

The three pieces on this CD are about warfare. I was just young enough to avoid National Service, but did take part in the Combined Cadet Force, training with the Royal Engineers and the RAF Mountain Rescue – but of warfare I have no direct experience.

Bannockburn refers to the famous Scottish victory over the English during the Wars of Independence, in 1314. My orchestral evocation was composed for a National Trust for Scotland exhibition on the site opened in 1972. 2014 is the 700th anniversary of the battle and also the year of the Scottish Independence referendum, so Scotland's history is still very much in the making.

The recording itself is an historic one. It was made in Abbey Road Studio 1 with Geoff Emerick of Beatles fame as producer/sound engineer, with The London Session Orchestra - a gathering of the top session players, many of them soloists in their own right, all under the eagle eye of the redoubtable Sidney Sax, who led. The leader of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, Hugh Bean, was on the second desk! The entire work was rehearsed and recorded in six hours, under the energetic and amazingly efficient baton of Christopher Seaman.

Throat makes use of a reproduction of a 2000-year-old Celtic war trumpet, the magnificent carnyx, made of beaten bronze, nearly two metres long, and held vertically. The sound emerges from a stylised wild boar's head, beautifully crafted by John Creed from bronze and brass, with enamel eyes. The music evokes the period of the Pictish-Roman conflicts of around 200AD and was commissioned by United Distillers and John Kenny, carnyx player extraordinaire.

Carrier Strike was composed for a concept of Ian Hamilton Finlay's in which an ironing board doubles as an aircraft carrier, and becomes a metaphor for both domestic and international warfare. It may seem at first to be light-hearted, but the piece refers to the Battle of Midway and is not without its disturbing elements. The battle was fought in the Pacific Ocean between Japan and the United States of America. It took place on the 4th-7th of June 1942 when I was four months old and innocent of all such matters.

This is one of three CDs of my music, but it is the only one with anything orchestral, though I have composed many such pieces, of which perhaps the most important to me is the radio opera *The Bell*. I studied composition at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama with Dr. Frank Spedding, and with the help of a Caird scholarship, went on to study with Sir Michael Tippett and Dr. Hans Gál. While they could scarcely anticipate my composing for pre-historic instruments such as bronze age horn on *Dreaming of Islands*, or carnyx on this CD, their teaching and encouragement lie behind all my work and still sustain me.

Musicians:

Glynn Bragg – Timpani
Joby Burgess - Percussion
Jack Keaney – Harpsichord
John Kenny – Carnyx
Sarah Leonard – Voice
George MacIlwham – Piccolo
Christopher Seaman – Conductor

The London Session Orchestra

Total running time: 39'23"

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Sleeve Notes:

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John Purser

Bannockburn

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.

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.

Track Listing

1-12 Bannockburn (17'21'') 13-18 Throat (15'15'') 19-38 Carrier Strike (6'47'')

1-12 *Bannockburn*

1 Dawn on the first day 2 Approach of the English army 3 Stand-off 4 de Bohun challenges and is killed by the Bruce 5 Distant fanfare and English cavalry charge 6 The schiltrons stand firm 7 Retreat of English cavalry 8 Night 9 Dawn on the second day, the Scots army pray 10 The main battle 11 The final surge 12 Victory and aftermath

Bannockburn was commissioned by the National Trust for Scotland for the Bannockburn Exhibition Centre, back in 1972. There was commentary, and a circular relief plan of the battle site highlighting the various actions with red and blue lights representing the opposing armies. The battle took place over two days, but I composed it long before I became a historian of Scottish music, so it makes no attempt at musicological accuracy.

A high sustained note on the violins describes the cool air of dawn and a solo flute suggests the first sounds of nature coming to life with the light of day (1).

Soon the mood is darkened by the ominous tread of the vast English army approaching with its lumbering waggon-train (2).

The two armies faced each other (3), and then the English knight Geoffrey de Bohun, rashly charged forward alone on horseback to be met by The Bruce, who struck him down with a single axe-blow (4).

The English then made a full cavalry charge (5) which was repulsed by the Scottish schiltrons (6) – formations of shields and lances that were impenetrable by mounted troops and which forced the English cavalry to retreat (7).

The English had chosen their ground badly and must have spent an uncomfortable night with little room for manoeuvre (8), but Edward II took heart when he saw the entire Scots army praying at dawn, claiming they prayed for mercy. It was one of his attendants who told him they were praying for mercy from God, not from the English king (9).

In the end the Scots' prayers were answered and the main battle (10) was won, partly through a well-judged light cavalry manoeuvre against the English archers (11), and partly through the intervention of some of the Scots camp followers, smelling victory and not wanting to miss taking part in it.

The music celebrating the victory (12) is derived from the music of the prayer, but in the end it returns to the calm of the opening.

The battle itself remains central to Scottish self-perception. There is no doubt that it established the independence of Scotland as a nation and as a kingdom, and it is also memorable for the fact that the smaller Scots army defeated a vast English army through both superior tactics and the fearless leadership of Robert the Bruce.

Orchestra – The London Session Orchestra led by Sidney Sax; Conductor – Christopher Seaman

13-18 *Throat*

This is one of the strangest combinations for which I have written music; but I must take the blame myself, as I instigated the reconstruction of the carnyx, which was funded by the Glenfiddich whisky company and the National Museums of Scotland. Of course I was delighted to accept United Distillers' and John Kenny's commission for a piece for Soprano, Carnyx and Percussion, and I called it *Throat* because the carnyx is a kind of extension of the human voice. The percussion instruments too – especially the bells and gongs – have voices of their own. I have mostly confined myself to a very simple scale that fits with the notes available on the carnyx; and I have tried to reflect ancient characteristics of Scotland's music.

The piece evokes the period of the Pictish-Roman wars of nearly 2000 years ago, the Picts being a loose confederation of tribes in Scotland whose language is lost to us, but whose jewellery and stone carving were unsurpassed. Their leader, Calgacus, said of the Romans "You make a desert and call it peace". Alas, those words are still relevant in many parts of the world, and they go some way towards explaining the contrasts between violence and calm in the music.

With the exception of the name of the Pictish King Nechtan, the soprano part has no words, and is extremely demanding as the voice is treated as an instrument throughout – but there are passages where the voice of the carnyx and the human voice are almost indistinguishable.

13 *Fanfare for a Pictish King* uses the voice pitched very high and singing syllables derived from vocables with an ancient history, still used in Gaelic singing, but with no specific meanings.

14 *They Greet The Dawn* is very simple, calm and expressive, and illustrates how similar the voices of soprano and carnyx can be.

15 *Procession* is a very slow and solemn movement with a strong sense of ritualistic behaviour.

16 *They Wish The Sun Goodnight* balances *They Greet the Dawn*.

17 *Lament For A Young Warrior* is based on the ancient Gaelic pre-Christian lament, the *pilililiu*. This used to be sung with emotional abandon: there was no modesty about grief in the past. I have tried to reflect this in the virtuosic vocal line. The percussion consists simply of cow bells and gongs and the carnyx briefly interjects its own cry of grief.

18 *They Go To War* speaks for itself. The name of Nechtan, a great Pictish king, is evoked, but otherwise the soprano sings only harsh syllables. This movement is a naked display of triumphant power, produced by a tiny but imposing ensemble.

Soprano – Sarah Leonard; Carnyx – John Kenny; Percussion – Joby Burgess

19-38 *Carrier Strike* for Harpsichord, Piccolo & Timpani (Concept: Ian Hamilton Finlay. Models and Photography: Carl Heideken. Music: John Purser) (1977)

This time, the war is brought into the twentieth century and the battle is both domestic and international. The idea was Ian Hamilton Finlay's. He has an international reputation as a "concrete poet" and for his iconic garden with sculptures, at Stonypath near Dunsyre in Lanarkshire. Collaborating with him on this project was a delight. He was a deeply serious, at times even truculent man, immensely well read and with a breadth of knowledge reinforced

by profundity of thought. At the same time Ian never lost the child in himself, and *Carrier Strike* was, for us, a kind of *jeu-d'esprit*, but not without its darker implications.

The music accompanied a black-and-white slide show, telling the story of a naval engagement partly inspired by the Battle of Midway which features in the garden at Stonypath. The piece used little model aircraft with an ironing board for an aircraft carrier, flat irons for escorts, and an electric iron for an enemy cruiser: but something rather more serious than domestic warfare breaks out. Carl Heideken's beautiful models and black and white photographs hover between the domestic and the deadly, the playful and the aggressive.

As for the music, the choice of instruments was obvious. Timpani and piccolo stand in for the sailor's fife and drum, with the timpani also serving for cannon-fire, and the harpsichord provides the domestic element; but with its almost brutal mechanism plucking tense strings, it is capable of being both sinister and vicious as well as jocular.

There are echoes of hornpipes, sounds of gunfire, alarming silence - and a blank black screen, when the enemy cruiser disappears briefly off the radar before battle is resumed and she is sunk. Her sinking calls for repeated dirge-like chords from the harpsichord and a wild, if brief lament from the piccolo. But since they primarily represent the victors, they revert to the music of the confident opening in a trice.

The piece ends with the folding up of the ironing board. The timpani sink into dark oblivion, and harpsichord and piccolo flicker into silence. The track listings below give a rough idea of how the story fits with the music. The images in italics are reproduced by kind permission of the Ian Hamilton Finlay Trust.

19 Title

20 ironing board with aircraft on flight deck

21 close up of aircraft on flight deck

22 single plane on aircraft lift

23 empty aircraft lift

24 *carrier with planes on deck and escort of flat irons*

25 black screen (threat of enemy battle cruiser)

26 enemy battle cruiser (a model electric iron) seen bow on

27 battle cruiser, showing hull and wake (the electric cable)

28 carrier and escort with scout plane in the air

29 scout plane spots enemy cruiser

30 *carrier with all fighter planes in the air*

31 *fighter planes and enemy cruiser with gunfire and flak*

32 cruiser with snaky wake taking avoiding action – music silent

33 *fighter planes and enemy cruiser with gunfire and flak*

34 cruiser on her side, sinking

35 carrier with all aircraft safely returned

36 single plane on aircraft lift

37 empty aircraft lift

38 ironing board alone with legs folded

Piccolo – George MacIlwham; Harpsichord – Jack Keaney; Timpani – Glynn Bragg