

Reviews

MUSIC
AWAY WITH THE
BIRDS/AIR FALBH LEIS
NA H-EÒIN
ISLE OF CANNA
★★★★

PRODUCING any kind of outdoor performance in Scotland requires considerable boldness, a factor much multiplied when it's taking place in the Hebrides, as summer tilts towards autumn, and most of your audience is required to undertake a five-hour return ferry crossing. But the fates and the elements – abetted, it would seem, by some highly effective marketing – conspired to smile upon Scottish-based musician and artist Hanna Tuulikki's *Away with the birds/Air falbh leis na h-eòin*, the final fruit of the Scotland-wide Culture 2014 programme that's complemented the Commonwealth Games.

Over its two-day run, some 200 people – around ten times the resident population – made the trip to Canna, westernmost of the four Small Isles south of Skye, to be utterly enthralled as Tuulikki and her nine fellow performers (together with sound designer Iain Thompson) wove vocal and sonic magic amid the magnificent setting of the island's harbour.

In its earlier stages, Tuulikki's creation arose from the Sea Change project, a partnership between Cape Farewell, which brings together international cultural and scientific practitioners to address climate change, and the Cove Park artists' community in Ayrshire. Sea Change saw a boatload of said creatives and scientists exploring Scotland's islands for a month, from Skye to St Kilda, their brief being "to consider

the relationships between people, places and resources", informed both by the history of the places they visited, and the present-day examples they found of adaptation, resilience and stewardship.

Alongside its natural splendours, including many rare flora and fauna, Canna's resources include the unique treasure-trove of Gaelic song and folklore held at Canna House, collected by John Lorne Campbell, who bought the island in 1938 and remained its chief steward until gifting it to the National Trust in 1981, and his American-born wife Margaret Fay Shaw.

Gaelic song, particularly its most ancient element (like that of many time-misted vocal traditions) of mimicking birds songs and calls, lies at the heart of Tuulikki's piece, with nuggets of melody and lyrics from the Canna collection

interwoven through her otherworldly composite score, together with other venerable Gaelic fragments and original material derived from group improvisation and her own imaginative response to the landscape.

We were led to the harbour from the tree-enclosed garden of Canna House, to find the performers lined up facing us, ankle-deep in the sea, either side of an old stone jetty, newly extended outwards by a forked wooden platform, and with six conical loudspeakers protruding on poles from the water behind them, plus more speakers among the seaweed closer inshore. Even the usual process of an audience settling and quietening was powerfully magnified as the scale and depth of the Hebridean silence

– broken only by real-life bird calls – made itself apparent.

Then the sounds of birds and lapping or surging water grew louder as Tuulikki's pre-recorded soundscape began, panning between the different sound outlets – and then came the voices, swelling and ebbing, contrasting and harmonising, calling and responding, as the singers shifted and regrouped between sections of the piece, gradually advancing towards us.

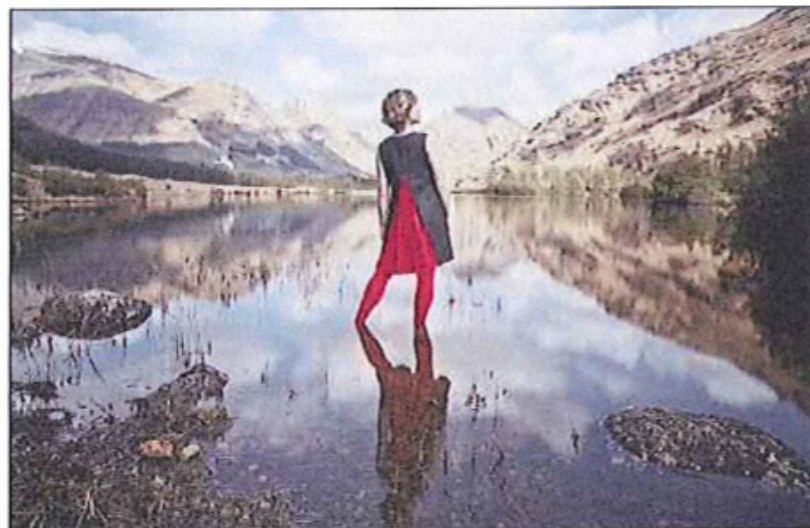
Many passages both explored and exquisitely drew out the likeness and overlap between bird and human song, and implicitly their respective social functions, while others, eerily spinetingling called to mind the realm of faerie music and fatal sirens, as well as the life/death borderline emblematised by the

land/sea margin and its folkloric representative the redshank, which the singers' costumes were designed to resemble.

And besides the unforgettably captivating spell cast by the performance itself, it also beautifully embodied the wider project objectives from which it emerged – 200 visitors to Canna, for a stunningly high-quality event that literally grew from the island itself, substantially staffed and crewed by the local community, will have represented a major fillip to its fragile economy, in the process of evoking and celebrating its precious natural and human ecology.

SUE WILSON

Seen on 30.08.14



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