

Festival in Fair Isle

by Kathy Hubbard

It is August 2002. We are shoe-horned into the neat Loganair Islander – Noel the pilot, three members of the Lerwick Choral Society, local piano *wunderkind* Neil Georgeson, a bemused tourist, myself, and a boy who clearly thinks we're all crazy. And *old*, probably. Neil is nervously contemplating his inaugural inter-island flight, and as the doors close and the engines rev up, he decides he needs the bathroom. Sounding exactly like my mother, I tell him he'll 'have to hang on because we're not stopping till we get there ...' I also venture the opinion that should the Islander go down halfway across the Fair Isle Channel, the world of music would suffer its greatest loss since Glen Miller or Buddy Holly crashed into a rainbow and went to Jesus; they all think I'm joking, for some reason.

The atmosphere is festive, because we're on our way to Fair Isle for a week of classical music, it's late August and the sun is shining. Even Neil forgets to look anxious as the sea shimmers below us, and the coast of Fair Isle rears up like a ghost in the haze. The Classic Fair Isle Festival, two years in the planning, is about to begin. Shetland composer Alastair Stout has been commissioned by the island community to write a new work for amateur and professional musicians and singers, a piece that will celebrate Fair Isle's history, its landscape, its people and its present day culture. And we are coming in to help the island celebrate by singing with the amazing Fair Isle Choir. It *feels* like a privilege, and it is.

On the airstrip the doors are opened and hands reach out to help us and our luggage out of the plane. Old friendships immediately re-kindled and new ones already in the making. I am billeted with my good friends Betty and John at Utra, at the southern tip of Fair Isle. Sitting in the garden, looking out to the sea under an impossibly blue sky, I have to remind myself that I'm here to work as well, to help the Classic Fair Isle Committee for the week. It doesn't feel like work, I have to say. Dash the Cat rolls over on his back on the grass and waves his legs enthusiastically in the air. It's exactly what I feel like doing.

We sit with Alastair who is signing copies of 'Glimster', the hymn tune he has written, which forms the basis of his new piece, and we plan for the week. The CHROMA quartet is already here, as is baritone Andy Ross. Librettist Jonathon Lennie will arrive on Wednesday, along with Peter Maxwell Davies, who

has generously agreed to be the patron for the event. Lise Sinclair has been rehearsing the Fair Isle Choir for months, whilst Nigel Hayward has given up several beautiful evenings from his precious summer holidays to coax the small group from the Lerwick Choral Society through Alastair's challenging composition (well it was challenging for *us*, Alastair ...). This is the point when two years of planning, creating, fund raising and organising come together, and that sense of anticipation is, for me, always the best part of any project.

Later there is a glorious sunset - yellows, golds and greens to the west, pinks to the east. John and I drive up to the North Light to catch the last of it. Everybody is out doing the same, even the maalies and the bonxies. The dog is tunnelling diligently after a rabbit, whilst his quarry has re-surfaced twenty yards away and is standing next to us to watch the huge moon rise. Three hours later I manage to sleep through the most breath-taking display of the aurora borealis for months. It's this gift I have.

Rehearsals

Tuesday morning and we're all up at the Hall, ready to rehearse 'Given days – sounds of Fair Isle'. We are all blown away by the amazing quartet who are here to help us – Clare, Stuart, Evgeny and Emily are clearly gifted musicians. We, the enthusiastic amateurs, are nervous and stumbling in the face of so much talent. Alastair is incredibly patient as we squeak and rumble our way through his marvellous creation. Not to worry, he says, encouragingly – still a whole three days to go, bound to be OK by then. Getting it right – to sound like it does in Alastair's head – is beginning to feel like a significant responsibility. The weight lifts, however, as we wander off down the road a few hours later, into the middle of another gorgeous day. The sheep meditate in the fields, a dunter cruises in the bay with her ducklings, there are flowers everywhere and the bees zoom from one to the other with quiet industry. I am reminded of the words we have just been rehearsing. 'Dear Lord, the very land is singing.' And it is, it is.

In the afternoon we meet again at the Kirk for a cheerful assault on Vivaldi's 'Gloria', rehearsed by Ruth Sharville, with Neil gamely accompanying us on the organ. There is as much laughter as singing, with everyone doing their best to do credit to

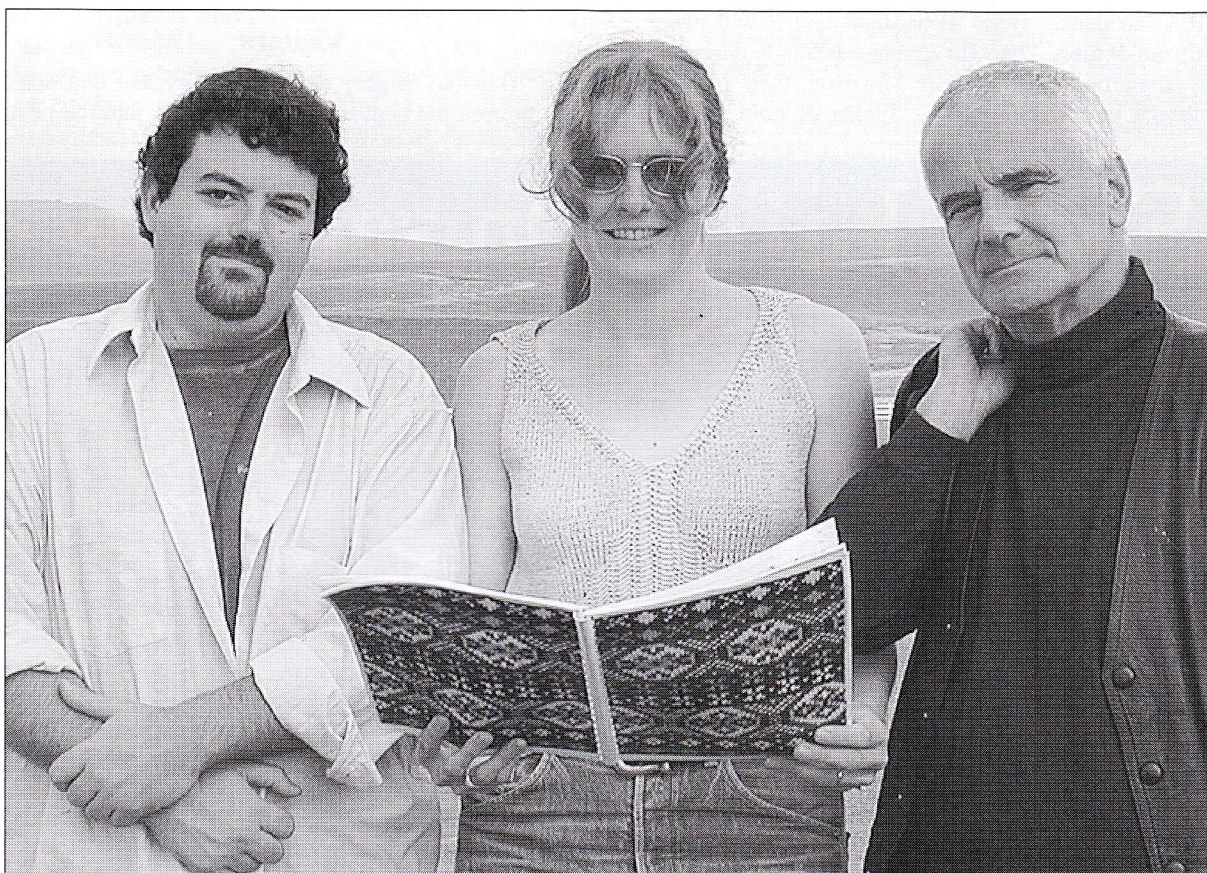
Vivaldi's joyful music, and Ruth whipping us in like foxhounds until we get the right scent. A man innocently wanders into the kirk to see the paintings and the stained glass windows, and is immediately press ganged into singing. He discovers he is a bass, or as near as will do, and tries to look brave in the face of adversity. His name is Gerry, and he and I spend the rest of the week swapping risqué jokes and stories. It's only on the last evening that I discover that he is Lerwick's Catholic priest. (Write out one hundred times: 'Always engage the brain before operating the mouth'.)

In the evening there is an open air rock concert, courtesy of Classic Ramparts, a.k.a. Neil and Innes Thomson, Patrick Ross-Smith and Iain Morrison. A string of hits from the seventies has those of us Of A Certain Age singing our heads off and leaping around the hall car park in an alarming fashion, but there's only the sheep to see us and they won't tell. The evening turns distinctly surreal later at the al fresco disco, when we find ourselves singing along to Tom Jones' Greatest Hits. A very 'happy' Alastair Stout chucks his arm around my shoulder and sighs 'Ah,

Tom Jones - he's my absolute favourite organist!', then wanders off. Clearly time to go to bed before the electricity generators do. More stunning aurora borealis at 2.00am. Yes. I sleep through it.

Wednesday

Wednesday morning - more sunshine, more rehearsals, and 'Given days' is now definitely taking shape. Jonathan Lennie and Peter Maxwell Davies arrive, as does Mary Blance, armed with a one-woman recording studio so that we can broadcast news of the project to the world. Well, to BBC Radio Shetland, BBC Scotland and the Radio 4 *Today* programme at any rate. Mary is taking part in the music by reading, along with Jonathan, descriptions of Fair Isle during the first movement of Alastair's piece. It is the first time I have ever seen her nervous, but as usual, she sounds great. A walk back to Utra takes me past the Stackhoull Stores where I purchase an unfeasibly large ice cream from Fiona and Robert, not for my own benefit, I assure them, but as a contribution to the island's economy. Back at Utra,



Alastair Stout, Lise Sinclair and Peter Maxwell Davies at the Classic Fair Isle Festival.

Photo: Dave Wheeler

six birdwatchers are scaling the garden dyke, SAS style, in pursuit of a thrush nightingale, which has just taken cover in Betty's vegetable patch. A period of intense stalking, peering, and beating which would have done a ghillie proud ensues, but the rare LBJ stays put. The cat has a good idea where it's lurking but he's damned if he'll tell them.

Birds - 1, Twitchers - 0.

Betty and I discover that the brightly coloured feathered friend which we had confidently identified that morning as a roseate starling, is in fact a crossbill.

Twitchers - 1, Betty / Kath - 0.

The evening is pure magic. Sun streams in through the kirk doors, as does the audience, and Neil Georgeson plays Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, Chopin and Stravinsky. So much beautiful music in under an hour, it's almost unreal. If Neil playing the middle movement from Beethoven's 'Waldstein' sonata does not touch you to your core ... then there is the cinder of an icicle where your heart ought to be. And thanks to Fair Isle's foresight in purchasing a top-of-the-range Yamaha electric piano a few years ago, Neil can be as percussive as he likes during the 'Russian dance' from 'Petrushka' and it will never slip out of tune. The wild applause is totally deserved. In anarchic contrast, Iain Morrison then plays a pibroch on the bagpipes - 'Fields of gold' by Mr

Donald McLeod of Lewis. Sitting in the front pew, you get it 'full frontal' and it's terrific. The 'scratch choir' finish the evening's concert with their own, very individual take on Vivaldi's 'Gloria' - he may be birling in his grave, but we have had such a good time doing it.

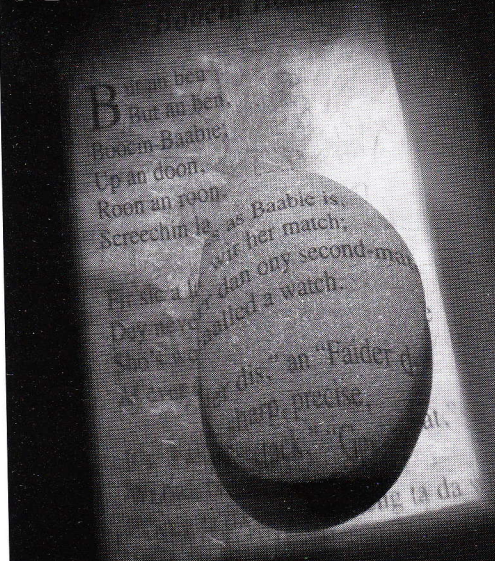
The night is still young as we all head up to the hall for a dance. The first waltz, however, is delayed by the fact that none of us want to go inside because the sky is showing off once again. As with Monday, it is deep greens, flame orange and ochre to the west, and a bouquet of lilacs, carnation pinks and fuchsia reds to the east. We stand and watch, speechless, until it dissolves. The children and CHROMA have been working on some original music for the past two days, and perform it for us now, to everyone's delight. Then the dancing begins, and the members of CHROMA have a go at everything with total enthusiasm, even the Quadrilles (no-one tells them it takes twenty minutes). Philip's dad plays the violin, and supper is handed round. Later, I sleep like a log, and if there were aurora borealis, everyone is kind enough not to tell me the next morning.

Visitors

Thursday is grey and a bit foggy, but that does not present the boat with any problems, and the next

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squad of visitors arrives, as does the *Swan*, bearing some very familiar faces. Our rehearsals have taken on a somewhat more bashful tone, given the presence of Peter Maxwell Davies in the hall, but Alastair has nearly got us where he wants us. Dave Wheeler, John and myself get stuck into the job of printing and collating programmes for Friday evening's performance. The office equipment chooses exactly that moment to start a quiet rebellion - the printer decides on a work-to-rule and the stapler goes on all-out wildcat strike. No nipping down to the office suppliers if you're on Fair Isle - teeth grinding, muttered curses and imprecations, and a dash of inventiveness have to suffice. Betty is getting nervous about her forthcoming live interview on the *Today* programme the next morning, but Mary Blance is on hand to speak words of reassurance. In the afternoon I get to practise with Alastair's new 'socket and spanner ensemble'; I only get four clangs in total, but tell myself that they will make all the difference.

This evening's treat is a lecture from Peter Maxwell Davies at the Bird Observatory. We arrive as the nightly bird count is underway (it resembles a school assembly and roll call: 'Shrikes?' 'Here sir!' 'Greenish warblers?' 'Absent' and so on. No-one seems that interested in the 47 starlings I saw earlier, so we keep a low profile.) Max, as he insists on everyone calling him, is wonderful to listen to. He tells us how he started the St Magnus Festival in the teeth of council apathy and press hostility, the latter continuing for several years until the local newspaper could no longer ignore the fact that locals and visitors alike were loving it and coming back in greater numbers each year. He says that Classic Fair Isle has the chance to be the start of something equally special, and then he plays us recordings of some of his music. The achingly beautiful strains of 'Farewell to Stromness' have several people surreptitiously snuffling into their Kleenex, the sad, sweet melody evoking memories, images and emotions which are secret and special for each of us.

It's Friday morning, and John and I are glued to the radio, listening to Betty giving a confident interview on the *Today* programme. No-one would ever guess how nervous she had been - she sounds like she does this all the time. After that, a day of gloriously frenetic activity - the dress rehearsal surprises us all, as it actually sounds quite good. Dave, John and I are wearing the road out between Field and Utra, going backwards and forwards with programmes and music score covers - no single computer is operating 100% and we have to do bits on one and the rest on another. Betty's kitchen has become 'Operations HQ' with the phone going constantly, and her fielding questions,

soothing feathers, adjusting plans, etc. I feel she should have a table with a map and those little flag things that you push around to indicate the state of battle.

Our local politicians fly in safely, Alistair Carmichael and Tavish Scott, along with MP Malcolm Bruce. That's everyone in as planned, to our relief and amazement - since when has the weather on Fair Isle been so accommodating?

Performance

Finally it's concert time, with the hall packed to the rafters with islanders and visitors. Music first from the quartet, then Purcell's 'Fairest isle' from *Ruth*. This provides the choir, sitting up on the stage, with an episode of frozen anxiety, as Neil's score falls onto the floor and under the piano whilst he is accompanying *Ruth*, and none of us is in a position to help. Not to worry. He carries on playing with one hand whilst ducking under the piano to search about for the mischievous score - a real 'pro'. The audience, and *Ruth*, who was stood in front of him, singing away, never even noticed.

I have sung in a premiere before - again it was one of Alastair's pieces, 'Between two mirrors' - but this was unbelievably special. Music, as Jimmy Stout said 'from the heart of the land and the soul of the people'. The piece opens with the MV *Good Shepherd* approaching Fair Isle. Voices reel off factual descriptions of the island's geology, flora and fauna, population size and demographical detail, as the 'socket and spanner' ensemble clang like a ship's bell, to the exact rhythm of the fog warning, getting steadily louder as the boat nears the haven. The choir sings poems by Jack Renwick, Tom Laurenson and Christine de Luca, Andy sings Jonathon's poems, and Lise and Eileen sing a poem by Barbara Wilson, before the whole choir returns to sing the words that the Fair Isle children have chosen to describe their home. Then - there is applause, speeches, presents for Alastair, Lise, and for the guests, then time to mix and speak and celebrate.

I have to go outside and sit in the dark, trying to distil the feelings of pride, achievement, gratitude and the sense of shared experience which this evening has evoked, and lock them away, so that I can take them out at some later date, when life is perhaps not so very happy, and remember a week when the sun shone, the sky vibrated colour, and a unique community worked and played and made music on a tiny island in the middle of the North Atlantic.

'Dear Lord, the very land is singing, the very land is singing, is singing'