

Torridon, fragile shell

COMPOSITION FOR CHOIR, OBOE, AND SPEAKER:

THE SPOKEN WORDS ARE SELECTED FROM MURDOCH MACDONALD'S
'WALKING INTO THE PAST', AND 'OLD TORRIDON';

THE CHOIR SINGS WORDS FROM PSALM 90.
TEXT SELECTED, AND MUSIC WRITTEN, BY DANIEL GORDON.

[notes: sp. = speaker; ch. = choir; sim. = simultaneously with previous spoken words. With oboe/cor interludes, and some choir cover, the parts run continuously.]

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(Introduction; oboist on cor anglais):

[sp.]: These march cairns still stand, reminders in this wilderness of lochs and rocky hills...

[sp.]: ...reminders that people once came this way, herded cattle, slept in bothies, met, parted,...

[ch., soloists]: Return, ye children.

[sp.]: This mound at Braighe Beag lies unassuming, bracken-covered, passed unseen every day, ...

[ch., soloists]: Return, O Lord, how long?

[sp.]: My father and my grandfather and my greatgrandfather had that hill.

(Part 1, with cor anglais):

[ch.]: Lord, thou hast been our refuge from one generation to another.

[sp.]: The Gneiss we see today, one of the oldest rocks in the world, shows swirling bands and folds, mute evidence of its tortured history...

[ch., (S. solo)]: Before the mountains were brought forth,

[sp.]: ...pits of ancient raindrops on sand, petrified in stone. Exposed..., soon they will be gone again,...

[ch., (sim with sp.)]: Before the mountains were brought forth,

[sp.]: To find such an imprint of something so ancient and yet so ephemeral staggers the imagination. Humankind has been on earth only a tiny fraction of the age of these delicate fossil raindrops.

[ch.]: or ever the earth was formed,

[sp.]: Such is our place in creation.

[ch.]: ..formed;

[sp.]: Thus were the crofters deprived of their livelihoods, their ancestral hill pastures taken from them by force or deceit.

(Part 2; oboist on oboe):

[ch.]: All our days are passed away. Thou carriest them away as with a flood. They are as a sleep,

[sp.]: John MacLennan, aged 19, herd boy...

[ch., (whispered, sim. with sp.)]: as a sleep,

[ch.]: as a tale that is told, return again;

[sp.]: Robert Mackenzie, 4 months, ...malnutrition...

[ch.]: turn again; in the morning it flourisheth; in the evening it is cut down

[sp.]: ...many brief lives; lives which have no memorial other than a faded entry in an old leger.

[ch.]: Cut off, we fly away; Thou has set our iniquities before thee; our secret sins in the light of thy countenance

[sp.]: The device being not to live and let live, but...we will disgust and starve them out.

[ch.]: Thou turnest man to destruction; Again thou sayest, turn again, turn again ye children of man!

(Part 3; oboist on oboe d'amore):

[sp.]: But the child always remembered the cadences of the precentor, the raw emotion of old voices...

[ch.]: Teach us to number our days

[sp.]: Singing the praises of God in these wild and plaintive notes which melted all our hearts,..., and hearing the Gospel preached in the face of a biting wind, and with the waves of the Atlantic dashing at their feet.

[ch., (sim. with sp.)]: ...to number our days

[ch.]: Let thy work appear,

[sp.]: ...the vivid colours of the Sphagnum moss; beautiful crimsons, greens and yellows. ...the startling blue or red of a dragonfly flitting around in the sun.

[sp.]: Hidden pools and startling emerald, ...rocky hollows..., bald summits rounded by glaciers.

[ch.]: thy beauty;

[sp.]: ...it was the abode of an old woman who lived there alone, on the very edge of existence.

(Part 3..reflection):

[ch.]: For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday.

[sp.]: ...exquisitely tiny bedding patterns, swirled into curves and arabesques...

[ch.]: And as a watch in the night,

[sp.]: The worms themselves left no trace. Only the ruins of their homes remain. A distant echo of the ruins of later inhabitants which dot the landscape.

[ch., (sim. with sp.)]: ...in the night;

(part 3..summation):

[ch.]: Return,

[sp.]: But I cannot pass by without remembering the old man's story. How many hopes, how many dreams and heartaches, lie buried here - unmarked and long forgotten.

[ch., (sim. with sp.)]: return, return.

[sp.]: The Lon itself seems somehow cushioned from the modern world around, as if the thick moss and peat muffle everything external, so that we are left with just the ceaseless whisper of the Allt na Criche, and the sigh of the wind - two things eternal...

[ch.]: Return, ye children.

[sp.]: ...But it is when the cloud is low on Beinn Alligin, and the curtains of mist drift across to obscure the loch below, that the fragile shell of the present collapses, and we are left in a timelessness of moss and moisture.

[sp.]: The old shielings lie, sadly, waiting for the next Imrich which will never come.

[ch.]: Return, ye children; O fragile shell, return.

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Spoken words (c) Murdoch MacDonald; music (c) Daniel Gordon.

Murdoch MacDonald's books are published by Torridon Publishing, 13 Ashill, Evanton. Scotland. IV16 9XB. They are also available at a variety of shops in the Highlands, on AbeBooks, and via Amazon.