

CELTIC CONNECTIONS

(Review article written by SUE WILSON in the SUNDAY HERALD/LIFE, PAGES 8 and 9. Published 18.01.15)

Musical map to Fair Isle folklore knits together threads from an island's life.

INGE THOMSON BRINGS A PERSONAL TOUCH TO HER CELTIC CONNECTIONS SHOW, DA FISHING HANDS. BY SUE WILSON

It's the kind of Celtic Connections show – tucked away towards the back of the 80-page programme; staged in the intimate, 230-seater Tron Theatre – that could easily be overlooked amid such a massive, multifarious festival. Yet as a hugely heartening illustration (or microcosm) of Scotland's current cultural vigour, Inge Thomson's exquisitely beautiful, densely resonant creation Da Fishing Hands – a mesmerising song-based tapestry of acoustic and electronic elements – could hardly be bettered.

Its title comes from the unique maritime lore of Thomson's native Fair Isle, the UK's most remote inhabited island, midway between Shetland and Orkney. Roughly three miles long and half as wide, its currently home to around 70. Over the many centuries when its inshore fish stocks were plentiful and absolutely central to its economy, Fair Isle crofters' minute knowledge of its rugged landscape, undersea topography, weather patterns and fish behaviour enabled them to target the best catch via an intricate series of triangulation points – sea-stacks, outcrops, buildings – around the coastline.

As explained online by the Fair Isle Marine Environment and Tourism Initiative (FIMETI) – who originally commissioned Thomson to create the piece – Da Fishing Hands – “consist of phrases usually indicating an alignment of two sets of landmarks, taking the boat to the exact position required, time and time again. The landmarks must be visible in various sea and weather conditions, and include rocs, cliffs and man-made features.”

FIMETI was founded in 1995, and four years later undertook to transcribe this collective mental cartography, passed down orally over numberless generations (people have lived on Fair Isle for at least 5,000 years), into an actual map.

“As the catch had declined over the years,” Thomson explains, “and there was no more commercial fishing off the island, all this incredibly detailed knowledge was just kind of disappearing. The maps of the hands are a way of preserving that store of information, because it tells us so much about our whole maritime ecology, but they're also really beautiful: all these zig-zagging lines clustered around the isle, linking up the orientation points, and the contours of the sea-bed underneath – how deep the trenches go; how rocky it is, so you're not going to lose your line on the bottom.”

Upon viewing the maps again on a visit home in 2012, Thomson says “I had the idea of creating a piece of music using the maps as a geographic score: that was the starting point. I talked to a few people about it over the next while, and gradually realised that behind these maps, which I'd been thinking about visually and musically, there was a much bigger picture. People had been gathering

this kind of information for a long time, putting in years and years of work and research, to make the case for an MPA – Marine Protected Area – around the island, which is FIMETI’s main goal. And then behind that there’s the whole issue of climate change tied in as well.

“So with the MPA campaign going on, I spoke to my cousin Lise Sinclair, about making some music that explored or represented more of the cultural side of things: the sort of changes people had experienced since they’d lived on Fair Isle, things that had gone and what they missed – the human dimension to all the science and statistics. The two of us started interviewing people, swapping ideas for tunes and lyrics. And then we lost Lise.”

A gifted poet, singer and songwriter – who also taught music in the island’s school, edited its newspaper, ran the choir and played organ in the chapel – Sinclair was known internationally as one of Fair Isle’s leading cultural ambassadors. Diagnosed with a brain tumour in April 2013, she died just four months later, leaving Thomson with her very last writings – lyrics for three songs, in various stages of completion.

“At first I thought that was the end of it, I just couldn’t imagine doing it without her,” Thomson says. “But then three weeks later I was invited on one of the Cape Farewell journeys, when they visit the North Isles. So I joined the boat and went with them to Fair Isle, bang in the middle of grieving – and, oh my goodness, what a life-changing experience it was.

“I was on a late watch when we got there: the weather was really coarse, so we couldn’t land, and I just stood at the front of the boat for those four hours looking at the island, seeing the lighthouse, thinking ‘That’s my home’. And something just cleared, or got banged out of me; it was just this massive revelatory, emotional, powerful thing. I stayed a few days after the boat left, and was speaking to my Auntie Anne, Lise’s mum, about carrying on the project, and she said, ‘I don’t think you should do it – I think that it’s actually essential that you do it.’ Which kind of made the decision for me.”

It didn’t make carrying it through easy, though. “There were some really hard moments,” Thomson continues. “Lise had finished the lyrics to one song, for instance, and she also had a tune for it – but she never wrote it down, I never heard it. She took it with her. I knew it was really important for this song to be part of the set; its words were the ones I got the most comfort from. But trying to find a tune for it, all the time feeling that no tune I came up with could possibly be right – that took a wee bit of work.”

These labour pains in delivering Da Fishing Hands were further eased by the Cape Farewell organisation, which brings artists and scientists together, seeking creative joint responses to climate change. They arranged a few days’ getaway for Thomson to write at Cove Park, the Argyll artists’ retreat overlooking Loch Long.

“With two young kids, and a husband who’s away a lot of the time, that total head-clearing space was just fantastic,” says Thomson, who is married to Lau accordionist Martin Green, and does her own fair share of travelling as a linchpin of Karen Polwart’s band. The project has also been supported by Creative Scotland and Shetland Arts as well as FIMETI, with a live album version, recorded at Shetland’s state-of-the art music venue Mareel, available now from Thomson’s website (www.ingethomson.com).

“The interview material it’s based on came from folk I had known all my life, including extended family,” Thomson says, “but when we got them talking about how life had changed on the isle, they kept coming out with all these magical little gems. There are quite a few pretty direct quotes among the lyrics. “The song Snowstorm comes from someone telling me about when she first moved to the island in early 1981: as you came in on the plane, you’d get these huge flocks of kittiwakes and turricks (Arctic terns) taking off from the cliffs. She said it was just like being inside a snow-globe – that doesn’t happen anymore. Or there’s an instrumental piece, Dark Stacks, about how the cliffs used to really stand out when you approached by boat, because they were so white with guano – and now they’re not, they’re dark.”

As these examples highlight, changes in seabird numbers, together with fish stocks, have been intrinsic to Fair Isle’s fortunes over recent decades. As commercial fishing dwindled, during the 1970’s and 1980’s, the local sand-eel population multiplied, feeding a major and long-term expansion of seabird colonies.

“Some birds, like guillemots and puffins, can live for 30 or 35 years; they mate for life, and they always come back to the same place to breed,” Thomson explains. “So once a colony’s established, it’s there for a long time.”

It was this period that consolidated Fair Isle’s now-central business of environmental tourism, around the hub of its custom-built, internationally renowned Bird Observatory. In turn, increased visitor numbers expanded the market for traditional crafts like the iconic local knitting – all further highlighting the complex interplay of factors within the island’s marine and human ecology.

More recently, however, bird populations have dramatically declined once more. “The year before last, just one solitary male black guillemot came back it was totally heartbreaking,” Thomson says. But then last year bird numbers were up a bit, which is encouraging. But we just don’t know enough about why it’s happening, which is the key reason for Fair Isle to be granted an MPA: its such a rich little microcosm to study so many aspects of these questions.”

Meanwhile, Da Fishing Hands constitutes its own marvellously rich and rewarding microcosm, of an island’s and its islanders’ interwoven stories; of the vision, sophistication, ambition and musicianship currently at work among Scotland’s folk community; of brand-new folk music that’s as completely rooted in its social and environmental context as the most ancient traditional ballad. And lastly, the alchemical art that can transform the seemingly tiniest particular into the grandly universal.

Inge Thomson’s Da Fishing Hands is performed at the Tron Theatre Glasgow on January 23, as part of Celtic Connections. Inge Thomson also plays solo as part of the festival’s Hazy recollections on February 1 at O2 ABC. Da Fishing Hands (featuring Sarah Hayes, Fraser Fifeild, Steven Polwart and Graeme Smillie) is available on CD from www.ingethomson.com, priced £10.99.