

# John McLeod unleashes his inner Viking in new concerto



David Kettle

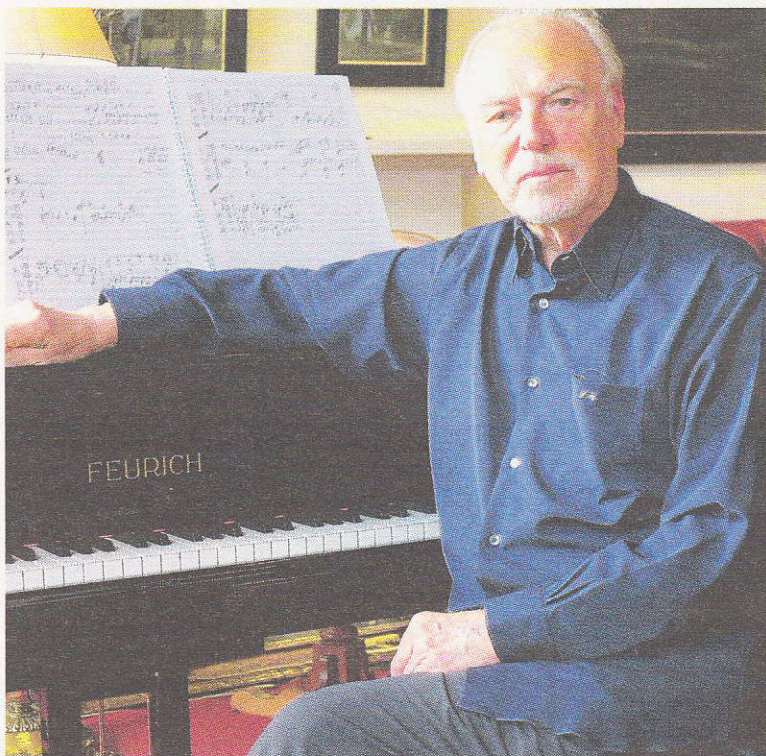
There aren't many classical pieces that owe their origins to roadworks. Head to the Scottish Chamber Orchestra's concerts on 25 and 26 October, however, and you'll hear one.

"You won't believe me, but it's absolutely true," explains its composer, Aberdeen-born, Edinburgh-based John McLeod. He's talking about his new viola concerto, *Nordic Fire*. "I was starting to write the piece about 18 months ago, and the council dug up the street outside my house, and put down five ugly splodges of tarmac outside my garage. I thought: this looks terrible... but it's also got an interesting shape. So I put five lines across it for a musical stave, and the splodges became the first five notes of the piece. I know, it's ridiculous."

It's an unlikely transformation, certainly, but it's indicative, too, of McLeod's inquisitive, perceptive mind, and the astonishing breadth of his inspirations. He has a decades-long career as one of Scotland's pre-eminent musical figures, having written for the National Youth Orchestra of Scotland and BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, as well as enjoying a long and fruitful musical relationship with percussionist Evelyn Glennie.

It was the SCO that in 2015 commissioned his striking *Out of the Silence*, an affectionate, profoundly searching tribute to Carl Nielsen, recently released on a compelling CD. And it was out of that earlier work that the new concerto itself emerged. "I happened to have a little viola solo in that piece, and when I heard it, I thought: lovely playing, lovely sound. It made me wonder about a concerto, and the SCO were very keen, so I said: OK, we'll do it."

That earlier solo was played by Jane Atkins, the SCO's principal viola, and it's for her that McLeod has written the new concerto. Indeed, he prides himself on close relationships with his performers. "I think possibly I've never written anything that hasn't been for a specific musician.



Photograph: George McBean

John McLeod usually composes with a specific musician in mind

I hope *Nordic Fire* reflects Jane's personality. She's a tremendously virtuosic player, and she's got quite an extrovert personality too. I said to her: when you come onto the platform, I want you to say: I am a viola! Take it or leave it! That's why the piece begins with a solo cadenza for her."

The work's title is a reference to the Northern Lights, which McLeod experienced as a child growing up in Aberdeen. And he arrived at

*"To me, music is life – and life is not all pleasant"*

that theme via a rather circuitous root. "The viola has a bit of a bad press. But really, it's the centre of the orchestra, and I thought: well, the centre of a person, according to Chinese thought, is qi, or life energy, and everything emanates from there. When I was in the Far East, I did a lot of tai chi and became interested in movement and body energy. I also recently discovered that my name has a Viking origin, so I started thinking about Nordic energy – which led me to the light and energy of the aurora borealis."

And to its colour, too – something McLeod is also keen to convey in the concerto. "I've got these unusual percussive effects – the timpani

player plays on the bowls rather than the skins of the drums, for example, and there are some effects from the wind and brass just breathing their rhythms rather than playing. It happens when you least expect it – just like the aurora borealis."

Now 84, does McLeod find composing has got easier as he's got older? "No, it's ten times more difficult now. That's because I like rethinking my style in everything I write, rather than just following a formula. It's always difficult finding what's going to excite me, and what's going to appeal to an audience too, because I do think of the audience when I'm composing." Gone are the days of music that's complex for complexity's sake, he feels. "As a result, audiences are often not so suspicious of new music as they were."

There's no sense of compromise about McLeod's own perspectives on his output, however. "To me, music is life – and life is not all pleasant. There's discord, happiness, complexity, incredible depths of despair, elation – it's got everything. And the kind of music I want to write – well, it has to have contrast. There's so much I want to express." ■

**Jane Atkins premieres John McLeod's *Nordic Fire* with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, 25 October and City Halls, Glasgow, 26 October**