

Scotland's Music © BBC 2007

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The Fairy Hill

writer/presenter: John Purser

producer: David McGuinness

John Purser: To the fairies we are the dead and they are the immortals. But who believes in fairies? Well, who believes in angels? Millions of people. Millions of them. But the evidence for angels is no better than the evidence for fairies. We don't have a photograph of an angel, we don't have one bottled in a museum. There's no evidence that would pass in a court of law. Yet, in that half-world between beliefs, imaginings, dreams and longings, such beings exist.

Are we the dreams and longings in their minds? Perhaps. Fairies and humans have fallen in love and borne children to each other, and Christianity depends upon an even more miraculous conception.

The fairies are older than Christianity: but how old is our fairy music? As old as it is young and as young as it is old. We are the dead and they are the immortals. Here's the voice of a man describing the fairy he was lucky enough to see, his different ways of singing superimposed upon each other as though his song had become confused in its passage from the dream of eternity . . .

Trad – Composition: The Fairy Visitation

Calum Ruadh, recorded by Thorkild Knudsen 1968

CASSETTE Calum Ruadh Bard of Skye (Scottish Tradition 7)

Greentrax CTRAX9007 Band 11

Calum Ruadh: I used to walk over there to that dyke in – watching Raasay – and the world could turn upside down for all that I cared. I was - I was at this – fairy in Raasay.

JP: Calum Ruadh, bard of Skye, describing his fairy, her eyes as blue as blaeberries, cheeks like roses, skin like bog-cotton, hair like gold about her shoulders and her voice as sweet as the song-thrush in spring.

Alyth McCormack: “Iain ‘ic IlleMhoire bhig, thig dhachaigh, thig dhachaigh.

Carson? Carson?

Gu d’dhinnear. Gu d’dhinnear.

Dè’n dinnear? Dè’n dinnear?

Aran cruaidh cuirce coirce . . . meug leis, meug leis. Bi clis! Bi clis.

Little Iain Morrison, come home, come home.

What for, what for?

To your dinner, to your dinner.

What dinner, what dinner?

Hard oatmeal bread . . . whey with it, whey with it. Be quick! Be quick!

JP: Well, that was a down-to-earth conversation between a thrush and its child. But birds can be fairy-like and in the Gaelic tradition their voices were thought of as fairy-like. But the fairies were not just sweet voices and sweet dreams, for they were used as scapegoats for the bad things that humans did, the humans accusing them of stealing children and women to cover up infanticide or rape and abduction. This is just such a song of fairy abduction. It's explained first by Calum Johnson, then Flora MacNeill sings it from within the fairy house in the hill in which she has been imprisoned.

Trad. - The Sister's Lament

Flora MacNeil (with explanation by Calum Johnson)

LP Heather and Glen

Topic TLP 1047 Side 2 Track 7

song only is also on

CD The Alan Lomax Collection

Rounder CD1700 T14

JP: Flora MacNeill singing from within a fairy hill. Many of these sithean or fairy hills were in fact prehistoric burial mounds and were associated with music. Often fairy musicians would emerge and teach humans to play with supernatural skill. But the great ballad of King Orfeo brings the human musician with his own skills into the fairy mound, to reclaim his wife from the fairy king.

The story is ancient and international and symbolises the cycle of the seasons, spring returning with the return of Orfeo's lost wife. This unique Scottish version from Unst, our most northerly island in Shetland, stirred even the most cautious of scholars to exclaim

(reader – David Greenberg) "That a tune should in the midst of the twentieth century be recovered for this whisper from the Middle Ages was as little to be expected as that we should hear the horns of elfland faintly blowing."

JP: Here it is, sung by Archie Fisher

Trad. arr. Fisher - Orfeo

Archie Fisher with John MacKinnon, John Doonan

LP Orfeo

Celtic Music CM028 Side 1 Track 1

JP: The strange words of the refrain are in Norn - the old Nordic language last spoken on mainland Scotland in the eighteenth century. They say that "The wood is green early where the stag goes yearly" and they point to the return of spring and to the vigilance of the stag as an example to King Orfeo who has let his wife slip out of his hands while he was hunting.

That Celtic and Nordic version of the ballad of King Orfeo harks back to ancient myths: but even more uncanny than the hall of the Fairy King are the halls of the high corries in the mountains.

There you can hear what is known in Gaelic as the "oiteag sluagh" - the breeze of the host of the dead. The sound is of strange unexpected gusts of wind, and was known to the Romans, who wrote of its meaning in these islands. These gusts have been heard by shepherds and climbers – I've heard them myself – and they're often inexplicable, sometimes sounding like breathing, other times like the cry of a child in pain. It's an eerie experience, captured here by Allan MacDonald in the

timeless traditional song, Tha sior coineadh am Beinn Dóbhraín. Ben Doran is well-known for this phenomenon, but here it is more than a sound from the past, it is a kind of aisling or pre-vision of tragedy to come.

“The voice of my darling is on the misty mountain. There is constant crying on the mountain. Your blood is flowing on the mountain. Your flesh is torn on the misty mountain. The voice of my darling is on the mountain, the crying over there is unceasing.”

Trad. - Tha Sior Cóineadh am Beinn Dóbhraín

Allan MacDonald, vocal, smallpipes, Iain MacFarlane, fiddle

CD Colla Mo Rùn

Greentrax CDTRAX 217 Track 6

JP: The sound of the breeze of the host of the dead - or perhaps they are better thought of as the ever-living. To the fairies we are the dead and they are the immortals. Are we the dreams and longings in their minds? Fairies and humans have fallen in love and borne children to each other. In this next song, the eich-uisge or water-horse of Norse tradition has fathered a child on a human. When the woman discovers his true identity, she abandons them and the eich-uisge is left to sing this lonely and beautiful lullaby to their son.

Trad. - Òran tàlaidh an each-uisge

Margaret Stewart, vocal, Allan MacDonald, smallpipes, Allan Henderson, fiddle

CD Colla Mo Rùn

Greentrax CDTRAX 217 Track 10

Allan MacDonald: “Sleep my child, Fast of foot you are, Great as a horse you are, My darling son, Oh my lovely little horse. You are far from the township. You will be sought after. Fast of foot you are. Great as a horse you are.”

JP: Margaret Stewart accompanied by Allan MacDonald. It is right that our last sounds for today should be fairy sounds. After all, in many of our traditions it is to them that we owe our gratitude for the gift of music.

Trad. - Port na bPúcaí

Allan MacDonald, pipes

CD Fhuair mi pòg

Greentrax CDTRAX 132 Track 15

JP: This is Allan MacDonald playing Port na bPúcaí. The tune comes from the Blasket Islands in the remote south-west of Ireland. It was heard in the night in the form of strange sounds of animals or birds, and its name means The Tune of the Fairies. It's as haunting as it is lovely, as old as it is young, as young as it is old.