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Staffa: an island of inspiration

Ned Bigham Tue 22nd August 2017

Ned Bigham introduces his multimedia voyage around the Scottish island of Staffa

Staffa, a new piece for symphony orchestra and three large screens suspended above the orchestra, is a collaboration between visual artist and BAFTA award-winner Gerry Fox and myself. Following in the footsteps of *Favela Descending*, our multi-screen 7.1 sound installation at the Shoreditch Concrete and Glass festival, we developed the idea to create a new multimedia piece inspired by Mendelssohn's visit to Fingal's Cave in 1829.



In the summer of 2015 I travelled to the isle of Staffa, home of the cave with its unique hexagonal, basalt columns. Situated to the north west of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, I could understand why Mendelssohn found it so richly inspirational, but I was anxious to avoid composing a pastiche of the *Hebrides Overture*, this would have been *de facto* inferior to his masterpiece and frankly a depressing waste of time. So instead I started from scratch and the music gathered a momentum of its own.

We were awarded a grant from Creative Scotland and Gerry then made several trips with film crew and adventurous aerial camerawoman Stefanie Williams, who was prepared to fly her drones into inaccessible places inside the cave and around the island. The footage captured the landscape in three contrasting weather conditions, from low, late October sunlight, illuminating deep inside the cave, to rainy dreich, and a Force Six Gale which forced the film crew eventually to abandon station. Each screen depicts one of these three impressions of the island from a flying viewpoint.

During the compositional and film-making process Gerry and I maintained an equal creative partnership, where music and image developed in tandem. For example, I would send Gerry a sketch of the music I had composed, he would then send me his footage cut to the music but with missing sections which required further music to be composed, and so on.



[NEW STAFFA trailer 27_04_2017](#) from [Gerald Fox](#) on [Vimeo](#).

For the installation version we recorded the score with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra at their new facility in central Glasgow. Jean-Claude Picard took the baton and the session was engineered by Phil Hobbs of Linn Records. It was mixed in a 4.1 quadrasonic format by Mark Rogers. This means that if you stand in front of the three screens you should feel as if you are in the middle of the orchestra, with speakers forward and behind and a sub-bass adding oomph. Scored for full orchestra, two harps and celeste, the music opens with strident brass and clashing cymbals, travelling through darkness and dissonance into the serenity of the sunlit cave, finally resolving into a celebration of Staffa's natural cycle.

Staffa is intended as a spiritual voyage around and inside this beautiful island, with its astonishing, quasi-religious, cathedral-like interior. The stereo version is included in my forthcoming album, also called *Staffa*, recorded by the RSNO and including further recent compositions such as *Archipelago Dances* and *Two Nightscapes*. This is released on Aruna Records on September 8.

Staffa will have its world premiere on August 27 at the Usher Hall performed by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra (conductor Martyn Brabbins) as part of the 70th Anniversary Celebration Concert of the [Edinburgh International Festival](#). It is also being staged as a free Edinburgh Festival installation at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh from August 17 to 27 (10am-6pm daily). The music for the installation was recorded by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra (conductor Jean-Claude Picard). For more information about [Ned Bigham](#), visit his website.



Ned Bigham

Ned Bigham is a composer whose influences range from Bruckner to Brooklyn. He writes mainly for orchestra, chamber and vocal groups, but his work also encompasses electronica and sound installations.