

# Prolific composer is back at home

A MUSICAL life which has encompassed practising *The Lord is My Shepherd* on the ferry down to Aberdeen, playing the organ at Westminster Abbey and composing a string quartet — yet Alastair Stout is still only 23.

Alastair, whose choral composition *Between Blue Mirrors* was performed for the first time at Lerwick Town Hall on Saturday, has a pretty astounding record by any overachieving standard.

He started composing when he was 12 and intends to keep doing so for as long as lives, "no matter what happens".

Alastair moved to Shetland to live in Vidlin with his parents and two sisters when he was five.

By the age of 10 he was literally transported through music back down south to King's School Ely in Cambridgeshire, which he attended on a choral scholarship.

A far cry from Vidlin, but he managed to do well there despite the rigorous routine.

"I was singing once a day and twice on a Sunday. You had music shoved at you all day long.

"I didn't have time to think. Now I realise the richness of it. As a child you are not bothered, you just get on with it."

He is not a singer now, but it was in the cathedral environment that he started to compose choral and organ music. He was en-

couraged by the director of music at Ely, Dr Arthur Willis.

When he was 14 he resumed his schooling in Brae. He laughs as he remembers those years.

"I'm not sure what they thought about it at Brae. A chorister was not the coolest thing to have been. The first year was a bit rough, but the second year was good. I got to know a lot of people. I also studied with the organist Cyril Baker at that time."

His next achievement was winning a scholarship to the Loretto school outside Edinburgh, where he did his A levels. All along he was composing and he had his first work published at the age of 15.

However, it was not until he was 17 that the world of orchestral music started to open up to him.

"There were so many different styles out there. I had to start from scratch. Suddenly, it was 'My god, where do I go from here?'. I had to forge my own style. It was so exciting to write music when there was a cauldron of things to draw on."

Alastair enjoyed his time in Edinburgh where he established many contacts in the musical world.

He went on to take his degree at the Royal College of Music in London, where he had a "brilliant" teacher.

"It was four years of com-



Lyricist Jonathan Lennie; composer Alastair Stout; conductor Ruth Sharville and composer Peter Davis in front of the Lerwick Choral Society following the spring concert in the Town Hall.

Photo: Keith Morrison

position and a great time of listening to orchestral music."

His music was also being played at different cathedrals during that time and he was performing at recitals.

"Recitals are nerve-wracking," he admits, "but listening to the first performance of your work is very nerve-wracking too. I would much rather sit in the pub for the evening than go and hear it."

But he stresses: "It is very important to perform. It's good to know what it's like to play a piece.

You realise the effect of different things you do when you are composing. It gives you a real insight."

His eyes light up as he recalls the "thrill of playing in Westminster Abbey and St Paul's".

"I also like to use other composers and get people to write for me," he says.

He did a masters in composition at the Guild Hall School of Music in London.

During that time he was forced

to write a piece every two weeks.

"It was an unbelievable course. There was such pressure on you. We collaborated with modern dance and theatre, got right down to the nitty gritty. It was very intensive."

Now, he says, a composition can take anything from a few days to a year.

He likes to start with a text and set it to music. His string quartet, for which he won Gregynog Composer Award of Wales was based on a poem by Rabindranath

Tagore, a writer for whom he has great enthusiasm.

The text for *Between Blue Mirrors*, a celebration of ships and the sea, was written by Jonathan Lennie with whom Alastair is also collaborating on a chamber opera.

"It's to do with space and Russian astronauts," he says dispensing with the notion that his choral background limits him to more traditional subjects.

"It is easy to write to a text. All of my pieces are inspired by texts, poems or paintings. *The Song of Judith*, which I wrote this time last year, is based on the Book of Judith. I've also just been to a Jackson Pollock exhibition which was amazing and I definitely will write something based on that."

He finds inspiration all around him, not least in the Shetland landscape.

"It's no problem for me to write here. I can work very naturally and freely while I am in Shetland. It's an amazing place to work and an amazing place socially. It's been great to have my work performed here and to have people come and see what I am doing."

However deep his love of Shetland, Alastair concedes that after three weeks or so he feels drawn back to the culture of London, where he is doing a PhD.

"I am studying at the University of London and I play for Wesley's Chapel. We get huge amounts of tourists there, but at night it's an oasis of calm. I often sit up until three or four in the morning composing there."

It sounds ideal and Alastair appreciates it. "I am very lucky to be able to do what I love doing."

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**Lifboat Weekend**



# Choral work celebrates sea

THE IDEA of the sea and ships was the inspiration for Lerwick Choral Society's spring concert last Saturday, and despite its single theme, there was no lack of variety in the programme.

The choir, directed by Ruth Sharville, began with two contrasting items, a lively *Song of the*

*Vikings* by the gloriously named Somerville Gibney and Eaton Fanning, and George Ewen's tuneful setting of *Vogeland's Faroe Fishin*, which warmed up to a confident third verse after some edgy soprano entries.

Four of Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet* followed: redolent of days of Empire, they are nonetheless fine musical settings, and show how well Stanford understood vocal writing. *Sailing at Dawn* was expressively shaped and finished with a beautifully sensitive ending. The evocative *Middle Watch* was less comfortable: the sopranos needed to project soft, controlled singing with more clarity and support, and words were sometimes lost in the complexity of the lines. But the final song — *The Little Admiral* — had splendid vitality and crisp phrasing, and diction here was spot on.

Keith Adam joined the choir as soloist, and impressed with a confident, rhythmic style, musical delivery, and a real feel for the character of the songs. Kept busy throughout the evening, Keith sang with spirit and commitment, and apart from the odd uneasy note in Faure's *Les Berceaux*, was clearly in control of his material.

Two more choir items were included in the first half: the charming *Ships of Arcady* by Michael Head, in which sopranos and altos showed a wide expressive range; and the first performance of Peter Davis' setting of Shakespeare's *Full Fathom Five*. This was resonant and romantic, with effective compositional balance. An

imaginative setting of this most evocative of poems, it should enhance any choir's repertoire.

The highlight of the evening came in the second half with the first programme of Alastair Stout's *Between Blue Mirrors*, commissioned by the society for this concert. Written for voices and piano, it is about sea and sky and ships, set to mood-engendering words by Jonathan Lennie.

From the first sound, attention is captured in this piece: whispered words in a tense, excited rhythm develop into dynamically-charged spoken words to end in a long choral exhalation to "Ah". The piano gently announced a folk melody (closely resembling a Shetland slow air) which acts as a leit-motif for the work, around which the composer weaves a pattern of many different musical styles — while, in his own words, remaining true to his own compositional voice and idiom.

The composition is in one movement: after the opening excitement depicting the start of a sea-voyage, the music moves into higher, more intangible modes where the mood is dream-like and surreal, and where finally the sounds and sights of sea and sky merge to form an endless reflection of dark and light.

Jonathan Lennie's poem provides powerful conceptual stimulus for music which reflects its impressions of light and air, loneliness and space; haunting phrases stay in the mind long after the performance has ended. Alastair Stout writes with integrity

and originality. *Between Blue Mirrors* is eclectic and restless, yet a fully integrated composition which speaks with musical authority.

The singers were more than capable of responding to the challenge of this demanding music; they gave a controlled and inspiring performance, and their conductor Ruth Sharville must be warmly congratulated on training them to such a high level of achievement. This is some of the best singing we've heard in a long while.

The rest of the second half contained some old favourites, including a set of lusty sea-shanties sung — lustily — by the tenors and basses. The gentle Vaughan Williams *Dark-eyed Sailor* needed more rhythmic impetus, but was tuneful and well balanced. Ruth's arrangement of *O Waly Waly* was quietly expressive and we were given another first performance in the final item, Ruth's delightfully witty setting of Lear's *The Jumbles*. Her compositional style shows a grasp of structure and musical direction which is always convincing, and the choir performed lightly and easily.

Finally, mention must be made of Peter Haviland, the choir's accompanist. Peter is not only a sensitive accompanist but a first-rate solo pianist, as his two authoritative performances of Debussy's *En Bateau* and La Cathédrale Engloutie showed. All in all, a stimulating evening, well prepared and confidently directed. We look forward to the next one.

Deirdre Hayward

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