

A close-up portrait of Sally Beamish, a woman with shoulder-length wavy brown hair and blue eyes, resting her chin on her hand and wearing a dark grey knitted sweater. The background is softly blurred, showing a bookshelf and a window.

# *Making it* **HAPPEN**

*There is an increasing trend among composers to make things happen by creating their own opportunities, and no one better typifies the approach than former freelance viola player Sally Beamish. She talks to **Andrew Stewart***



Two decades ago, with help from an Arts Council bursary and the support of her cellist husband, Sally Beamish cut loose from life as a freelance London orchestral musician to become a full-time composer. The decision was hastened when someone stole her viola and a move to Scotland sealed the change, one that certainly turned out for the better. Details of her translation from busy viola player to even busier composer will no doubt differ from those of other successful colleagues. Yet there appears to be a pattern or at least some consistent theme at play among her generation of composers, those who, often out of necessity, have made things happen by creating opportunities for new work.

Beamish, who only recently signed her first publishing deal, has built a formidable catalogue rich in collaborations, co-commissions and invaluable partnerships. Any composer waiting for the call from a grand publishing house might profitably fill the time by studying the way she has developed and sustained her career. 'In many ways, I've been lucky,' she says, adding that part of her good fortune derives from secure and lasting relationships with individual players and ensembles. It also rests on the committed private patronage of retired scientist Gerry Mattock and his partner Beryl Calver-Jones.

'Gerry heard one of my pieces on the radio and phoned up because of it,' Beamish recalls. 'It all began with him wanting a piece for his 70th birthday. I think they've commissioned seven or eight compositions, including orchestral and chamber works, the piece I'm working on now for the Cheltenham Festival, and several other things.' In return, Mattock received a new Beamish score as an 80th birthday present. The composer notes how Mattock and Calver-Jones, her close friends as well as sponsors, have provided ideas for new pieces or suggestions that have shaped others. Thanks to another radio broadcast, they heard actor Samuel West talking about his passion for working with musicians. 'They contacted him to see if he'd do something with me, and that's how my new Cheltenham piece with him, *The Seven Deadly Sins*, came into being. That's an

ideal relationship: Gerry and Beryl are like my musical parents.'

Until she signed with the small independent firm, Norsk Musikforlag, Beamish operated without a publisher and effectively worked as her own agent. 'Having a publisher, especially one that's very clearly focused, means you feel supported and that you're not so alone,' she observes. 'Before that, though, I really had to make connections for myself. You have to be quite organised, and not all composers are like that. The Scottish Music Information Centre was an incredible support. They operated like a publisher, keeping my scores, sending them out to people and working like a hire library. So long as I was organised in getting things to them, everything was fine.'

Beamish, largely self-taught in composition, recalls a fortunate meeting in the mid 1980s with oboist Gregor Zubicky at the Prussia Cove International Musicians Seminar. She was there as a viola player. Their musical interests and instincts overlapped, so much so that Zubicky commissioned her to write a chamber piece for his ensemble. 'That relationship continued when Gregor became artistic manager of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra. He had the idea of me being the orchestra's composer-in-residence. When he was told they couldn't have a British composer, he got round it by arranging for a Swedish composer to be resident with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra and for me to work with his orchestra. It was visionary thinking.' Beamish delivered a string of quality works during her four-year residency to match the smartness of Zubicky's management strategy, her second viola concerto for Tabeta Zimmerman and her saxophone concerto, *The Imagined Sound of Sun on Stone*, significant among them.

The composer's Swedish connections expanded when Robert von Bahr's BIS label chose to invest heavily in recording her work. Four all-Beamish titles have appeared to date, while her flute concerto, *Spellbound*, and two string quartets are also part of the discography. Her chamber concerto, written for the Raschèr Saxophone Quartet and the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra and jointly commissioned by the Scottish, Stuttgart and Norbotten



Chamber Orchestras, was recorded last October. 'It's been an amazing relationship with BIS, almost like a fairytale for me,' says Beamish. Glowing reviews and the independent record company's global reach have certainly helped raise the composer's international profile, which has risen steadily since her first BIS release in September 1999.

'The saxophone quartet piece we've just recorded for BIS also shows the positive value of co-commissioning, where you see the build up of a relationship between orchestras and the sharing of new ideas. The relationship I started with the Swedish and Scottish Chamber Orchestras has continued with other composers, such as Karin Rehnqvist and Brett Dean, which is a lovely thing to see happening. You feel a sense of these off-shoots growing and continuing. With co-commissioning, you know there will be two or three performances straight away and other possibilities for the piece to go further. It simply makes sense.'

The same, she adds, goes for composers meeting and talking with players whenever their works are performed. 'I think they appreciate that I know what it's like to be a player and trust me to write for them because of that. I also know what it's like to experience that sinking feeling when another brown envelope arrives with something that's just so difficult and unrewarding to learn. It's very important to me that a piece, even if it's difficult, should feel good and be satisfying to play. There has to be something about it that grabs the performer's attention.'

Above all, Beamish is open to suggestions for new work from players.

'They need to feel they can communicate with you and that you're sensitive to them as musicians. We'd be silent as composers if it wasn't for them. I suppose that having been in an orchestra, I know how important it is to establish a connection with the composer of new works. Musicians often come to me with ideas, and I respond to that.' She recalls how Mark Padmore and Roger Vignoles approached her in 2006 in search of new songs for a commission from Leeds Lieder. The proposal presented the composer with an opportunity to set Jila Peacock's 'shape poem' calligraphic representations of words by the 14th-century Persian metaphysical poet, Divan e Hafez, distinguished by their blend of the spiritual and the sensual.

As so often in Beamish's career, one strand of work led to another. She turned again to Peacock's Hafez texts as the foundation for *The Lion and the Deer*, commissioned by Portsmouth Grammar School as part of its series of works for Remembrance Sunday. 'I'm a Quaker and was worried about the idea of the Glorious Dead. But then I thought about Hafez and his theme of enduring love. I am not a politician, but I can write music that encourages people to think and ask questions. That's all I can hope to do.' Portsmouth Grammar's pupils contributed to the text, inventing haikus on war and conflict that were woven into the work's fabric and read by them in performance. 'The juxtaposition of the children's thoughts and these love lyrics really made it into a work about peace.'

Michael Chance, who sang in the premiere performance and recording of *The Lion and the Deer*, subsequently asked for a version of the work for countertenor and viol consort Fretwork; likewise, Nicholas Daniel has requested a version for oboe and strings. Two of the Hafez Songs have now been arranged for the Branford Marsalis Quartet by its eponymous leader, for whom Beamish recently rescored her *Under the Wing of the Rock*. 'I'm also doing a piece based on *The Lion and the Deer* for the Isle of Purbeck Strings, an amateur ensemble,' adds Beamish. 'They wanted something for amateur strings of all levels with a professional string quartet and parts for harp and solo viola. The Portsmouth commission has spun off in so many different directions.' James Gilchrist is set to perform Beamish's Hafez songs at the Presteigne Festival in August, with the Purbeck string piece, *Rhapsody*, in the diary for 15 March.

The composer's year will also be shaped by work on *The Seven Deadly Sins*, based on Langland's allegorical poem *Piers Plowman*; a new choral work for St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh, and a cello concerto for Robert Cohen and the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra. She is also sketching ideas for a second musical, which appears well set for a production. Beamish plunged into the genre in 2006 with *Senachie*, a stage musical for ten adults and 25 children written for the Forest Theatre Group in her home village near Stirling. 'I approached them with the idea of writing a musical and they went for it,' she explains. 'None of them read music and had to learn some quite difficult stuff. That was very exciting and rewarding for me, to see people explore something different, something they couldn't learn from watching a DVD of a standard musical. For me, starting at home is the best place to capture people's interest in what composers do. It's easier to do that as a composer living in a rural community.'

Beamish clearly enjoyed the possibilities of working within walking distance of home. In addition to attending *Senachie* rehearsals, she also led workshops in the local primary school and is eager to do more of the same. Writing an evening-long musical, she observes, is both demanding and time consuming. 'I'm embracing the genre, which is such fun! And I've learnt so much about dramatic pacing.'

While the deadline clock ticked on a Cheltenham Festival accordion concerto commission, Beamish recalls how she became totally absorbed by her village musical. 'I kept not doing the concerto, which got closer

and closer to the delivery date. In the end, with very little time left to write it, I sat down and the music just jumped on to the page. I'm sure that was because I was working on this other genre and learning new skills of pacing, drama and emotional expression. You really have to think about communicating in a musical. If people go to a new opera and don't get it, they usually think it's their fault; if they go to a new music and don't get it, they'll usually ask for their money back. They know whose fault it is!'

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For Beamish, communicating through conventional forms has grown in importance. Her language, meanwhile, remains refreshingly eclectic in its influences and wonderfully subversive of rigid convention. She recalls hearing a poet speaking on the radio about the liberating creative effects of formal structures. 'She compared it to corsetry,' says Beamish before dissolving into laughter. 'It sounds like the Ann Summers School! I come back to the established forms more and more, because they allow you to be much freer and, I think, so much more exciting than when you're simply cut adrift without any boundaries. There's nothing more exciting than knowing what you're trying to do; if you're simply floundering it's hopeless and depressing.'

The business of creating clear structures and playing within them could serve as a metaphor for Sally Beamish's whole approach to composition. It definitely carried her to new creative territory in her chamber concerto for the Raschèr Saxophone Quartet and string band. The work, she explains, is closely modelled on Bach *Brandenburg Concertos*: the first movement has the same number of bars as *Brandenburg Four*, the second movement has a bass line quote from *Brandenburg Six*, and so on. 'The idea of writing for a saxophone quartet and string orchestra suddenly said "*Brandenburg*" to me. The possibilities of concertante and ripieno fascinated me and I had great fun playing with it. I'd never done anything like that before and was quite nervous about it. Much of my music is inspired by visual images and poetry; this was an academic exercise. It was so good for me – I wish I'd done it earlier. I guess I would have done if I'd studied composition!'

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