient musical companion and dearest friend for several years.

Above all, I thank my family and especially my son Seán and my wife Barbara who have done so much to make this project a reality. Seán is responsible for design, photography and many other aspects of production: Bar has brought her own musical sensitivities to bear and given constant support in every way.

Since childhood, mountains have been a central part of my life. As a family we climbed in summer and winter, anywhere that could be reached by bus or train from Glasgow. As a teenager, W.H. Murray gave me my first lessons in rock-climbing on Buachaille Etive Mor – the Big Shepherd of Etive. As a music student I rock-climbed regularly with my fellow students. After a few days on the gabbro of the Cuillins our finger-tips were so raw it was painful to press them down on violin and cello strings. We loved rock: the shape, the feel, the strength, the trickiness of it.

Where I live and where I have climbed, the mountains and the sea share the magical light of our northern latitudes, and both stretch out into the ocean, westward with the sun. So, on the cover of this CD, there is a little marble boat headed for some island out there and beyond. It is one of three marble boats I made for the artist, Will MacLean, the violinist, Bonnie Rideout, and this one is for my wife Barbara.

My father was a poet and philosopher and my mother was a pianist, and on both sides of the family there were famous Irish artists – Sarah Purser and Mainie Jellett: so the arts were as central to our lives as the family farms in County Wicklow; and we loved the mountains in both countries. There is the big music, and if I have managed to capture something of that in my own music, I will be content.

TRACKS

1. The Banks of Corrib (4'04") 2. Creagan Beaga (5'30") 3. Luis (8'57") 4. Bonnie on the Deck (1'11") 5-8. Clavier Sonata (12'06") 9. Skyelines (6'56") 10. Piobaireachd for solo flute "Wai Taheke" (8'28") 11. Tha thu air aigeann m'inntinn (7'52") 12. Dreaming of Islands (4'13")

Dreaming of Islands

1 *The Banks of Corrib*

The Loch and River Corrib are in Connemara, close to where Simon and Maria O'Dwyer live. Simon and Maria commissioned this piece for viola, cello and bronze age horn and it was premiered in Galway in 2009. Because the horn is in Eflat, Bonnie Rideout and I retuned our instruments to get the maximum resonance.

Viola: Bflat, bflat, eflat, b'flat – Bonnie Rideout

Cello: Bflat, G, eflat, bflat – John Purser

Bronze Age Horn: Eflat – Simon O'Dwyer

2 *Creagan Beaga* by Sorley MacLean.

The John Muir Trust commissioned this piece for an international Wild Land Conference in Pitlochry in 2004. I chose Sorley's poem because of the beauty of its description and because it has no agenda and no deep inner meaning. It is just itself. My justification for setting it to music was a desire to linger on it – to stretch out its beauties and to colour its vision with sound. Sorley MacLean was brought up in a world where poetry was oral and as often as not it was sung.

The first performance was with students of the then Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, and it is scored for soprano, two clàrsachs (Celtic harps) and cello. The clàrsachs help to suggest the flow of light on water, but the music starts, like the poem, at a slow walking pace in the darkness. The key changes when the voice reaches the word "deas", which in Gaelic means much more than "south". There is a rightness about this word which is hard to express in English but which I hope to have captured in music. The poem is reproduced with kind permission from Renee and Ishbel MacLean and Carcanet Press, from Sorley MacLean's *O Choille gu Bearradh - From Wood to Ridge - Collected Poems in Gaelic and English*, Carcanet Press Limited 1991.

Tha mi dol troimh Chreagan Beaga
anns an dorchadas liom fhìn
agus an rod air Camus Alba
'na shian air a' mhol mhìn.

Tha 'n guilbearnach 's an fheadag
ag éigheach shìos mu 'n Chùil,
's an earraidheas air Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blàthbheinn, 's a' ghealach gun smùr.

Stràcadh na soillse air clàr mara
o Rubha na Fainge sìnte tuath,
agus an sruth an Caol na h-Airde
a' ruith gu deas le lannir luaith.

I am going through Creagan Beaga
in the darkness alone
and the surf on Camus Alba
is a sough on smooth shingle.

The curlew and the plover
are crying down about the Suil;
and south-east of Sgurr nan Gillean,
Blaven, and the stainless moon.

The light levels the sea flatness
from Rudha na Fainge stretched north,
and the current in Caol na h-Airde
is running south with swift glitter.

Soprano – Mary Ann Kennedy; Clàrsachs - Cheyenne Brown and Fraya Thomson; Cello –
John Purser

3-4 Luis and Bonnie on the Deck

Piobaireachd literally means “pipe music”, but refers to a specific form or genre. Scottish composers have been writing pìobaireachd for solo violin since the early 18th-century. I composed this one for Bonnie in the early 21st-century, for she, more than any, has mastered the art of fiddle pìobaireachd. My own offering, dedicated to her, takes the traditional form of a theme (ùrlar) which honours the mode of the bagpipe chanter and is followed by variations. “Luis” is Gaelic for the rowan tree – a beautiful, magical tree that gives protection from many ills.

As for *Bonnie on the Deck* (4), the deck in question might be that of a ship, or it might be the deck of Bonnie’s house in Maine. The music for *Luis* is derived from the same theme and the two pieces together are a kind of portrait.

Violin – Bonnie Rideout

5-8 *Clavier Sonata*

The Glasgow organist, Gordon Frier, commissioned this piece in 1974. It is mostly very gentle and unassuming, intended for performance on a chamber organ or piano and without any audience in mind, though audiences have liked it. Perhaps they enjoy its nostalgia.

Some of the ideas were originally intended for a lyric opera, based on Thomas Love Peacock's *The Misfortunes of Elphin*. I never completed the opera, but it has had a world premiere on page 474 of Alasdair Gray's novel *Lanark*. He assured me that it was a success.

There are four movements. The first, *Allegro*, (5) is largely a two-part invention on a flowing stream in Wales. It resurfaces in the third movement of *The Old Composer Remembers* (on CD *Circus Suite*), by which time I had actually been to Wales.

The second movement (6) is a simple melody expanded by two- and three-part canons – two and three voices gently conversing. It could almost be sung.

The third movement is a scherzo and trio (7), in an earlier version from the published one, from which I mistakenly cut a few bars. The trio again features canonic writing.

The last (8) is the most nostalgic of all, recalling the halcyon days of the first movement, and, after a brief Gaelic break for freedom, it settles down beside the stream and slips gently into C major.

The thematic material is all inter-related, but that seems less important to me now than when I wrote it. What is still important to me is the performance by Jean Hutchison, recorded many years ago, and so full of clarity and sensitivity.

Piano – Jean Hutchison

9 *Skyelines*

I wrote *Skyelines* in 1999 for John Kenny and John Kitchen. The title refers to the dramatic coastal scenery of the Isle of Skye, where I live and croft, and for which the combination of trombone and organ is ideally suited.

The piece outlines and responds to the varied shapes of the mountain skyline and the varied moods of the weather. However, despite their power, it is the mystery of the underlying and irresistible spirituality of the mountains which prevails.

This recording is reproduced with kind permission from the British Music Label CD *The Voice of the Carnyx*, BML 016 - see www.carnyxscotland.co.uk. *Skyelines* is published by Warwick Music – see sales@warwickmusic.com.

Trombone – John Kenny; Organ – John Kitchen

10 *Pìobaireachd “Wai Taheke”*

I first met Alexa Still, to whom this piece is dedicated, when we were both sharing a wonderful musical exploration with Maori musicians. She was foolish enough to show an interest in my own music, and this was the result. It starts with a very slow and thoughtful theme (*ùrlar*), which, as with *Luis*, confines itself to the mode of the bagpipe chanter. The variations, however, become increasingly virtuosic, until it reaches a triumphant climax which then subsides into a repeat of the opening theme, as is the custom with all *pìobaireachd*.

At its first performance in Rotorua in 2005, I asked the largely Maori audience to give it a name. They chose “Wai Taheke” – meaning “Falling waters”, with the implication of calm at the beginning and end of the journey, just as a river gathers force before spreading into a loch. I could not have chosen better myself. The music is published in the USA by International Opus – www.internationalopus.com.

Flute – Alexa Still

11 *Tha Thu Air Aigeann M’Inntinn – You are at the Bottom of my Mind* by Iain Crichton Smith

This setting was composed in 1999 for a memorial celebration of Iain Crichton Smith’s life. Two cellos accompany the soprano and give a sense of the dark mysterious world at the bottom of the sea. Iain’s poem is desperately sad but wonderfully beautiful. The poem is reproduced with kind permission from Donalda Henderson and Carcanet Press, from *Nua-Bhardachd Ghaidhlig – Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, Edited and Introduced by Donald Macaulay, Carcanet Press Limited 1995.

Gun fhios dhomh tha thu air aigeann m’inntinn
mar fhear-tadhail grunn na mara
le chlogaid ’s a dhà shùil mhóir
's chan aithne dhomh ceart d’fhiamh no do dhòigh
an déidh cóig bliadhna shiantan
tìme dòrtadh eadar mise ’s tù:

beanntan bùirn gun ainm a’ dòrtadh
eadar mise ’gad shlaodadh air bòrd
's d’fhiamh ’s do dhòighean ’nam làmhan fann.
Chaidh thu air chall
am measg lusan dìomhair a’ ghrunna
anns an leth-sholus uaine gun ghràdh,

's chan éirich thu chaoidh air bhàrr cuain
a chaoidh ’s mo làmhan a’ slaodadh gun sgar
's chan aithne dhomh do shlighe idir,

thus' ann an leth-sholus do shuain
a' tathaich aigeann na mara gun tàmh
's mise slaodadh 's a' slaodadh air uachdar cuain.

Without my knowing it you are at the bottom of my mind
like a visitor to the bottom of the sea
with his helmet and his two large eyes
and I do not rightly know your appearance or your manner
after five years of showers
of time pouring between me and you:

nameless mountains of water pouring
between me hauling you on board
and your appearance and manner in my weak hands.
You went astray
among the mysterious plants of the sea-bed
in the green half-light without love,

and you will never rise to the surface
though my hands are hauling ceaselessly
and I do not know your way at all,
you in the half-light of your sleep
haunting the bed of the sea without ceasing
and I hauling and hauling on the surface.

Soprano – Mary Ann Kennedy; Cellos – Neil Johnstone and Naomi Pavri

12 Dreaming of Islands

This was originally composed for Bonnie on solo violin, a few years ago, but she asked me to add a cello part, so now it starts as a solo and ends as a duet. The title speaks for itself. Both Bonnie and I are island people.

Violin – Bonnie Rideout; Cello – John Purser