



VIOLA

Verse, Poetry, and Songs: Storytelling in the Viola Concerto No. 2 by Sally Beamish

by Valerie Little

As a doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, I wanted my research to combine various interests, including literature, lesser known modern works, and string compositions by women. I was particularly drawn to the work of Sally Beamish and her second viola concerto. I had the pleasure of interviewing Ms. Beamish while she was visiting the Twin Cities to attend the North American premiere of her third viola concerto, *Under the Wing of the Rock*, performed by violist Sabina Thatcher and the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. The aim of this article is to introduce the life and work of Sally Beamish, followed by a broad-spectrum analysis as to how the music successfully represents the poetry that inspired the concerto.

Biographical Information

Sally Beamish (b. 1956) is a Scotland-based composer who began studying the viola at Camden School for Girls in London. She began composition lessons with Alan Richardson and Herbert Howells while still at Camden; her first orchestral work—a two-minute piano concerto—was performed there when she was twelve years old. When interviewed, Beamish repeatedly stressed her love of storytelling and drama in the concerto, having composed fifteen concerti to date.

After studying viola with Patrick Ireland, Atar Arad, and Bruno Giuranna, Beamish began freelancing in London. Luciano Berio offered her an opportunity to study with him, but she was unable due to her first pregnancy. Later, Oliver Knussen took it upon himself to give her lessons while commuting to Sinfonietta concerts. Without formal schooling in composition, Beamish says of her training, “I think it’s very instinctive and it’s unusual.” She also believes her tonal language, once less fashionable in the wake of extreme experimentation in Europe, is acceptable again, thus leaving her free to organically compose.

Growing tired of the freelancing life, Beamish found a welcoming musical community in Scotland; “We’re all very much influenced by the traditional music

of Scotland because it’s everywhere. It’s just in everything that I write.” In a series of oddly fortuitous events, Beamish’s 1749 Gabrieli viola was stolen from her house in 1989 and was never recovered. That, paired with a successful application for funding, prompted Beamish to fully devote herself to composition. “It’s useful to have been a player, to understand how it feels to play new music, and how important it is to value the players and really be clear. Looking back on it, there’s no better way to learn about composing than by playing what other people have written.”

Despite her vast experience as a professional violist, she does not use her instrument to compose, instead preferring the piano and her own imagination: “I hear the player in my head, the actual player that’s going to do it, and then writing to that.” In a past article for the *Journal of the American Viola Society*, Beamish also addresses her compositional process, joking, “I have to confess I have never, ever attempted even the smallest passage from any of my viola works!”

Viola Concerto No. 2 (2001)

The second viola concerto completes Beamish’s *Seafarer Trilogy*, a group of works that also includes a solo violin piece (1998) and a piece for narrator and piano trio (2000), each depicting aspects of a 9th Century Anglo-Saxon poem retranslated by Charles Harrison Wallace. She explains that “the poem explores the idea of life’s journey, using the metaphor of a sea voyage.” Written for violist Tabea Zimmermann and jointly commissioned by the Swedish and Scottish Chamber Orchestras, it was to be conducted by Zimmermann’s husband, David Shallon, who passed away suddenly while touring with Zimmermann in Japan.

Beamish realizes the myriad of technical difficulties presented in this concerto. When asked which composers were most

inspirational in terms of her own writing for the viola, she said: “Probably Hindemith... with the double stopping. And probably Shostakovich [viola sonata]. In the second concerto I used a lot of fourths, which Tabea was not overly thrilled about! You know, in the Shostakovich, those fourths, you just move your hand up. Actually, the way I used them in the second concerto is not as friendly...but she’s wonderful, amazing. But you always have to recognize

the difference between virtuosity and just plain difficulty. If it doesn’t feel good to play, you’re not going to get such a good result...unless you’re Tabea!”

First Movement

While there are clear musical depictions of bird calls, whale sounds, and a screaming banshee,

the concerto does not follow the poem in linear fashion. The listener is also free to use their imagination to associate musical gestures with the text of the poem. The first movement follows a loose ABA structure:

A	B	A
m.1-98	m.99-128	m.129-169

Measures 1-43 state the primary theme of the first movement, first heard in the solo viola line over a C drone in the cello. The melody highlights the viola’s low register and focuses around the interval of a half step. Creating an image of utter solitude, the solo viola essentially stands alone for the opening 30 measures, creating an unquiet mood of someone at sea with “endless halls of heaving waves.” The $\frac{6}{8}$ time signature, one that often lends itself well to depicting the rolling sea, and the suspended cymbal adds shimmer to the waves as Beamish gradually introduces pairs of winds separated by half steps, reinforcing the importance of that interval.

While the seafarer is looking straight ahead at the beginning of his journey, the offbeat accents and hemiola in the lower strings and solo viola demonstrate the



Sally Beamish

(photo credit: Ashley Combes)

difficult and sometimes jarring voyage as he “steer[s] her clear of clashing cliffs.” It is during this section that we begin to hear bird calls in measures 62-64 in the violins and violas. More bird calls arrive in the violins and upper woodwinds in measure 86-87, calling to mind the sixth stanza of the poem:

All I ever heard along the ice-way
was sounding sea, the gannet’s shanty
whooper and curlew calls and
mewling gull
were all my gaming, mead and mirth
At tempest-tested granite crags
the ice-winged tern would taunt
spray-feathered ospreys overhead
would soar and scream.

The B section differs mainly in terms of meter, deviating from the outer sections’ $\frac{6}{8}$ to feature frequent changes, including $\frac{5}{8}$, $\frac{9}{16}$ and $\frac{11}{16}$ —a shaky foundation for the seafarer with “no one to comfort or console” him. The brittle quality of the strings and upper winds, combined with the stopped horn, creates the perfect dry texture to depict loneliness, while the solo viola is one of the birds via tremolo and far-reaching upward and downward glissandi.

Second Movement

The second movement, also in ABA form, is based around the opening motive in the bassoon, symbolizing the cuckoo. Cuckoos and whales were feared creatures at the time of this poem’s creation. She writes, “the cuckoo in this context is seen as malevolent, even sinister...The music is mocking and ironic in character, with a fragile and transient middle section—the half-heard cries of banshee-like spirits.” The malevolent quality of the bassoon’s cuckoo is clear from the beginning as it squawks over a unison bass line of timpani, celli, and contrabass. The sneering trills, as well a repeated rhythmic motive of a sixteenth-dotted eighth figure, in the tom-tom and solo viola conjure the mockery and ongoing suffering of the seafarer for which Beamish was searching:

And heralding his summer hoard
of pain
the gowk repeats his plaintive geck
foreboding bitterness of breast
Soft-bedded bloods cannot conceive
what some men suffer as abroad
they travel tracks of exile
My mind is cast upon the sea swell,
over the whale’s world
widely to course creation’s coast

The middle section begins with string harmonics and crotales accompanying the solo viola, creating an eerie, fragile landscape. Despite the seafarer’s acknowledgment that sea life is difficult, he cannot resist the call to journey onward into the unknown. Though traditionally associated with Irish folklore, the banshee, a woman wailing to signal death, is also found in Scottish legends. Here, the viola serves as the banshee, wailing via dynamically wide-ranging glissandi between high G# and E# without vibrato. As listeners, we are able to extend our realm of possibility, allowing a banshee to serve as one of the possible obstacles that the seafarer could face. Perhaps this banshee cry also represents the shock and mourning following David Shallon’s unexpected death.

Measure 245 brings about a Presto section—a surprisingly straight forward dance in $\frac{6}{8}$ featuring the piccolo, suggesting a quirky sea jig. This music lacks the malevolence of the rest of the movement, containing light, cascading melodic lines and colorful orchestration. The use of sul ponticello in the solo viola makes even the minor tonality sound playful.

The recapitulation presents the materials in a backwards order. For a composer who initially was reticent about composing for full orchestra, Beamish creates uniquely colorful combinations of instruments in this movement. Also worth noting is that the bass line, once only timpani, celli, and bass, now includes the violas, clarinets, bassoons, and horn 2—strengthening the sense of foreboding and repetition. Starting in measure 348, Beamish creates a wonderful effect as each section of the orchestra weaves in and out combining the cuckoo and bass line themes. The movement closes in a playful way with the solo viola descending to a unison C with the orchestra.

Third Movement

The final movement is an elegy for David Shallon, looking back at material from the previous two movements. This concerto is dedicated to him and remains the work that is most important to Beamish. This movement is based upon the second to last stanza of the poem:

Come, consider where we have a
home, how
we can travel to it, how our travail
here
will lead us to the living well-head
and heaven haven of our Lord’s love.

Beamish reflects upon the previous two movements through a series of four sections of sparsely-accompanied cadenzas and hymn-like tutti passages. The cadenza uses double stops to highlight the second and the seventh, once again bringing to mind Beamish’s prominent use of the half step throughout the concerto.

Section Two is delineated by the reintroduction of the second movement’s sixteenth-dotted eighth motive in the solo viola, while timpani and tom-toms provide the cuckoo rhythm. In measure 444, the viola then takes up the cuckoo theme in octaves, while trills in the timpani reference the mockery of the seafarer, creating one of the most effective moments of orchestration in the piece. With only three instruments playing, Beamish creates an extremely loud and powerful reiteration of this material. Continuing with references to the second movement, the seafarer’s jig returns from measure 452-461, modulated up by one half step.

Section Three is an orchestral tutti combining new material with the jig and march themes from the previous movements. Beamish does a remarkable job of layering voices here, gradually increasing the number of instruments essentially playing only two melodies.

Section Four is comprised of a triple-meter hymn-tune. Reminiscent of Britten’s *Lachrymae*, Beamish seamlessly breaks down all of the dissonant struggle of the entire concerto into a simple hymn in the solo viola (measures 525-553). The seafarer’s journey ends in the same key in which we began—c minor. The tranquility certainly lends itself to heavenly goal of the poetry, but the firm establishment of c minor serves as a final reminder of the personal tragedy that surrounded this work. During our interview, Beamish spoke of how Shallon’s death truly shaped the outcome of the concerto, bringing deeper meaning and personal resonance to the poem’s emphasis of the brevity and transience of human life. More information about Sally Beamish and her compositions can be found at: <https://www.sallybeamish.com/>

Valerie Little serves as assistant principal librarian of the Minnesota Orchestra. She has performed with the Minnesota Orchestra, Minnesota Opera, Mill City Summer Opera, and with local pop/rock artists. Since 2013, Valerie has been the violist of the Mill City String Quartet. She is also an accomplished poet with almost a dozen works in print. ♪