

Scotland's Music © BBC 2007

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Merlin and Mungo

writer/presenter: John Purser

producer: David McGuinness

Trad - Hwy, hwy

Mary MacMaster

BBC recording

John Purser voice-over: Today we're headed into a weird world of magic with Glasgow's St Mungo and the wizard Merlin arguing it out. But what you're hearing is a simple Welsh lullaby, because that was the language spoken in Strathclyde in those days. Mary MacMaster sings it and you'll hear the words of another lullaby in Welsh, written in Strathclyde in the 7th century. It describes little Dinogad's father out hunting.

Female reader voice-over (Sarah Purser): "Dinogad's coat is of many colours, many colours. I made it of the skins of pine-martens. Phew, phew – a whistling! Let us sing to him – the eight slaves sing to him. When your father would go to hunt, with a spear-shaft on his shoulder and a club in his hand, he called to the nimble hounds 'Giff, Gaff, seize, seize, fetch, fetch' He killed fish in his coracle . . . when your father went to the mountains he would bring back a roebuck, a wild pig, a stag, a speckled grouse from the mountain, a fish from the falls of Derwennydd. Out of all those that your father got at with his dart, whether wild pig or fox, none escaped unless it had wings."

JP: Thirteen hundred years ago, Welsh was the language spoken in most of southern Scotland, and Glasgow's patron saint, St Kentigern, spoke Welsh. His pet name, Mungo, is Welsh and means "Dear friend". To this day, Glaswegians prefer to call him Mungo rather than Kentigern. Mungo also learnt to speak Latin, the language of the chants written in honour of him. I've never forgotten the thrill of opening the Sprouton Breviary in the manuscript room of the National Library of Scotland and finding there not just words, but pages of music in honour of St Kentigern, written down quite probably in Glasgow Cathedral itself, seven hundred years ago. The chants hadn't been sung for centuries, but I am happy to say that they are now back in musical if not religious circulation.

This chant, sung here by Cappella Nova, is from the evening service for St Kentigern. Mungo was still a young novice priest when, one night, he fell asleep by the sacred fire which he was meant to keep alight. His fellow novices put it out, hoping to get him into trouble, but Mungo was able to relight it simply with his breath. It's described as a miracle, but there's nearly always a hot ember left that will respond to a breath and a prayer:-

Anon – Responsorium 'In septentrionali'

Cappella Nova/Alan Tavener

CD Scottish Medieval Plainchant: The Miracles of St Kentigern

ASV Gaudeamus CDGAU169, Track 1

Welsh male voice-over (Huw Williams): "In North Wales, not far from Alba, the holy church celebrates the rites of St Kentigern. Birds, beasts, fish and streams obey him as servants obedient to his will.

The little flame which was extinguished through ill-will, was rekindled by his breath, in Scotland, without recourse to any form of fire.” (*translation by John Purser*)

JP: St Mungo, it's told, was conceived illegitimately, on Traprain law, near Haddington and his pregnant mother thrown down from the top on the orders of her father, the King. Surviving that, she was cast out to sea in a coracle, drifted across to Fife and gave birth at Culross, maintaining all along that hers was a virgin conception. Mungo's biographer will have none of this and claims she was drugged and raped.

Whether he was a miracle or a bastard, Mungo survived, perhaps even put to sleep by the lullaby we've already heard. He himself is said to have had a “high, sweet, harmonious, and indefatigable voice for singing “divine praises”, and his first miracle was to bring a singer back to life - the pet robin beloved of his teacher, St Serf.

Anon - Lectio III Erat Igitur

Cappella Nova/Alan Tavener

CD Scottish Mediaeval Plainchant: The Miracles of St Kentigern

ASV Gaudemus CDGAU169, Track 8

JP voice-over: Years later, the story was read out as part of divine service, intoned and accompanied by a small Celtic harp of the kind shown on some of the Pictish stones.

Welsh male voice-over: “St Kentigern, who was just a child, was playing in the refectory and accidentally hit and killed St Serf's pet bird.

When St Serf heard of this, he became angry and left off praying in the church to come to the refectory. The boy was terrified when he saw his master, not so much that he might be beaten as that he might be thrown out of the community.

So Kentigern picked up the tiny body of the bird and, on straightening its head so that it was just as it was before, the bird suddenly revived and, alive again, flew eagerly twittering to St Serf.”

JP: Mungo was also involved with the famous druid and prophet, Merlin. The story, like that of Mungo's life, was written down in the twelfth century – five hundred years after the deaths of them both. But while Mungo died in his bed, Merlin had a profoundly strange almost ritual triple death which he foretold himself.

ANON (Robert ap Huw MS) - Gosteg Dafydd Athro

William Taylor

CD Two Worlds of the Welsh Harp

Dorian DOR 90260, Track 1

JP voice-over: To accompany the story, here's some of Europe's oldest known harp music. Its strange musical patterning have important connections with Scottish bagpipe music, but it's from a Welsh manuscript, and the man who wrote down this story might well have done so with just such sounds in his ears:-

Welsh Male Reader: (adapted from the translation by MacQueen, W. and J., “Vita Merlini Silvestris”, In: *Scottish Studies* 29, 1989, pp.77-93)

“At that time when blessed *Mungo* used to frequent the desert wilds, it happened on a certain day, as he was praying in a thicket in the wilderness, that a certain madman, naked and hairy and devoid of all worldly possessions, crossed his path like a raging beast . . . certain people say that he was *Merlin*, who was regarded by the Britons as unique in his powers of prophecy . . .”

JP Voice-over: Merlin explains to Mungo that he’s been condemned to a life in the wilderness because he was the cause of the slaughter of many men in battle. But Mungo takes pity on him.

Welsh Male Reader: “This our brother has shape, nakedness, flesh, blood, frailty, just like one of us, yet lacks everything which human nature requires, with the sole exception of the common air we breathe. How then does he live among the wild beasts in spite of hunger, cold and a complete lack of anything to eat?” So the holy bishop *Mungo* wept, his cheeks drenched in pious tears . . . He sought to obtain help from the Lord also with earnest prayers for that wild man, wretched, unclean and possessed of the devil, in order that the misfortunes and sorrows which he was enduring here in the body would stand as refreshment to his soul in the world to come.”

ANON (Robert ap Huw MS) – Caniad of St. Silin

William Taylor

CD Two Worlds of the Welsh Harp

Dorian DOR 90260, Track 5

Welsh Male Reader Voice-over: “Now this madman, as it is said, afterwards often came out of the wilderness and sat on a certain steep crag which rises on the other side of the Molendinar burn, overlooking Glasgow, to the north of the church of that place. On many occasions he disturbed St Kentigern and his clergy with horrifying shrieks, as they were singing the divine office.

For he foretold there many future events, as if he were a prophet, although his prophecies were extremely obscure and quite unintelligible, but because he used never to repeat what he had foretold no one dared to believe him. But they remembered certain worthless words and entrusted them to writing. . . .”

JP Voice-over: Merlin prophesies that he will die a triple death from beating, piercing and drowning and asks to receive the sacraments before he dies, but Mungo ridicules this prophecy saying it’s a tissue of lies and refuses. Of course they are both magicians. But Mungo’s a saint so his magic is called a miracle – and that’s official. Fortunately, Mungo’s own fellow monks persuade him to relent and in the end, perhaps seeing the light of Christ even in the magician’s face, he does give Merlin communion.

Welsh Male Reader: “Merlin, after receiving the episcopal benediction, leapt away from there like a wild goat set free from the hunter’s snare and joyfully made tracks for the desolate waste.

But since what has been preordained by the Lord must come to pass, it happened that on the same day he was stoned and beaten to death by certain shepherds of king Meldred, near the town of Drumelzier, and while he was in the throes of death he fell down the steep bank of the river Tweed on to a sharp stake which had been driven into the ground as part of a fish-trap and he was impaled right through the middle of his body. His head fell forward into the water and so, just as he had prophesied, he gave up his soul to the Lord.”

Mike Scott/May East/Craig Gibbsone – Seek the Light
The Waterboys
CD Universal Hall
Puck PUCK 1, Track 7

JP voice-over: Now it might seem a little odd to dive into the Tweed with Merlin and come up with Mike Scott in the 20th century – but people like Mungo and Merlin live **outside** time. Besides, I have a feeling Mike Scott is on the same wavelength and in search of much the same kind of enlightenment . . .

Mike Scott Voice-over (From Travelling Folk, Celtic Spirit BBC Radio Scotland 7.11.05): “This idea of the mantra type song which includes only two or three lines of lyric, well there are two reasons behind that. One is I recognise that some of the ideas in these songs – like there’s a song called the Christ in you, talking about seeing the Christ in people’s faces, that’s an idea that a lot of people have resistance to, and if I don’t put anything else in the lyric, people have to deal with that idea, and if I repeat it over and over and over again, they can’t escape from it . . . the other reason is I have in my life worked a lot with these things called affirmations, a statement that one says inwardly or outwardly in order to change a pattern of thinking – one’s own thinking . . . and that got me used to the simple repeated phrase and the power of that.

Anon (Robert ap Huw MS) – Caniad of St Silin
William Taylor
CD Two Worlds of the Welsh Harp
Dorian DOR 90260, Track 5

JP: Bill Taylor displaying the same power of the repeated phrase in that ancient Song of Saint Silin, as we heard from Mike Scott and perhaps towards the same end – to bring the Merlins of this world into the Christian fold. Mike was talking about his song “Seek the Light” from The Waterboys album Universal Hall, and Bill was playing first on the late mediaeval harp with bray pins that make a buzzing sound, and then on an early mediaeval harp without them. Both harp pieces came from the Ap Huw manuscript.

Mike Scott’s music wasn’t specifically related to Mungo, but Thomas Wilson’s music is. Tom Wilson was one of Glasgow’s and Scotland’s most distinguished composers, and he honoured his city with a homage to its patron saint, Mungo himself. The piece is called The Kentigern Suite and is related to the five symbols of St Mungo’s miracles that are shown on Glasgow’s coat of arms – the bird, the fish, the ring, the bell and finally the tree. It was originally just a branch which Mungo breathed on to revive the fire we heard about earlier. This music doesn’t make trees out of branches: instead it captures that simplicity of faith which performs little miracles out of what is really quite ordinary. It’s gentle, beautiful, and finds its own ultimate serenity.

Thomas Wilson - St Kentigern Suite: Tree: Adagio calmo
Scottish Ensemble/Jonathan Rees
Virgin VC 7 91112-2, Track 19