

Eilean Fuinn



A new multi-channel sound installation by Richard Skelton,
commissioned by ATLAS Arts as part of *A Work for the North Atlantic*.

7 - 23 September 2017
Skye Sailing Club
Scorrybreac Boathouse
Portree, Isle of Skye, IV51 9QU
Open Wed - Sun, 10.00am - 5.00pm

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Singing for the Sea

In 2016 ATLAS Arts, in partnership with Artangel, brought Bethan Huws' film *Singing for the Sea* (1993) to the Isle of Skye. Huws' film documents a group of eight Bulgarian women, the Bistrista Babi, who Huws invited to travel from their home in the heart of Eastern Europe to the edge of an island, to the north east coast of England. She then asked the women to sing to the North Sea.

This film installation marked the start of *A Work for the North Atlantic*, a year-long programme of commissions, exhibitions and workshops exploring singing and the sea. As part of this ATLAS commissioned a new piece of work by Richard Skelton.

Skelton has created a multi-channel composition that evokes Huws' work and its re-sited presentation in the Scorrybreac boathouse,

Portree. He has turned his attention to the west, from the North Sea to the North Atlantic. Exploring traditional songs, field recordings, and inspiration from the landscape of Skye, its seascape and the stories that accompany them, *Eilean Fuinn* suggests that the sea and the landscape are 'endlessly singing to each other'.

In the creation of this new composition, Skelton worked with the following pieces of music:

Cumha na Cloinne (*Lament for the Children*) played by Decker Forrest, Highland bagpipes; *Oran Manitoba* played by Hector MacInnes, accordion; *Em Tòg orm mo Phìob* (*Bring Me My Pipes*) and *Am Iomramh Eadar Il' A's Uist* (*Rowing From Islay To Uist*) played by Ronan Martin, fiddle; and *Braes of Lochiel* played by Frances Wilkins, concertina.



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In the Norn language of Orkney there is a word with a rather unique definition. According to the Orcadian scholar Hugh Marwick, *swaa(r)* means ‘the singing noise of the sea’. Crucially, Marwick adds ‘– not the thunder of breakers, nor yet the murmur of ripples, but the prolonged note of the sea that falls upon the ear like an everlasting sigh’. We might wonder if Marwick embellished his description with that rather lyrical qualifying statement – its poetic concept seems rather out of place next to the more prosaic, down-to-earth descriptions that populate the rest of his dictionary. By contrast, Edmonston’s 1866 *Glossary of the Shetland & Orkney Dialect* defines *swaar* variously as ‘the middle of the night’, and ‘too high, top heavy, heavy’. Notwithstanding these discrepancies, there was something in Marwick’s definition that I could not dismiss entirely – having lived by the sea on the west coast of Ireland, I can attest to hearing something of that ‘singing noise’ – something that I couldn’t quite attribute to one particular phenomenon. Moreover, I have a deep abiding interest in the elusive and the esoteric. In my 2009 book, *Landings*, I wrote ‘is there ever ... silence? When sounds recede below the threshold of hearing, perhaps they linger, nevertheless? Diminishing, but never gone completely.

Commingling with the residual undersong – the map and vessel of all melodies.’

Something about the idea of ‘the prolonged note of the sea’ resonated, and, when commissioned by ATLAS Arts to respond to Bethan Huws’ film, *Singing for the Sea*, I began to explore Marwick’s concept more fully. It requires not too much of an imaginative leap to conceive of the sea as having its own song – for the sea is never silent – but what of the land? Moreover, what if the sea and the land were endlessly singing to each other, in perpetual call-and-response, across the vastness of geological time? Although I could find no analogue for *swaa(r)* in Gaelic, I did discover the word *fonn* (genitive *fuinn*) in Dwelly’s famous dictionary. Its meanings include both ‘land, earth, plain’, as well as ‘air, tune, music’ – such that landscape and music are homonymically connected. Dwelly also adds one further definition to *fonn*, the ‘drone of a bagpipe’. If we remember that in Indian classical music the drone note, *sa*, is also called the *ground-note*, and in Scottish Piobaireachd the *ground* is the melodic theme of a particular composition, then the connection between music and landscape becomes more evident.



Among many other words, Dwelly also lists *crònan* as a ‘dull note’, a ‘mournful tune’, ‘any low murmuring sound’, ‘the buzzing of a fly’, ‘the humming of a bee’, ‘the purring of a cat’, the ‘purling sound of a brook’, ‘bass in music’, a ‘dirge’, the ‘sound of a bagpipe drone’, the ‘bellowing of a deer’, a ‘lulling voice’. This polyphony of definitions reminds us that the land’s inhabitants are rarely ever silent, and so, by association, we might ask – does the land itself not have its own song – the *ground* from which all these other melodies spring? In particular, Dwelly’s references to ‘any low murmuring sound’ and ‘the humming of a bee’ are interesting because they might relate to another auditory phenomenon, known as the *hummadruz*. This word of indeterminate etymology describes *a low drone or humming sound that cannot be placed*. In 1769, the eminent naturalist Gilbert White might have been describing such a phenomenon when he wrote, ‘There is a natural occurrence to be met with upon the highest part of our downs in hot summer days ... a loud humming as of bees in the air, though not one insect is to be seen. The sound is distinctly to be heard the whole common through.’ Perhaps the *hummadruz* is an echo of the *land’s song*.

Taking my cue from Huws’ film, which repositions Bulgarian folk-song and dance along the fringes of the North Sea, I therefore began to explore what traces of that distant, hermetic *musica terrae* might be found in the folk music of the Highlands. With the help of ATLAS Arts, I asked four musicians to record those melodies that each felt resonated with the theme. My idea was to evoke something of Marwick’s description of a ‘prolonged note’, and Dwelly’s ‘low murmuring sound’, and so elements from these traditional tunes, along with my own cello improvisations and field recordings made in Skye, formed the foundations for this new musical composition. The resulting installation comprises four discrete channels of sound playing simultaneously, each repeating over long durations (between one and two hours) but at variance with one another. This evolving sound work will therefore subtly change over the course of its installation, being never quite the same twice. It is my hope that – in its position overlooking the bay at Scorrybreac boathouse – it will make audible something of the ‘singing noise’ of the land – a brief sampling of that prolonged, everlasting murmur.

About ATLAS Arts

ATLAS Arts is an award-winning, pioneering producer and commissioner of contemporary art that creates connections between artists and audiences and responds to the unique qualities of this region, its landscapes, its culture and its people. Through our work we provide unique opportunities for artists to develop ambitious, often temporary or durational work in the public realm.

atlasarts.org.uk

Richard Skelton

Born in Lancashire, Richard Skelton's work is informed by landscape, evolving from sustained immersion in specific environments and deep, wide-ranging research incorporating toponymy and language, ecology and geology, folklore and myth. To date he has released over thirty EPs and albums of music, and has produced work for exhibitions, performance, feature films and documentaries.

Skelton often works with his wife and creative partner, Autumn Richardson. Over the past half-decade they have collaborated to produce a significant body of work encompassing music, texts, film and artefacts informed by the upland landscape of south-west Cumbria. Together they edit *Reliquiae*, an annual journal of poetry, short fiction, non-fiction, translations and visual art.

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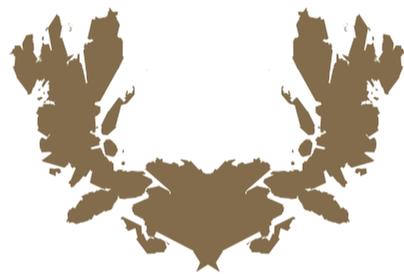
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Richard Skelton, 2017.

Page one:

The Bistritsa Babi / Bethan Huws, *A Work for the North Sea*, Artangel.
Sugar Sands, Longhoughton, Northumberland 22, 23 and 24 July 1993.
Commissioned by Artangel, London.



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