

Black Snow: Dubh-Shneachd

Mary Ann Kennedy & Nick Turner

'Black Snow' is a vocal/electronic work created for the 11th International Symposium on Antarctic Earth Sciences and designed for performance in the historic Playfair Library at Old College, University of Edinburgh. 'Black Snow' is contemporary in nature but inspired by the relationship between Gaels and the natural world around them.

At its heart are the events of the winter of 1829, known in the Gaelic-speaking Highlands and Islands of Scotland as Bliadhna an t-Sneachd Dhuibh – The Year of the Black Snow - when the winter lasted so long that huge numbers of cattle died and great hardship ensued. In several communities, the teine-èiginn or 'need-fire' was invoked to ward off evil and try to hasten Spring. There are several accounts of this year's disaster, including a drinking song by Iain MacMhurchaidh, the Kintail Bard, in which there is a dark humour and wilful disengagement with their terrible situation, a kind of 'drink, for tomorrow we die'.

The 'Year of the Black Snow' challenges contemporary concepts of severe and unusual weather and climate change as a modern-day phenomenon. It also celebrates the natural relationship between people and their surroundings, their innate understanding of the interplay of the elements, and the ability of humans to use humour and conviviality to endure hardship.

'Black Snow' also plays with the challenges of the Playfair Library as a performance space, using the acoustics of a striking and unusual room to build a soundscape that fills its entire space in all three dimensions. The music draws its text from a fragment of a pibroch song, '*M'Agh Donn*' (*My Brown Heifer*), and part of the Kintail song, '*Thoir a-nall am Botal*' (*Fetch over the Bottle*), and the soundscape is created from manipulated instrumental and electronic sound, and also sounds from nature, including the sound of stones bouncing over a solid frozen loch down the road from the composers' studio in the West Highlands.

Mary Ann was joined in the vocal quartet for the first performance by three members of Glasgow's Hidden Lane Choir – Gillian Frame, Rachel Newton and Fiona Hunter. Nick was joined by sound engineer Moray Munro. This subsequent recording was made by Mary Ann and Nick at Watercolour Music, their residential recording and creative facilities in Ardgour in the West Highlands. Mary Ann recorded all four voices.

M'Agh Donn' (My Brown Heifer)

Ged dh'fhanadh crodh chàch a-muigh, thigeadh m'agh donn.

Though everyone else's cattle would be outside, my brown heifer will return to me.

Thoir a-nall am Botal (Fetch over the Bottle)

O, thoir a-nall am botal, hè, cùm thall am bodach,
Nuair a thogadh e oirnn sogan, 's e 'm botal bu docha leinn.

B'e sud earrach dubh a' challa, dh'fhag e iomadh aon dhinn falamh,
Thug e bhuamsa mo chrodh bainne, 's iad na gearrain bha mi caoidh.

Gur beag m' ùidh dhol chun na h-àirigh shealltainn air mo chuid cruaidh
àlainn,
Gun agam dhiubh ach na cnàmhan 's iad gun bhliochd, gun àl gun laoigh.

*Fetch over the bottle! You can keep your half-bottle!
When we're in our cups, there's nothing like the bottle.*

*That was the black spring of darkness, it left many of us with nothing,
It took my milch-cows from me, how I lamented their loss.*

*What interest do I have in heading for the high pasture to see my beautiful
cattle?
Only their bones are left, without produce, without young, without calves.*