

Pan (British Flute Society Magazine)

“Creating Sparks”

Flautist Emily Beynon has been chosen as one of a “New generation” of artists and is currently having a new work written for her by composer John Woolrich. Matthew Studdert-Kennedy profiles the personality and career of this committed, talented flautist.

Emily Beynon’s flute playing is fast becoming familiar to the listening public. There are an increasing number of recordings to her name, recital appearances throughout Britain and regular broadcasts for the BBC under the auspices of the Radio 3 New Generation Artists scheme. You may have heard, for instance, radio performances earlier this year of Prokofiev’s Sonata and Dutilleux’s Sonatine with pianist Andrew West and of Jolivet’s Flute Concerto with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.

The New Generation scheme “gives the selected musicians intensive BBC coverage and opportunities to work with the BBC orchestras” Emily tells me. Though she is not entirely sure how she was chosen for the opportunity. “I did an audition for the BBC when I was still a student at the Royal Academy of Music and they invited me to do a studio recital. Then I performed for them with my sister (harpist Catherine Beynon) as part of the Young Artists Forum and then suddenly I was a New Generation Artist. So its nice when things fall in your lap!”

However, my impression is that rather than waiting for things to fall her way, Emily is someone who makes them happen. After studying at the Royal Academy of Music with William Bennett and then in Paris with Alain Marion, she spent short periods with Glyndbourne Touring Opera and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales. From the age of 25, Emily has been principal flute with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw orchestra while returning regularly to Britain for recitals and for the various BBC projects.

The latest of these involves a new work by John Woorich that has been commissioned for her jointly by the BBC and the Royal Philharmonic Society. This is one of a series of commissions pairing up established composers with outstanding young instrumentalists and chamber music ensembles. Hopefully, these commissions will make some valuable new contributions to the chamber music repertoire.

“I was thrilled when I found out who the composer was as I knew he wrote a lot for the voice and in my experience, composers who write well for the voice also write well for the flute. I have made a lot of transcriptions for the flute of music that was originally written for the voice.”

The new work, Darker Still, will receive its world premier in a public broadcast recital from Manchester on 22 February in a programme devoted to British music. Commissioning and premiering new work is all very well but in Emily’s view, “we have to think harder about how commissioning can involve more than one performance, so as to establish a piece. Concert promoters get very excited by the prospect of a premier but first performances are notoriously unreliable, not in the sense that players don’t perform well, but that pieces change mysteriously between performances. You have to live with the work, to get it into your bloodstream, and that doesn’t happen after only one performance.”

There is also a concert of more familiar music planned for a lunchtime recital at the Purcell Room in May including Emily’s own transcription of Beethoven’s Spring Sonata and Trios by Weber and Martinu with cellist Paul Watkins and pianist Andrew West.

Despite these regular high profile recital engagements, Emily’s principal concern is as an orchestral flute player. In 1995 this occupation took her from Wales to The Netherlands for a position in one of Europe’s finest symphony orchestras. And Emily wasn’t the only one to go to Holland. “Funnily enough my last week at the BBC Welsh was conducted by Mariss Jansons and my first week, ten days later, at the Concertgebouw was also conducted by Mariss Jansons” who is one of her, and the orchestra’s favourite maestro’s. “Haitink is also amazing to work for. And Harnoncourt - the way he analyses music, pulling it apart and putting it together again is fantastic.”

Playing in the Concertgebouw, with an exciting line up of top conductors and soloists, was not, however, entirely without obstacles. Pitch in Holland, for instance, is at A442 (someone once said ‘somewhere between England and Germany’) but Emily did not immediately invest in a new flute that would compensate for this.

Going Dutch

Until recently, she has continued to play her Louis Lot with a Lafin headjoint. "It took me at least a year to learn how to play in the hall in Amsterdam. The wind can easily be late because of the huge organ behind us and we sit in an acoustically 'weak' place in the hall. So, the difference in pitch was immediately compensated for by being able to blow a bit harder. Now I play with much more diaphragm support, the embouchure has opened up and I blow a bit more freely."

Recently, with an international schedule that allows regular visits to the Altus workshop in Japan, Emily has bought a 'powder silver' Altus flute (with which she also plays a Lafin head joint) and has a 'dirty silver' Altus on order. "This is silver mixed with minute quantities of, I think, 20 other metals to make it as close as possible to the quality of silver used by Louis Lot. These flutes have a better scale, though, and are also more technically reliable than an instrument built almost 100 years ago!"

Emily first visited Japan in 1993 as a competitor (soon to become prize winner) in the Kobé International Flute Competition. She returned to the competition this year but as a member of the jury. "It was fascinating listening to so many different styles and approaches to music and to flute playing. Although it was a flute competition what I missed the most was music making. The technical level was demanded by the pieces the entrants had to choose. They were all fantastic flute players but I often missed the music."

Her own success in the competition has led to a series of engagements in Japan including what was probably the the Asian premiere of Malcolm Arnold's Flute Concerto (Op.45) at the Japanese Flute Convention in August. She was also asked to make a recording in Japan last year. "They wanted anything and everything from Bach to Bartók which gave me a real carte blanche to do what I wanted; but for myself I still wanted a link between the pieces. I always try to find, in any programme, a connection or a common theme. As a listener also, I like to have some kind of link." The CD entitled 'Pastoral' includes Takemitsu's Air, Beethoven's Spring Sonata and Doppler's Fantasie Pastorale Hongroise "which always goes down really well in Japan as it apparently sounds like a Japanese folk melody."

Emily has also recently recorded the Sonata for flute and piano by the Dutch composer Rudolf Escher (1912-1980), with Sepp Grotenhuis. It appears on a disc with the composer's cello sonata and a solo flute piece played by Thies Roorda. "The European market is very different from the Japanese one, where they like a recital disk with a broad repertoire. Europeans like to have music grouped together so it can be filed in a record shop neatly under the composer's name."

Lateral Thinking

For Hyperion, Emily has recorded concertos by John McCabe and Rutland Boughton (on discs devoted exclusively to their music) and more audaciously last year, the complete flute and piano repertoire by the group of composers who, living in Paris, became known as 'Les Six': Georges Auric; Louis Durey; Arthur Honegger; Germaine Tailleferre; Darius Milhaud and Francis Poulenc. A recording of the Poulenc sonata had been planned for some time but Emily wanted to present it in a different way. "I didn't want to do another disc of the standard French flute music so I went to Edward Blakeman at the BBC who is an encyclopaedia of flute repertoire and he came up with the idea."

Les Six were brought together towards the end of the Great War by a need to steer their activity away from the huge influences of Wagner and Debussy. But their collective identity did not last more than four years before each began to pursue more personal musical aims. The composers featured on the disc are therefore connected by their brief shared history while the music, written over a period of more than fifty years, is greatly varied.

"What I liked about the 'Les Six' idea was this link between the composers and also the diversification. It would have been a dull disk without the broad historical range and the differences in compositional style that it covers. Andrew West plays the solo piano piece 'Album des Six', the only piece on which all six composers collaborated, and that ties everything together, but in the flute repertoire you can hear the diversification. Poulenc stays romantic, Auric goes mad, Milhaud becomes influenced by jazz and so on."

Diversity seems to appeal to this flute player with such a greatly varied career. Furthermore Emily teaches students at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. But interest does not stop at music and the flute. She plans to fit in a part-time Open University degree. "I started thinking seriously about doing a degree when a friend of mine had a serious car accident. What would I do if I couldn't play any more? Flute playing has been such an enormous focus of my life for the past fourteen years and I have nothing to fall back on. I also always wonder if I would be playing the flute had I taken up my place at Cambridge rather than gone to music college."

"I decided that I wouldn't allow myself to study the flute if I didn't get a scholarship to either the Royal Academy or the Royal College of Music. There are five music colleges in London and therefore ten to fifteen flute players graduating from them each year. So you have to be one of the best in your year, if not the five previous years as well, in order to stand a chance."

We cannot doubt Emily's drive or her commitment to what she does. And this, allied to a rational and clear vision, have taken her quickly to the top of her profession. The BBC has already decided Emily represents a new generation of artist.

By Matthew Studdert-Kennedy

Matthew Studdert-Kennedy lives in Edinburgh and studies in The Hague. He is a freelance flute player and also Manager of the chamber music group, the Hebrides Ensemble. Matthew receives generous support from the Duncan Barker Foundation.