

Songs of the Cotton Grass

Hilary Tann

Matthew Jones and Ensemble

Deux-Elles



SONGS OF THE COTTON GRASS

Chamber Music by Hilary Tann

THE WALLS OF MORLAIS CASTLE

oboe, viola, cello

Morlais Castle, near the composer's home in South Wales, was destroyed in 1314. Only ruins remain: in fact, in many places it is impossible to tell whether a particular mound of earth and stones is part of the rocky, bare landscape or part of the old castle walls. At one point a protruding piece of wall is evident. The rhythmical placement of the stones in the broken wall contrasts with the haphazard distribution of the rocks in the surrounding scree. The composition was inspired by this contrast – a contrast between ruined castle walls and a landscape naturally strewn with rocks – and also an implied contrast between the hustle and bustle of the former castle and the present natural contours of the high moorland.

The Walls of Morlais Castle was composed during fall 1998 for the Tritonis Trio (flute, guitar, cello). It was revised for the Ovid Ensemble (oboe, viola, cello) in the Presteigne Festival, August 29, 2000.

SONGS OF THE COTTON GRASS

Words: Menna Elfyn, used by permission.

soprano, viola

The cycle, "Songs of the Cotton Grass," evolved over six years with all texts by distinguished Welsh poet Menna Elfyn (www.mennaelfyn.co.uk). These are "reverse lullabies" in which a daughter lulls her mother to sleep. The first song, "A Girl's Song to Her Mother" was written for mezzo-soprano Mari Morgan and premiered July 30, 1999 during a Celtic Weekend at the Pan-American Games in Winnipeg. The second song, "Wings of the Grasses" was composed for "A Garland for Presteigne" and received its first performance August 25, 2003 by soprano Gillian Keith with Simon Lepper, piano. In 2004 the "Girl's Song" was slightly revised for soprano Jancanne Houston who recorded the two completed songs and subsequently commissioned and recorded "Vale of Feathers". "Vale of Feathers" opens with a slow, tolling figure inspired in part by the then-recent passing of Pope John Paul II in April 2005. The refrain "take me to the vale of feathers" echoes back to the first song of the cycle.

I. A GIRL'S SONG TO HER MOTHER

I remember your shawl's fragrance in the crook of your shoulder.

There I'd find leaves of the palm tree, and shelter;
there I'd find a heartbeat like hummingbirds.
My yoke was so tender enfolded in your arms.

I remember the songlines of the blanket's murmur,
the coverlet received every year for your labour,
slave of the old story, caressed by your skin
and the balm of garment to hide away your pain.

I sing nightly of the shawl, its timeless embrace,
how gently it raised me safely with grace.
Tonight, is my turn to place a blanket over you,
and keep you, my mistress, without burden or cry.

Refrain:

*Take me to the vale of feathers,
to the dancing world, my downy one,
my head on your pillow,
my days filled with cotton grass and love.*

II. WINGS OF THE GRASSES

In our sleep the wings of the grasses
bring us secret messages and we set them free:
*tickling grass under chin, tickling maidens' legs,
grass to plait in our hair, grass the tail of squirrels.*

They will guide us to the vale of freedom
where the candle gleams in the eye:
*the fairy's grass, the kitten's grass,
grass of little lamb-tails, grass frog and toad.*

On the gorse and on the mountain
where the grass gives us a pillow,
where the grass murmurs fables,
where the grass hides our footsteps,

We'd count all the grasses:
*sweet grass, grass lock,
grass-desiring, grass of loving,
grass of the seasons, grass departing.*

III. VALE OF FEATHERS

Who would have thought
A cradle and bed
Are the same in the end.

Those who are born
Learn how to mourn,
See the blanket all torn.

When labour is o'er
And all is receiv'd,
Life's last note when we leave.

Refrain:

Take me to the vale of feathers, ...

THE CRESSET STONE

viola

A cresset stone is a medieval method of lighting – a hollowed-out stone, filled with oil, with a lighted wick. The ancient cathedral at Brecon, South Wales, contains a remarkable example of such a stone and it was this stone, in its cathedral context, which directly inspired the composition. *The Cresset Stone* is a meditation on stone and light that begins and ends in stillness. The inner sections contain references to the final Kyrie of an eleventh-century Gregorian chant.

The Cresset Stone was composed in December 1993 for the Presteigne Festival with funds from the Welsh Arts Council and Amadeus Stringed Instruments. It was first performed September 2, 1994, by Krzysztof Smietana at the 1994 Presteigne Festival.

FROM THE SONG OF AMERGIN

harp, flute, viola

From the Song of Amergin is in five sections, played without a break. Three lines from Robert Graves' restoration of the text of an ancient Celtic calendar-alphabet, the "Song of Amergin", directly inspired the piece:

I am a wind: on a deep lake,
I am a tear: the Sun lets fall,
I am a hawk: above the cliff.

The inner sections of *From the Song of Amergin* are shaped by twinned images: wind/deep lake (harp), tear/Sun (viola), and hawk/cliff (flute). The piece begins and ends with an invocation of "I am".

Commissioned by the Criccieth Festival with funds provided in part by the Welsh Arts Council, From the Song of Amergin was premiered in Puwllheli, North Wales, June 26th 1995, by harpist Elinor Bennett with members of the Lontano Ensemble.

DUO

oboe, viola

The *Duo* was written in 1981 for violist David Sills. The timbres of the viola and oboe are similar in many respects and the composer became fascinated by the idea of a single line shaped by two instruments. At the opening, the viola "courts" the oboe, encouraging its moves and framing its melodies. A short viola outburst leads from this reflective dialogue to the pairing of the central section, after which an octave unison passage ushers in the fanfare-like conclusion.

First performance: June 18, 1983 by Gene Marie-Green, oboe and Susan St. Amour, viola, in Albany, NY

NOTHING FORGOTTEN

piano, violin, cello

Nothing Forgotten takes its title from a line in a long poem by Jordan Smith ("A Lesson from the Hudson River School: Glens Falls, New York, 1848" from *An Apology for Loving the Old Hymns*, PUP, 1982). The complete sentence reads: "You see, what scares me / about this landscape is that nothing is new, / nothing forgotten, nothing lost, / and nothing changes." The piece is in three linked movements, played without a break. Each movement has a subtitle, again taken from Jordan Smith's poem: *Andante maestoso* – "as if the granite were / some half-forgotten spirit", *Allegretto* – "all that light caught forever in the pine boughs / bound between the stones and current", *Andante recitativo - Larghetto flessibile* – "the mesh of branches, root, and sky". Windows into two traditional Adirondack songs are included in the piece: towards the beginning, "The Jam on Gerry's Rock" as transcribed in *Adirondack Voices*, by Robert D. Bethke (U. of Illinois Press, 1981), and, towards the end, a free version of "Miner Hill" (which itself bears close resemblance to the lumbering ballad, "Blue Mountain Lake").

Nothing Forgotten was commissioned by the Adirondack Ensemble and premiered, December 7 1997, at the Hyde Collection, Glens Falls, NY.

Matthew Jones
Viola



Matthew is violist of the Bridge Duo (with pianist Michael Hampton) and the Debussy Ensemble. Recent recital venues include Carnegie Hall, Purcell Room, St. Martin-in-the-Fields and St. David's Hall; he was violist with The Badke Quartet when they won first prize and the audience prize at the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition. This is his fourth CD recording; future plans include premieres of several new viola works and performances and a recording of the Walton Viola and Violin concertos. Swansea-born Matthew is also a composer, mathematics graduate and teacher of the Alexander Technique and Kundalini Yoga. For more information, visit www.matt-jones.com.

Alun Darbyshire
Oboe



Alun studied at the Royal College of Music with Michael Winfield and in Freiburg, Germany with Heinz Holliger and now enjoys a varied career combining solo, chamber and orchestral playing. He has performed as guest principal oboe with many leading orchestras including The Philharmonia, London Philharmonic, Royal Philharmonic, Orchestra of the Royal Opera House and Academy of St Martin in the Fields, and has also performed as soloist with the Northern Sinfonia, London Festival Orchestra, Brighton Philharmonic and Northern Chamber Orchestra. As a member of the Ovid Ensemble Alun has performed throughout the UK and has appeared in the Wigmore Hall, Purcell Room and Bridgewater Hall, Manchester.

Elizabeth Donovan
Soprano



Elizabeth Donovan was born and educated in South Wales, and studied at the Royal Northern College of Music and National Opera Studio, London. Winner of the 2002 Welsh Singer Competition, she represented Wales in the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition 2003. Elizabeth was a Welsh National Opera Associate Artist from 2003 to 2006. Roles for the company include Zerlina in Don Giovanni, Barbarina in Le Nozze di Figaro, First Lady in The Magic Flute, Echo in Ariadne auf Naxos and also a concert performance of Brigitta in Iolante at the 2005 BBC Proms.

Thomas Carroll
Cello



photo Hanya Chlala

Born in Swansea, Thomas studied with Melissa Phelps at the Yehudi Menuhin School and with Heinrich Schiff in Austria. He is one of only two artists who auditioned successfully for both Young Concert Artists Trust in London and in New York. He has since gone on to give critically acclaimed debut recitals at the Wigmore Hall (London), Alice Tully Hall (NY) and in Boston, California, Florida and Washington DC. As a concerto soloist he has appeared with the London Symphony Orchestra, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, London Mozart Players, the Vienna Chamber Orchestra (Heinrich Schiff), English Chamber Orchestra, Prague Philharmonic, Sofia Philharmonic, and Bayerischer Rundfunk Orchestra. Thomas is currently a professor at the Royal College of Music, London, and the Yehudi Menuhin School.

Lucy Wakeford
Harp



Appointed principal of the Philharmonia Orchestra in 2002, Lucy Wakeford is one of the most outstanding harpists of her generation. Much in demand as a soloist, recitalist and ensemble player she has performed at major venues and festivals throughout Europe, appearing as guest artist with musicians including Roger Vignoles, John Mark Ainsley, Michael Chance, James Galway and the Belcea Quartet. She regularly gives concerts with the Erard Trio, Haffner Wind and Zenith Ensembles. She is principal harp of Britten Sinfonia and harpist of the Nash Ensemble. Most recently Lucy's engagements have included return visits to the Queen Elizabeth Hall, Purcell Room and Wigmore Hall, both as soloist and in performances of works by Britten with Roger Vignoles and John Mark Ainsley.

Kathryn Thomas
Flute

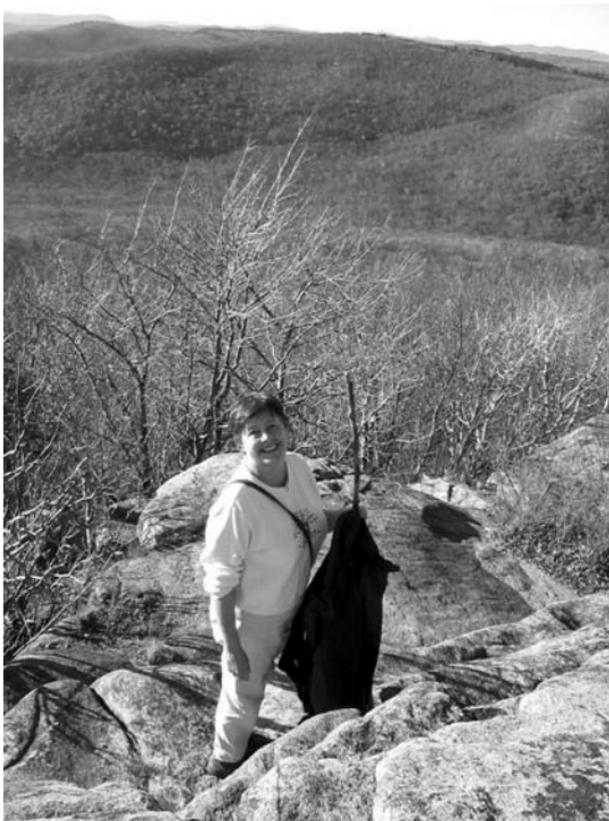


Selected by 'The Times' as a 'Great British Hope', Kathryn has established a reputation as a committed solo and chamber musician. She is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, and has been made an Associate of the Royal Academy of Music for distinction in the music profession. She regularly appears as a recitalist and chamber musician at venues such as the Wigmore Hall, the South Bank Centre, and the Bridgewater Hall, and at festivals including the BBC Proms, and is frequently broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and internationally. Kathryn is a founder member of the award-winning Galliard Ensemble, previous members of BBC Radio 3's New Generation Artists scheme.

Michael Hampton
Piano



Michael specialises in the fields of song repertoire and chamber music. He was a major prize-winner and Junior Fellow of the Royal College of Music, studying with both John Blakely and Roger Vignoles. He has broadcast regularly on the BBC and appeared at many Festivals, Clubs and Societies throughout the UK. Notable events include a performance of *Winterreise* in the Usher Hall as part of the Edinburgh International Festival and two Live BBC Radio 3 Lunchtime Concerts from the Wigmore Hall with Jonathan Lemalu, concerts at all the major chamber music venues in London and at the Royal Festival Hall and recitals in France, Italy, Belgium and Sweden. In 2007, he gave his acting debut in a staged performance of Schumann's *Dichterliebe!* For more information, visit www.TheAccompanist.com.



Hilary Tann in the Adirondacks, November 2007

HILARY TANN

Welsh composer Hilary Tann (b. 1947) lives in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in upstate New York. Born in Ferndale, Rhondda Fach, she holds degrees in composition from the University of Wales at Cardiff and from Princeton University. Since 1980 she has been a member of the faculty of Union College in Schenectady where she is the John Howard Payne Professor of Music. From 1982 to 1995 she held a number of Executive Committee positions in the International League of Women Composers. A deep interest in the traditional music of Japan has led to private study of the shakuhachi and to guest visits to Japan, Korea, and China. Three influences inform her writing - from Wales, a love of nature and hymns; from the Adirondacks, a love of nature and folksong; and from Japan, a love of nature and the "landscaped line". Numerous organizations have supported her work, including the Welsh Arts Council, New York State Council on the Arts, and National Endowment for the Arts. Her music is published by Brichtmark Music and by Oxford University Press. Commissioning ensembles that have performed her works include the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, European Women's Orchestra, Knoxville Symphony, North Carolina Symphony, Women's Philharmonic, North American Welsh Choir, American Guild of Organists, Swansea Bach Choir, Meininger Trio, Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod and Tenebrae.



Photo: Lawrence White

Hilary Tann : Chamber Music

Songs of the Cotton Grass

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- 1 The Walls of Morlais Castle 10:16

oboe, viola, cello

Songs of the Cotton Grass

soprano, viola

- 2 A Girl's Song to her Mother 5:37

- 3 Wings of the Grasses 3:35

- 4 Vale of Feathers 4:28

- 5 The Cresset Stone 9:49

viola

- 6 From the Song of Amergin 11:09

flute, viola, harp

- 7 Duo 8:45

oboe, viola

- 8 Nothing Forgotten 9:35

violin, cello, piano

Andante maestoso, Allegretto, Andante
recitativo - Larghetto flessibile



Recording Producer
Recording Engineer
Booklet Notes

Michael Ponder
Patrick Naylor
Hilary Tann

This recording was supported by the RVW Trust, London, whose generous contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Recorded in Potton Hall, Saxmundham, 15th and 16th March 2008.
Cover Image Twyn Disgwylya (Rhondda) by Carol Amos.