



Your Leaning Neck – Song as Portrait

Devised by Steven Anderson

Scottish National Portrait Gallery,
Edinburgh

Peacock Visual Arts and St Andrew's Cathedral,
Aberdeen

A response to portraits from the Scottish contribution to the Enlightenment

Video Installation

Steven Anderson

Camera: Mairi Lafferty

Camera and Edit: Clyde Jones

“The fallen nature of modern man cannot be separated from social progress. On the one hand the growth of economic productivity furnishes the conditions for a world of greater justice; on the other hand it allows the technical apparatus and the social groups which administer it a disproportionate superiority to the rest of the population. The individual is wholly devalued in relation to the economic powers, which at the same time press the control of society over nature to hitherto unsuspected heights. Even though the individual disappears before the apparatus which he serves, that apparatus provides for him as never before. In an unjust state of life, the impotence and pliability of the masses grow with the quantitative increase in commodities allowed them.”

“The flood of detailed information and candy-floss entertainment simultaneously instructs and stultifies mankind”¹

Performances

Sheila Stewart

Hanna Tuulikki
(with Nerea Bello and Lucy Duncombe)

Elizabeth Stewart

Arthur Watson

Ruth Barker

¹ T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer: Dialectic of the Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (1972)

Introduction

In November 2011 the first public event in the refurbished Scottish National Portrait Gallery was the performance *Your Leaning Neck - Song as Portrait* devised by artist Steven Anderson. In response to portraits in the room celebrating Scotland's contribution to the Enlightenment Anderson invited seven artists from both oral tradition and contemporary art backgrounds to perform. With no painted portraits of oral tradition singers in the national collection the event challenged institutional representations of national identity by giving voice to non-institutional values.

A central question the performance posed was whether there should be painted documents in recognition of Scots who are notable and exemplar in the field of oral traditions. Those key figures and their culture are vitally important to discussions of national identity, however the fixed form of a painted portrait as a means of acknowledgement seems antithetical to the ethos of oral transmission culture. So who should be portrayed, why would they be acknowledged and how should they be represented?

Within the event oral tradition singers are presented alongside contemporary artists who also use their unaccompanied voice as their means of expression. Historical narratives, mythology and nature are shared areas of inspiration and subject matter. Presented together these performances focus on live, emotionally invested expression as a collective experience involving performers and audience alike.

The installation at Peacock Visual Arts is a silent video screening of real time, full-length documentation of the performance from two perspectives. In being videoed the performers and audience become as fixed to the image document as the portraits on the walls of the Portrait Gallery.

On 24 February 2012 a re-contextualization of the live performance, featuring Ruth Barker, Elizabeth Stewart, Sheila Stewart, Hanna Tuulikki (with Nerea Bello and Lucy Duncombe) and Arthur Watson takes place in the adjacent St Andrew's Cathedral, King Street, Aberdeen.

St Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen

In the eighteenth century the Episcopal Church remained closely aligned to the Jacobite succession. In the north east of Scotland the Church suffered greatly in the aftermath of the risings of 1715 and 1745 with the troops of the Duke of Cumberland burning meeting houses and evicting priests. Following the wars of independence the American Church wished to have its own bishop however this required a gathering of existing bishops to perform the consecration. Samuel Seabury of Connecticut was sent to London but his consecration was blocked by Pitt's government. Given the recent opposition of the Scottish Episcopal Church to the government it seemed logical for Seabury to travel north to Aberdeen where, in 1784, bishops Kilgour, Petrie and Skinner consecrated him the first Bishop of America. John Skinner later became Bishop of Aberdeen and head of the Scottish Episcopal Church. His statue stands at the west end of St. Andrew's Cathedral, below a ceiling decorated with the arms of the north east families who remained loyal to the episcopacy. In the north aisle are the arms of each of the United States.

Skinner's father, the minister of Longside, was a notable poet and songwriter who had been jailed in Old Aberdeen for his seditious verses. The elder Skinner was greatly admired by Burns who met his son, the Bishop, in Chalmers' printing office in Castle Street then 'adjourned to a neighbouring tavern where they discussed the national poetry over the national liquor'. Burns was particularly impressed by the song 'Tullochgorum', a plea for political unity sealed by drink and dancing, later part of the repertoire of Jeannie Robertson, the great Aberdeen ballad singer. Perhaps Skinner's best known song, still sung in Aberdeenshire, is 'Ewie Wi the Crookit Horn' definitively sung by Elizabeth Stewart, one of the singers featured in the performance "Your Leaning Neck: Song as Portrait".

Arthur Watson

Sheila Stewart MBE

“Sheila Stewart is the last in a long line of a rich oral tradition and a singer of unsurpassed character, passion and power. Born on July 7, 1937, Sheila grew up in a family of travelling people whose roots in Scotland have been traced back to the eleventh century and whose music and song gained world-wide renown during the folk music revival. Her mother, Belle, was a great singer and tradition bearer as well as a songwriter, and her father, Alec, was a piper and storyteller. It was Sheila’s Uncle Donald, however, who chose her to carry on the family’s songs and stories. She has lectured on travellers’ culture at Princeton and Harvard universities and for many years sat on the Secretary of State for Scotland’s advisory committee on travellers.”¹

Sheila has said that her singing voice has changed over the years. Far from being a criticism, she has stated with pride that her voice has got better as she’s gotten older. From listening to Sheila sing now in relation to early recordings, it seems that her voice has grown into something other than it was, having gained in qualities additional to the embodied, raw, emotional quality of the voice she has always been famed for.

“The ‘grain’ of the voice is not - or is not merely - its timbre; the significance it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message).” “The ‘grain’ is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs.”²

“La Niña de los Peines had to tear her voice because she had an exquisite audience, one which demanded not forms but the marrow of forms, pure music with a body so lean it could stay in the air. She had to rob herself of skill and security, send away her muse and become helpless, that her duende might come and deign to fight her hand to hand. And how she sang! Her voice was no longer playing, it was a jet of blood worthy of her pain and her sincerity”³

¹“Sheila Stewart” 01 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.tradmusichall.com/sheilastewart.htm>>

² Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text* (1977)

³ Federico García Lorca, *The Play and Theory of the Duende* (1933)

Hanna Tuulikki

Air falbh leis na h-eòin | Away with the Birds

Composition for three voices

Performed by Nerea Bello, Lucy Duncombe and Hanna Tuulikki

In the Scottish Gaelic oral tradition, wordless vocables as well as the melody and rhythm of lyrics are used in song and rhyme to emulate the sounds of particular species or natural phenomena, such as the call of the seal or the breaking of waves. The most common of these, however, imitate birds.

As fragments of oral tradition, these songs invoke something much larger than a portrait of the original songwriters, for they carry with them the lifeblood of generations of singers, and offer a glimpse into historic Scottish Gaelic peoples’ relationship to the environment around them.

In *Air falbh leis na h-eòin | Away with the Birds*, Hanna Tuulikki has deconstructed these songs into their basic components, lifting mimetic phrases from their original song context and narrative, in order to weave together a new composition that evokes the sounds, movements and interactions of several species of birds within a Hebridean landscape.

The piece results from a period of research into archive material gathered in the Western Isles: field recordings made by John Lorne Campbell, Hamish Henderson and Alan Lomax, as well as songs and rhymes learnt directly from bearers of the tradition such as Christine Primrose and Kenna Campbell.

As a work in progress this piece is evolving into a site-specific performance for multiple voices within a rural environment in the Western Isles. The excerpt performed here was developed through a series of solo and group improvisations exploring material where the birds evoked include the redshank, the oystercatcher, and seabird colonies.

Elizabeth Stewart

Elizabeth Stewart is one of Scotland's great traditional singers. She comes from a family celebrated for a remarkable fund of traditional lore: stories, riddles, music and songs, and particularly the classic ballads. Her aunt, Lucy Stewart (1901–1982), was a dealer in new and used goods, but also a wonderful performer. Of the ballad, she was an acknowledged master, and though she never performed in public, she influenced a generation of revival singers. Elizabeth's mother, Jean (1911–1962), enjoyed a remarkable career as a pianist, accordionist, broadcaster and band leader, for which she is well remembered today.

From these two women, Elizabeth inherited an unshakable faith in the value of her culture which she has shared with audiences throughout Scotland, England and the USA. Elizabeth's own song repertoire covers a wide range of material: traditional, Music Hall, wartime songs, Country and Western, Blues and a smattering of Rock and Roll. The Stewarts are also renowned for their musicality, producing pipers, fiddlers, accordionists, piano players, and Elizabeth led her own dance band from the age of sixteen.

Tradition is about communication, the passing on of culture through an emotional bond between a performer and her sources and Elizabeth draws on these intense relationships for repertoire, singing style and, most importantly, for her convictions about the transcendent power of song. She sings in an emotional, extrovert, dynamic style, which virtually demands attention, with supple grace notes and charged timbres, a refined musical sensibility and a taste for statuesque, sweeping tunes. So wrapped up is she in the songs that she is often overcome: "I feel like cryin within the song. I jist find maself part o that story."

Singing keeps a story alive, of course, but more than that, it rehearses timeless human experience. And beyond even that, it remakes Elizabeth's vital relationships with family, with landscape, with a rich, multi-faceted Traveller culture. Elizabeth Stewart nourishes herself – and us – from the well of the past, carrying knowledge, experience and emotion forward, creating a present and a future by performing tradition. "It brings aa different feelins tae ye, that songs."

Thomas A. McKean

Arthur Watson

"It has to be remembered that in any given parish platform singing is done by two or three vocalists... the older generation has been largely silenced..."¹

"Long ago almost everybody sang or tried to sing. The standard of musical attainment was low, and no accompaniments were needed. The occasions were always social, and criticism was mild and mutual."²

"The minstrelsy of the people was still largely traditional, and the old ballads and songs which formed its staple were sung in unconventional style around the fire..."³

These three quotations, selected by Ian Olson⁴ from the Aberdeenshire schoolmaster and song collector, Gavin Greig, chart the demise of social singing with the rise of the village hall and its stage, leading to the consequent division of communities into active performers and passive audience. Hierarchies are also implicit in major art collections. Quality of artistic output is established through connoisseurship underpinned by informed critique. If the collection however is of portraits then further hierarchies within the status of the sitters are apparent.

In my sung response to the works in the enlightenment gallery I have selected a triptych of ballads (all with versions collected by Greig) which deal with aspects of love and marriage across social strata. Some are from singers I have known (Jeannie Robertson and Lizzie Higgins) others have words or tunes from recordings, and printed texts have been consulted when memory fails. All have value as reflections on the attitudes of the day, particularly in the context of the paintings which surround us.

"Fan he is dead and I am dead,
And baith in ae grave laid, o;
Fan seven lang years are past and gane,
Fa's tae ken hes dust fae mine, o."⁵

For the performance in the Cathedral I would like to reference the eternal flying between good and evil, personified by the devil and his lieutenant, the elfin knight: a battle for possession of the innocent or the guilty which will condemn their souls to the flames of hell.

1 Gavin Greig, "Folk-Song of the North-East" (1908)

2 Gavin Greig, "Folk-Song in Buchan" (1906)

3 Gavin Greig, "Some Impressions of Rural Buchan" (1913)

4 Ian Olson, from five quotations in "Leaving Jericho: New Work in Response to Scottish Landscape & Language; Doug Cocker & Arthur Watson." (2003) John David Mooney Foundation, Chicago.

5 "The Laird of Drum" sung by Jeannie Robertson.

Ruth Barker

Glasgow-based visual artist Ruth Barker creates artworks that involve writing and performing poetic monologues that remake ancient myths as resonant, current, events. She uses literary techniques of poetic writing and composition to question how and why ancient myths might still be important and relevant to us.

In *New Songs For Three Mothers*, produced for the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Barker reminds us of the figure of a Mother Goddess who was once worshipped in Northern Britain, but who is now largely forgotten. This new performance has grown from research into Romano-British sculpture that Barker undertook during a year-long residency at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Artefact Studies, Newcastle, during 2010. The performance sketches out a complex and contradictory portrait of this Mother figure, speaking from the imagined point of view of the forgotten Goddess herself. In the text, Barker refers to the attributes with which the Goddess was associated (water, corn, human health and fertility, and the number three), and reflects Roman beliefs about dream interpretation (dreams were seen as one way in which gods and goddesses would communicate with people, and make their wishes known).

By presenting this work to us in the context of *Your Leaning Neck – Song As Portrait*, Barker reminds us of all the portraits that have gone before, whose sitters have been forgotten. Two thousand years ago, someone cut a portrait of a Goddess out of stone. Today, a woman in a red dress steps into the outline of that portrait to re-tell it, asking us to recall an image that has been lost. Who is this Mother that we are asked to recognise? We do not know. We have never seen her face before, but she says that she knows us.

The garment used in this performance was designed and produced by Lesley Hepburn.

All Portraiture is Part of Something Bigger:

The arts in primitive societies are not divided. In dynamic civilised societies the Arts exist under culturally unifying socio-political umbrellas. In our institutionalised age, the arts have tended to be pigeon-holed, and possessed, by institutional establishments. Consequently, one of the most vital forces in contemporary art has been the attempt to reconvene artistic experience - in its wholeness. Galleries have become, amongst other things, public arenas, performance spaces, political platforms: at best, cathedrals of the soul.

In Scotland the man who acted as the fulcrum to these resurgent developments was Hamish Henderson, and there can be no doubt that various galleries, recent Turner Prize winners and this *Song as Portrait* event (organised by Steven Anderson), owe much to Henderson's enabling vision. Hamish, like many individuals of genuine originality, was, in his lifetime, treated with widespread contempt, and, more narrowly, becoming love. It is no accident that the two lead singers of this seminal event (in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery) come from Traveller families that Hamish brought 'onto the stage of Scotland'.

Sheila and Elizabeth Stewart are distant relations, and, two of the great ballads singer's of the world. Like Masaccio (Clumsy Tom), and Carravaggio, their art lacks 'finish' but both have the kind of powers that passeth understanding, that speak directly to anyone with ears to hear, anyone with a thought or two to rub together. In the House of Art there are many mansions, and the best of them are undivided.

Timothy Neat

Steven Anderson

Central to the performance work of Steven Anderson is the presence of the unaccompanied voice, alongside invited audience participation. Using his own voice or the voice of others the performances present embodied expression as an expansion to the site of performance and the artifacts displayed there. *Your Leaning Neck – Song as Portrait* has been developed by Anderson as an extension of his performance practice, to continue creating situations of common ground between painting artifacts and performance as: object and interaction, relic and ritualistic act, documentation and emotional experience.

While working on the project, he has also created work for Catalyst Arts in Belfast and *Instal'10* at Tramway in Glasgow.

Your Leaning Neck - Song as Portrait is an outcome of a two-year research project led by Anderson, during which time he held conversations with many highly experienced, enthusiastic, generous people working in the fields of traditional Scots song, contemporary art and contemporary performance. Through the course of these discussions the event was devised and the final outcome is indebted to all those involved.

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Your Leaning Neck – Song as Portrait

Your Leaning Neck – Song as Portrait was a site-specific performance event at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Performance - Friday 2nd December 2011

Scottish National Portrait Gallery
Queen Street
Edinburgh
EH2 1JD

This event is an exhibition and recontextualisation of the performance, taking place at Peacock Visual Arts and St Andrew's Cathedral, Aberdeen.

Exhibition Saturday 18th – 10th March 2012

Performance - Friday 24th February 2012

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Front page image: performance by Ruth Barker, photography by Andy McGregor