

# The Corryvreckan whirlpool puts composer Sally Beamish in a spin



David Kettle



Sally Beamish's Piano Concerto No. 2 is premiered by the BBC SCO today

It's like the No. 11 bus – I've always wanted to write a piano concerto, and then three of them come along at once." Scottish-based composer Sally Beamish sounds understandably surprised about the unexpected trio of concertos for keyboard she's been working on recently. And what's more, the collision happened purely by chance. "They were all in discussion at the same time, but of course I thought at least one of them would fall through – but then they all came to fruition."

The pianists and orchestras she's been writing for, however, have in themselves meant that Beamish's three new concertos have entirely different personalities. The First – titled *Hill Stanzas*, yet to get an airing in Scotland – was premiered last March in Amsterdam by Dutch pianist Ronald Brautigam. "He wanted something about the north-east of Scotland, because his wife comes from there and he spends a lot of time there, so I based the piece on Nan Shepherd's book *The Living Mountain*, about the Cairngorms."

But it's No. 2 that we're most interested in here. It's unveiled to the world tonight, as part of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's *Scottish Inspirations* concert celebrating new Scottish music, alongside recent works by Helen Grime, Jay Capper and Peter Maxwell Davies. And like its predecessor, it takes its inspiration from the Scottish natural world – this time, the sea.

Beamish has called it *Cauldron of the Speckled Seas*, a translation of the original Gaelic name for the Corryvreckan whirlpool, which churns and boils between the islands of Jura and Scarba. And this unusual inspiration came from the Concerto's soloist, English pianist Martin Roscoe. "Martin and I have been friends for a long while," Beamish continues. "He's a great lover of Scotland and spends a lot of time here. He wanted to take me to the Corryvreckan whirlpool in a boat – we did go right into the middle, and the boat span round and round. It was an extraordinary experience."

They even made a short film about

the trip, which is now on the BBC SSO website. It wasn't just the power of nature that left its mark on Beamish, however, but also something far more personal. "I was absolutely terrified beforehand – I told my son and he said: 'Mum, you're not going on that boat!' But in the end I took all three of my children with me. The trip was punctuated by texts from their dad saying: call the lifeboat at the first sign of danger!" What has emerged, she explains, is a concerto that's as much

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about family relationships as it is about natural wonders. "That family experience made me think about the way our lives are sometimes thrown into a kind of maelstrom, and that you actually emerge transformed from that. It felt symbolic that I'd taken my children into the whirlpool, and because my mother had also died recently, I also thought about her."

Beamish has ended up writing melodies in the final concerto to represent each of her three children, as well as an important violin theme for her mother, herself a violinist. "And I suppose the piano represents me," she admits. "It was my very

first instrument, and in a way the placement of the piano right in the middle of the stage, surrounded by the orchestra, is symbolic as well." That unusual placement also allows for what promises to be some striking musical effects – not least sending music spinning in whirlpool-like circles around the soloist. It promises to be a turbulent, memorable experience.

That leaves, of course, Beamish's Third Piano Concerto – which gets its premiere in January next year in St Paul, Minnesota. "Pianist Jonathan Biss has a project where he's commissioning a new concerto as a companion for each of the Beethoven piano concertos, so I'm writing for a Beethovenian orchestra," Beamish explains. And after focusing on the natural world in the First and Second Concertos, No. 3 – which she's titled *City Stanzas* – is an entirely urban experience. "It has a lot of influences from rock and pop, and it uses a drumkit as well – I'm sure Beethoven would have loved a drumkit in his orchestra!" We'll get the chance to judge for ourselves when the RSNO brings *City Stanzas* to Scotland next April. ■

Sally Beamish's Piano Concerto No. 2, *Cauldron of the Speckled Seas*, is premiered by Martin Roscoe (piano) and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra at the City Halls, Glasgow, today, [www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso](http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso)