Nicola Benedetti explores her Scottish roots in an album combining the traditions of classical and Scottish folk music

Nicola Benedetti’s new album on Decca Classics is deeply personal as she presents music of her native Scotland. There is no better way to highlight this personal journey than through the words of Nicola herself. Here she talks in more detail about Homecoming: A Scottish Fantasy.

Comprising three parts, this album brings together two musical traditions, classical and Scottish folk; worlds that have for centuries, co-existed but rarely been recorded alongside one another. At the very heart of the album is Bruch’s Scottish Fantasy, a work that brilliantly captures Scotland’s folklore, landscape and people. Bruch’s usage of traditional Scottish tunes including those of Robert Burns, the ‘People’s Poet’ of Scotland provides a thread to Burns’ three songs arranged for violin and orchestra. The album ends with music that has inspired both Bruch and Burns; that of Scottish folk music, and includes a collaboration with some of Scotland’s most esteemed folk musicians; Phil Cunningham, Julie Fowlis and Aly Bain.

Bruch’s Scottish Fantasy

The use of folk song in classical music has survived innumerable changes in social, philosophical and compositional trends. Musicians have faithfully returned to its wholesomeness again and again, often utilising entire melodies or striving to capture the nuanced style of playing on paper. The German composer Max Bruch (1838–1920) looked to Scotland’s own for inspiration in creating his Scottish Fantasy, a work in four movements for violin and orchestra. For someone who has never visited Scotland, Bruch’s exploration of the landscape during this introduction is astonishingly clear. The solo violin line beckons the listener to join a journey through brooding terrain and heavy weather – rising and falling, wild and tumultuous. But with the sweet emergence of “Auld Rob Morris”, a bonnie Robert Burns tune, Bruch moves away from the land and onto the folklore of the Scottish people, and it is this which continues to take centre stage for much of the work. The second movement opens with a declaration of roughness and realness played by the orchestra. The solo violin enters with a convincing interpretation of “Dusty Miller” — euphoric, uplifting and virtuosic. The care and tenderness with which Bruch encases “I’m A-Doun for Lack of Johnnie” in the third movement reveals his true adoration for folk song in all its purity and simplicity. The final movement, based on “Hey Tutti Tati”, which Burns later adapted into “Scots, Wha Hae”, is a very challenging set of variations, appropriately written on a theme in the spirit of battle: the Battle of Bannockburn to be precise, one that proved to be quite successful for the Scots.

Robert Burns
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Robert Burns was born in 1759 in Ayrshire, the country where I was born and raised and my connection with the poet is very strong. As a child, I sang his songs and my mother grew up in a cottage down the road from one of his numerous homes. I recall the fear and ongoing nightmares brought on by his thrilling poem ‘Tam O’Shanter’. In paying tribute to Burns, I have recorded three of his most loved songs: Ae Fond Kiss; My Love is Like a Red Red Rose and Auld Lang Syne. These traditional melodies have been interpreted in all kinds of ways but it is believed this is the first time they have been arranged for violin and orchestra. Ae Fond Kiss, the first love song, is characterised by the passion and turmoil Burns felt in his painful relationship with “Clarinda” — Mrs Agnes (Nancy) McLehose. The second song, My Love is Like a Red Red Rose, is a euphoric declaration of how positive love — a state in which the ever amorous Burns very often found himself — can be. Auld Lang Syne is Burns’ best-known song — sung every year around the world on New Year’s Eve. But here, for solo violin, it is given in its original version — a far more subtle, sweet and contemplative ode to remembrance and nostalgia. I commissioned the orchestral arrangements from the Irish composer and orchestrator Paul Campbell, who has a natural love and understanding of Celtic music. Auld Lang Syne was arranged by the young pianist and conductor, Petr Limonov.

Folk Collaborations

In Scotland it is impossible to ignore folk music. Scots are fiercely proud of it, and many still love dancing and listening to it. The importance of the violin in Scottish music is undisputed — a folk band is incomplete without one, fiddle tunes make up an enormous body of reels and jigs, and the violin is a primary exponent of the intensely soulful yet rarely indulgent slow airs. My own violinistic path didn’t bring me closer to the Scottish tradition. In pursuing a classical education, I was encouraged to avoid mixing styles because the physical techniques required are so different. This collaboration gave me the opportunity to face the challenges of playing Scottish traditional music with some of Scotland’s most esteemed folk musicians: Phil Cunningham, Aly Bain and Julie Fowlis.

With Phil, Aly and Julie’s help and patience, I came a little way towards finding my own place within Scottish folk music. In trying to understand the rhythmic, stylistic and interpretational differences, I felt a disorienting shift in both my mental and physical state. The question quickly became ‘How far down this road do I go?’ I came to the same conclusion as when trying to find my way in the minefield of options in interpreting Baroque music: try it all, research as much as possible, and settle on where your voice lies most comfortably. The classical and folk story is one of endless collaboration and crossover, shared material and playing techniques. Our education categorises and separates traditions that were never that far apart. The more connections of this nature I discovered, the freer I felt to take liberties.

The idea of liberation inspired the idea of adding a cadenza to one of James Scott Skinner’s tunes “The Hurricane”. Skinner, born in 1843, studied classical violin with the French maestro Charles Rougier, played in orchestras and also worked as a dance master. He embraced all styles and
integrated these discoveries into his own compositions such as “Dean Brig o’ Edinburgh” and “Banks Hornpipe”.

The music of Phil Cunningham features strongly on the album, and it was an honour to record Aberlady – named after the town the entire band stayed in during the recording The Gentle Light that Wakes Me and Hogties with the man himself.

This tribute to Scottish music would have felt incomplete without representing the Gaelic language and culture. Gaelic was the predominant language of Scotland until the end of the 11th century. By the later middle age, it had retreated to the Highlands and Hebrides, which maintained some degree of independence within the Scottish state. The number of Gaelic speakers today is estimated at just 58,000. “Coisich a ruin” is a waulking song: music that accompanied the practice of waulking cloth (beating newly woven cloth against a table to soften it) by groups of women.

The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond’ is one of Scotland's most loved tunes. First published in 1841, this tune has inspired many interpretations from composers and performers over the years. Paul Campbell’s arrangement glides through a variety of guises and upholds the versatility of “The Bonnie Banks”. From melancholy to heroic pride, from a rough and ready 6/8 reel to classical virtuosity, before returning for one last “goodbye”.

Homecoming: A Scottish Fantasy

UK Release date 7 July 2014

BRUCH: Scottish Fantasy

BURNS Arr Campbell: Ae Fond Kiss
BURNS Arr. Limonov: Auld Lang Syne
BURNS Arr Campbell: My Love is Like a Red Red Rose

Nicola Benedetti (violin)
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Rory MacDonald

Composed Skinner Arr Benedetti/Doorley: Hurricane Set
Composed Skinner arranged Benedetti/Cunningham: The Dean Brig O Edinburgh Trad arr
Benedetti/Cunningham The Banks Hornpipe
Composed Cunningham: Aberlady
Mouth music and tunes set: Trad Arr Fowlis/Cunningham: Bothan a bh’ aig Fionnghuala (Fionnghuala’s Bothy), Composed Cunningham/MacDonald: The Appropriate Dipstick, Trad Arr Fowlis/Cunningham: Meal do bhrógan / Praise your shoes, Composed Cunningham: Hogties
Composed Cunningham: The Gentle Light that wakes me
TRAD Arr Fowlis/Benedetti/Doorley: Coisich a Rùin (Walk my beloved)

Nicola Benedetti (fiddle)
Éamon Doorley (bouzouki)
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Tony Byrne (guitar)
Ewen Vernal (double bass)
Phil Cunningham (accordion)
Julie Fowlis (vocals)
Aly Bain, Duncan Chisholm (fiddle)
James Macintosh (percussion)
Michael Goldrick (flute)

TRAD Arr Campbell: Loch Lomond
Nicola Benedetti (violin)
BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Rory MacDonald

***Bonus Digital Download
TRAD Arr. Campbell: Ashokan Farewell
TRAD Arr Fowlis/Cunningham: Chan e caoidh Mhic Shiridh

For further press information please contact:
Decca Classics
Caroline Crick
Tel: +44(0)7799 748169 | Email: Caroline.Crick@umusic.com

Rebecca Driver Media Relations
Rebecca Driver
Tel: +44(0)2072471894
Email: rebecca@rdmr.co.uk | isobel@rdmr.co.uk