

Shaping the Silences

Mary Blanche speaks to Shetland composer, Alastair Stout.

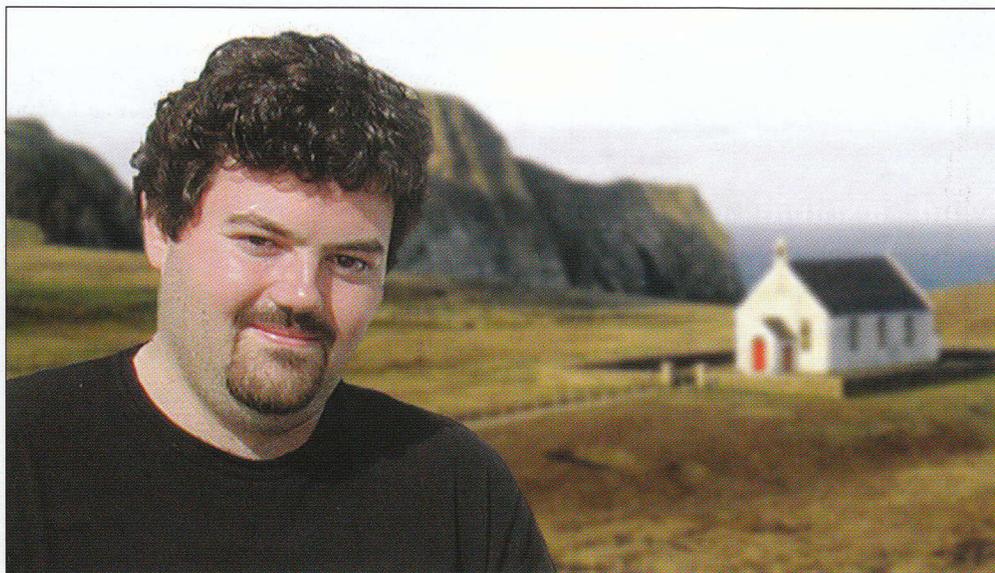


Photo: Dave Wheeler

Alastair Stout is the kind of person who will light up any room he comes into – he’s so full of energy and enthusiasm. When he talks, his conversation sparkles as his mind dances off in a myriad of directions. I enjoyed spending time with the dynamic young composer who interrupted his busy schedule to speak to me. Alastair was at home in Shetland for a few days to fulfil a very special professional commitment.

Back in 2000, Fair Islander Betty Best came up with the idea that the island should commission a piece of new classical music to mark the millennium. So it came to pass that Alastair, who has close family connections with Fair Isle, was invited to write a piece of music, and ‘*Given Days, The Sounds of Fair Isle*’ was premiered in the isle on 23rd August 2002. The performance brought together an exciting mix of professional musicians from Shetland and from ‘South’, together with amateur performers, including the hard-working Fair Isle choir. The piece was conducted by the composer himself, in front of his mentor and ‘Classic Fair Isle’ patron, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

Alastair says, “It was one of the toughest commissions I’ve had. I had no idea how to go about it – it forced me to rethink how to write. I had to incorporate all the aspects of the island into a coherent half hour. It had to work

as music, and the Fair Isle Choir had to be able to sing it. The tenth version was the final draft.” Alastair worked closely with librettist Jonathan Lennie to create a piece of work, which summed up the island in as few words as possible. Another vital ingredient was the words chosen by the local school children reflecting what Fair Isle means to them.

It’s Alastair’s third composition to be performed in Shetland. In 1999, he was commissioned to write a piece of music for the Lerwick Choral Society to celebrate Lerwick’s participation in the Cutty Sark Tall Ships Race. ‘*Between Blue Mirrors*’, another collaboration with Jonathan Lennie, was an intense piece of work. Farther back, Alastair wrote a short piece ‘*Of Reels and Fathoms*’ for a concert by a group of Shetland music students calling themselves Classic Youth. “It was good enough at the time but the score’s lost now,” says the 27-year-old of his teenage self.

Nowadays, Alastair lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where he’s organist and director of music as well as artist in residence at Coraopolis United Methodist Church. It’s suiting him very well, he says. The congregation appreciate that he does the job for the church “but they also support my composing. It’s so nice to get that support – with an office, desk and peace to write. I feel it’s a home from home.”

But home for Alastair will always be Lunnasting in Shetland – though he has strong family ties to Fair Isle where his father was born and lies buried, his grandfather still lives, his uncle is the ferry skipper and where he has cousins and friends galore. He loves to visit, enjoying the special holiday feeling prompted by the short flight overseas. He also feels island life itself is a spur for the creative imagination. “There’s a limit to what you can do, so what you do is special – whether it’s meeting the ferry or making the trip to the North Light. You become a lot more creative and use your imagination more

when there’s less to do. It’s made me write music, made me focus on it. I love Fair Isle,” says Alastair, before adding, “but my heart is very much in Vidlin where I grew up. I think it’s where I intend to grow old too.”

Alastair was born in Derbyshire in 1975 and moved to Shetland in 1981, where he went to the local primary school. The musical path of his life first took him away from home when he was only 10 years old. He won a choral scholarship to King’s School in Ely and for the next 4 years he sang every day, except Wednesdays, and twice on Sundays. It wasn’t plain sailing. “It was difficult for the first 2 years, I was very homesick. I used to see P & O trucks going through Ely, probably going to Ramsgate. But I was convinced they were heading for Aberdeen and the P & O ferry to Shetland. I used to plan that sometime I’d stop a truck and get a lift home. But I never plucked up courage.” Before too long, Alastair had started to enjoy his new life. He began to play the organ when he was only 12, and later he became head chorister. “I was growing up. I was learning independence and taking on responsibilities, representing the choir. I began to appreciate the rich tradition I lived in, the music of Palestrina and Byrd through to Stravinsky and Messiaen.”

Then it was back home to Shetland

and the local comprehensive school. "It was nice to be back among Shetland folk again." A teacher who remembers him with affection says, "Charm, that's what he had, charm. Dark curls and twinkling dark eyes. Not taking the homework very seriously. A likeable boy." During these years, it was his organ teacher Cyril Baker who brought his pupil to the attention of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. "He sent my music to Max," says Alastair, "to get an idea of whether there was inspiration behind the music, whether the germ was there." Cyril Baker says today, "I asked him for a comment and he said he felt that Alastair definitely had a future in music. It gave Alastair a boost. It seemed to be his heart's desire to have a life in music so he was a dedicated and rewarding pupil."

Soon Alastair was off south on his travels again. At 16, he won an organ scholarship to Loretto School in Musselburgh, where he was delighted to have the opportunity to play a brand new organ. He practised with dedication, even when he was supposed to be elsewhere. He recalls his time there with affection saying, "I made a lot of friends." After two years it was time to move on again and this time he began to study composition and organ at the Royal College of Music in London.

One of the experiences he recalls most vividly from those four years was meeting and questioning other musicians, keen to understand their craft. "I went round asking them exactly how their instruments worked, buying them drinks and trying things out. You can't just learn how to compose from books; you need to understand things like instrumental fingering and extended techniques. The rest of my time I spent in the library listening to CDs and reading scores. Up till then I'd just been writing organ music." But this meant a problem for the young composer: "How was I to deal with such an input? It was Max to the rescue again." On this occasion, it was a visit to a summer school at Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's home on Hoy in Orkney that set Alastair back on track. "I was in a room with a desk and paper for a week - with no piano. It liberated my mind. I wrote differently. If it was a piece for the horn, I wrote it for the horn."

He'd done well enough to earn himself a mark that won him a Major Scottish Studentship Award and a place on the Guildhall School of Music

and Drama's Master's degree. It was demanding - with a piece of music to write every fortnight - so he became skilled in creating "miniatures", as he calls them. Meanwhile, the Guildhall gave him the opportunity to work with other students from different disciplines. "It was interesting to collaborate," he says. "I worked on Chekhov's *'The Cherry Orchard'* with drama students, not just writing music but playing the piano for the dancing in the background. I enjoyed watching them develop in their roles. I also worked with the London Contemporary Dance School."

With another qualification under his belt, Alastair applied to the University of London to study for a PhD, grateful that the Scottish Studentship was still continuing. "I was panicking and asking myself how I was going to earn a living from composing. During those years, I felt I was hiding from the real world but I spent the time developing my compositional technique. I had an incredible teacher, Simon Holt, and with him I learned to give music more space, to strip layers away, to recognise that maybe what I was writing didn't need more colouring, but more silences. Yes, it was interesting to be taught about silence when working with music. Learning how to deal with silence - that was the most important thing I gained from those years."

Then the student years were over and it was time to earn a living. Alastair already knew there was a demand for organists in the United States, where the money was good. So he applied and got his current job, where he's so delighted to be encouraged in his own composition work.

Speaking of the stage his career is at, Alastair makes no great claims for himself: "What I've done so far is try to get a technique." And he says he tries to follow his own advice: "Be as self-critical as you can be and never be satisfied."

When it comes to his major musical influences, he naturally talks of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies with admiration and respect: "At the root of it - he's a humble, amazing person. His work *'The Lighthouse'* was inspirational to me; it's a masterpiece." Alastair acknowledges that "Max" has had a profound effect on his development as a composer. "Then there are the organ composers like Bach, and the incredible 16th century English composer, Purcell. Growing up, of

course, the music I was hearing at home in Vidlin was traditional Shetland fiddle music and my friends and I still have fun spicing up the tunes with slightly more modern accompaniments!"

Alastair is aware he's influenced as much by literature as music. As an example, he singles out George Mackay Brown's *'Northern Lights, A Poet's Source'*. "I could easily write for the rest of my life through that material." And there's the Shetland poet, Rhoda Bulter. "If the time ever comes, that's a poet I would like to set to music. I'm also fascinated by books about sailing like *'North to the Night'* by Alvar Simon. Sailing, I would imagine, is comparable to being in space. When a difficulty arises, you have to fix it with what you've got on board - with no outside help. I can parallel that with dealing with problems when preparing for a performance - you've got to find a way out that doesn't waste rehearsal time, that works first time."

Alastair relaxes by going to the cinema, not by listening to music, and nowadays goes to the gym more than he used to. "I swim and work out a bit." But most of all, Alastair has his family and his friends. He's still close to his childhood friends in Shetland and can tell fairly hair-raising yarns about ploys they got up to. Some of them made the journey to Fair Isle to show their support for him at the performance of *'Given Days'*. Then there are the friends he made in Edinburgh, and in London, and the new friends he's making now. "I don't deserve half as many friends as I have," he says, acknowledging how rich he is in friendship, "and I love my family."

Will he ever come back to live in Shetland? "Whenever I come back to Shetland," he muses, "I feel I could instantly drop everything and live here for the rest of my life. No other place does that to me. It makes me feel satisfied, happy and, I don't know what the word is... content perhaps." So maybe some day he will come back to stay.

Meantime, of his future as a composer he says, "It sounds very selfish, doesn't it, but I want to write the kind of music I want to hear. The music just happens. I have no idea where it comes from. It's as natural as breathing - though it is hard work." Then, with a mischievous smile, he adds, "But I also get incredible pleasure from tarring roofs."