

scottish ensemble

Re-defining the string orchestra

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Concerto in D minor for Two Violins, BWV 1043 (c.1717–23)

- 1 *Vivace*
- 2 *Largo ma non tanto*
- 3 *Allegro*

With its effortless melodic invention and its naturally unfolding counterpoint, the Concerto for Two Violins is understandably one of Bach's most popular and most admired works. It should come as no surprise, either, that Bach wrote the piece during one of the most fulfilling and most content periods of his life – some time between 1717 and 1723, when he was Kapellmeister and director of chamber music in the court of the enlightened Prince Leopold at Anhalt-Köthen, with an ensemble of 18 fine musicians at his disposal. The well-loved Brandenburg Concertos date from the same period, and share the Concerto's easy-going balance of contrapuntal dexterity and melodic charm.

It's written in the typically Italian three-movement, fast-slow-fast form, fashionable at the time and which went on to become accepted as the concerto norm. And the Italian influences don't stop there. During his earlier years in Weimar, Bach had studied and come to greatly admire the virtuosic concerto style of Vivaldi, even rearranging some of the great Italian composer's sparkling violin showpieces for keyboard. He clearly brought the lessons he'd learnt from Vivaldi's spectacular violin writing to the virtuosity of the Double Concerto, but it's not simply a showpiece. Instead, Bach finds other ways to spotlight his soloists' technical skills – for example, clearing away the orchestral accompaniment to just a few supportive chords, and thereby allowing the violinists' passagework to be heard in all its intricate glory.

The first movement contrasts the memorably urgent, spiky theme of its extended orchestral opening – which returns at the middle and end of the movement – with two long episodes of remarkable contrapuntal richness for the pair of soloists. The poignant slow movement is rightly celebrated as one of Bach's most sublime creations, its continuous stream of sinuous melody passed back and forth between the two soloists with only discreet accompaniment from the orchestra.

The soloists open the finale and dominate the movement, interrupting their bustling semiquaver passages with sudden rushes of triplets and even breaking into pulsing chords to provide accompaniment for the orchestra. The movement ends with a brief memory of the assertive opening in a resolute D minor.

David Kettle

Sally Beamish (1956–)

Seavaigers (2012)

- I. *Storm*
- II. *Lament*
- III. *Haven*

Seavaigers is a collaboration between its composer, Sally Beamish, and two of the foremost soloists in the Celtic tradition: Chris Stout and Catriona McKay. The score leaves space for much improvisation in the solo parts, and the piece was the result of many discussions and ideas from all three.

The title means 'Seafarers' and refers both to the seafaring people of the North Sea, and to the two soloists: Chris Stout, from Shetland, and Catriona McKay, from Dundee. The stretch of water between these two Northerly ports has claimed countless lives over the centuries, but is also one of the most beautiful and romantic seascapes in the world – home to seabirds, whales, dolphins and endless changes of light and weather. Strong emotions are always connected to dangerous journeys, and this piece reflects the anticipation, fear, comradeship and adventure of sea voyaging. The first movement, *Storm*, begins with a shimmering dawn over the water before launching into a reel which becomes increasingly unsettled and harmonically dark, before resolving into optimism.

The *Lament* consists of one very simple melody, which repeats and overlaps with varying ornamentation, written and improvised. The solo improvisations continue as the last movement begins – *Haven* – steering a final exhilarated course towards home. Just before the end, the opening music returns, as if land is in sight.

Seavaigers was commissioned by Celtic Connections and the Edinburgh International Harp Festival, with funding from Creative Scotland. It was first performed by Chris Stout and Catriona McKay with the Scottish Ensemble, directed by Jonathan Morton, at Celtic Connections in the Fruitmarket Glasgow, January 2012, and at the Edinburgh International Harp Festival, April 2012.

Chris Stout and Catriona McKay