

CLASSICAL

Essence of the sea

The grand sound of Debussy's *La Mer* has been reinterpreted by Sally Beamish for the Hebrides Ensemble – and that's not the only innovation of the group's upcoming tour, finds **David Kettle**

Debussy's *La Mer* is hardly the longest piece in the orchestral repertoire – it doesn't even stretch to half an hour – nor is it the grandest. But it's one of the most sumptuously descriptive, capturing the moods, movements and textures of the sea, scintillating and playful. And for that, it relies hugely on the glistening colours that Debussy conjures from his orchestra.

Trying to slim down this shimmering orchestral masterpiece to a version for an intimate trio of violin, cello and piano might seem like a mad idea – but that's exactly what the Hebrides Ensemble are doing on their imminent mini-tour, taking in New Galloway, Perth and Edinburgh.

The person responsible for this

“At first, I was trying to get every detail of the score into the piano trio,” Beamish says, “but in the end I realised I was looking at it from the wrong side. So I listened to a lot of French music for piano trio, particularly Ravel's Piano Trio, and tried to think about that sound world on its own.” Audiences will have the chance to compare those two works: it's Ravel's Piano Trio that accompanies *La Mer* in the Hebrides's three concerts.

Beamish must have felt some responsibility to Debussy's original? “Oh yes – I felt Debussy looking over my shoulder when I was doing it. But of course I couldn't ask him what he would have done. I didn't really go into it wanting to put my own stamp on it, though. Maybe other people will hear my own individual accent in



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The person responsible for this small-scale rethink, Scottish-based composer Sally Beamish, also thought it was a bit of a mad idea at first. It came about when eminent English threesome Trio Apaches was looking for a partner for Beamish's *The Seafarer* on a new CD, and suggested she make an arrangement of *La Mer* for piano trio. "Initially I said no," explains Beamish, "because I just didn't think it was possible. They kept pestering me, though, and in the end I agreed, with some trepidation. And it was actually even more difficult than I expected."

Beamish has said that arranging *La Mer* took her twice as long as writing an original piece of her own. But what she's ended up with is quite a magical rethink that unashamedly shrinks Debussy's grand evocations down to a more intimate scale, but loses nothing of *La Mer*'s power and detail – summoned by some particularly virtuosic demands, especially for the trio's pianist (Philip Moore, who joins violinist James Clark, returning to the ensemble after two decades, and cellist William Conway in the Hebrides performances). Most importantly, it feels entirely like a piece of music in its own right.

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One way Beamish has emulated Debussy's sumptuous orchestral textures is in using unusual playing techniques, especially in the two stringed instruments. Nothing too bizarre, but a bit of pizzicato plucking, some unearthly harmonics, a little propulsive scrubbing low down in the cello. "I was looking at quite contemporary techniques of string playing to represent orchestral instruments – for example I've used the cello playing false harmonics, which represents a muted trumpet in the orchestral version."

Another unusual thing about the Hebrides Ensemble's *La Mer* tour is that you don't need to go to a concert hall to experience it. A Perth evening concert (ironically not a public event, although a Perth lunchtime concert earlier the same day is) will be live-streamed on the ensemble's website, part of the group's ongoing exploration of what role online can play in the classical music of the future.

But as the ensemble's chief executive Jennifer Martin stresses, at the moment it's all about research.



"We want to know if there's a demand for our work online. We want to know about sound quality, what platform people are using to watch and listen, and we want to know all about their experience – whether there's enough chat, enough introduction and explanation." If you do tune in online – which you can do at hebridesensemble.com on Monday 7 March from 7:20pm – expect to be asked to share your thoughts on the project via a questionnaire.

This concert is being live-streamed, and in June a Hebrides event will be made available online on demand (details are yet to be revealed). These events fit in perfectly with the Hebrides' aims to engage more broadly with listeners and concert-goers.

"We're looking at how we can extend our audience reach, within Scotland, the UK and internationally," explains Martin. "And the other prong to our digital strategy is to reduce our carbon footprint, to overcome any constraints of location by performers or audiences." She doesn't envisage Hebrides concerts becoming a set of screens showing the Ensemble's soloists performing



The Hebrides Ensemble, main; violinist James Clark, above

from afar, but she can see immediate benefits for rehearsals or education work.

"We also want to give audiences as much access as possible to the composers and performers we work with," Martin continues.

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“Sally Beamish will be with us at the streamed event, for example, and she’ll introduce the piece and talk about it afterwards.”

Beamish herself is equally enthusiastic about the streaming idea. “I’m really excited about the concert being online,” she says, “and it’ll be really interesting to see what kind of response there is. I know more and more people are getting rid of their televisions and finding what they want online, so it would be really exciting if a new classical audience is out there.”

So concert-goers can take their pick: either a traditional live performance at one of the tour’s three venues, or tuning in online – and thereby playing your own part in shaping what might just turn into the next generation of classical concerts. ■

The Hebrides Ensemble performs Sally Beamish’s arrangement of Debussy’s La Mer, with Ravel’s Piano Trio and Takemitsu’s Between Tides, at The CatStrand, New Galloway, 4 March, Perth Concert Hall, 7 March and Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh, 8 March. Watch online at hebridesensemble.com on 7 March, 7:20pm.