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Gentle Divinity

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producer: David McGuinness

John Purser: I've called this programme Gentle Divinity, and it features a poet, a professor of music, and a minister. They were all gentle people: but there was nothing gentle about the world into which Dugald Buchanan was sent by the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge in 1755. He was to be a teacher and a catechist: the catechism was a sort of question and answer method of teaching religion, and its spiritual values. The place Buchanan was sent to was Kinloch Rannoch, and it was in dire need of religion and spiritual values. It was on the edge of Rannoch Moor and was so remote that all the rejects of society – outlaws, dispossessed and banished, had gathered there, as far from the law as possible.

They were known as the broken men of Rannoch, a people destitute and desperate. In ministering to these last vestiges of society, Buchanan was working at its roots, not certain if they were strong or rotten, not certain if his own motives were good or bad. Confronting the great dilemmas of self-consciousness in his confessional diary and his poetry, Buchanan emerges triumphant and yet sober, thoughtful and grateful. In such a place at such a time it is a magnificent achievement.

The song we're going to hear is called An Claigeann - The Skull. It came to Buchanan when, following a young woman's burial, he picked up a skull left exposed in the steep-sided graveyard on the shores of Loch Rannoch.

Today, the graveyard is wild with bracken, and as neglected as were the people living there in Buchanan's day. Picture him then among the tombstones, looking out northward across the loch, a buzzard mewing above, the eerie sound of snipe drumming, and the thoughts racing through his mind like the wind through the branches of the surrounding trees, as he addresses the skull in his hands:

Buchanan - An Claigeann

Allan MacDonald

BBC recording

JP voiceover: Buchanan asks the skull if it belonged to a preacher and did the preacher care for his flock or leave them to the care of the fox?

Buchanan ends assured that there is hope even in the grave, that the eyes that were once in the skull may shine again as brilliantly as the stars, and that the soul may fly to Christ with the speed of the eagle - to be greeted with love.

JP: Part of Dugald Buchanan's The Skull, recorded especially for us by Allan MacDonald. It's a far cry from Buchanan, the teacher and catechist in Gaelic-speaking Rannoch in the 1750s, to William Thomson, the minister of Sprouston Kirk in the Borders. But Thomson was also keen on the catechism, and he also championed the right of Gaelic-speaking congregations to have a Gaelic-speaking minister. Like Buchanan, Thomson was keen on the value of poetry and song in support of faith – which may explain why, when he baptised his son John in Sprouston Kirk in 1805, he was baptising the child destined to become Scotland's first professor of music.

John Thomson - Overture to 'Hermann'
Camerata Scotland/William Conway,
CD Camerata Scotland
NYOS 003 Track 8

JP voiceover: This is the Overture to John Thomson's opera "Hermann". But where Dugald Buchanan was dealing with real bandits, this opera deals with imaginary ones. It's set in German-speaking Europe where the whole Romantic movement had settled and where Thomson went to study.

JP: The National Youth Orchestra of Scotland conducted by William Conway with part of John Thomson's Overture "Hermann". It sounds and is Germanic, but the Romantic movement had to a great degree been initiated in Scotland by James MacPherson from the Highlands, Sir Walter Scott from the Borders and Lord Byron from Aberdeenshire. Each one of them had a seminal influence right across Europe and America. So here is Thomson's setting of "Stanzas for Music" by Byron, only, irony of ironies, he set it in a German translation and published the song in Leipzig. It's a magical setting of a magical poem - "There be none of Beauty's daughters with a magic like thee: like music on the waters is thy sweet voice to me . . . so the Spirit bows before thee to listen and adore thee; with a full but soft emotion like the swell of Summer's ocean."

John Thomson - Drei Lieder No 1
Patricia MacMahon, soprano Jack Keaney, piano
CD Scotland's Music
Linn CKD 008 CD2 Track 5

JP: Patricia MacMahon and Jack Keaney with the first of John Thomson's Drei Leider. Thomson returned from Germany and taught piano and composition in Edinburgh, and in 1839 he successfully applied for the new Chair of Music at Edinburgh University. The following year, he married the daughter of the Principal of the University and his future looked bright and assured, but within a few months he was dead from heart failure. Thomson was soon forgotten, and so was his music and we don't even know where he is buried. However, in October 2005 a Bicentennial Festival was mounted in his honour in Kelso and Sprouston, his home village. Tommy Fowler has researched Thomson's music, and told me about the event which involved performers of all ages and skills:

Tommy Fowler (interview): We heard a whole weekend of Thomson's music ranging from solo piano music to orchestral music and it was the orchestral music that I was involved in because they kindly invited me to down to conduct it. It was a great weekend, and the thing that struck me most was how enthusiastic the players and the people of Kelso and the surrounding area were.

John Thomson - Overture to 'Hermann'
Camerata Scotland/William Conway,
CD Camerata Scotland
NYOS 003 Track 8

Tommy Fowler (voiceover): It was something that warmed my heart to be part of that event where 200 years after this man's birth, his music was performed in the church where his father served as minister and where he lived and worked around in that area and it was just delightful to feel the enthusiasm of the people delighted in presenting to the whole world their son, John Thomson.

JP: The end of Thomson's Overture to his opera "Hermann", bringing redemption in the nick of time to its criminal hero. Just a year older than John Thomson, was a minor but disarming figure in the story of Scotland's music - the Rev. John Park, born in Greenock in 1804. Besides being a minister, Park was an amateur painter, poet and composer. His last ministry was in St Andrews where his pastoral duties weren't allowed to inhibit his musical pleasures. Park was of a gentle, retiring disposition; and his parishioners were content with his quiet private ways - which were only broken by his playing discords on the piano when he ran into theological difficulties composing his sermons. This is his "Sea Song", with its dream of secluded wedded bliss.

John Park – Sea Song

Susan Hamilton, soprano David McGuinness, piano

BBC recording

JP: Susan Hamilton sang John Park's Sea Song. Secluded Park may have been, but wedded bliss was not to be his, for he never married. His life was tinged with some hidden sadness which no one could get him to reveal. My guess is that the one he loved died young. That sadness is in many of his songs, not least in Village Bells. Though the bells ring more cheerfully at the end, it's only to bring happiness to the soul of a loved one buried nearby. Here's Jamie MacDougall.

John Park - Village Bells

Jamie MacDougall, tenor David McGuinness, piano

BBC recording

JP: Village Bells by John Park. This next song is a setting of Walter Scott's "Yes, thou may'st sigh." It's an acceptance of death as an end of human ill and, like many of Park's songs, its simplicity is deceptive and it has a way of lingering in the mind.

John Park - Yes, Thou May'st Sigh

Susan Hamilton, soprano David McGuinness, piano

BBC recording

JP: Susan Hamilton with John Park's "Yes, thou may'st sigh". There are many hints of sorrows in Park's songs, but he died as good a musician's death as one could wish for. It was in St Andrews in 1865, and he'd just been listening to Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" declaring 'Is this not glorious!' when he was taken with a paralytic seizure. His last words to his physician were 'Is not this death?' in which supposition he was correct.

Handel - Hallelujah Chorus (Messiah)

Royal Choral Society, Royal Albert Hall Orchestra/Malcolm Sargent (1926)

CD A Collector's Messiah

Koch 3-7703-2Y6X2 CD2 Track 12