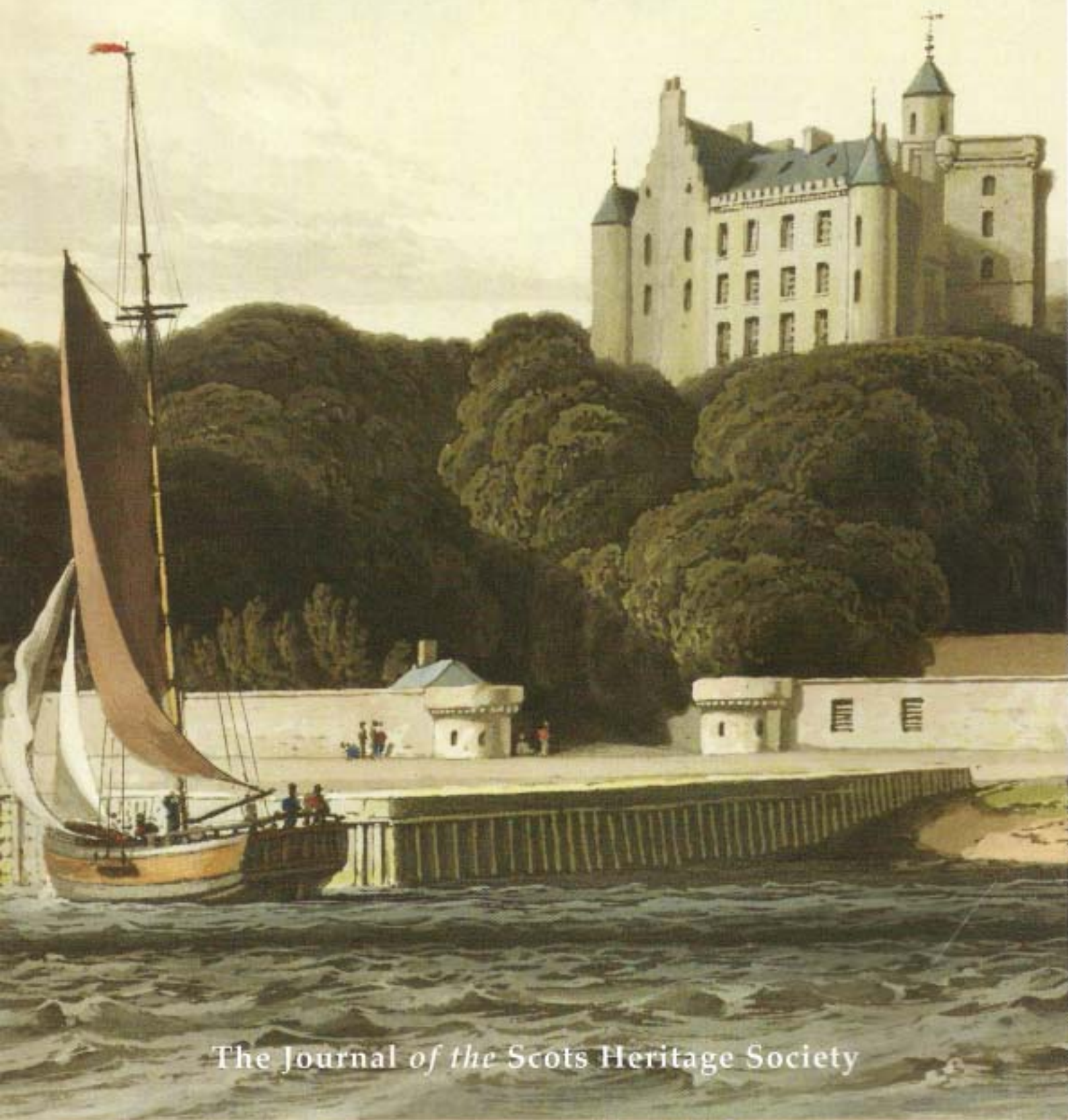


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THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL WITH A HARP TO MATCH

Deirdre Campbell-Shaw is a singer-songwriter blessed with an exceptionally rare combination of talents. She is a soprano with the voice of an angel and a harper who creates the kind of music one expects to hear in heaven. She is also one of the few with the ability to sing the songs of Robert Burns as one imagines the Bard himself meant them to be sung. Fiona MacGillivray reports on a rising star of Scottish music.

When Deirdre Campbell-Shaw was a child growing up between Duddingston and Portobello on the eastern side Edinburgh, her father struggled home with an ancient upright piano, a cast-off from the local kirk where it had been pounded mercilessly for the best part of a century. The piano's lovely old bronze sconces were still intact, but the ivory keys were all yellow and worn, the mahogany cabinet was faded and crazed and some of the felt-tipped hammers were stuck in the strings. None of that mattered; to a four-year-old, barely tall enough to reach the keyboard, that piano was nothing less than a thing of magic. Although Deirdre had to stand on tippy-toes to touch the keys, her granny astonished her by sitting down at once and playing a succession of old familiar Church of Scotland hymns. Deirdre was fascinated and from that moment on, she says, she knew that music would be the path she would follow throughout her life.

It was a direction which was greatly encouraged by her grandmother who taught her the "auld Scots sangs" at her home hard by the Forth of Firth at Portobello. Her mother paid for her piano lessons and the family quickly realised that their wee blonde moppet was something of a child prodigy. Deirdre recalls her mother being so delighted that she sometimes cried out in astonishment: "This child is full of music!" Music ran through the Campbell family. Deirdre's mother was musical, but as the daughter of a less-than-prosperous Presbyterian minister, she never had the opportunity to develop her talents and certainly never enjoyed the luxury of owning her own musical instrument. She was, therefore, determined that the same fate would not inhibit her own daughter.

Deirdre was a highly intelligent and deeply determined child and during the freezing cold of the bleak Edinburgh winters, she sat at the piano with mittened hands, practicing for hours on end. Today, in her early forties, Deirdre Campbell-Shaw

is that rarity, a multi-talented musician equally at ease with the piano as she is with the clarinet, the clarsach (the Gaelic harp) or the French horn. Not only that, she is also a soprano with a voice of exceptional clarity and beauty. It is a genuine pleasure to hear her accompany herself on her CD *My Heart's in the Highlands*. The trouble is that Deirdre Campbell-Shaw is virtually unknown in Scotland. In fact, she is better known in Germany, her husband's country, than she is in her own homeland. Although she had been given a magnificent education, like many another young Scot, she was obliged to pack up and leave in search of the employment she was unable to find at home. It is an all too familiar story.

Music and languages have always been her twin interests. In her teens Deirdre won a scholarship to George Watson's College in Edinburgh, one of the best private secondary schools in Scotland, and there plunged into the heady world of orchestral and choral music. Her teachers, in particular the choir master Patrick Criswell and music mistress, Cecelia Cavaye, saw her potential and encouraged her with individual tuition. They also boosted her much-needed self-confidence and allowed her to glimpse the tantalising possibility of a career as a professional performer, a dream she had long cherished but never felt able to realise. Dreams, however, do have a way of asserting themselves, as she would later discover. She blossomed at George Watson's College and on a tour of Italy with the school's Madrigal Choir she had the honour of singing solo in the famous medieval Basilica in Assisi.

In the College library she came across a book of Celtic names and in discovering the origins of her own: Deirdre, the beautiful harpist of Celtic mythology, the bright spark of an idea, a vision, flashed across her mind's eye. She pictured herself seated at a great golden clarsach; she was plucking its strings and singing. The combination was overwhelming, irresistible. When the lone harper in the school orchestra showed her how to hold her hands correctly and allowed her to pluck

away for the first time, she says she was mesmerised by the strange beauty of the instrument. On the spur of that moment she knew that she would be not only a singer, but a harper as well.

Deirdre left George Watson's with a string of high distinctions and won another scholarship, this time to study music and languages at the University of Aberdeen. She would graduate as a Master of Arts with Honours in Russian and German. During a semester in Moscow she contracted encephalitis, a dangerous inflammation of the brain, and had to take a year off university and it was during her recuperation at home that she spent much of her time listening to Scottish and classical music on the radio. That became a turning point for her. "I began to appreciate the richness of the Scottish musical tradition", she said. "That's when I started to learn more about Robert Burns and his songs. I've been singing them ever since".

While she was at university in Aberdeen, Deirdre won yet another musical scholarship, this time studying under Neil Mackie, head of singing at the Royal College of Music in London. After graduating as a Master of Arts with Honours in 1992, she reluctantly accepted that her career prospects as a professional musician were probably pretty slim and so she went in search of what might be called a real job. Despite her extremely impressive qualifications there were no jobs for linguists to be had anywhere in Scotland. It was a deeply frustrating experience. She spoke five languages and had earned her degree with Honours, but no one seemed in the least bit willing to hire her.

She left Scotland and went to Germany to teach English. She enjoyed the experience, but soon realised that to land a really good job in qualification-oriented Germany she would have to earn yet another degree. She returned to Edinburgh and completed a one year Diploma in Marketing and Languages. Back in Germany she was appointed head of language teaching at a vocational college in Aschaffenburg, a town near Frankfurt am Main, which is twinned with Perth in Scotland.

"Music is so much a part of my life," she said, "that it's impossible to shut it out. I started singing in choirs in Germany and gradually I was given more and more solo work. There are, of course, so many very good classical sopranos in Germany and they have all studied at music colleges and have had the best teachers. To go forward I knew I had to have a niche. That's when I went back to my musical roots and started singing the 'auld Scottish songs' my granny taught me all those years ago in Portobello.

Those songs were very well received in Germany and especially in Aschaffenburg where people know

quite a lot about Scotland. Although I was regularly invited to perform, it was almost impossible to find an accompanist for the Scottish songs I wanted to sing. That's when I thought, 'why not accompany yourself ... on the harp?' She commissioned one of Scotland's top harp-makers, Ardival Harps near Strathpeffer to build her a beautiful 23-string instrument, one which is based on a harp depicted in a Pictish stone carving on Dupplin Moor near Perth. She carried it all the way back to Germany where she had risen to become the highly paid personal assistant to the managing director of a large manufacturing corporation. It was a position in which she was working 10 to 12-hour days.

"One night I had a dream," she said, "a dream which was to change my life. It was all so vivid, so real that I can recall every little detail. I was 65-years-old and the guest of honour at my own retirement party. I was presented with flowers and champagne and a medal inscribed with thanks for my 30 years of service at the company, but I was suddenly overwhelmed with an intense feeling of regret. I thought, 'if only I'd made a go of my music when I was 35'. I woke up and immediately realised what I had to do. I handed in my notice that day. I started phoning around Germany asking about performance possibilities for a Scottish singer/harper. It worked." She was booked to perform at two concerts at the Frankfurt International Theatre and at the Munich Philharmonic Hall, the Charlemagne Prizegiving and at various trade fairs throughout Germany.

It was time for a little recognition in Scotland. In 2003, Deirdre had the audacity to enter the 100th anniversary competition for the Royal National Mod, the premier Gaelic cultural event, which was that year held in Oban in Argyll. Although she could not understand one word of Gaelic, she nevertheless won first prize for a Gaelic song accompanied by the clarsach.

"Having won at the Mod," she said, "I decided I had better learn Gaelic. I attended a couple of one-week courses at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, the Gaelic College on Skye, but long breaks in between meant I forgot most of what I'd learned, so in October 2006 I took the plunge and decided to do the college's long-distance access course. This involves about 10 hours a week, listening to CDs and doing exercises. There's even a weekly conversation group by telephone. I think it is particularly important for me to learn the language of my ancestors, as well as being able to pronounce and understand the Gaelic songs I sing".

Deirdre Campbell-Shaw deserves all the success and recognition that she has so obviously earned. I have no doubt that we will be hearing a lot more from her in the years to come. ■



Ae Fond Kiss Deirdre Campbell-Shaw

We have taken the unusual step of reviewing two CDs from the same artist in this issue of SCOTS because we firmly believe that the artist, Deirdre Campbell-Shaw, richly deserves far greater recognition, both for her singing and her musical ability.

Like her previous work, this disk also includes several well-known songs by Robert Burns together with others from Ireland and Wales. Ms. Campbell-Shaw is fluent in five languages and she manages a flawless transition from the Gaelic to the Welsh to the "auld Scotch songs" of Robert Burns.

There are 21 tracks on this disk. As well as the haunting beauty of the title track, *Ae Fond Kiss*, Ms. Campbell-Shaw also gives us beautiful renditions of other Burns classics including the *Lea Rig* and *Oh Whistle And I'll Come Tae Ye My Lad*.

There are several traditional Scottish songs like the *Eriskay Love Lilt* and *Deirdre's Farewell to Scotland* together with a beautiful performance of Sir Walter Scott's ballad *Jock O'Hazeldean*.

Ae Fond Kiss will be available at Easter 2007.
Order direct from deirdre@harp-and-song.com 📧



My Heart's in the Highlands Deirdre Campbell-Shaw

The magic of Robert Burns is that he speaks to us still, and always will, through the timeless beauty of his poetry and song. And yet the Bard's words and music take on an entirely new dimension in the hands of someone with a genuine feeling for and love of the material: someone who can present it in the way in which it was originally meant to be heard. Deirdre Campbell-Shaw has the happy knack of doing precisely this.

Among the 18 tracks on this CD are six that feature Burns' songs. These include the classics, *My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose* and *Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonnie Doon* and *Ca' the Yowes*.

Ms. Campbell-Shaw is blessed with a truly beautiful and flawless soprano voice which is an absolute joy to listen to. She accompanies herself on the clarsach, the Gaelic harp, and the combination is both haunting and lovely. I've no doubt that the Bard himself would approve.

The disk also contains some well-known Irish and Welsh tunes. There's something for everyone here, but for Burns fans this is a special treat.
Order direct from deirdre@harp-and-song.com 📧