



CELTIC CONNECTIONS 2009: HALLAIG – A CELEBRATION OF SORLEY MACLEAN (City Halls, Glasgow, 18 January 2009)

Stuart MacRae (photo - Chris MacRae)

JENNIE MACFIE salutes a successful tribute to the work of Sorley Maclean

REMINISCING about the late Raasay poet, Sorley Maclean, who she first met on the sidelines of a shinty match in Portree, compere Mary Ann Kennedy said that he became a poet because unlike everyone else in his family, he could not sing.

Anyone who has heard the richly sonorous, confidently drawling tones will know that Maclean, though not singing as such, used his speaking voice as a musical instrument of rare subtlety and precision. Which is why it works so well alongside the music of Capercaillie, Martyn Bennett or Aidan O'Rourke, whose new *An Tobar* is only the latest of many albums to incorporate recordings of that inimitable voice declaiming his own works.

Hallaig – A Celebration was conceived and midwived by the tireless Kenneth Thomson, who last year notched up 25 years at the helm as conductor of the Glasgow Gaelic Musical Association, and is a devotee of Gaelic arts in general and Sorley Maclean's work in particular. He had commissioned, co-opted and coerced an impressive array of performing, arranging and composing talents to create this celebration of all things Sorley.

“No words can be put on beauty,” as the poet himself said, writing of dawn over Applecross as seen from Raasay, but it is the reviewer's duty, as much as the artist's, to try. On the City Halls' stage were names to conjure with – Christine Hanson, Gordon Gunn, Dougie Pincock and Bryan McAlpine among them, all playing at the top of their bent.

The choirs, both Thomson's own GGs (the Glasgow Gaelic Musical Association) and the enchanting Islay Junior Gaelic Choir, enthusiastically led by Jane McQueen, were first rate, particularly the former on a beautiful setting by Eilidh Mackenzie with a diverse, richly textured palette of humming and vocal percussion.

Thomson himself is a highly skilled arranger of works for the voice, and his spirited conducting, particularly on 'The Dawn', elicited an astonishing range of tonal light and shade. Soloists, including Kirsteen MacDonald and Alasdair Whyte from Mull, were consistently impressive and I was particularly charmed by Mary Ann Kennedy's own 'Traighean', a tone poem for piano, fiddle and voice that recalled Britten's *Sea Interludes*, and incorporated another lovely performance by James Graham.

But the eponymous commission by Stuart Macrae was not only the centrepiece but also the highlight of the evening. Clarsach, fiddle, and cello were conducted by the Inverness-born composer, while Kenneth Thomson conducted his choir and the end result was a wee bit of a triumph. Gaelic music in recent decades has fused happily with anything from headbanging techno to African drumming but this was a piece which would – and should – find its way into the mainstream classical repertoire.