

ISSHALLYN

BLOOMINGTON, IN

Farewell Forever to the Music of the Harp

IN-PERSON CONCERT

Tunes and Verse from the Life of Sileas na Ceapaich (c.1665-ca.1730)

TUESDAY, MAY 24 | 8PM

TEXTS & TRANSLATIONS

[Ceòl na Clàrsaich]

Do bheatha, chlàrsaich, a ris,
An dèis domh do thilgeadh uam;
Nam faodainn do chumail a steach,
Cha reachadh tu mach ri luaths.

Bu bhinn leam iuchair do theud
Bhith 'ga gleusadh goirid uam ;
B' ait leam do chom buidhe binn
Bhith 'ga seinn làmh ri m' chluais.

Nam bu bhean mi 'g am biodh oighreachd
Bhiodh tu daonnan an mo chaidreabh;
Bu bhinn le m' chluais bhith 'gad chluinntinn
'Nuair a dhùisginn anns a' mhadainn.

B' annsa na fiodhull is beus,
Orgain cha tèid mi g'a luaidh,
'S b' e mo roghainn thar gach ceòl
Fuaim do theud throimh d' bhòrdaibh cruaidh.

Marbhrann

Chorus:

Is coma leam fhèin na co dhùibh sin,
Mire nó aighear no sùgragh;
An diugh ó théann mi ri chunntadh,
So ceann na bliadhna thog riadh dhìom dùbailt.

'Si so bhliadhna 's tur a chlaoidh mi,
Gun sùnn gun aighear gun aoibhneas:
Mi mar bhàta air tràigh air sgaoileadh,
Gun stiùir gun seòl gun ràmh gun taoman.

Chorus

Si so bhliadhna chaisg air m' àilgheas:
Chuir mi fear mo thighe 'n càradh
An ciste chaoil 's na saoir ga sàbhadh;
O's mise tha faoin 's mo dhaoine air m' fhàgail.

[Hail to the harp]

Hail to you, O harp, once more,
after I have cast you from me;
if I could keep you inside
you would not very speedily get out.

Melodious to me was the temperament (?)
of your strings being tuned close by me;
delightful to me was your sweet sallow body
being played near to my ear.

If I were a woman with an inheritance
you would be ever in my company;
my ear would delight to hear you
as I arose in the morning.

Dearer than fiddle and bass-
I will not mention the organ-
and my choice above all music
was the sound of your strings through your hard
boards.

Elegy

Chorus:

I care nothing whatever
For mirth, or joy, or play;
Since I have been assessing it today
Here ends the year which levied a double tax on me.

This is the year which has totally despoiled me,
leaving no happiness, joy or pleasure;
leaving me like a boat disintegrating on a beach,
with no helm or sail, no oar or bailer.

Chorus

This is the year which put an end to my enjoyment:
I have laid my goodman to rest
in a narrow coffin sawn by the carpenters ;
Oh, I am feeble since my dear ones have left me.

Chorus

Chaill mi sin 's mo chuilean gràdhach,
Bha gun bheum gun leum gun àrdan,
Bha gu beusach ceutach nàrach :
Bha guth do bheòil mar cheòl na clàrsaich.

Chorus

Mas beag leam sin, fhuair mi bàrr air
Ceann mo stuic is pruiop nan càirdean,
Leag na céid le bheum 's na blàraibh.
D'a chur fo 'n fhòd le òl na gràisge.

Chorus

Cead nan creachan a thug uainn thu!
Thug do Inbhir Nis air chuairt thu,
Dh'òl an fhìona las do ghruaidhean,
'S a dh'fhàg 'nad chorp gun lot gun luaidh thu.

Chorus

'S mór a tha gun fhios de d' chàirdibh
'S an tìr mhóir tha nunn o 'n t-sàile,
Thu bhith aig na Gaill 'gad chàradh,
'S do dhùthaich fhèin air a mort le nàimhdibh.

Chorus

Cumha Lachlainn Daill

Slàn a chaidh le ceòl na clàrsaich
Ona ghlac am bàs thu, Lachlainn;
Cha bhidh mi tuille 'gat iargain,
Ni mò dh'iarras mi chaidh t' fhaicinn ;
Fhuair mi mo chleachdadh ri d' cheòl-sa
'Nuair a bha mi òg 's mi 'm phàisdean,
'S ged a thàinig mi 'n taobh tuath uat
Thigeadh tu air chuairt do m' fhàrdaich.

Gheibhinn sgeul air Mòir's air Seònaid,
Ged tha 'n còmhnuidh 'n Earraghaidheal;
Gheibhinn sgeul air Gleanna Comhann,
"S air gach gnothach mar a b' àill leam;
Nis o chaill mi mo cheann seanchais,
'S cruaidh an naidheachd leam ri èisdeachd;
Mur cluinn mi tuille dhe d' labhairt,
Cò uaidh a ghabhas mi sgeula?
Ach mur tig thu chaidh do 'n bhaile,

Chorus

As well as him I lost my loving dear one,
who was free from reproach, from wrath, from pride,
who was well-behaved, graceful, and modest:
the voice from your mouth was like the music of the
harp.

Chorus

If that were not enough for me, I got more:
that the head of my family, the prop of the comrades,
who slew hundreds with his blow in battles,
was sent to his grave by the drinking of riff-raff.

Chorus

A disastrous trip it was that took you from us,
took you on a visit to Inverness
to drink the wine which inflamed your cheeks,
and left you a corpse without gash or bullet.

Chorus

Many of your friends on the mainland,
away from the sea, do not know
that you are being laid to rest by Lowlanders,
while your own land is being destroyed by enemies.

Chorus

Lament for Blind Lachlann

Farewell forever to the music of the harp,
since death has taken you, Lachlann;
no more shall I bewail your absence,
nor ever seek to see you.
I became accustomed to your music
when I was a young child,
and though I came north from you,
you used to come visiting my house.

I would get news of [my sisters] Mòr and Seònaid,
though their home is in Argyll;
I would get news of Glencoe,
and of every matter as I wished.
Now that I have lost my source of information
I find the news of it hard to listen to.
If I am to hear no more of your speech,
from whom shall I get news ?
If you never again come to this place,

Gun laidh smàl air mo shùgradh
'S e an t-eug 'gad thoirt le cabhaig
Thug an diugh gal air mo shùilibh;
'S ann umad a bha mi eòlach,
'S air do cheòl a bha mi dèidheil;
Cha bhiodh gruaman air nar buidhinn
Far an suidheamaid le chèile.

'Nuair a ghlacadh tu do chèile
'S a bhiodh tu 'ga gleusadh làmh rium,
Cha mhath a thuigte le h-ùmaidh
Do chur chiùil 's mo ghabhail dhàn-sa;
Bu bhinn do mheòir air a cliathaich
'Nuair a dh'iarrainn Cumha 'n Easbuig,
Cumha Ni Mhic Raghnaill làmh ris,
Cumha Màiri 's Cumha Ghilleasbuig.

Cha chluinn mi chaoidh Socair Dhàna,
Cumha na Fàilte na Òran,
Nach tig na deòir o mo shùilean
Le trom-thùirse o nach beò thu;
Ged a bha iad dall do shùilean,
Cha bu dall an cùis no dhà thu:
Cha bu dall do bheul ri sùgradh,
'S cha bu dall air lùths do làmh thu.

'S truagh leam do chlarsach 'ga rùsgadh
'S truagh leam gach cùis mar a thachair;
'S duilich leam nach tig thu 'n taobh so
'S gun mo dhùil bhith chaoidh ri t' fhaicinn;
Iarram air Dia bhith riut iochdmhor
'S do leigeil am miosg nan Aingeal;
O bha do thlachd 's a' cheòl's an t-saoghal,
Ceòl am miosg nan naomh dha t' anam.

Cha d'iarr thu phòrsan 's a' bheatha
Ach na gheibheadh tu o uaislean,
'G imeachd le sùgradh 's le aighear
'Nuair bhiodh tu caitheamh do dhuaise ;
Ciod an stà dhomh bhith 'gad chaoidh-se
'N déidh gach saoidh a rinn ar fàgail?
'Sge bu toigh leam e ri m' òige,
Slàn a chaoidh le ceòl na clàrsaich.

there will be a cloud over my sportiveness;
death's carrying you off in haste
has caused me to shed tears today.
I knew a lot about you
and was fond of your music:
there was no gloom on our companions
wherever we would sit together.

When you took your loved one [his harp]
and were tuning it beside me,
a fool would not have understood very well
your making of music or my giving of poems.
Your fingers were sweet on the side (?)
when I would ask for Lament for the Bishop,
Lament for Raghnaill's Daughter as well,
Lament for Màiri and Lament for Gillespie.

I shall never hear [the genres of] Gentle Verse,
Lament, or Welcome or Song,
but the tears will come from my eyes
in deep sadness that you are no longer alive.
Though your eyes were blind,
you were not blind in one or two matters:
your lips were not blind in sporting,
and you were not blind in the nimbleness of your
hands.

I am grieved that your harp is laid bare*;
I am grieved at the way it all happened;
I am saddened that you will never come to this part
and that I can never expect to see you.
I beseech God to be merciful
to you and to admit you among the angels :
since your delight on earth was in music,
may your soul have music among the saints.

You asked no portion in life
but what you got from noblemen,
going about in playfulness and joy
when spending your reward.
What use for me to mourn you,
after all the heroes who have left us?
And although I loved it in my youth,
farewell forever to the music of the harp.

*there is some evidence that at the death of a harper,
his/her harp was unstrung for a time.

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

The end of the 17th century saw profound changes to Scottish society. With the departure of the Catholic King James II, himself of Scottish ancestry, and then the Act of Union of 1707 which deprived Scotland of its independence, all strata of Scottish society saw profound alterations to daily life: Catholic and Protestant, Highland and Lowland, Gaelic speakers and Scots speakers. The poems, or more accurately songs of Sileas Nighean Mhic Mhic Raghnaill, or Sileas na Ceapaich, survive in a number of manuscripts and field recordings. Originally from Lochaber, she married Alexander Gordon of Camdell, later Beldorney, by about 1685. Her support for the restoration of King James II, and later his son, is expressed in her poems, and she bore witness to incipient rebellion in 1715. Her poetry reflects two approaches, one ancient and one modern. The syllabic poetry with its intricate internal rhyme schemes reflects an earlier, “bardic” tradition. The newer stressed verse was a more accessible, popular approach.

As traditional Gaelic culture disintegrated around her, she keenly observed the perceived military failings of the Gaelic aristocracy, and the concurrent decline of the learned arts of poetry and harping. The moving lament she made on the death of her friend the blind harper believed to be Lachlann Mac Iomhuinn is particularly poignant; in one tantalizing verse she mentions singing to his accompaniment, and even records names of tunes she loved to hear him play. This verse is one of the precious few hints we have of how vocalist and harper interacted in a Gaelic idiom. English-language accounts, usually antagonistic, provide ambiguous clues by using such descriptions as “recite” or “gave the rhyme” or “kept even pace” while the harper played. In her lament for Lachlann she uses the term *gabhail* “giving” the poem. There is a perfectly ordinary word for “to sing” in Gaelic, but curiously it is almost never used in this context. In Irish, the word for the vocalist element in the classical triad of poet, vocalist, and harper is *reacaire*, “reciter.”

Though she was aggrieved at the waning of the harpers, poets, and their respective arts, other musical activities in Scotland were blossoming. The bagpipe and the fiddle were ascendant in the musical life of both Highlander and Lowlander. Pipers constructed immensely complicated and refined works called in Gaelic *ceòl mor*, or

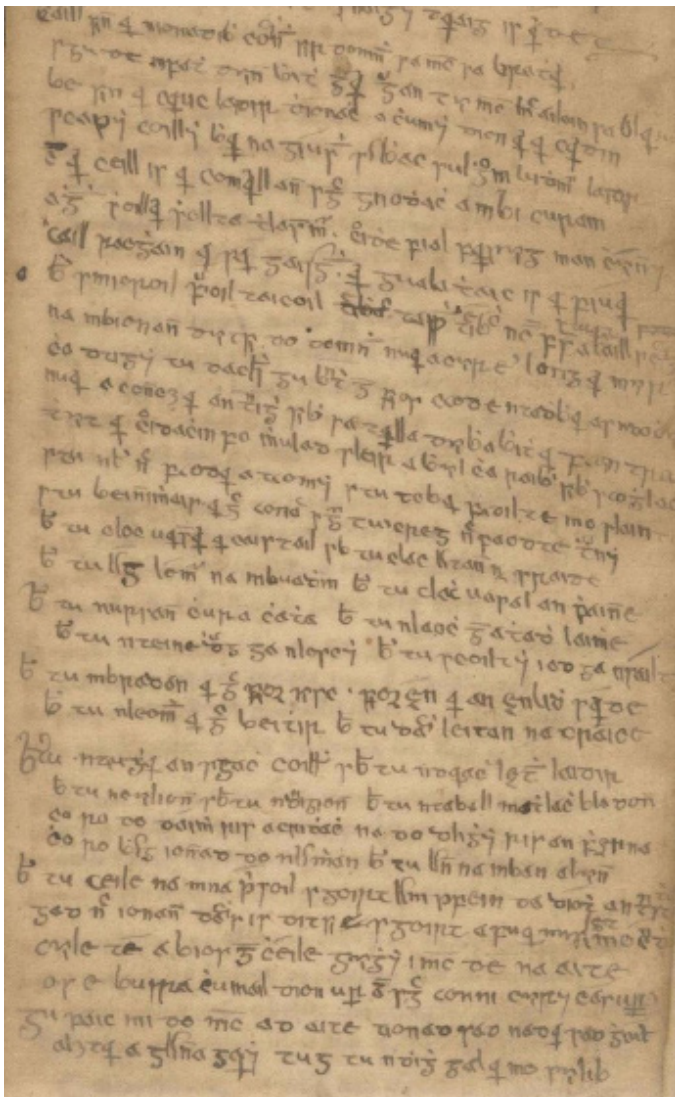
great music/large music. A melody, the *ùrlar* (lit. floor or ground), is played with embellishments and certain notes elongated. Then follow a number of variations, or *siubhal* (journey) of increasing complexity, each traditionally followed by a repeat of the *ùrlar*. The most complicated and advanced variations have as many as eight or more very fast decorative notes on each note of the melody. Interestingly, linguistic evidence suggests harpers had a similar tradition, sadly lost.

Much more portable than a harp and more suitable for indoors, the fiddle and cello were immensely popular in 18th century Scotland. By the end of the century there were scores of prints available aimed at amateur players of both fiddle and flute. In the vein of the fascination in previous centuries with chinoiserie and turquoise, a similar interest in Scottish music overtook much of Europe, which influenced Haydn and Beethoven. Fiddlers even played in the style of the piper’s “great music,” known as *pibroch* in English (from Gaelic *piobaireachd* “piping”). One amateur poet, Grant of Sheuglie, writes of these three instruments being in competition with each other. The original Gaelic is lost, but an English translation survives. In our program each instrument has a version of the tune, and also plays a piece extolling the virtues of said instrument, or deriding another.



Beldorney Castle, where Sileas lived from 1713 until her death.

Vocal and instrumental laments were powerful tributes to dead relatives, clan leaders, clergy, and even circumstances. When in 1720 Sileas lost her husband and youngest daughter within a two-week period (probably to typhus), and also her chieftain, she made a moving lament to their memories. By chance, a 19th-centu



Manuscript page preserving a song by Sileas.

ry manuscript preserves a tune “Sileas’ lament on the deaths of her husband and child.” We present it here accompanied by the wire-strung harp native to Ireland and Scotland. Our reconstruction of the harp’s role is informed by the parallel harping tradition in Wales, where a ca. 1612 manuscript in tablature includes what may be a repertory of tunes and techniques used to accompany poetry.

While poets were usually men, women poets were not unheard of in Highland society; they were, however, viewed with suspicion. She came to poetry relatively late in life, and composed in both the older syllabic style and the newer stressed meters which could be sung to popular tunes, some of which she named. How or where she came by the knowledge of poetry is not known.

-- C. Keith Collins