

**scottish
ensemble**

An Evening with: Sally Beamish

Wednesday 24 February 2021: 19:30



My Scottish Journey: 1990-2018

An introduction by Sally Beamish OBE

Having been a freelance viola player in London for ten years, I moved to Scotland from London in 1990. I wanted to concentrate on composing, and I had just had my first baby. There were several factors in my decision to move. I was married to Scottish cellist Robert Irvine, who wanted to raise our family in Scotland. It seemed to me that working from home as a composer would fit better with parenthood than the life of a freelance player, and composing was what I had always wanted to do. When my viola was stolen in 1989 it seemed like a final sign that we should move north.

Concerto Grosso (1992)

One of the first commissions I received in Scotland was from the BT Scottish Ensemble. I was working on an idea for an opera with the English playwright David Pownall, based on his play 'Music to Murder By'. The play links the composers Carlo Gesualdo and Peter Warlock in a sinister (and sometimes comical) ghost story. I wanted to start developing material for the opera, and several pieces around that time used the music of Gesualdo as a starting point. I was drawn to the idea of soloists from within the orchestra, and a string ensemble was an ideal medium to explore the baroque Concerto Grosso form. I took fragments of Gesualdo's madrigals and built the music from these - and the central movement is a direct transcription of Gesualdo's 'In Monte Oliveti'. Gesualdo, as well as being a prince and a murderer, was remarkable in his chromatic language - using expressionistic harmonies that were not to be heard again until the 20th century. I tried to capture the tortuous, exploratory nature of his writing, and fragments of the original madrigals break through the texture throughout the piece.

Like all the pieces I've written for the Scottish Ensemble, Concerto Grosso was written to be performed uncondacted.

Listen:

Sally Beamish: [Concerto Grosso - Premiere Recording](#), 1993 (YouTube)

Gesualdo: [Moro Lasso](#) (Spotify)

Handel: [Op 6 No.1: Allegro](#) (Spotify)

Prelude and Canon (2006)

When I was asked in 2006 to write a piece for a violin makers' symposium at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, the Scottish Ensemble's past and present directors, Clio Gould and Jonathan Morton, formed the duo of violins in *Prelude and Canon*. It was written to display a new Stradivarius copy made during the week, alongside the Strad itself, and I wanted to contrast and compare the two instruments. The best way to do this seemed to be a canon, where the same material would be heard played on each instrument. This piece highlights my fascination with Scottish fiddle music, and bagpipes, as well as drawing on Baroque forms. I later arranged the duo for 2 cellos, and 2 violas, and orchestrated parts of it as part of my ballet 'The Little Mermaid'; also as the slow movement of my concerto for four saxophones: *Chamber Concerto*. Probably my most recycled work!

Listen:

Sally Beamish: *Prelude and Canon* - [Premiere Recording, 2006](#) (YouTube)

Prelude and Canon - [Played on violas by Sophie Renshaw and Sally Beamish](#) (YouTube)

Chamber Concerto - [Slow Movement](#) (Spotify)

J.S. Bach: [Canon a 2 violini in unisono](#) - from *The Musical Offering* (Spotify)

Traditional: Examples of [Pibroch](#) (Spotify)

Under the Wing of the Rock (2006)

In the same year, the Scottish Ensemble commissioned me to write a concerto for the virtuoso viola player Lawrence Power. I knew his playing well, as he had already performed my second viola concerto (*The Seafarer*) as part of a BBC documentary - he was BBC Young Artist. Like many of my works, *Under the Wing of the Rock* is inspired by Celtic Songs and Blessings - particularly as collected by Alexander Carmichael in the 19th century *Carmina Gadelica*. In this wonderful collection of Gaelic poetry, I discovered the Lullaby of the Snow, which was reputedly sung by a mother to her baby after the massacre of Glen Coe. An English officer heard a baby crying and sent a soldier to find it and kill it. He found the young mother singing to her baby in the snow, and instead of killing them, he gave them his coat and returned to his officer with blood from a sheep on his sword.

This piece touches on Gaelic melody; and also, on jazz. While I was writing it, I travelled to Rotterdam to hear the American saxophonist Branford Marsalis performing my saxophone concerto. His sound inspired me, and this was the beginning of a long association, both classical and jazz, which has led to many works. After the viola premiere of *Under the Wing*, I arranged it for saxophone, and Branford performed it with the RSNO.

Listen:

Sally Beamish: [Under the Wing of the Rock](#) - Lawrence Power with BBCNOW/Douglas Boyd (at 2:25:00)

[Under the Wing of the Rock \(Viola\)](#) (Spotify)

[Under the Wing of the Rock \(Saxophone\)](#) (Spotify)

Traditional: Examples of [Waulking Song](#)

Purcell: [O solitude](#) (arr. The Branford Marsalis Quartet)

Albatross (2012)

After the first meeting with Branford Marsalis in Rotterdam, he approached me about working on a jazz project together, with the Branford Marsalis Quartet. 12 years on, we still haven't completed it! - but in the meantime many other pieces have emerged. I realised I needed to learn more about jazz, and took Richard Ingham's fantastic jazz course at St Andrew's University - learning the basics of chord symbols, terminology and structure, and venturing into jazz a little, as a pianist. This of course fed into my music and I became much freer in my compositional process. After all, a solo, in jazz, is simply composing in real time. I began to improvise onto the page, worrying less about devising systems of organising notes, but just listening to what was in my head and trusting what I heard. I have written several 'classical' pieces for Branford, including Albatross. The title refers to his love of golf (it's a term for achieving 3 under par on a single hole), but I also made references to the bird itself, and the lore surrounding it. The second movement, a barcarola, refers to the souls of lost sailors, and the third movement was inspired by the beautiful mating ritual of the albatross, performing a near-symmetrical dance. The last movement, 'Bird Bone Whistle' imagines the sounds of ancient flutes made from birds' bones, and also the cries of sea birds.

Listen:

Sally Beamish: [Albatross](#) (YouTube)

Branford Marsalis/BMQ: [In the Crease](#) (Spotify)

Seavaigers 2011

I could never have guessed how important the music of Scotland would become in my work. I knew I was moving to a stunningly beautiful country but had not been aware of the importance of music in everyday Scottish life. Almost immediately, I was immersed in a schools project which involved bagpipes, fiddles and bodhrans, and was astonished by the richness of the folk culture. In 2005 I was invited to be a tutor on the 'Distil' course designed for traditional musicians, as a classical composer who could give advice on scoring and orchestration. There I met Shetland fiddler Chris Stout, and his duo partner, harpist Catriona McKay. My daughter, who was 9, was enthralled by the clarsach (lever harp) and Catriona agreed to give her lessons.

Over the next years Catriona and I became close friends, and I often needed her help arranging music for Stephanie so that she could join in with music projects at school. It requires specialist knowledge to write for lever harp.

My first attempt at writing for Catriona was a film score entitled 'The Gift', and I made many fundamental mistakes. Catriona patiently adapted the part and explained why the writing didn't work!

I began to dream of writing a concerto for Catriona, with Chris Stout. It's one of the few times I've put commissions to one side and followed through an idea in my head. I was determined to make it happen, and because of my longstanding relationship with the Scottish Ensemble, I approached them to see if they would come on board. To my delight, they agreed, and Seavaigers was born. The working process was collaborative, and began with me creating the concerto, but leaving gaps in the solo parts for Chris and Catriona to respond to what I had written in their own way.

Before the first rehearsal there was some nervousness from both the classical and the traditional musicians. Neither knew how the other would want to work, and they hadn't met before. But SE director, Jonathan Morton, and Chris, bonded immediately, and any surprises were much enjoyed by all. My favourite moment was when Jonathan stopped playing to ask 'I'm sorry, Chris, I have a cue here, and you're not playing it' - to which Chris responded 'Na - I didnae fancy that bit'. It was one of the most joyful collaborations I've experienced, and Chris and Catriona continued to work with the Ensemble in further projects of their own.

A couple of years ago I created a piece for the 'missing' slow movement in Brandenburg 3, with Chris and Catriona as soloists, which completed a joint programme combining them with the Scottish Ensemble.

Listen:

Sally Beamish:

[Seavaigers](#) (Spotify)

[Seavaigers: The Film](#) (YouTube)

[Seavaigers, Lament \(arr. Recorder and accordion\)](#) (Spotify)

[Slow Movement from Brandenburg 3](#) (YouTube)

Chris Stout and Catriona McKay:

[Seeker Reaper](#) (Spotify)

Chris, Catriona and Scottish Ensemble: [Moder Dy](#) (Spotify)

The Slave's Lament 2015

In 2015, I was approached by the Scottish artist Graham Fagen, who had an idea for a musical installation as part of his show for the Venice Biennale. He wanted string music added to a version by the dub/rap artist Ghetto Priest of Burns' A Slave's Lament. He had contacted the Scottish Ensemble, and they had suggested me as a collaborator.

This was a new departure for me. I had to work out how to add in solo string lines to an existing recording, which would work in any combination, to be chosen by Graham. He wanted violin, cello and double bass, and Jonathan, Alison and Diane were each filmed playing a whole take of the song twice, with two different solo lines.

Chosen parts of these six tracks were then mixed with the recording of Ghetto Priest. The resulting filmed material was shown on four separate video screens in a palazzo on the Grand Canal at the Venice Biennale in April 2015.

The powerful and moving Robert Burns poem led me to base an organ work (Chaconne) on fragments of the material.

Sally Beamish: [The Slave's Lament](#) (YouTube)

Graham Fagen: [Venice Biennale Installation 2015 - Short Film](#) (YouTube)

Ghetto Priest: [Every Man for Every Man](#) (Spotify)

Now living in England again, it's been interesting to track my journey with the Scottish Ensemble, which in many ways has reflected the richness I discovered in Scottish music and music making. It's so important for a composer to develop a special relationship with a group of musicians, in which they can feel free and able to experiment and explore. This has been the case for me with the Scottish Ensemble, and I am so grateful for that.

Appendix: Programme Notes

Concerto Grosso (1992)

For several years, Sally Beamish worked on ideas for an opera with playwright David Pownall, based on his play *Music to Murder By*, which is about the 16th-century Italian prince and murderer, Don Carlo Gesualdo. History relates that he arranged for his unfaithful wife and her lover to be murdered. By contrast, he also happened to be a prolific composer of madrigals, having six books of them published.

Beamish initially built a guitar piece around one of his more extraordinary madrigals, and described how 'the strange resonances of his music continue to surface in my mind, leading me to use two of his madrigals and a sacred motet as the basis of this Concerto Grosso.'

The piece is in five movements. The first two and the last two being pairs of 'slow-fast' and the central movement, an Adagio, drawn directly from the first of the 'Responsorien' - 'In Monte Oliveti'. The first two movements use material from one of Gesualdo's best known madrigals, 'Moro Lasso' - the harmony and rhythmic figurations are strongly influenced by his chromaticism and idiosyncrasies. The fourth movement refers back to this sound-world, and leads into the fifth which waves a strongly characterized 'concerto grosso'-style movement around rhythmic fragments taken from a lighter madrigal 'Or che in gioia'.

Concerto Grosso was commissioned by the BT Scottish Ensemble, and first performed in Dundee on 1st January 1993.

Under the Wing of the Rock (2006)

for viola and strings

for Lawrence Power

The starting point for this piece was a poem from '*Carmina Gadelica*' - Gaelic songs and prayers collected by Alexander Carmichael in the 19th Century. The poem is called 'Lullaby of the Snow' and is supposed to have been sung by a young mother to her child, fleeing the massacre at Glencoe. The story is that an officer heard the sound of a child crying, and a young soldier was despatched to kill it:

'The soldier came upon the mother lulling her child to sleep the sleep of death amid the snow. And it chanced that the gentle croon of music that the child's mother was singing in the snow was the very same music as he had last heard when he left his kin and his home many a day and a year before that. The soldier wrapped the woman and her child in his plaid, gave them what food and drink he had, and left them, to overtake his comrades. On the way he slew a wolf and showed the officer the blood upon his sword. By the mercy of God and through the soldier's compassion mother and child survived. Descendants of the child are still living, and the tradition is current and believed throughout the districts of Appin and Lochaber.'

Under the Wing of the Rock is a line from the lullaby - and refers not only to the crag which hides the mother and child, but also to the wings of angels and of the 'Rock', the 'Son of Tears' Himself:

Heavenly light directs my feet,

The music of the skies gives peace to my soul,

Alone I am under the wing of the Rock,

Angels of God calling me home.

from 'The Lullaby of the Snow'

The piece is inspired by Celtic song and psalm, beginning and ending with an extended, quasi-extemporary slow section for the solo viola. The central section, marked *Allegro*, is a restless counterpoint, drawing on rhythms and chants from Celtic working songs. There are also jazz resonances, perceptible in the harmonies, and in the improvisatory feel of the solo line. *

Under the Wing of the Rock was commissioned by the Scottish Ensemble, with the generous support of PRS Foundation, RVW Trust, Scottish Arts Council. It was first performed by Lawrence Power with the Scottish Ensemble, directed by Jonathan Morton, on 4 October 2006, at Marryat Hall, Dundee.

** When I was writing the piece in 2006 I heard the saxophonist Branford Marsalis play, and this influenced the sound world of the piece. In 2008 I made a new version for alto saxophone and strings.*

Prelude and Canon (2006)

originally for two violins

This short duet is 'canonic' throughout, the opening Prelude leading to a true canon, beginning with the second violin. In the central, slower section, the violins reverse, and the first violin is the lead voice to the end of the piece, which ends with a brief coda referring to the Prelude. As well as hinting at the musical language that Stradivarius would have known, 'Prelude and Canon' is inspired by traditional Scottish fiddle music, and Pibroch: the classical music of the Highland bagpipes.

The work was later arranged in 2007 for 2 cellos, and in 2020 for 2 violas. The cello version was premiered at RSAMD by Robert Irvine and Colin Carr, and the viola version by Sophie Renshaw and the composer, in an online film during the coronavirus lockdown, as part of the London Mozart Players

'Prelude and Canon' was commissioned by Peter Lissauer for the Inaugural 'Partial to Paganini Festival' held at Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama. The premiere, on 17th March 2006, was given by Clio Gould and Jonathan Morton, played on a Stradivarius by Clio, with Jonathan playing on a new violin inspired by Stradivarius, built that week by a team of UK violin makers.

Funding for this work was made available by the RSAMD and generously supported by the Scottish Arts Council.

Chamber Concerto for Saxophone Quartet & Strings (2008)

for the Raschèr Saxophone Quartet

This work has two main sources of inspiration. One is the extraordinary artistry of the Raschèr Quartet, to whom it is dedicated, and the other is Bach's Brandenburg Concertos - works I grew up with, and which have always held a fascination for me. I have used the idea of 'concertante' and 'ripieno', with the saxophones featured both as an entity and as individual soloists. There are also soloists within the string group.

The first movement is modelled on the first movement of Brandenburg Four, following the structure quite closely, with similar points of tension and climax, using shifts of meter and virtuosic doubling of tempo.

The second movement takes as its starting point an exact canon, with ornamentation that stems both from the Baroque, and from traditional Scottish music. The canon at times hints at the contrapuntal nature of Gaelic psalm, set against direct quotes from Brandenburg Six in the 'walking' bass line.

The last movement uses a simple pentatonic theme, which is introduced as a fugato, in the manner of many of Bach's finales. Although the semiquavers remain regular, the meter alters and destabilises. Transposed sequences, in the baroque tradition, are undermined by wild saxophone interjections. The music condenses and overlaps, before a repeated, rough, chordal motif is introduced, which precipitates the ending.

This work was commissioned by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra (with funding from the Scottish Government and the Britten Pears Foundation), the Norrbottens Kammarorkester and the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester, for the Raschèr Saxophone Quartet, and first performed by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Garry Walker, at the City Halls, Glasgow, on 18th January 2008. It was given its Scandinavian premiere on 24th January in Luleå, Sweden by the Norrbottens Kammarorkester conducted by Peter Sundkvist. Its German premiere was given by the Stuttgarter Kammerorchester in 2008.

Seavaigers (2011)

for Chris Stout and Catriona McKay

- I. Storm
- II. Lament
- III. Haven

Seavaigers is a collaboration between its composer, Sally Beamish, and two of the foremost soloists in the Celtic tradition: Chris Stout and Catriona McKay. The score leaves space for much improvisation in the solo parts, and the piece was the result of many discussions and ideas from all three.

The title means ‘Seafarers’ and refers both to the seafaring people of the North Sea, and to the two soloists: Chris Stout, from Shetland, and Catriona McKay, from Dundee. The stretch of water between these two Northerly ports has claimed countless lives over the centuries, but is also one of the most beautiful and romantic seascapes in the world – home to seabirds, whales, dolphins and endless changes of light and weather. Strong emotions are always connected to dangerous journeys, and this piece reflects the anticipation, fear, comradeship and adventure of sea voyaging.

The first movement, *Storm*, begins with a shimmering dawn over the water before launching into a ‘reel’ which becomes increasingly unsettled and harmonically dark, before resolving into optimism.

The *Lament* refers to many seafaring tragedies. The music consists of one very simple melody, which repeats and overlaps with varying ornamentation, written and improvised.

The solo improvisations continue as the last movement begins – steering a final exhilarated course towards home. Just before the end, the opening music returns, as if land is in sight.

Seavaigers was commissioned by Celtic Connections and the Edinburgh International Harp Festival, with funding from Creative Scotland. It was first performed by Chris Stout and Catriona McKay with the Scottish Ensemble, directed by Jonathan Morton, at Celtic Connections in the Fruitmarket, Glasgow, January 2012, and at the Edinburgh International Harp Festival, April 2012.

Albatross (2012)

sonata for soprano saxophone and piano, for Branford Marsalis

1. Albatross
2. The Souls of Lost Sailors
3. Dance
4. Bird Bone Whistle

When I knew that this new sonata would be given its premiere in St Andrews, by a passionate golfer, I wondered if there was a golfing term that might give me a starting point for the piece.

The first one on the list is 'albatross' - a term for the exceptional achievement of three shots under par for a hole. (In the USA this is known as a double-eagle).

The first movement of the sonata, which is driving and energetic, takes this as inspiration, with a short repeated motif which curls around a single note, like a ball finally dropping into a hole. The Latin name for the albatross, *Procellariiformes*, derives from *procella*: a violent wind or storm; and the unpredictability of sea weather is never far away.

Albatrosses have been described as "the most legendary of all birds", and they can be an omen of either good or bad luck - or even a burden to be carried as penance (as in Coleridge's famous Rime of the Ancient Mariner). These huge birds are regarded in some cultures as embodying the souls of lost sailors. The second movement is a 'barcarola' - a kind of ghostly 'sea-lullaby' in 6/8 time.

The 'Dance' is a response to the extraordinary mating dance of the albatross - a kind of synchronized, symmetrical duet, interspersed with pointing and calling.

Ancient tribes used the wing bones of the albatross to carve flutes, and the last movement begins with a solo 'open-air' call. This is followed by a fast, quirky toccata section, which abates into a reprise of the 'bird whistle' music, before a short, fast coda.

Albatross was commissioned by the World Saxophone Congress XVI with funding from Creative Scotland and The Clarinet and Saxophone Society of Great Britain, and first performed by Branford Marsalis and Sally Beamish at the Younger Hall, University of St Andrews on 11th July 2012.