

Aud the Deep Minded - programme notes

The history The woman known as Aud the Deep Minded was a real person - accounts conflict on when exactly in the 9th century she lived, but we can be fairly sure she was the daughter of Ketil Flatnose, a Norwegian military commander who came to oversee areas we now know as the Scottish Hebrides on behalf of Harald Fairhair, King of Norway, and that her husband was Olaf the White (King of Dublin) and their son was Thorstein the Red, who conquered large areas of Scotland and declared himself king there. Following the deaths of Olaf and Thorstein, Aud commissioned a boat to be built in secret in the Caithness woods, which she then captained to Iceland, crewed by members of her family and high ranking thralls. On reaching new lands in the west, she gave the thralls their freedom and parcels of land to farm, forming a community where she lived until her natural death as an old woman.

Aud was a Christian at a time when most Vikings were still worshipping pagan gods.

The plot Scene 1: Dublin, Ireland. Aud has just learned that her husband Olaf the White, King of Dublin, is dead. However, she is on her way to a night out. She makes plans to seek protection for her son, from her father, Ketil Flatnose, in Orkney.

Scene 2: A burial ground in the Caithness forest, Scotland. Aud is talking to a corpse we at first think is her husband, then learn is her son. She makes an incantation in a strange form of Gaelic, then sings Christian funeral rites and a keening song that blends influences from Ireland and her Viking heritage. She experiences a strange episode, which might be psychosis, or might reveal that she is in fact the Morrigan, a supernatural tripartite phantom queen and seer of Irish folklore. In an intense surge of grief and revenge, she commands the thralls to build her boat.

Scene 3: On the boat, towards Iceland. She comes to understand that she has become what she most despises, an oppressor. She appeals to God to help her transcend this state, and offers the thralls their freedom.

Source material The musical material is derived from two existing melodies which represent the ancient nature of the story, and its mix of cultures – the responsorium *Media Vita* (In the midst of life we are in death) attributed to Notker the Stammerer, a Benedictine monk, and a Norwegian folk song.

Early on in workshopping sessions, the performers struggled to pronounce the name “Aud” – our instinctive English-speaker handling of the vowel became a source of distress to the Norwegian language coach, as we couldn’t get it in the right place on the palate. And that was just the Norwegian pronunciation, we were also nowhere with the Icelandic version, and the Gaelic (Irish and Scots), and wouldn’t it have been in Old Norse anyway.....? I have utilised different ways of pronouncing Aud’s name to reflect on her multifaceted identity as an immigrant, as well as her dual Christian and Viking religious and spiritual influences. She speaks to us in English, to God in Latin, is possessed by her ancient, mystic self in a fantasy Gaelic, and swears in Norwegian.

All of the electronic material, with the exception of the birdsong, is generated from samples of the musicians.

The three instruments – voice, horn and clarinet – represent Aud’s tripartite nature as the Morrigan (I think of the horn and clarinet as the conflicting voices each of us hears from our opposite shoulders).

The virtual set is created by Kirsty Anderson, with images of the Viking age hogback gravestones from Govan Old Parish Church to create 3D projection art that plays onto the bodies of the performers, responsive in real time to the music, therefore appearing differently every time.

I would definitely want Aud the Deep Minded on my fantasy dinner party guest list, even though she'd be over 1000 years old. The qualities she displayed – strategic thinking, daring, compassionate and intelligent leadership – make her a role model for any era. So I started playing around with where I was going to locate her in time, were we sticking in the Viking age, or presenting her as a contemporary woman. The real Aud is so far back in time she's blurred by storytelling, embellishment and omission, she feels like a mystic character and I wondered, what if she's reincarnated, if she's a supernatural being present through time and we might, indeed, meet her now. This is my imagining of her story, or what might be her story, and how she might tell it.

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