



Time and tide

This year's Trondheim Chamber Music Festival celebrated the folk tunes of Norway and Scotland through the musical seafaring of resident composer Sally Beamish, writes **Chloe Cutts**

From the illuminated interior of Trondheim's Dokkhuset (dock house), a lone voice is heard reading – in tones thick with foreboding – Charles Harrison Wallace's 1999 translation of *The Seafarer*. The elegy comes from the Exeter Book, a magnificent compendium of Anglo-Saxon poetry dating from the tenth century, and gives a seafarer's account of the hardships of life on the ocean, as he grapples with the transitory nature of his existence and contemplates the afterlife.

'This is the truth: the way I toiled / distraught, for days on end / enduring cares and bitter bale / within my breast, my keel cleaving / endless halls of heaving waves,' the poem begins.

On stage beside the narrator Peter Thomson the musicians of Trio Isimsiz etch out the tense contours and searing melodies of festival composer Sally Beamish's darkly expressive setting of the

text for piano trio and voice, *The Seafarer Trio* (2000). Themes appear and recede as the narrative unfolds, and the musicians – violinist Pablo Hernán Benedí, cellist Michael Petrov and pianist Erdem Misirlioglu – emerge as potent illustrators of the protagonist's turbulent inner journey, of the assortment of bird cries and natural phenomena that populate the text and Beamish's score: 'the gannet's shanty whooper and curlew / calls and mewling gull'. In the background, inky depictions by artist Jila Peacock are transformed by film maker Laurie Irvine into swirling animation that appears to cast the players into the watery depths. The result is a transportive theatrical experience.

It is day one of the Trondheim Chamber Music Festival and the spirit of adventure is as alive today as it was ten years ago, when I attended the twelfth edition and George Crumb was resident composer. Now, as then, the event's artistic leader

Sigmund Tvette Vik and director Vegar Snøfugl – two string playing friends who launched the festival in 1996 – have taken pains to link the featured composer's creative world to wider thematic elements running through the programmes: the musical heritages of Beamish's adopted Scotland and of Norway; the seas that separate and connect these lands; and storytelling. A former violist, Beamish moved to Scotland in 1990 to concentrate on composition, and much of her music since then has drawn on Scottish folk traditions. *Seavaigers* ('Seafarers', 2011), her freewheeling folk-classical double concerto for Shetland fiddle, Scottish harp and string orchestra written collaboratively with fiddler Chris Stout and harpist Catriona McKay, makes for an enjoyably bracing Trondheim Festival opener. The work tells of a dramatic journey set in the North Sea, and the score allows plenty of space for improvisation in the solo parts so that against the 16 strings of the Trondheim Soloists, Stout and McKay conjure their own extended soundscapes – Stout's high-wire fiddle playing finding its perfect foil in the needlepoint virtuosity of McKay's harp.

'I have always thought of Scotland as a Nordic country, relating more northwards than southwards,' says Beamish afterwards. It is a view shared by Stout, who points out that his native Shetland was once part of Norway before becoming part of Scotland: 'Five hundred years ago we were Norwegian, and Nordic influence is in our songs and culture, as well as in the Viking place names that remain.' At a converted farmhouse in the hills above the city, Stout and McKay explore these connections in an evening concert with traditional fiddle player Susanne Lundeng, a specialist in northern Norwegian folk styles and a uniquely original voice whose music draws deeply on the tunes, language and extreme landscape of her homeland. Lundeng plays a standard violin but her sound and music are redolent of the Hardanger fiddle, the national fiddle of Norway – 'which, with its sympathetic strings and open tuning, creates a ringing, resonant and other-worldly sound which we lean towards in Shetland too', Stout



Darkly expressive: Trio Isimsiz perform Sally Beamish's *The Seafarer Trio* with narrator Peter Thomson



Fiddler Chris Stout and Scottish harpist Catriona McKay perform with the Trondheim Soloists

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explains. 'It is very different from the rich classical violin tone.' Stout and Lundeng both use multiple tunings to produce a spectrum of harmonics and drone effects, creating descriptive compositions that sound at once ancient and radically new.

Elsewhere there are treasures to be found in the imaginatively curated concerts held at locations throughout the city. Among them is a beguiling and disorientating work for string orchestra by Fartein Valen (1887–1952), a leading Norwegian composer and organist whose compositional style is based on what he terms 'dissonant counterpoint'. The description sounds dry, but his Pastoral op.34 – arranged for

strings from an original piece for solo organ (1939) and performed at the twelfth-century Vår Frue Church (Our Lady Church) with searching intensity by the Trondheim Soloists – has a luminous, ruminative beauty about it, each strand shifting seamlessly into the next, regenerating, refusing to resolve.

The Trondheim Soloists are equally adept at conveying Sándor Veress's *Transylvanian Dances* (1943–9), from the processional claustrophobia of the third, 'Lejtös', a slow-burner that morphs disconcertingly into a sprightly folk dance, to the questing rhythmic drive of the fourth, 'Dobbantós'. On the same folk-inspired opening programme we hear a suite of Armenian songs for string quartet

(1950) by composer Sarkis Aslamazian – arrangements of songs collected by his compatriot, the composer and ethnomusicologist Komitas (1869–1935) before World War I and the Armenian genocide. Bittersweet in nature, these descriptive character pieces – among them 'Kelle Kelle' ('Walk, Walk'), 'Yergink ambel' ('It Is Clouding Over') and 'Chinar es' ('The Poplar Tree') – evoke everyday life with wit and pathos, and receive tender renditions from the Chilingirian Quartet.

Two evenings later the Chilingirian players are on stage at Trondheim's Royal Residence in a programme pairing Beamish's String Quartet no.2, 'Opus California', with the piece on which it was based: Beethoven's Quartet in C minor op.18 no.4, specifically the first movement exposition. The Beethoven quotations are recognisable but utterly transported by the sights and sounds of West Coast America in Beamish's piece – from the suspended wonder of 'Golden Gate' to the terse rhythms and punctuating silences of 'Boardwalk', which makes for a lively study piece the next day when the composer holds a lecture-masterclass with students from the local university.

The popularity of stringed instrument tuition has exploded in the city in the generation since the Trondheim Soloists launched as a training ensemble in 1988. Vik and Snøfugl are both alumni, and in the meantime the orchestra has matured into a professional ensemble with an international reputation. Since 2000, the festival has also run a concurrent biennial Chamber Music Competition, won in 2015 by Trio Isimsiz and at this year's event by the Maxwell Quartet from Scotland (see page 19). At a concert showcasing young musical talent at the Dokkhuset, a new generation of string players from Trondheim Municipal Cultural School perform Beamish's *The Day Dawn* (1997), written for youth orchestra and later repenned in a more demanding version for the Scottish Chamber Orchestra. With its shimmering string effects and cartwheeling folk-dance tunes, this is a wonderfully fresh young person's introduction to string ensemble playing, and rather fitting as the Nordic winter approaches, too. 'The Day Dawn is a traditional Shetland tune sung to mark the darkest point of winter,' says Beamish. 'The title refers to the ray of hope for longer days.' ●