

## St Andrews Voices

7.30pm, 4<sup>th</sup> October, Holy Trinity Church, St Andrews

[www.standrewsvoices.com](http://www.standrewsvoices.com)

### *Hagar in the Wilderness*

A one-act chamber opera in four scenes

Music by Sally Beamish | Libretto by Clara Glynn after biblical texts

*Scottish premiere of a joint Presteigne Festival/Nova Music commission funded by the Britten-Pears Foundation*

Produced in association with the Presteigne Festival, Canterbury Festival and Music at Oxford

Production supported by the RVW Trust

Production Benefactors: Nicholas Boas Charitable Trust, Honeymead Arts Trust, Peter and Shelley Lane,

Cissie Rosefield Charitable Trust and Philip Waller CBE

Performed by arrangement with Norsk Musikforlag, Oslo

Kirsty Hopkins Hagar | Owen Gilhooly Abraham | Edmund Hastings Gabriel

Nova Music Opera Ensemble

George Vass conductor

---

### **Hagar in the Wilderness**

*The librettist writes:*

The story of Hagar is as resonant today as it was in biblical times.

Hagar, the woman who is cast out with her child, has come to symbolise society's 'have nots'. In the context of modern Israeli/Palestinian conflict she is often used to symbolise the dispossessed Arabs. However, her resonance is far wider than that. She represents *all* of the people outside the tent.

The intrinsic problem with the idea of a 'chosen people' is that it necessitates another, larger group of people who are not chosen. This is not only a problem for religion, but one that all of us face at one time or another. We have to make decisions about how far to extend our circle of care – if my neighbour's child was starving I'd feed him, if the people in the next town were starving I'd forget about work, empty my larder, load up the car and feed them. So why, when a child in Africa is starving, don't I feel the same compulsion to help?

The story of Hagar is problematic for many, because it appears as though God is in the wrong. God tells Abraham that it is right for him to draw his circle of care around Sarah and her new baby, and to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. A thirteen-year-old I know, Raphael, read this portion at his Bar Mitzvah last year, in his speech saying, 'Was this God's idea of a game; playing around with people's minds as if they were toys? Maybe he just got a little bored, up there sitting on a cloud, with nobody to talk to except his collection of little angels.' Most of us reading this story lack Raphael's audacity, and end up thinking it is impossible to fully understand God's actions.

The wider 'God-problem' highlighted by the Hagar story is this: If you believe in an interventionist God, then why does he help some people and not others? Why does he stretch out his hand? We look around the world and see injustice and suffering – mothers crying over their dying children. It is tempting to think that God cannot be omnipotent and just.

One of the striking things about Hagar's story is where she ends up. God takes this woman – a single mother, homeless, from the wrong tribe, an outcast – and makes her the mother of Islam. It's striking that both Islam and Christianity have founding stories that centre on a child conceived out of wedlock to someone on the margins of society. In the wilderness, and in the stable, in humble places where we'd least expect it, God makes his choice.

Personally, I read the Hagar story as a fable designed to make us think about all of this – and it is absolutely brilliant.

© 2013, Clara Glynn

*The composer writes:*

I was struck by the universal resonance of the story of Hagar, and also attracted to the spiritual and human questions raised by it. Clara Glynn's libretto is characterised by its simplicity, and I wanted the music to illustrate the stark nature of the subject, and the bleakness of the scorched environment.

I chose an accompanying ensemble of five players: flute/piccolo, percussion, harp, viola and double bass. The percussion is characterised by drums played with hands, and marimba, giving a real dryness to the sound, while the use of crotales (small bells) reflects the mystical aspect of the story.

The viola and double bass, rather than violin and cello, have a gentle poignancy and a 'covered' quality which I feel gives an air of mystery and other-worldliness to the piece. I have used flute, sometimes almost as a folk 'pipe' and sometimes to add virtuosic colour, with the piccolo representing the 'call of the sandpiper'.

To give greater clarity to the text, the arias are sparse and understated, often with marimba and/or harp accompanying with a repetitive pulse; and the word setting is mainly syllabic.

There are several references to music from the Middle East. In the opening scene, I have used Klezmer-inspired dance music, with drums and a raw viola with no vibrato. And at the end of the piece, the voice of Gabriel draws on Koranic chanting.

*Hagar in the Wilderness* was commissioned jointly by the Presteigne Festival and the Nova Music Trust, with funding from the Arts Council of Wales and the Britten-Pears Foundation.

© 2013, Sally Beamish

### *Synopsis*

Hagar is an Egyptian servant in Abraham's household, and the mother of his illegitimate child. Sarah, Abraham's wife, was barren, but in her seventies miraculously gives birth to a son, Isaac.

#### *Scene 1: The Kitchen*

Hagar is preparing a celebration feast, complaining to herself about the fuss surrounding the birth of the new baby. She feels her own son, Ishmael, is being overlooked. Abraham comes into the kitchen and listens.

#### *Scene 2: Hagar's Bedroom*

Abraham tells Hagar she must take Ishmael and leave, as Sarah wants them both out of the house. Hagar pleads with him, reminding him that he has another son. But Abraham is so overjoyed to be a father again, he simply cannot hear her.

#### *Scene 3: The Wilderness*

Abraham abandons Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. Hagar protests but Abraham says God has told him to do as his wife asks.

Scene 4: *The Wilderness, some days later*

Hagar has run out of water in the desert. She puts her child under a bush and moves away as she cannot bear to watch him die. An angel appears and tells Hagar that God has stretched out his hand to save Ishmael. He stamps on the ground and a spring of water appears in the desert.

## FIRST HALF REPERTOIRE

**Sally Beamish (b 1956)**

**Four Songs from Hafez, for tenor and harp**

- 1 Nightingale
- 2 Peacock
- 3 Fish
- 4 Hoopoe

These are settings of the fourteenth-century Persian Sufi poet, each using a bird or animal to describe separation from, and longing for, the Beloved. I chose these texts after seeing Jila Peacock's extraordinary book *Ten Poems from Hafez*, in which the whole Persian text of each poem has been designed in the shape of the animal mentioned by Hafez in the text, and set alongside a new English translation by the artist.

The music attempts to create the mood of each poem; the first, *Nightingale*, set against an ostinato accompaniment, and the second, *Peacock*, created almost entirely from 'falling' motifs. The third poem, *Fish*, is directly inspired by an Iranian motif which develops into fast-flowing breathless semiquavers. *Hoopoe* uses the bird's call as a refrain throughout, with the piano repeating paragraphs of intensifying chords.

© 2013, Sally Beamish

**Benjamin Britten (1913 – 1976)**

**Five folksong arrangements, with harp accompaniment**

- 1 Bonny at morn
- 2 Lord! I married me a wife
- 3 She's like the swallow
- 4 Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn 'Watching the Wheat'
- 5 Bird Scarer's Song

**Franz Schubert (1797 – 1828)**

**Songs accompanied by harp**

- An die Musik, D547
- Du bist die ruh, D776
- Ave Maria, D839
- Nacht und Träume, D827
- Ständchen, D957

**Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)****Sonata for flute, viola and harp**

1 Pastorale: Lento, dolce rubato

2 Interlude: Tempo di minuetto

3 Finale: Allegro moderato ma risoluto

In the summer of 1915 Debussy began work on what he intended to be a set of six chamber sonatas for various combinations; in the end he finished only three of them before cancer claimed him in March 1918. This second sonata was initially destined to be for flute, oboe and harp, but Debussy may have felt that the two wind instruments were too similar to each other. The combination of flute, viola and harp gave him, as well as a more restrained, unassertive atmosphere, the individuality of sounds that he prized: one blown instrument, one bowed and one plucked, though the viola, with its capacity for sustained or pizzicato sounds, could act as linkman when required.

Because the instrumental colours are distinct, it is easy to follow the games Debussy is playing: combinations, separations, sudden new ideas; and even imitations of outdated Impressionism from the harp, although the flute remains coolly unimpressed. In a letter written when he had just started the sonata, Debussy described himself as being 'in the process of re-learning what music is about' and he expressed his conviction that 'no other art can give you the totality of emotion you get from a well-arranged series of harmonies'. This sounds rather as though Debussy was exploring the abstract possibilities of music, but in fact the notes are indissolubly wedded to the instrumental sonorities and to the almost schizoid instrumental characters that emerge: the flute by turns pastoral and irreverent; the harp functional and magical; the viola lyrical and strenuous. The drama played out between these personalities is as much part of the music as any opposition of keys or themes.

Certainly few works written before 1920 are so resistant to formal analysis. Once you have said that in the first movement seven different themes arrive one after the other, you have said everything ... and nothing. The whole work seems to unfold through a process of free association, mirrored by continually changing time signatures and textures. The only structural feature that points to any 'meaning' in the work is the return of the opening harp and flute phrase at the end of the work, where its floating indecisiveness is almost brutally countermanded by the determined F major of the last nine bars – saying, maybe, 'yes, despite problems and uncertainties, we shall win the war'.