



BILLINGS SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA & CHORALE

CONCERT NOTES “A Celtic Evening with Christopher Layer” Feb. 20, 2010

By Chris Morrison

Harris Dance Traditional Irish

This concert is not only a celebration of the Celtic spirit. It is also all about the sense of place, about how music can transport us to distant lands and evoke distant landscapes, events, and cultures.

One of the ways this is done most effectively and vividly is through traditional dance music. The reel is a folk dance common to both Scotland and Ireland. It is also found among emigrants to the United States and Canada, where the dance became part of the Appalachian and French-Canadian musical cultures. In duple time, it is often danced in soft shoes and taught to beginning students. Our concert begins in Ireland with a short traditional Irish reel, the *Harris Dance*, which features the fiddling skills of BSO&C concertmaster Randy Tracy.

Symphony No. 3 in A minor, Op. 56 “Scottish” Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

A prodigy whose early skills were rivaled only by those of the young Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn started composing at a young age. Through his well-known family he became acquainted with many of the great musicians, scholars, philosophers, writers, and politicians of his day. Several of the works of his teens, like the remarkable Octet (1825) and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1826), are still part of the standard repertoire. From 1833-1835 he served as music director in Düsseldorf. Then in 1835 he became municipal music director in Leipzig, where he also conducted the Gewandhaus Orchestra and later founded the Leipzig Conservatory. Much in demand as both a composer and conductor, Mendelssohn also spent a short period as royal composer and music director in Berlin.

As he entered his third decade of life, Mendelssohn had already visited several countries when his father, a wealthy banker, sent him off on a European “grand tour,” which began in April 1829 and extended for a full three years. Traveling with his friend Karl Klingemann, Mendelssohn

stopped first in England to give several concerts – he eventually became a familiar figure in England, visiting there ten times during his life. Then he headed north to Scotland, where over the course of several weeks he visited places like Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Inverness, Loch Lomond, and the Hebrides islands of Iona, Mull, and Staffa. (The latter provided the inspiration for Mendelssohn’s concert overture *Fingal’s Cave*.) In one of his many vivid letters Mendelssohn described the Scottish people and their “long, red beards, tartan plaids, bonnets and feathers, naked knees, and their bagpipes in their hands” He got to meet Sir Walter Scott, whose novels Mendelssohn had eagerly read, and even witnessed a bagpipe competition (though he eventually came to hate the sound of the pipes).

The ruined chapel of Holyrood Castle near Edinburgh – where Mary, Queen of Scots supposedly fell in love with her private secretary David Rizzio, who subsequently was murdered by the queen’s husband Henry Stuart, Lord Darnley – seemed to have affected Mendelssohn particularly strongly. As he wrote in a letter to his family, “This evening, in the deep twilight, we went to the palace where Queen Mary lived and loved; there is a small room with a winding staircase leading up to it ... The adjacent chapel has lost its roof; grass and ivy grow thickly within; and on the broken altar Mary was crowned Queen of Scotland. Everything there is in ruins and ramshackle, open to the blue sky. I think I have today found the opening of my Scottish Symphony.” As the “grand tour” continued on to Italy in May 1830, Mendelssohn continued to create sketches for his new symphony. But the sunshine of the Mediterranean had its effect, too: “The loveliest time of the year in Italy is the period from April 15 to May 15. Who then can blame me for not being able to return to the mists of Scotland? I have therefore laid aside the symphony for the present.”

Mendelssohn didn’t return to the “Scottish” Symphony for another ten years. He finally completed it in Berlin on January 20, 1842, and conducted its first performance March 3 of that year. After a successful performance of the symphony in England later that year, Mendelssohn received permission to dedicate it to Queen Victoria.

The Symphony No. 3 was actually the last of Mendelssohn’s five symphonies (they are numbered in the order in which they were published, and were composed in the order 1, 5, 4, 2, 3). Although there is a hint of Scottish folk music in two of the Symphony’s movements, the work doesn’t employ any actual Scottish melodies, and Mendelssohn eventually preferred to discard the “Scottish” nickname altogether. The work’s four movements are played without pause.

Mendelssohn’s initial sketch for the Symphony, what might be called the “Holyrood Castle” theme, is heard in the first movement’s slow introduction. Passionate violins then introduce a new theme. After a moment’s silence, the tempo picks up substantially. The rest of the movement highlights two main melodies, one dramatic, the other almost a sigh. The orchestration throughout is dense and complex, with surprising modulations. A stormy climax leads to return of the dramatic main theme in the recapitulation and that of the introduction in the coda, both with new underlying cello melodies. The coda also contains a famous chromatic “wave” in the strings.

The joyful second movement Scherzo – with its light touch, swift tempo, clarinet tune, and distant horn calls – is probably most directly influenced by Scottish folk music. The doleful third

movement almost has the feeling of a funeral march. Reminiscent of some of Mendelssohn's "Songs Without Words" for piano, it grows increasingly forceful as it progresses. Hints of folk music and dance rhythms recur in the powerful Finale, which opens with a leaping violin theme marked *Allegro guerriero* (fast and warlike). It and other ideas are broken apart, reassembled, merged contrapuntally, and tossed about rapidly amongst the sections of the orchestra in the central development. In the triumphant, major key coda we hear a hymn-like version of the "Holyrood Castle" melody – sounding, in Mendelssohn's words, "properly clear and strong as a male chorus."

The Brendan Voyage

Shaun Davey (1948-)

Composer, songwriter, and record producer Shaun Davey has gained considerable fame as one of Ireland's most distinctive musicians. Brought up on the southern shore of Belfast Lough on the outskirts of the city of Belfast, Davey moved to Dublin after finishing school. It was there that he first heard traditional Irish music, specifically the bagpipe playing of Finbar Furey. Davey's college degree is actually in Art History, and he largely learned music by ear. He made a living writing music for commercials, while expanding his familiarity with Ireland's traditional music. He has continued writing extensively for theater, film and television, while also amassing a small but substantial body of classical concert works.

The Brendan Voyage, Davey's first and best-known classical work, was inspired by historian Tim Severin's 1976 effort to retrace, in a currach or leather-skin boat, the voyage of St. Brendan, Abbot of Clonfert, from County Kerry across the Atlantic to Newfoundland in the year 500 C.E. (this Irish saint may have reached America before either the Vikings or Columbus). In Davey's suite, the uilleann pipes (the national bagpipes of Ireland) represent the boat, which interacts with the orchestra – the ocean – as it travels through storms, ice sheets, and other dangers, visiting spots like the Faroes and Iceland on the way to the New World. Written with the playing of Davey's friend Liam O'Flynn, piper of the folk band Planxty, in mind, *The Brendan Voyage* was first performed in Rennes, France in 1982.

The suite is in ten sections. Many of the following details come from the ShaunDavey.com website.

1. Introduction: The starting point of the trip, Brandon Creek in County Kerry.
2. The Brendan Theme: The ship sets sail for the first time.
3. Jig: The currach gains speed as it travels off the west coast of Scotland.
4. Journey to the Faroes: The ship makes its way through swirling mists, with the sound of birds in the distance.
5. The Cliffs of Mykines: Emerging from the mist, the cliffs are very high, and the "Brendan" is driven towards them by the tides. Thousands of birds swarm about as the boat has to negotiate a dangerous tide rip.
6. Mykines Sound: The pipes sound a reel as the boat rushes headlong through a narrow channel between two of the Faroe Islands.
8. The Gale: The "Brendan" battles a tremendous storm in the waters off Greenland.

9. Labrador: After making its careful way through freezing fog, the ship now has to deal with pack ice. The crew discovers a small hole in the boat, and repairs it in the freezing water. Birds reappear as the ship nears land.

10. Newfoundland: The pipes take the lead in celebrating the arrival of the “Brendan” in the new world, and the end of the voyage.