Commentary on
PhD Composition Portfolio

From text to music: a Scots portfolio

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Abstract

This portfolio presents seven pieces or sequences of music setting or drawn from texts in Scots; in three of them, parts of the text also use other languages. The pieces are of varying scale, forces and forms. The commentary outlines the range and nature of the texts used and the compositional approaches taken to their use. The musical idioms of the pieces are discussed, as well as their forms and the forces used. The pieces are largely post-tonal and several are influenced by the serialist tradition. The commentary considers the portfolio in the broad context of Scots literature and culture, and **n**ot**e**s the international context of three of the pieces. Two central aims of the portfolio are indicated: to recognise and exploit in music the expressive energies of Scots language and diction, and to embody in the range of pieces submitted the elements of dramatic contrast and dialogue inherent in many of the texts used. A third element is also considered: the exploration of ways in which visual perceptions and imagination as expressed in several of the texts may be evoked in the music. The importance of performance is considered. Finally, it is argued that the portfolio presents a sustained and coherent body of work, consistent in its compositional approach and productive in its use of texts.

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Headings

Commentary

From text to music: a Scots portfolio

Overview

This portfolio presents seven pieces or sequences of varying scale, forces and forms. They are principally settings of, or are drawn from, texts in Scots; in three of them, however, parts of the text also use other languages. In this revised commentary I outline the range and nature of the texts used and the compositional approaches taken to their use. I discuss the musical idioms of the pieces, their forms and the forces used. Two central aims of the portfolio are indicated: to recognise and exploit in music the expressive energies of Scots language and diction, and to embody in the range of pieces submitted the elements of dramatic contrast and dialogue inherent in many of the texts used. A third key element that emerged during work on the portfolio is also considered: the exploration of ways in which visual perceptions and imagination as expressed in several of the texts may be evoked in the music. Finally, it is argued that the portfolio presents a sustained and coherent body of work, consistent in its compositional approach and productive in its use of texts.

Summary list of the pieces

The pieces in the portfolio, along with dates of composition and approximate performance times, are as follows:

1. *The Jaud,* for string orchestra (composed in 2015, with some recent adjustments): an instrumental setting of the poem of the same name by the North Eastern poet Violet Jacob (1863-1946); 12 minutes;

2.(a) *Twa Drumlie Sangs for soprano and cello:*

- *The Daemon Lover* (2016): a setting of selected text from the Scots ballad; 14 minutes

- *In to thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis* (2020); a setting of selected text from the poem of the Scots makar William Dunbar (c.1460-c.1520); 5 minutes;

(b) *In to thir Dirk and Drublie Days* (2020): a longer setting of the Dunbar poem, for three voices and cello; 8 minutes;

3. *Five Soutar Songs* (2018), for soprano and piano: a sequence of settings of five short poems by the poet William Soutar (1898-1943); 18 minutes;

4. *Sichts Unseen* (2016), for chorus and small orchestra: suggested by James Morrison's painting *View from St Cyrus*, set to a short Doric text; 12 minutes;

5. *Sang o Sangs* (2017), for soprano and bass soloists, SATB chorus, wind, bass drum and strings: a setting of selections from a modern Scots translation of the biblical Song of Songs; 35 minutes;

6.(a) *Three String Pieces after Edwin Morgan* (2019): an instrumental setting of three short poems by Morgan (1920-2010); 4 minutes;

(b) *Three Pieces for Orchestra after Edwin Morgan* (2020): an orchestral version of 6(a); (also 4 minutes);

7. *Vico visits Canedolia* (2020), for unaccompanied soprano, mezzo-soprano and contralto: settings of two more poems by Edwin Morgan; 8 minutes.

Texts are shown in full in the prefaces to scores. Total performance time is from 110 to 120 minutes. The scores are shown in pdf format in the accompanying files.
Copyright permission has been obtained for the use of the texts in Nos. 5-7 in the portfolio.

Why Scots? Why these texts?

The working title for the original proposal for the portfolio was 'setting Scots poetry'. The background to the proposal was one of the pieces in my MMus portfolio, a setting of extracts from Robert Henryson's *The Testament of Cresseid*. The work involved in setting that late medieval poem constantly drew my attention to what I called the 'phonic energy' of Scots language and diction. Examples of this energy run throughout the texts used in this new portfolio. The first line of Dunbar's poem *In to thir dirk and drublie dayis,* for

instance, is marked by the powerful, percussive alliteration that resounds through much Scots poetry. Later in the same poem, the terse monosyllables of 'I walk, I turne, sleip may I nocht' vividly reflect the poet's restless state of mind. In Soutar's poem *Brichtness*, the words describing the town, 'sae crystal bricht' in the summer heat, glitter in the sharpness of their consonants. Jeremy J Smith comments on the exploitation in Scots poetry of phonaesthetic effects, particularly alliteration.[1] The pursuit of the potential of such characteristics of Scots language and diction for generating musical ideas and material is one of the central aims of this portfolio.

Patterns of sound and diction characterise individual words and phrases. Beyond that, they are often integral to the structure and sense of a text as a whole. In another of the texts used in the portfolio, Violet Jacob's poem *The Jaud*, for instance, the down-to-earth language of one speaker's hard-hearted righteousness is contrasted with the lyrical power of the other's reflection on what she senses she has missed. In Soutar's *The Sea-Shell* the onomatopoeia of the ' sea-birds skreel' and the 'wail o' women' embodies the child's sensation of putting a shell to the ear; and in Morgan's *Canedolia*, the riotous agglomeration of Scottish place names is the whole comic point. This range of vividly expressive diction offers wide opportunities for the musical exploration, through rhythm, pitch, accent and contrast, of sounds, images and meanings. I have therefore aimed to work on approaches combining, on the one hand, close attention to the musical potential of key words, phrases and sound patterns and, on the other, an appreciation of the wider structures and sense of the texts chosen for setting.

Scotland is famously said to have three voices, Gaelic, Scots and English – though a fourth, Latin, also figures in the long sweep of Scottish literature. My main intention, for the reasons outlined above, has been to concentrate largely on texts, mainly poems, in Scots, though some pieces also have some English or Latin text. The Scottish literary tradition is an extensive one, stretching from Barbour in the fourteenth century and still vigorous today. It encompasses the high literary Scots of the makars, Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas, the work of Fergusson and Burns in the eighteenth century, the twentieth century renaissance driven by MacDiarmid and his contemporaries, and the varied literary landscape of the late 20th and the 21st centuries. There are distinctive and active traditions

1 Jeremy J Smith in John Corbett, J Derrick McClure, Jane Stuart-Smith (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Scots* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp 199-202

in different varieties of Scots, such as lowland Scots, the Doric, the demotic and the urban. Many stances are taken – narrative, reflective, dramatic and comic. There is a wealth of themes, from the philosophical and polemical to the lyrical and the nostalgic, as well as a strong tradition of awareness of and translation from other languages and cultures: this international outlook is recognised in the use of text in English or Latin in some pieces. Finally, the clash of contradictory energies is widely recognised as a characteristic element in Scottish literature and culture, notably identified in Gregory Smith's concept of the Caledonian Antisyzygy.[2] Dramatic dialogue between opposing or complementary stances or senses is a central feature in several of the texts used in the portfolio, and its musical exploitation is another of my key aims.

While welcoming the opportunities presented by this rich tradition, I recognised early on that it would be impracticable to attempt a widely representative coverage of such a large body of literature. Accordingly, only two periods are represented in the choice of texts: the late middle ages and the period from the 1920s.[3] Through these choices, I have aimed in the portfolio to draw on and to embody in music some of the characteristic features, stances and energies of the Scots literary tradition. It will be helpful to outline briefly the main features of the texts chosen before a more detailed account of their use in the portfolio.

Two of the poems used date from the late middle ages. *The Daemon Lover* is a well known ballad with a story that appears, in similar forms, in many cultures[4]. A woman is sought out, after seven years, by her former lover. She now has a husband and two children, but she is persuaded to leave them behind and to sail with her lover. After sailing only a league or three, he reveals himself as the devil and takes her down to hell. Three voices – the woman, her lover and the narrator – tell the supernatural story and trace the emotions of the woman through a powerful dramatic dialogue. In *In to thir Dirk and Drublie Days,* by William Dunbar (c.1460-c.1520), the poet describes his own despair vividly through the imagery of winter. In this poem too there is a dramatic dialogue, as the poet wrestles with the personifications of Despair, Patience, Age and Death.

2 See Ian Brown & Alan Riach (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p 10 for a brief discussion. MacDiarmid's adoption of the idea made it highly influential.

3 Though the 18th Century makes a brief appearance in a quotation of a line of Burns in *Three String Pieces*.

4 Emily Lyle (ed.), *Scottish Ballads* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1994), pp 9 and 13.

The language of *The Daemon Lover* has been relayed to us in a 19th Century version through Scott and Child[5]. Here too alliteration marks the woman's longing and sadness - 'my long, long love', 'sad strife', 'and drumlie grew his ee' - and the metrical structure emphasises the hopelessness of her situation as stanza after stanza ends with inescapable brevity - 'where you will never win'. The Dunbar poem is in a high literary style, rich in vocabulary and image, where the richness of the language and the regularity of the metre and the rhyming scheme throw into relief the poet's miserable state of mind.

By contrast, the language of Violet Jacob's *The Jaud,* published in 1927*,* is the Doric of the north east. Jacob was a contemporary of Hugh MacDiarmid, who knew her and praised her work, but she was not, at the time at least, regarded as part of the Scottish literary renaissance[6]. The poem is set in a rural churchyard, where the speakers look towards the neglected grave of the despised woman of the title. Katherine Gordon notes Colin Milton's comment that it has 'the spare power of the best ballad work'[7], and, like *The Daemon Lover*, it takes the form of a dialogue: between the self-righteousness of one voice and the regret of the other; between the hard scorn of the language of one - 'it's a jaud lies yont i' the nettle shaws' - and the lyrical yearning of the other - 'her hair was gowd like the gowd broom'. Sound, form and meaning coalesce. And it is left to the reader to judge whether the dialogue is between two speakers or between the two voices in one woman's mind.

The text for *Sichts Unseen* is also in the Doric. But the initial text for the piece is James Morrison's painting *View from St Cyrus*, which is held in the Heriot-Watt University art collection. An image of the painting is appended to the Bibliography. The piece was an entry in the Heriot-Watt composer competition of 2016, and was played in St Giles Cathedral in July of that year. The music pursues the viewer's eye as it moves round the painting, and the thoughts of the unseen observer within the painting, who looks inward from the shore but imagines, without being able to see it, what has taken place at sea behind him. I had looked for a Scots text that would fit the stance of the painting. I could find poems set on the seashore, or looking out to sea, but nothing looking inland from the shore; so I wrote a brief poem to suit the scene - plain, almost monosyllabic, intended to encapsulate both sight and thought.

5 F J Child (ed.): *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-98)

6 Robyn Marsack, in Ian Brown & Alan Riach (eds.): *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p 164

7 Katherine Gordon (ed.): *Voices From Their Ain Countrie* (Glasgow: The Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2006), p 368

Five Soutar Songs uses a selection of five short poems by William Soutar, a contemporary of Jacob and MacDiarmid, and very much associated with the Scottish literary renaissance. Like MacDiarmid, he believed that there was an 'intrinsic value' in writing in Scots, at a time when that view was much contested.[8] The poems come from two different collections of Soutar's work, from the period between 1932 and 1943, and are not ostensibly connected. They do, however, share several characteristics: their brevity, their vivid use of Scots language and diction, their intense evocation of light, of darkness and of sound. They are marked by the uncanny: a sudden solitude, or the lost world of sound within a seashell held to the ear, or the distant unicorn walking on the brae of the poet's imagination. The poems are always ambivalent, reaching beyond the world of the senses towards the deeper experience of the poet and of the reader.

For *Sang o Sangs*, selections were made from a text of a quite different scale. All of the texts used in this piece are in prose: but each is from a translation of an ancient Hebrew poem, the Song of Songs, and each has strong poetic characteristics. I was drawn to the Song of Songs by its pregnant mix of solemn celebration, dramatic story, lyrical romance and moral injunction. I originally thought of basing the text on selections from the paraphrase of the Song of Songs produced in 1606 by James Melville, a Scots Presbyterian propagandist and poet. This was to be accompanied in a multi-lingual text by selections from the English - and almost contemporaneous - King James version, and by selections from Melville's principal source, the Latin translation by Tremellius, a 16th Century scholar of Hebrew. Melville's paraphrase, however, is neither good poetry nor even particularly Scots in the version that has survived.[9] I therefore replaced it as the main element in the text with selections of extracts from the modern Scots translation of the Song of Songs by Gavin Falconer and Ross G. Arthur[10]. These selections are accompanied, as originally planned, by some quotations from the King James version and from Tremellius.

Most of the text used in *Sang o Sangs* is drawn from the modern Scots translation, and much of it has some of the typical qualities of Scots that offer strong musical potential:

8 Brown & Riach, p 58

9 A worthwhile reminder that Scots does not necessarily equal poetic quality.

10 Gavin Falconer and Ross G. Arthur (transl.), *The Old Testament in Scots* (Wordzworth Publishing, 2014), Volume Three, pp. 185-190

percussive consonants, strong rhythmic patterns, distinctive vowel sounds, and a premium on energetic diction. The plain Scots, as the translators call it, can also combine lyrical language and vivid visual images:

See, he comes dancing on the muntains, stappin swith on the knowes.[11]

The corresponding selections from the King James version are fewer and more bland. The Latin text used, however, matches the Scots texts in its vigour: it too has strong consonants and rhythms, and benefits equally from an energetic diction. Used together, the Scots and Latin texts offer good potential for dramatic juxtaposition.

Like *Sang o Sangs,* the two final sequences in the portfolio use texts in more than one language, in this case Scots and English. But these two sequences differ significantly from the other pieces in the portfolio in that their texts are concrete poems, by Edwin Morgan, a key figure in the generation of poets that followed the Scottish literary renaissance. Just as the three texts used in *Sang o Sangs* belong to the long-standing international tradition of Biblical translation, so these poems by Morgan are a modern expression of another ancient tradition, that of concrete poetry. Morgan was a leading Scots participant in a 20th Century movement in which the 'verbivocovisual' approach was central. On this approach, verbal and visual communication interact, and 'structure-content' is as important as conventional ideas of meaning.[12] Such poems pose challenges to the composer quite different from those arising from the other texts used in the portfolio. How to deal with the opaque verbal formulations? How to deal with words, or syllables or individual letters, where visual form seems to be central to meaning? How is the visual to be represented, or drawn on, or appropriated, in the music's voice?

Three String Pieces is an instrumental setting of a brief, ambilingual group of apparently self-referential texts.[13] The first poem is Morgan's treatment of the statement by John Cage – an American – that he has 'nothing to say'. The second text builds from groupings of apparently random letters towards a famous line of Robert Burns: 'a daimen icker in a thrave'[14]. The third text, which can be read as in English and/or Scots,[15] takes the opposite

11 Ibid., p 186; 3.8

12 See John Corbett in Alan Riach (ed.), *The International Companion to Edwin Morgan* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2015), pp 130-144. The term 'verbivocovisual' is taken from James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

13 The grouping of these three poems is by the composer, not the poet.

14 From *To a Mouse*.

15 The two words which make up the text, 'generation' and 'upon', have been in use in Scots, in these and other spellings, since the 15th Century. For entries in *Dictionaries of the Scots Language*, see *DSL Online*: https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/generatioun and https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/upon

course, moving from multiple repetitions of its sole two-word phrase ‘generation upon’ to a gradual but complete fragmentation – as if there is, indeed, ‘nothing to say’. No story has been told, no scene painted, no character or emotion explored; but this sequence of texts offers in its own way a dramatic trajectory, from proposition, to development and (re)construction, and finally to disintegration. It is intended as another expression of the tradition of dramatic dialogue noted earlier as a characteristic element in Scottish literature and culture. These Morgan settings in the two final sequences in the portfolio also reflect the multilingual traditions of Scottish poetry and its ‘inclusive conceptions of multiple national identities’,[16] and are designed as a distinctive element in a varied choice of texts from different periods.

Of the texts used in the portfolio, some are very short, some longer; there is dramatic dialogue, intense personal experience and vivid visual perception. Above all, language and diction – literary or plain, rugged or lyrical – are central.

General approaches taken in the use of texts

Before discussing each piece in more detail, it is useful at this point to summarise the range of approaches taken to setting texts. Though used for convenience, the term ‘setting’ is restrictive and does not satisfactorily represent the radically different ways in which texts are treated by composers. The portfolio offers a number of varied approaches, which fall, a little untidily, into three main groups.

Several of the pieces or sequences adhere closely to their texts. In *Five Soutar Songs*, the five short poems are set conventionally, word for word. In *Sichts Unseen* too, the very short text is set in full – but with cumulative iterations which leave the crucial final words ‘ahint wer een’[17] until the end. The two songs in *Vico Visits Canedolia* also use the full texts of the poems, though again, in *Vico’s Song*, there is extensive repetition and variation, which will be discussed more fully below.

More selective use of texts is made in both of the songs in *Twa Drumlie Sangs,* which are for soprano and cello. In *The Daemon Lover*, only nine of the fifteen stanzas of the

16 See, for instance, Brown & Riach, pp 2-10 and 221.
17 Doric for ‘behind our eyes’

standard version of the ballad are sung. But the sad story is told in full, the dramatic interchanges are played out, and the woman's yearning and regret are, I hope, fully expressed. In the version of *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis* used in this pairing, the text is much abbreviated: only four of Dunbar's stanzas are used, in an attempt to embody concisely the poet's despair followed, at the end, by the promise of summer. The longer version of *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis,* for three voices and cello, is also intended for performance. It uses more, though not all, of Dunbar's stanzas, and uses the three voices to enact the dialogue between the poet and the states of mind assailing him. Though it uses the same musical material, the dramatic effect is quite different.

Sang o Sangs, as indicated earlier, uses extracts from three versions – a modern Scots translation, the King James Bible and a Latin translation. The texts used are highly selective, but the piece is nonetheless intended to tell the story fully and to do justice to the emotions and conflicts that occur within it. Longer or more numerous extracts would have been likely to result in a piece uneconomical both musically and in terms of any possibility of performance.

Finally, the remaining items in the portfolio are purely instrumental - *The Jaud,* scored for string orchestra, and *Three String Pieces after Edwin Morgan* and its other version, *Three Pieces for Orchestra after Edwin Morgan. The Jaud* does not aim to depict in any detail the course of Jacob's poem. It does, however, follow the broad dramatic course of the dialogue between the two voices, and the music is intended to take on, respectively, the character of each of those voices. The three Morgan pieces, in whichever version, take a different approach. Their musical material and form, which will be discussed more fully below, are explicitly based on a close reading of the structures, words, and in two cases the letters of the three poems. In their way, they adhere as closely to their texts as do *Five Soutar Songs* and *Sichts Unseen*. Whether or not the listener has any knowledge of the poems by Jacob and Morgan that lie behind them, these pieces are intended to be able to stand independently as instrumental works.

The portfolio is also designed to offer music using a varied range of forces. The purely instrumental pieces have just been mentioned. Two reasonably large scale pieces, *Sichts Unseen* and *Sang o Sangs*, use a small orchestra or chamber ensemble along with solo voices and chorus. The two sequences *Twa Drumlie Sangs* and *Five Soutar Songs* are

set more intimately, one for soprano and cello, the other for soprano and piano. The longer version of *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis* is set for three women's voices and cello. It could perhaps be performed alongside *Vico Visits Canedolia*, which consists of two *a cappella* settings for soprano, mezzo and contralto.

Musical idiom, development and form

The treatment of texts in the portfolio, then, is varied, as is the range of forces used. Running through this variety, however, is a consistent post-tonal musical idiom. Some of the music has a modal feel; there is often a sense of a central or predominant pitch, and there is sometimes a suggestion, though no more than that, of a particular key. But overwhelmingly the music in the portfolio is non-diatonic, often using twelve tones and a post-serial approach to musical development. In places characteristic rhythms arise in the setting of particular words and phrases; but there is no aim deliberately to draw on or to allude to 'Scottish' musical styles or traditions. Finally, while there are several different ways of handling the texts in the portfolio, the centrality of language and diction in Scots literature that was emphasised earlier is mirrored in the main approach taken in the formation of musical material.

In this context I could refer again to my MMus portfolio, where I noted the insights that Janácek gives, in *Leaves from his life*[18], into his methods of developing musical ideas from speech. He talks of sounds leading to an idea, and shaping themselves into 'an intellectual concept'. He speaks, for example, of how hearing the names Beatrice and Dante suggested to him a range of tonal patterns and rhythms, or how an overheard conversation might be turned into musical figures and then into a musical line. I cannot claim that, of themselves, the sounds of a text suggest an intellectual concept to me. But in this portfolio I have regularly aimed to use the patterns of sound in key words or phrases – the vocal contours of the spoken word, the force of consonants, the rhythms of syllables and words – as a route to the development of musical ideas and material.

18 Vilem and Margaret Tausky (eds, and transl.), *Janácek: Leaves from his life* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1982), pp 73 and 103.

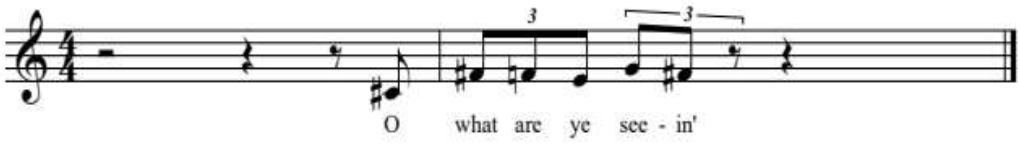
1. The Jaud

It may seem odd, in a commentary on a portfolio explicitly concerned with setting Scots texts, to begin a more detailed account of its contents with a purely instrumental piece. However, I aim to show that a text, even without its explicit presence, may be used both to generate the musical material of a piece and to develop its form. It was noted in the first section of the commentary that dramatic dialogue is a characteristic feature of much Scots poetry. *The Jaud* takes the form of just such a dialogue, between an old woman, who looks with sadness and yearning at the neglected grave of the scorned woman of the title, and her conventional, self-righteous companion – or perhaps a second voice in her own mind. In the poem, the two voices speak alternately, three times each. Similarly, in the piece, two sets of musical material alternate – A B A B A B – but with an asymmetry in their length.

The woman's interlocutor begins with the bluntness that the Doric can express so well:

'O what are ye seein', ye auld wife…?

I hear this question, as it might be spoken or sung, rising impatiently, importunately, in what becomes the key figure in the A sections of the piece:

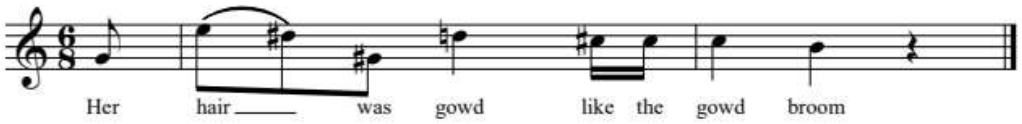


This phrase is anticipated in the opening bars, in a different, aggressive form without the triplets that the metre implies, and then is stated clearly in the second A section, in bb 22ff. The frank words 'ye auld wife' give rise to the repeated three, or sometimes two, note figure that sounds heavily through the piece, often in repeated double-stopped chords (bb 33ff, but anticipated from b 17). The pitch-class set that arises (C-C sharp-E-F sharp-G-A sharp) also provides the harmonic material for these sections. The main figure, in both forms, is varied rhythmically and melodically through the piece, and the two versions of it are often set alongside each other, as for instance in bb 40ff. As the same passage moves towards a climax at b 50, the 'auld wife' chords resound again along with them. One brief question, in spare but emphatic language, has given rise to three related motivic figures that form the basis of much of the piece.

These figures recur, in varied forms and various combinations, and their insistence and their fitful climaxes contrast with the music of the B sections. The main thematic and harmonic material of these sections arises from my hearing of the vivid visual image that the woman calls up as she sees again the dead woman's golden hair:

Her hair was gowd like the gowd broom

The first working version of a theme arising from this line was:



But I preferred an adjustment which, when it appears fully in b101, traces more fully a regretful downward shape, and in its last notes ironically recall the 'auld wife' figure of the A sections:

As was noted earlier, these two sections alternate, with varied lengths and development, throughout the piece. The A sections, reflecting the self-righteousness of its voice, become more and more angry, whereas the B sections, apart from a brief climax towards the end, remain lyrical. But there is more than intolerance and sadness. In the central B section, at bb105ff, a dance version of the theme breaks out: it reflects the former grace of the dead woman as her image moves in the line:

Sae prood an' lichtsome an' fine was she

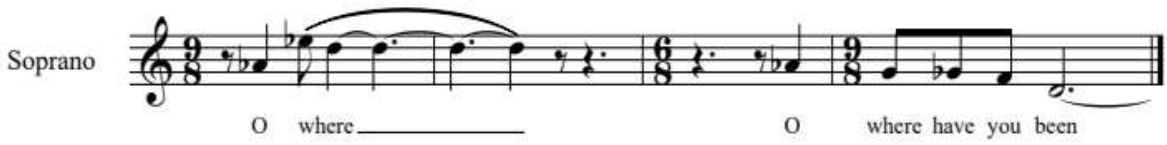
The sections, though irregular in length, succeed each other regularly. But some features draw them together – the repeated notes that characterise both, and the dance music that, at bb 137ff, is heard above the angry chords of the hard-hearted interlocutor.

2. Twa Drumlie Sangs (and an extra)

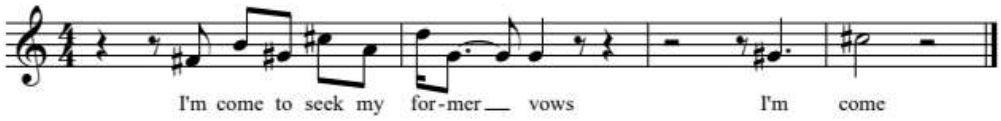
The ballad *The Daemon Lover*, the first of the poems set in *Twa Drumlie Sangs*[19], and one of the first pieces in the portfolio to be written, also opens with the simplest of questions: 'O

19 The Scots word 'drumlie' appears in *The Daemon Lover*. Its entry in the *Concise Scots Dictionary (CSD)* includes: *cloudy, gloomy, troubled, disturbed.*

where have you been?' The plain language throws into relief the depth of emotion felt by the woman as she faces the suitor who is, she is led to believe, her long-lost former lover. I hear the question rising swiftly to the word *where*; I imagine that syllable dropping over two notes (ideally ending with a strong Scots /r/) and then the phrase falling away gradually.[20] From this sense of the contour of the sound of the woman's key question, I derived the following musical phrase:



This plangent phrase becomes, with variations, the central figure in the passages where the woman is the speaker: the downward shape of the musical phrase is suggested by the contour of the spoken words, but equally it prefigures the trajectory of the ballad: brief new hope and expectation followed by realization and disaster. The musical phrase is characterised by its shape, by its chromatic fall, and by the triplet rhythm which arises readily from the metre. As in the 'auld wife' figure in *The Jaud*, this triplet re-appears constantly, sometimes speeded up (for example bar 88), sometimes cross-rhythmically (bb 182-3), sometimes slowed down, as in the baleful final bars. In contrast, the music associated with the lover/devil announces itself vigorously, with a series of bold, rising perfect fourths:



The contour matches the shape of his opening words: 'I'm come to seek my former vows', and the rising fourths on 'come', 'seek' and 'former' emphasise his intent and the entitlement that he claims from their past life. He marches in to unadorned quavers in simple time (b 44); but later, as he prevails, his musical line takes on the woman's rhythms (bb 104-7). But she too breaks her rhythmic patterns, as the music disrupts the metre of

20 There is of course often a choice to be made; in some parts of the country, *been* would naturally rise again.

the ballad: in bb 63-7 for instance, an angular, syncopated phrase, emphasising and repeating the words ‘a wife’, marks her initial resistance to his offer.

The tonality of the song is non-diatonic. But there is a characteristic tonal sense attaching to each of the characters: the woman’s part seems to suggest E flat major, or C minor. In contrast, the lover’s part tends to hint at something like D major or A major; and some of his music is given a modal sense by the cello’s double-stop fourths and fifths. But the picture can become confused. In bb 126 ff, for instance, the musics of the woman and the lover are layered together as she is won over and bids farewell to her children: her characteristic musical line is sung, this time, to the lover’s fourths and fifths resounding in the cello.

This has to be done by the cello, of course, because the song is written for only one voice. The singer has to portray three characters – the woman, the lover/devil, and the narrator. To separate the narrator’s part from the others, and to emphasise his or her neutral stance, *Sprechstimme* is used. The narrator is given a more featureless musical line, but the lover’s fourths, albeit sometimes augmented, break in: he is prevailing. The singer not only has to convey the two very different temperaments and stances of the two characters, but she must also, in the narrator’s passages, impart the sense of an observer standing outside the action. On the other hand, the cello is part of the action - a fourth actor in the drama. In the opening bars, it anticipates the main musical theme of the first speaker, the woman; but it also hints, with a couple of perfect fifths and a scotch snap, at the coming dilemma. In bb 69 ff an agitated solo passage seems to warn the woman as she debates the idea of leaving her husband and family; and at the end, as the devil simply appropriates the woman’s musical theme, it is the cello that closes the song with the chords that confirm his victory. As suggested earlier, all of this is based on musical material generated by the sound, as I hear it, of the spoken words of the poem.

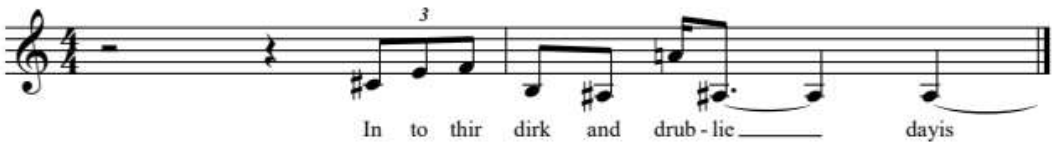
Like *The Jaud, The Daemon Lover* uses a text marked by that characteristic feature of Scots poetry, the dramatic dialogue. The exchanges between the woman and the lover succeed each other in the song as in the ballad, with the narrator’s story-telling interjected almost like episodes in a rondo. The song’s form develops from the musical material that derived from the words of the speakers. But the music has a further dimension. The song ends with the woman’s words followed, as always, by those of the lover, now recognised

as the devil. But from b 187 onwards the music disrupts its own expected thematic sequence, as the woman's voice, reduced to the narrator's monotone, loses its usual theme and character, while the devil takes over her music for his own malign ends.

The second of the songs in the pairing *Twa Drumlie Sangs*, is a setting of the first three and the last stanza of Dunbar's poem *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis*. The two songs, and their texts, have strong similarities. Both texts come to us from the late middle ages, both are in iambic metre and have strong rhyming schemes, their content is full of despair; and both songs are set for soprano and cello. But – making for a more interesting pairing in performance – there are some key differences. The second song is much shorter than the first: its text is highly selective – only four stanzas, and its cello part is much less prominent. Unlike *The Daemon Lover,* it does not consist of dramatic dialogue, concentrating instead on the poet's frame of mind. The poet's feelings are expressed in high literary language, with striking visual images representing the medieval association between mortality and winter.[21]

Quhone sabill all the hevin arrayis
With mystie vapouris, cluddis and skyis

The dismal mood of both poem and song is set from the start with the alliteration on the letters [d] and [r]. Jeremy J Smith shows how, in the alliterative verse common in early Scots (and Old English) poetry, metre and alliteration are used together to emphasise meaning.[22] Here the iambic metre is disrupted before it has begun: where we would expect the first two feet to be scanned *weak-strong / weak-strong,* the first foot is trochaic, giving us *strong-weak / weak strong*. This deviation throws the emphasis on to 'dirk' and the succession of dismal plosives that mark the opening of the poem. The rhythm and the emphasis led me to the musical figure for the opening of the song:



The trochee and iamb together produce a triplet leading headlong to 'dirk', followed by an emphasis on the next [d] with major sevenths and a scotch snap; and the syncopated delay in reaching the third [d] on 'dayis' warns that winter will be long. Using a scheme of

21 J A Tasioulas (ed.), *The Makars: The Poems of Henryson, Dunbar and Douglas* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1999), p 784
22 Smith in Corbett, McClure and Stuart-Smith, p 199-202

transposed rotations, similar to that described by Julian Anderson in a discussion of Oliver Knussen's work,[23] this figure becomes the melodic and harmonic basis of the song. Each rotation begins on a succeeding pitch in the set, transposed to C sharp (or D flat). All twelve tones occur. The first stanza uses the first and sixth rotation; the second uses the second and fifth, the third uses the third and fourth, and the final stanza returns to the first and sixth. The aim is to avoid a monotonous repetition across the stanzas, and to achieve, within the context of unstable tonalities through the song, a coherence based on the recurrence of varied melodic patterns, on familiar intervals and on the centrality of C sharp. All of this arises from a figure drawing on the quality of Scots language and diction that was claimed at the outset of the commentary - its phonic energy.

Twa Drumlie Sangs is intended as a similar but contrasting pair of songs. One of the main differences between them is the absence, in the second song, of the dramatic dialogue essential to the first. But I have also submitted, as a separate item, another version of *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis*. This version includes more of Dunbar's stanzas, particularly those where the poet is 'assayit' by the personifications of Despair, Patience, Age and Deid (Death) – another example of the kind of dialogue that was cited earlier as a characteristic feature of Scots literature. Where in *The Daemon Lover* the different voices of the dialogue are taken by one voice, in this second version of *In to thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis* the voices are taken by three singers: the mezzo is the poet (and, of course, probably the listener), while the soprano and the contralto between them take the parts of the four personifications. The first three stanzas and the final stanza are as before. In the new intervening section the three voices, covering five characters, use the same melodic and harmonic material and variation to weave along with the cello a different, polyphonic texture, with contrasting vocal techniques. Thereafter the last stanza, using the musical material of the first, becomes calmer, allows the cello some freedom, and looks towards summer and 'sum disport'. The two versions recall the limitations of the concept of setting poetry. The first version uses a very limited selection from the original text to produce, deliberately, a concise, economical 'setting' to accompany and contrast with another song. The second more closely – though not completely - represents the original text to produce

23 Julian Anderson. "Harmonic Practices in Oliver Knussen's Music since 1988: Part I." *Tempo*, no. 221, 2002, pp. 2–13. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/946777. Accessed 21 Sept. 2020. Anderson notes that this approach was derived from Stravinsky. Similar approaches, on a larger scale, are used by Peter Maxwell Davies, for instance in the Strathclyde Concertos.

a version more able to stand on its own, with movement between the inward-looking thoughts of the poet and with a fuller texture embodying the dramatic dialogue in his mind.

Some key features of individual pieces

I do not intend to continue the detailed discussion of the musical development of the rest of the pieces in the portfolio in the same way as in the previous section. The material of most of the other pieces was worked in the same sort of way, drawing closely on the sound and contour of the spoken word and using the resulting figures to develop the musical line. Instead, this section will examine some key features of the remaining pieces in the context of the main themes set out earlier in the commentary, and will explore whether any further theme should be considered.

3. Five Soutar Songs

These songs are settings, word for word, of five poems by William Soutar. The poems come from different collections, but I have tried to form a coherent musical sequence embodying their powerful visual and sonic language, their ambivalent weighing of contrasts, and their reaching beyond the world of the senses. The musical idiom of the songs is post-tonal, mainly non-diatonic but with modal suggestions in places (Lydian in the first song, Phrygian in the third and fourth). Although the textural palette is limited to voice and piano, I have aimed for a range of textures and contrasts to match the ambivalence of the poems and the vigour of their language. While writing the songs, I was influenced by the wide range and dramatic contrasts in the piano music of Debussy and Ligeti, and by the sense of weightlessness in some of Ravel's music.[24] I also had in mind music by Ronald Stevenson and Thomas Ades.[25]

Ae Simmer's Day starts with the same, immediate metric disruption to the iambic metre that Dunbar uses in *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Dayis* – and the emphasis is thrown on to the word 'up', announcing the spatial sense that runs through the sequence. This variation suggests the triplet with a dotted rhythm which then recurs throughout; and the piano reflects the sense of being 'up', staying in the treble clef through the song. In the poem, the

24 For example: Debussy's *Préludes*, Ligeti's *Études pour piano*, and Ravel's Piano Trio.
25 Stevenson's settings of Scots poems, available in the recording *a'e gowden lyric* (Delphian 2003); and Ades' *Traced overhead*, Op.15

child[26] listens to the call of the gowk (the cuckoo); so, in the song, the singer constantly hears that call repeated in the piano part. The song picks up the alliteration in 'the wind stude still' and in the next line 'the gowk's saft whistle' in the monotone and the syncopation in bb 19 ff. Here, as often, the singer must make the most of the sounds. The visual imagery of the preceding line is strong: for the phrase 'the reemlin licht ...gaed up', the piano plays a high trill while the voice makes a major seventh jump.[27] Sound, visual image and spatial sense combine.

***T**he Sea-Shell* offers an immediate contrast as the piano opens with the deep bass discords that continue through much of the piece. This song and its text are about sound. The singer commands the listener – or the child putting a shell to her ear – 'Listen!' The repeated G sharp that is used to emphasise this, and the D with which it is often paired, become the troubled central tones of the song. The short text is packed with phonaesthetic effects - 'the blufferts blare' and 'the sea-birds skreel' invite the singer to make the most of the alliterative consonant clusters and to indulge her glissando and portamento. In the final bars, irregular rhythms and glissandi take advantage of the vividly expressive Scots diction: the 'swaw', the 'swurly waters whummlin', and the heart-rending 'cry o' the sailormen' fading in the distance, piano silenced, hope gone. The sonic imagery captures in the child's small shell a whole world of sound and pain.

The third song, *Faith*, is characterised by opposites. At the opening, we are to look up; in bar 24, we are to 'look doun and doun', as the voice lingers on a low C sharp. The song is 'in silence born' (bb 7-10). Syncopation and a rising melody attend the unicorn walking 'wi' the dayspring o' the day'; his burning 'glitter' is accompanied by a high flurry in the piano, and more syncopation and a halting rhythm mark the darkness that surrounds the light. Amid these evocations of light and darkness, height and depth, there is a sense of the uncanny in the image of the unicorn that walks on the brae - and in the poet's heart. Carl MacDougall and Douglas Gifford relate the idea of the unicorn in Soutar's poetry to the commitment to pursue an ideal beauty, or 'an ideal cause such as the Scottish Renaissance'.[28] Whatever the significance of the unicorn, the singer evokes its mystery by

26 W R Aitken includes this poem in the 'bairnrhymes' section of his edition *Poems in Scots and English by William Soutar* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1975)

27 The *CSD*'s entry for 'reemle' is: *to make a sharp, tremulous noise*. Soutar has used a word that evokes sound to describe light.

28 Carl MacDougall & Douglas Gifford (eds.), *Into a Room: selected poems of William Soutar* (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2000), p 23

moving between *Sprechgesang* and *Sprechstimme* throughout the song, using her singing voice only for the glitter in the darkness in bb 19-20, at the heart of the song.

Whereas *The Sea-Shell* was about sound, the fourth song *Brichtness* is about light. It is another song with a sense of spatial opposites as the light drills down to the street and then burns back. Within that frame, expressive consonants powerfully evoke the physical sense of light and heat, in words such as 'straucht', 'licht', 'dreels', 'reemlin' and 'crystal bricht'. In the song, the idea of height is expressed at the opening by a major seventh in the melodic line and by a high rolled discord on the piano, which goes on to frame the piece just as the image of light drilling down and up frames the text. The phonaesthetic consonants are mirrored by the piano with its dialogue of discords and shimmering runs. And, as ever in these songs, there is a premium on the singer's enunciation of the consonants and on her glissando and portamento on the vowels.

The piano opens the last song in the sequence, simply called *Song*, with bass chords that recall *The Sea-Shell* and, high in the treble, suggestions of the cuckoo call figure from *Ae Simmer's Day*. A sense of space – in the poet's imagination – is sketched again, this time by the opening word 'whaur' with its elongated [wh]. Awkward intervals and irregular rhythms emphasise alliterations – for example 'yon broken brig' (b 14), 'Babylon blaws by' (bb 20-21) and 'deep for onie drouth' (bb 31-33), where again the consonants can be drawn out. The cheerful melody from the first song is recalled in bar 42, to reflect that there is at least some resignation about the inevitable - 'gang doun wi' a sang', and its fragments continue to be heard over the piano's inexorable descent.

These five poems strikingly exemplify the phonic energy and the phonaesthetic effects claimed for Scots poetry at the outset of the commentary. That other characteristic of Scots literature, dramatic dialogue, so strong in the other texts and songs discussed so far, is not an explicit feature of Soutar's poems, but they project their own drama of contrasts and opposites – height and depth, light and darkness, sound and silence. *Five Soutar Songs* aims to embody these contrasts, not just within individual songs but also across the whole sequence, with its movement from light to darkness, from the light-hearted to resignation, from the singer's first word 'up' to her last word 'doun'. And another characteristic, at least within the selection of texts for this portfolio, has emerged. In *The Jaud*, as was noted in the earlier discussion, the old woman longingly pictures the golden

hair of the dead woman. In *In to Thir Dirk and Drublie Days*, the poet/singer vividly sees the 'mystie vapouris, cluddis and skyis' that surround him/her in the winter of despair. Now, in *Five Soutar Songs*, the music seeks to grasp in its own terms the visual imagery so powerfully evoked in its texts.

4. Sichts Unseen

This piece was written for the Heriot-Watt composer competition of 2016: the call was for a piece to be suggested by one of the art works in the Heriot-Watt gallery. The piece was to be for voices and five unspecified instruments (two treble, two bass, one in-between). I wrote the piece for SATB chorus, flute, oboe (added later), bassoon, violin, viola and cello; this was for small orchestra rather than chamber ensemble. A copy of the painting that I chose, *View from St Cyrus* by James Morrison, is shown as Appendix 2. I chose this painting not so much for its content as for its structure: three distinct elements – sky, woods and beach – and what I saw as a fourth element, the unseen work of the fishermen harvesting the sea and hauling their catches over the beach. This structure had potential, I thought, for a musical structure with distinct elements but flexible dialogue between them. I supplied a text in Doric, the Scots dialect used in the St Cyrus area.

The form of *Sichts Unseen,* then, is based on the four elements identified, and represents an attempt to reflect not so much the content of the painting as the viewer's mobile, varying perception of its elements. In the first section the viewer's eye moves round the elements – sky, woods, sand (and the mysterious lines that cross it), and the unseen. The texture for the first element, the sky (A: bb 1-32), is calm and expansive, with a whole-tone tonality. The two strong Doric words 'grand' and 'braid' are each heard as two rising pitches, and the two main phrases are repeated polyphonically by the chorus. For the second element, the woods (B: bb 33-46), the texture is both more dense and more mobile; the tonality is again, more or less, based on whole tones. There is a glance back at the sky before we hear the material for the third element (C: bb 56-67), the sand with the streaked lines across it. This music is atonal and chromatic; the hard consonants of the key words 'rauch straiks' are longer, heavily accented notes. The last, unseen element (D: bb 68-75) is introduced by fluid but halting woodwinds, atonal and with a hint of diminished chords, as the chorus uses an awkward, angular line to begin to ask its question - 'fit sichts unseen div they convey…?'.

In the second section (bb 76-150), the eye moves round the picture again, but in a less regular sequence: A – A/B – C – D – C – D. Texts and textures are sometimes mixed, the streaks in the sand become more clearly marked, and the questioning about the sights unseen is more insistent. The third section (bb 151- end), round the picture again, is yet more flexible: A – A/B – C – (D) – C – (D) – C – D – A. The chorus becomes more and more insistent, almost angry (bb 213-6), before finally being able to complete the question that has been hanging since the first section:

Fit sichts unseen div they convey
O hairsts hard won ahint wer een?

No answer is provided to the question. The piece ends simply with a brief return to the serenity of the sky.

Like the other pieces discussed so far, *Sichts Unseen* has a text characterised by vigorous consonants and strong diction. Like *Five Soutar Songs*, it is not ostensibly a dramatic piece: but it is constructed from the dialogue of its elements. And, even more explicitly than in the Soutar songs, the visual image is fundamental. I suggested in the introductory discussion that the initial text for *Sichts Unseen* was Morrison's painting, but that is perhaps too simplistic. The 'text' for the music is not the written words, nor the painting itself, but the imagined perceptions of the viewer as the mind's eye surveys and moves round the painting, searching for a sight of what cannot be seen. The music lets the listener 'hear' what the viewer is seeing, asking and imagining.

5. Sang o Sangs

The background to the choice of translations of the Song of Songs was explained earlier.
The Song of Songs is a short, distinctive and highly poetic book of the Bible. Its form and interpretation are much contested. Is it a single song, or a collection of related songs? Is it simply a love song, or is it a reflection on the relationship between God and Israel? Or between Christ and the church? Or between Christ and the reformed church? I have not attempted to explore these questions in the piece, but have simply treated selections from the texts as songs that express the love (and the conflicts) of the bride and bridegroom or reflect the responses of the watching chorus.

Sang o Sangs is on a larger scale than any of the other pieces in the portfolio, lasting about thirty-five minutes and using two soloists, chorus, oboe, horn ensemble, strings and bass drum. Its six movements are formed from seventeen components. These are not intended as disparate songs: on the contrary, my aim was to build a coherent musical structure to reflect the dramatic structure of the book, tracing the emotions – sometimes turbulent - of the two main characters as their wedding approaches, on the day of the wedding, and thereafter. There are lyrical passages, dramatic exchanges, celebration and moral comment. I was influenced by the reading of the book offered by Duane Garrett [29], who interprets it as a chiastic structure with thirteen songs, or cantos, where the last six mirror the first six, and the seventh – the consummation of the marriage – is at the centre. While the structure of my piece differs in detail, it is intended to draw on textual and dramatic allusions and correspondences between the songs leading up to the wedding and those that follow it. The summary table, shown as Appendix 1, notes the musical correspondences across *Sang o Sangs*, particularly between movements II and III on the one hand and V and VI on the other. This table also shows in summary form the forces used in each section and movement, as well as the tonality of each. In order to achieve a sense of harmonic variety and progression, several different kinds of tonality are used: modal, octatonic and twelve tone.

The compositional approach for *Sang o Sangs* is similar to that for the pieces already discussed, and I will therefore comment in detail only on a feature that distinguishes this piece from the others in the portfolio. As indicated earlier, most of the text used is selected from a modern translation into Scots, but there are also substantial selections from the Latin translation by Tremellius, and these translations are used together in several passages.

In the third and again in the fifth movement, for instance, in what I have taken to be dream sequences, the bride becomes alarmed about the presence or absence of the bridegroom, and about his commitment or otherwise. In the opening section of the fifth movement (bb1-46), both soloists simply speak to each other, in normal spoken rhythm, until the chorus enters with words spoken rhythmically. The soloists speak in plain but highly expressive Scots:

29 Duane Garrett and Paul R. House, *Word Biblical Commentary Volume 23B* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004)

a sleep, but ma hert is waukrife

and:

a gat up for tae let ma jo in, an ma haunds wis dreepin wi myrrh.

The chorus comes in with text from the King James version:

Open to me, my love, my dove

before moving to the Latin version:

Surrexi ego, manus stillarunt myrrhinum.

Unaccompanied, the Scots and Latin consonants cluster in counterpoint, as the bride's hands drip with myrrh. The passage becomes agitated as the bride goes looking for her husband, and is assaulted by the watchmen. The Scots *Sprechstimme*, rhythmic but often syncopated, is punctuated by brass and strings mirroring the 'blaws an wounds' she receives. Both languages – Latin as much as Scots – display that highly expressive energy and phonaesthetic effect that has been seen in other pieces in the portfolio.

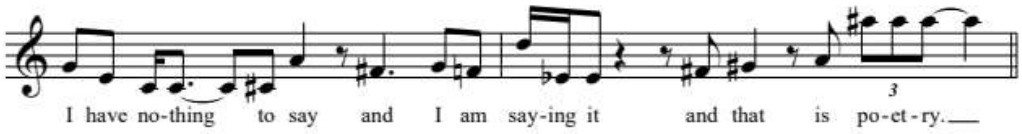
*6. Three String Pieces after Edwin Morgan (*and *Three Pieces for Orchestra)*

It might have seemed appropriate to discuss T*hree String Pieces after Edwin Morgan* earlier in the commentary, along with the other purely instrumental piece, *The Jaud*. However, the texts on which the string pieces draw are so different from that of the earlier piece that it is more useful to discuss them at this point in the commentary, where they can be considered alongside the other pieces that use texts by Edwin Morgan. The poems are enigmatic and playful; they are concerned with, and constructed from, words and letters; and for two of them, *Dialeck Piece* and *Archives*, their appearance on the page seems to be a major aspect of their meaning. The challenge for the composer is to find ways of embodying in music these tight packages of poetic device. Despite the poetic differences in their texts, however, the aim that was set out in the discussion of *The Jaud* is equally relevant to *Three String Pieces*: this aim was 'to show that a text, even without its explicit presence, may be used both to generate the musical material of a piece and to develop its form'. In the same context, attention was again drawn to the importance of dramatic dialogue as a characteristic feature of much Scots poetry. The overall dramatic contour of *Three String Pieces* has already been discussed.

The first in the set, *Opening the Cage,* has as its text a poem of the same name based on an enigmatic fourteen-word (twelve words, two repeated) statement by John Cage:

I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry

For this poem, my approach to developing musical material is, despite the differences between the two pieces, similar to that for *The Jaud*. I imagine a first phrase, as if sung, moving through a major triad to a forthright repeated note on the key word 'nothing', followed chromatically by a minor sixth on 'to say'. The next phrase would first recall the sixth and then mark the step of 'saying it' with a major seventh leap. The third phrase might hesitate for thought, and then gently rise, with a still wider interval, to 'poetry':



Morgan's poem consists of fourteen lines, each a playful re-arrangement of Cage's words, creating fourteen similarly enigmatic permutations, meaningful or meaningless as the reader decides. The piece, for violin, viola and cello, mirrors this process, stating the theme (twelve pitches, two of them repeated; a pitch per word) in a three-way conversation, and re-arranging it fourteen times following Morgan's patterns. The compositional process is, on the face of it, mechanical, but there are opportunities for wide variations in rhythm, register and dynamics. The resulting texture is spare, enabling nonetheless a fluid, if brief, dialogue between the three instruments.

The second piece in the set is even more brief. Its text is another concrete poem, *Dialeck Piece*, which builds from fragmented groups of apparently random letters into a quotation from one of Burns' best known poems with the line 'a daimen icker in a thrave'. This final line consists of fourteen letters, two of them used twice. The piece follows the process of the poem, with a pitch assigned to each letter, and so it moves from fragmentary groups of notes to a complete statement of the theme – a twelve-tone row, with two pitches repeated, just like the theme of the first piece. There are other similarities: each of these themes starts with a passing hint of C major; each has a halting rhythm and angular intervals, with a major seventh half-way through; and each melts away in a high, quiet triplet.

The third piece in the set, *Archives*, works in the opposite direction. Morgan's poem consists of nineteen repetitions of the phrase 'generation upon', followed by thirteen gradual disintegrations, and ending simply with the letter g. A theme using eleven pitches

is formed from the letter-sounds of the phrase: it shares the characteristics of the themes of the earlier pieces – halting rhythms, an angular contour, a major seventh leap in the middle. The piece follows the poem's pattern, pursuing the repetitions, but with some transpositions (augmented fourth – the missing F sharp immediately appears), rhythmic variations, augmentation and diminution, and inversion and retrograde. There is a restatement of the line at bar 34, before the thirteen progressive fragmentations take over. Reminiscent of the endings of the themes of the two earlier pieces, *Archives* evaporates on a high G sharp in the violin. To return to Corbett's discussion of 'structure-content': the reader *sees* and *reads* the shape and words of the poem, while the listener *hears* the music that has appropriated the poem's structure and filled it with its own content. Throughout *Three String Pieces*, just as in *The Jaud*, the text has been used both to generate the musical material and to develop its form.

Three Pieces for Orchestra after Edwin Morgan is an orchestration of the string pieces. The terse musical material and structure are retained, but the texture and dynamics are more spacious.

7. Vico visits Canedolia

Three String Pieces is a sober title, reminiscent of Berg or Webern; *Vico visits Canedolia* is a purposely facetious one. The first song in the pair, *Vico's Song,* is an example of the verbivocovisual approach of the concrete poets that was referred to earlier. The verbal and visual modes of communication interact, and structure-content is as important as any conventional idea of meaning. The poem has three stanzas of exactly the same shape: the first reads:

the universe that turned in on itself
turned in on itself
on itself
self was
was the universe
that was turned in
it was the universe that was turned in

The shape of the poem on the page seems as important as the meaning of the words (which relate, perhaps, to the cyclical view of history advanced by the enlightenment philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744)). My approach to composing the piece was

influenced by Corbett's account[30] of a recording of a performance of the poem *uma vez* by the Brazilian concrete poet Augusto de Campos, with whom Morgan directly engaged. Apparently, in this recording the poem was read several times, once conventionally, once following its visual diagonals and once starting at a point part way through. *Vico's Song*, for three voices, traces the text three times. One is a straightforward homophonic setting, very simple other than for its visual appearance in the score, which is intended to mirror the shape of Morgan's stanzas on the page, for the use of the three voices to mirror that shape in shifting depths of sound, and for its use progressively of three different vocal techniques. Another is much more free, a sung polyphonic version varying in tempo, dynamics and mood. The other is an abbreviated, spoken version of the text, threaded through the stanzas as the other versions proceed. The piece is another attempt to shift the dimension of a verbivocovisual text: we hear the words, we hear the voice(s), and we hear rather than see the shape of the text.

Finally, Morgan's subtitle for *Canedolia* is *An Off-Concrete Scotch Fantasia.* The title's swopped letters and the long-unfashionable 'Scotch' give the game away: this is an affectionate send-up – a comic celebration of Scottish place names. I have taken the speakers in the poem to be a visitor and two locals, who discuss the events, apparently riotous, of the previous evening. Like *Vico's Song*, *Canedolia* is for three voices, and I have taken the entirely unjustified liberty of casting Vico, fresh from the eternal returns of the universe, as the visitor. Much of the song is spoken rather than sung, and it progresses as a dialogue, sometimes rhythmic, sometimes melodic, and comically different from all the other dialogues identified in this commentary, as it triumphantly celebrates the phonic bonanza served up by the two locals.

Performance

Three of the pieces in the portfolio have been performed: *The Daemon Lover* and *Sichts Unseen*, both in 2016, and *Five Soutar Songs*, in 2019. I have tried, so far without success, to have *Sang o Sangs* performed within the university; although I had deliberately aimed to make the chorus parts accessible for a good amateur choir, it was thought likely to demand too much rehearsal time. Most of the recent pieces, such as *Three String Pieces* and *Vico visits Canedolia*, are for small ensembles and should, when current

30 *Ibid*. p 141. I have not managed to track down the recording.

restrictions are ended, be performable. I would also like to hear the full *Twa Drumlie Sangs* pairing performed.

Throughout this commentary there has been an emphasis on the expressive vigour and energy of Scots language and diction, and on the opportunities that they offer for the musical exploration of sounds, images and meanings. These are equally opportunities for performers, and throughout this portfolio there is a premium on performance that grasps the opportunities offered by the language of the texts. This will include emphatic enjoyment of the consonants and their clusters, the use of *glissandi* where indicated and, no doubt, in other places, and the full use of the vocal techniques indicated: spoken passages, *Sprechstimme* and *Sprechgesang* as well as conventional pitched singing.

In some pieces, there is potentially an element of musical theatre. For instance, the second song in *Twa Drumlie Sangs* can be seen not simply as the poet's expression of his misery but as the stylised *performance* of such an expression; this might suggest a performance verging on the grotesque. Another constant theme throughout the commentary has been the significance of dramatic dialogue. Whether for one singer, as in *The Daemon Lover* and *Five Soutar Songs,* for small ensembles of soloists, or for chorus, many of the pieces, as has been noted, demand strong dramatic exchange and contrast in performance.

In all cases, it is helpful for performers and composer to work together in rehearsal. This will be particularly so for the most recently composed pair, *Vico visits Canedolia*. I have submitted these two songs fully aware that they will require substantial work and experimentation with performers.

Conclusion

Throughout the commentary I have referred to the expressive power of Scots language and diction, to its 'phonic energy' and phonaesthetic potential, and I have described how I have attempted to exploit and embody these qualities in the music of the portfolio. This approach is, in most of the pieces, based on fashioning musical figures from the sounds and contours of the spoken words of the texts, and on developing musical lines and harmonic patterns from that starting point. The musical idiom is largely non-diatonic and

post-tonal, with an approach to musical development often influenced by the serialist tradition. Melodic shapes and rhythmic patterns are typically, and explicitly, derived directly from the language of the texts, and are often angular in contour and irregular in rhythm. Even where, as in *Three String Pieces*, the relation between language, sound and meaning is of a different kind, the musical material and its development are derived directly from the texts, and the musical idiom is consistent with that of the portfolio as a whole. Texts from two major periods of Scottish literature, the late middle ages and the period from the 1920s, have been used, offering a wide range of characteristics – narrative, dramatic, reflective, lyrical, comic. The concrete poems of Edwin Morgan provide an additional perspective, and both there and in *Five Soutar Songs* and *Sichts Unseen* a pervasive sense of the visual gives rise to the attempt to embody the text, or to appropriate it, in the music to which it is set, empowering the listener to hear what otherwise is seen.

Attention has been drawn to the importance of performance, particularly in terms of recognising and taking full advantage of the phonaesthetic qualities of Scots language and diction, the strength of the consonants and the opportunities for effects such as *glissandi* in the treatment of vowels. Strong performance will be essential equally for the many examples of dramatic contrasts and dialogue in the pieces. I have attempted to embody in music this vital characteristic of the Scots tradition, not just in individual pieces but across the portfolio as a whole. Some pieces, such as *The Jaud* and *Twa Drumlie Sangs*, are full of sadness and despair, whereas *Sang o Sangs*, after all the vicissitudes of its characters, projects joy and expectation, and *Canedolia* is happily comic. Some pieces are explicitly dramatic, whereas *Five Soutar Songs* explores the diverse oppositions of height and depth, light and darkness, sound and silence. And the portfolio as a whole is designed, within its consistent musical idiom, to draw a dramatic arc of musical textures and forces: it begins with the purely instrumental *The Jaud*, moves towards the larger scale of *Sang o Sangs*, and comes to an end with the a cappella *Vico visits Canedolia*.

Does the portfolio offer an independent contribution? Throughout, it pursues the central aims of exploiting in music the expressive energies of Scots language and diction, and of embodying in that music the elements of dramatic contrast and dialogue inherent in many of its texts. In its treatment of a range of widely varied texts, including those that sit within international traditions, the portfolio holds to its imperative to derive musical material and form from the linguistic and dramatic characteristics of these texts. An additional

perspective is offered by the exploration of ways of evoking the visual perceptions expressed in some texts. The principal approach used in the crafting of musical material from the language of the texts, within the musical idiom used across this broad palette, has in my view proved to be an effective vehicle for meeting the aims set out. The portfolio thereby presents a sustained, coherent body of work developed in the context of these aims, consistent in its compositional approach and productive in its use of texts to generate varied musical material and form.

Appendix 1

***Sang o Sangs* summary table** OTS: The Old Testament in Scots; Trem: Tremellius; KJ: King James

No	Title	Songs	Chap/vv	Correspond to	Texts	Voices	Instruments	Tonality	Duration (approximate)
I	**Sang o sangs**	*a* Sang o sangs	1.1	IVa Vc	OTS	SATB	Hns/Drum	Mostly white note (plus E flat); BFEA figure central	**2 minutes**
II	**Sangs o luve – and admonitioun**	*a* Kisses	1.2-3	IIIa VIb	OTS Trem	Br SATB	Ob Str	- sugg of Gm (mid-eastern feel)	**8m**
		b See, ye ar bonny	1.15-16	IVb Vc Vd	OTS/KJ/Trem	Br Gr SATB	Cello	- Phrygian based on E (with tonal shift and return)	
		c Rose o Sharon	2.1-2	Vb Vd	OTS Trem	Br Gr SATB	Str	- sugg of C sharp m/Phryg	
		d A say tae ye	2.7	IIIc VIa	OTS Trem	Br TB	Hns/Str	-12 tone; rel to I	
III	**Afore the weddin**	*a* The vyce o ma luved ane	2.8-17	**IIa Vd VIb**	OTS	Br Gr	Ob/Hns/Str	12 tone, but derived from BFEA figure from I and IId, used at varying pitches (plus some tonal shifts)	**8m**
		b By nicht on ma bed	3.1-4	**Va**	OTS	Br	Tutti	Octatonic	
		c A say tae ye	3.5 (=2.7)	**IId VIa**	OTS Trem	Br TB	Hns/Str	12 tone	
IV	**Weddin day**	*a* Wha's this?	3.6-11	**I IId**	OTS/KJ/Trem	SATB	Tutti	Mostly as I	**6m 30**
		b See, ye ar bonny	*1.15/4.1*	**IIb Vc**	-	-	Ob/Hns/VIa	As IIb but a tone lower	
		c Wauk, O north wind	4.16-5.1	-	OTS Trem	Br Gr SATB	Tutti	12 tone (serial)	
V	**Efter**	*a* A sleep	5.2-7	**IIIb**	OTS/KJ/Trem	Br Gr SATB	Tutti	As IIIb	**6m**
		b Whaur is yer jo gaen?	6.1-3	**IIc Vd**	OTS	SA	Str	As IIc	
		c Ye ar bonny	6.4-10	**IIb IVb**	OTS/KJ/Trem	Gr SATB	Cello	As IIb	
		d A am for ma luved ane	7.10 (+2.1)	**IIc Vb**	OTS Trem	Br SATB	Str	As IIc	
VI	**Conclusioun**	*a* A say tae ye	*8.4 (= 2.7)*	**IId IIIc**	-	-	Ob/Hns/Str	12 tone	**4m 30**
		b Come swith	8.13-14	**IIa IIIa**	OTS Trem	Br Gr SATB	Tutti	Gm feel cf IIa	
									35 minutes

Appendix 2

James Morrison: *View from St Cyrus*

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