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Homecoming or Outgoing: The Challenges facing Scottish composers

It will doubtless not have escaped your notice that when the national media reports successes in artistic or sporting endeavour there is a tendency to refer to individuals as English if born in England and British if born beyond the bounds of England. Indeed very recently an English colleague of mine remarked on a radio broadcast that had described Scotland as a 'region of Britain' – noting that his expectation was that this would cause a storm of protest.

My paper today springs from some seeds of disquiet which have been sown through recent reading about Scottish cultural identity and the development of individual voice within that identity. What I see, looking in from the outside, from a vantage point that Alistair Williams has described as a required 'estrangement from familiar surroundings' are some tendencies with the Scottish situation which suggests on the one hand **a degree of identity introspection** existing in a variety of guises which may be a limiting factor on the success of Scottish musical culture outside of the bounds of the country and, indeed, inside as well. And on the other hand a worrying lack of institutional recognition that there is a need to better promote Scottish identity in musical culture. I only have enough time here to unpick four particular aspects of this identity phenomenon and suggest what the challenges are that need to be confronted.

I need first of all to say that though I will refer to the notion of the Celtic I am only too aware, as I suspect many of you are also, that the term has many caveats attached to it. There is little agreement on what the word actually means, whether linguistic, national, cultural, identity related or in its manifestation. I do not intend to add to this debate in this paper, time is too short, and the issues too complex to achieve anything significant. All I ask is that where I use the term 'celtic' we keep it in inverted commas.

Malcolm Chapman has written about the nature of celtic music, by which HE, means folk-based music. His categorizations, even though there is criticism of the narrowness of his definitions, can be applied to the area of, for want of a better term, art music emanating from Scotland. I am being careful here because I do not want this to be interpreted as only applying to those composers born in Scotland, rather I include anyone working in Scotland (such as Maxwell Davies or Beamish), or anyone with Scottish roots working mostly outside Scotland (such as Judith Weir or James Dillon).

Very briefly, Chapman defines 4 categories applying to celtic music. First an elaboration of an opposition Self/Other with celtic music figuring as the Other. Second a strong progression of fashion from the centre to the periphery (as in from London to Scotland). Third a systematic function of the meeting of incongruent category types. Fourth, problems of authenticity and especially the Romanticisation of the culture of the Other

This list is a gloss on his writing but will be important in due course as you will see.

If we first consider the opposition of Self/Other (**and for that matter the Romanticisation of the Other in relation to Scottish Art music**) I can find no better example than this English review of MacMillan's *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie* by Stephen Johnson which speaks of:

‘catholic Socialist Scottish indignation’
‘English middle class guilt is always a good target for the aspiring young artist’
‘martyrdom of an innocent woman at the hands of Anglo Saxon protestant imperialists’
‘English music lovers are not used to being talked at like that’
[Johnson, S., ‘James MacMillan’, *Tempo*, No. 185, (Jun. 1993), pp.2 -5]

You see what’s happening here – Scottish/English identities are being contrasted emphasising a certain type of attitude and Otherness on the part of MacMillan. The climax of this review finally turns the spotlight on the background of the music and talks of ‘ancient sounds – Celtic ancients maybe, but perhaps not unrelated in spirit’.

Lest you think this is an isolated example – 6 years later we have Nicholas Williams writing of ‘themes of oppression and defiance on the one hand, of a patriotic Scot asserting his regional identity’ and ‘ a Roman Catholic, raised in an area of the United Kingdom often associated with a stern and oppressive Protestantism’. [Williams, N., ‘Acts of Grace’, *Musical Times*, Vol. 140, No. 1866 (Spring 1999), pp. 44-6]. Poor Jimmy, no wonder he turned out as he did!

But this is not confined to Scots living in Scotland, there are perhaps even more insidious comments made about Judith Weir, born in England but of Scottish parentage. Wright comments:

‘Scottishness is an integral, rather than an assumed, aspect. It gives a sense of identity...’ and further ‘that she comes from an expatriate Scottish family [who] maintained the spontaneous musical nature of that tradition’. [Wright, D., ‘Weir to Now?’ *Musical Times* Vol. 134, no. 1806 (Aug. 1993) pp. 432-7] White in 2000 writes: ‘her melodic style was unquestionably influenced by her study in the early 1980s of Scottish bagpipe music’ [White, B., ‘Music Drama on the Concert Stage’, *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 12 No. 1 (Mar 2000) pp. 55-79]and Dreyer writing early on in her career that ‘there’s no mistaking her Scottish independence of mind’ [Dreyer, M., Judith Weir Composer: A Talent to Amuse’ *Musical Times*, Vol. 122, No. 1663, (Sep. 1981), pp. 593-96].

I have spent a while on this because it’s important to show how perceptions of the assumed ‘Other’ can dictate a public perception of the nature of a Scottish composer’s style, idea and identity even. I should also say that it is much more difficult to find such comments in relation to other Scottish composers whose reputation is strong in Scotland but who are less well known, if at all, outside the borders of the country. John Maxwell Geddes and Eddie McGuire come to mind here.

Danger/Challenge No. 1 then is that Scottish based composers find themselves saddled with images and descriptors which may or may not adequately define their intent but allow a certain tick box mentality to prevail in the thinking of the Other. It may be that this does not substantially disadvantage the individual – Maxwell Davies is probably not adversely affected by the characterisation of his music as evoking a ‘sense of place’ as Arnold Whittall would put it – but this may be partly because the general understanding of the Orkneys and Shetlands is as ‘Other’ even to those within Scotland itself.

A related danger/challenge is located within the minds of composers themselves. In order to explain what I mean, I have to here evoke the notion of a Scottish artistic Renaissance, a term which, from the outside at least, seems to be used a great deal at present, almost as though here

are ghosts to expelled from the more recent past.

And ghosts there are. Those of you who have read the volume 'Scotland's Shame' which contained responses to MacMillan's now infamous Edinburgh Festival speech, may remember John Haldane's discourse in which he maintains that 'what is underdeveloped in Scottish culture is properly aesthetic sensitivity... the openness to beauty and transcendence ... our backwardness in this regard is due, I think, to the Reformation and to what followed it'. This is one of many such comments which suggest that Scottish artistic activity has been, and continues to be, 'infected' with a self consciousness bordering on neurosis which views the Reformation and its consequences in Scotland as a stultifying dead weight (Edwin Muir's phrase) hanging round the necks of creative artists even to the present day. The burden of the past continually affects the ability of artists in Scotland to truly express themselves, is the implication. You might feel that I am overegging the pudding here but it is clear from the work of diverse writers that they accept that this millstone exists. MacMillan himself writes that there is a 'tendency to restrict, to control and to enforce conformity and homogeneity [which] is an obsessive and paranoid flaw in the Scottish character'. In saying this he is giving expression to the nature of the burden which artists feel they are still bearing as a result of what Michael Walzer has described as 'the driving motive in the specifically Calvinist brand of reformation ... a horror at disorder'.

The danger lies in how the composer responds to this and whether its effects, if they truly persist, are consciously perceived BY the composer. The desire to escape from the strictures of this mindset encourages composers consciously or unconsciously, to seek new means of expression in older, one might say purer – even celtic – forms. This is one way of looking at Maxwell Davies's continued use of plainsong (though it would be simplistic to assert that this is all there was to it); or equally McGuire's use of subject matter and musical motifs derived from Celtic knotwork, the title of one of his works; John Purser's work with Gaelic song and instrumental forms; some of the subject matter of John Maxwell Geddes's work and even, dare I say, MacMillan himself whose Edinburgh Festival speech contained this unreported statement:

'If I have a mission I think it must involve acts of remembrance, of recollection. Of rediscovery of the past or a re-animation of our heritage, of a reawakening of our culture'

Note the preponderance of re- words – not Re-formation which he rejects but re-membrance (back to things that are buried in the collective memory; re-collection (going back and retrieving ideas and bringing them into the present; re-discovery (finding art/music that was written/made in the past and celebrating its value now; re-animation (giving new life to old ideas; and re-awakening (bringing back to life after a long deep sleep. This is surely a very telling statement which defines very clearly the idea of a Renaissance. And what are the musical components of which MacMillan speaks and which he has embodied in his own work?. He continues: 'the remnants of plainsong, such works of the Scottish Renaissance as survived the 1560 cultural revolution, Gaelic psalm singing from the Western Isles and folk singing from the lowland peasantry'.

You might argue that this is becoming more about MacMillan than about other Scottish based composers, and the fact is that very few other composers have been given a voice in the Media comparable to that offered MacMillan to state what they believe. There is here a research project

in Scotland to find out more about the contextualisation of composing in the country. Is the past really such a burden, and if it is, how is it manifested?

Adorno argues against 'identity thinking' and yet it seems important to recognise that such identity thinking is all pervasive within the Scottish mindset and that the understanding of identity appears to be profoundly circumscribed by history. Everett reminds us that in the 11th century the King of Scotland 'ruled over not one but four distinct ethnicities ... and the differences between these groups remains to the present day'. While I might disagree about ethnicities exactly there is no doubt that there is a deep and lasting difference between West of Scotland thinking and that of the Highlands and islands, as indeed there is between east coast and west coast, so solutions to this danger/challenge will be defined and delimited by an acknowledgement of regional identity within Scotland as much as it will be by a response to what it is to be Scottish.

Evidence for this discourse is limited by the sheer lack of auto-biographical and auto-ethnographic material currently available for British composers to permit comparative studies to be made. Nevertheless danger/challenge No.2 to for Scottish composers is to combat a self consciousness which is borne through bearing the burden of the (Reformed) past.

The third danger/challenge for Scottish composers is a very practical one. How and when are their voices given an opportunity to be heard? There is no doubt that the concept of a new Scottish Renaissance is accepted by many in Scotland today, **but** is its public face more that of literary fiction, non-fiction and poetry? Does this reflect the greater ease in reaching a larger audience through more widely available publishing outlets as exemplified by the public consumption of works by Banks, McEwan, Rankin and even, Rowlands. Surely not, because surely our great musical institutions are places of development and nurture for musical work just as they have always been. I don't doubt that our Universities and the RSAMD are doing the job they always have in nurturing and developing compositional talent but I am thinking here rather of the professional institutions, Scottish Opera, the BBCSSO, the RSNO and etc.

Now I have only just begun to scratch the surface of this aspect as yet and there's certainly a research project in this too: you may be surprised to learn that in the last four years the BBCSSO's performance of Scottish based music has averaged 4.95 per cent of all works performed, but that compared with the 5 year periods 95-99, and 2000-4 when the percentage of works performed was 5.85 and 6.59 respectively of all works performed, the last 4 years has seen a reduction to 3.06 percent of all works performed. In other words the BBCSSO is performing half as many works by living Scottish composers as it was in 2000-2004. The RSNO to my surprise is far less generous. Their total output has been hard to calculate so I have rather underestimated a total of 4000 performances in 14 years. As you can see from the handout the average for the decade 1995-2004 of works by Scottish composers was about 3.75 per cent of all works performed, but in the last 4 years this has dropped to a worrying low 0.69 per cent – translating into 3 works by MacMillan, 2 by Beamish and 1 by Dillon only. You'll note by comparison how many works by Tchaikovsky have been played and how many times!

The handout I have sent round summarises the composers who have been performed and how many works in the last 14 years, and that in itself makes worrying reading. I will leave you to consider what composers working here in Scotland. And, who have a strong national reputation,

are seriously underrepresented in these lists, and whose work is not being promoted by the two major orchestras who, one would have thought, would be the most likely to promote Scottish orchestral music. Lest you think I am being entirely negative here we should congratulate BBCSSO for its composer in residence programme which has given the likes of Stuart McRae a substantial hearing. And we should likewise celebrate the work of the smaller ensembles like the SCO or the Scottish Ensemble who continue to perform and commission new works. I did obtain some details of work over the last 14 years from the SCO but it has been difficult to process since some information was missing, though my impression is that latterly there has been a reduction in the amount of music commissioned and played in favour of the money earners. By the way I also tried to get information from some of the other BBC orchestras based in England, as well as the Scottish Ensemble but data was not forthcoming. The Philharmonic alone supplied me with a list of works performed, but just by MacMillan (26 works and 63 performances).

There is another pernicious aspect to this. What Scottish Art music is being heard **abroad** in live performances. Well, unless you are James MacMillan, not very much, and even with MacMillan, not really that much. The big Chinese tour by the BBCSSO in 2001 did not contain a single major work by a Scottish composer. Scottish composers were represented on that tour: Alistair Beaton by his arrangement of the Eightsome Reel and McGuire for his arrangement of 2 Chinese Melodies, both done as encores. What message is being given here?

Danger/Challenge no. 3 then is that the major performing institutions will not give sufficient airing to representative or even un-representative Scottish art music. Rather revealingly also, when asked, it was apparent that no-one had asked the orchestras such questions before.

There are more dangers/challenges than I have enumerated albeit briefly here. But I want to finish with another danger (challenge) which I think is an important one for the value which composers feel in relation to what they do and the value that Scotland as a nation puts on them.

The genesis of this paper came some time ago when I asked the question of some of the composers' organisations as to how many Scottish composers or composers working in Scotland have been mentioned in the Honours lists. The Scottish Music Centre did not have any information on this, nor did the British Music Information Centre, who passed me to the Composers' Guild, who did not respond.

The biographies of Scottish composers tend not to include reference to such things, and I expect the same problem would be encountered thinking about English, Welsh or Irish composers. There are of course the obvious Sirs, and perhaps you have noticed that there is one composer whose name has come up a few times today who might be due consideration in this regard in about 3 years time, but based on previous criteria (and I have that in inverted commas) why do we not have Dame Judith Weir by now. And what of the lower orders CBE, MBE etc – well as I said it was hard to find out about these but my impression is that it is the usual suspects who have these honours and not those who have devoted most if not all of their lives and energy to working in the Scottish environment.

Writers make much of the increasing optimism in this country, symbolised by the return of the Scottish parliament which looks after many of the interests of Scotland. Is it time now, after 10

years, for the Scottish parliament to recognise achievement within Scotland by those working in Scotland, and not rely on an essentially London based committee structure. I'm clearly not the only one thinking this as you will see from the Parliamentary question asked by George Foulkes last month which is the last page of the handout.

Danger/Challenge No. 4 then is that Scottish based composers will, generally, continue to work unrecognised, within the Scottish environment. Witness just one example: Conway writing about premiers for *Tempo* says of Sally Beamish 'the general critical reluctance to recognise her worth and contribution as an important British composer of her generation is baffling but surely can not last long...' . That was just 6 years ago and she is 3 years older than MacMillan.

It can't be said that this is simply a case of a Self/Other discourse affecting an individual's status (for one would also have to consider a gender discourse) there is clearly more that should be done to address the issues which I have raised. There is a sense that while homecoming has always had a place in the nature of Scottish music (such as through folk song, Gaelic psalm singing, traditional stories with song) there has to be a suspicion that the outgoing from Scotland is both more limited and limiting. These are issues which the Scottish compositional fraternity and the cultural bastions of Scotland need to address as a matter of importance if the Scottish Renaissance in new music is to continue to flourish.