

Savourna Stevenson: Biography

Savourna Stevenson, “a composer who is a national treasure” (The Herald), began playing the piano and composing from the age of 5 with her father, the composer Ronald Stevenson, and made her concert debut with the harp at the age of 15 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, London.

Although her music strongly reflects her Scottish roots, it also reveals her uniquely eclectic and innovative urge to break through stylistic barriers between classical, folk, world music and jazz.

She championed the clarsach, the traditional Scottish harp, from an early age and has written prolifically for the instrument, collaborating with traditional artists including Aly Bain, Danny Thompson, Davy Spillane, June Tabor and Eddi Reader. Musical experimentation across a variety of genres led to more collaborations with artists such as African Kora player Toumani Diabate, the Bhundu Boys (Zimbabwe), Iranian percussionists The Chemirani and many more at Peter Gabriel’s Real World Studios and WOMAD festivals.

Alongside international touring commitments as both a harp and clarsach virtuoso in the 1980s and 1990s, Savourna was commissioned to write for dance, theatre, TV/film and live concert performances. The diversity of commissioning organisations, from the BBC to Iona Abbey, and her equally diverse audiences, from concert hall patrons to viewers of HBO, are a measure of the breadth and scope of her output.

Major compositions from these years, many of which have been recorded, include the acclaimed seven movement suite, Tweed Journey; Moorsong (a setting of John Buchan’s short story); Cutting the Chord (celebrating the 1792 Belfast Harp Gathering); Tusitala (music for BBC TV Omnibus on the life & travels of Robert Louis Stevenson); Singing the Storm (a song cycle of new Border Ballads for singer June Tabor); Calman the Dove (a celebration of St. Columba for Iona Abbey); and her Harp Quintet, premiered at Glasgow Royal Concert Hall in 2000 before finding new audiences via the popular American TV series ‘Sex and the City’ and ‘Ugly Betty’.

In 2001 Savourna returned to her classical roots when a Creative Scotland Award to honour her existing contribution to Scottish music allowed her to fulfil a long-held aspiration to write for symphony orchestra. The resulting children’s orchestral work, Misterstourworm and the Kelpie’s Gift, was premiered by the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and narrated by Scottish actor Billy Boyd (famous for his appearance in The Lord of the Rings) for the Children’s Classic Concerts series in 2003.

Following the outstanding success of this work, which received standing ovations from capacity audiences and universally positive reviews ... “instrumental storytelling with a special intuitive magic of its own” (The Scotsman) ... “a resounding success with orchestral imagery that was impressionistic, ravishing and exquisite” (The Herald) ... Children’s Classic Concerts commissioned a second orchestral adventure for family audiences, Hansel and Gretel, which premiered in 2005 and toured throughout Scotland, performed by the Orchestra of Scottish Opera, to equally enthusiastic critical and popular acclaim.

A commission from the National Youth Choirs of Scotland followed, demonstrating her sensitive understanding of music for children. After the NYCOS 15th Anniversary concert with the RSNO and a 600 strong children’s choir, the Herald wrote “Savourna Stevenson’s ‘Waiting for the Silver-Sailed Moon’ for the upper voices was again confirmed as the loveliest tune to have been created by the choral organisation’s commissioning work”.

In June 2012 Stevenson's Concerto for Pedal Harp was premiered & toured by international harp soloist Catrin Finch and the Scottish Ensemble. The Herald's critic found it to be typical of what he called "the joy of Savourna Stevenson's music ... from the heart and to the heart, absolutely open and totally honest in its integrity and expressive qualities ... voluptuously romantic ... unashamedly gorgeous ... and a darker striking flavour of Bernard Herman in the finale".

In December 2013 her work for percussion & orchestra, 'The Snow Queen', featuring percussionists Owen Gunnell & Oliver Cox was premiered by the RSNO with narrator Siobhan Redmond at Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall and Edinburgh's Usher Hall. The Scotsman wrote "most plaudits must be laid at the door of Scottish composer Savourna Stevenson ... her expansive score captured the essence of Anderson's tale – fear, tenderness, loyalty ... each step of the narrative journey accompanied by just the right musical intent".

In 2013, Savourna was commissioned by Broughton Choral Society (with subsidy from SSE) to write a piece named *The Dream* for SATB choir. This work was inspired by John Buchan's story *The Moorsong* and the beauty of the Scottish Borders landscape where the composer lives.

Earlier this year, Stevenson composed one of four movements of a new commission to celebrate the 15th anniversary of the all-female quartet 4 Girls 4 Harps. Whilst writing, the composer drew from H. Renié's solo harp piece *Légende* and the life of American-born and Paris-based performer Josephine Baker as sources of inspiration. This work, entitled Tetra, was premiered by the ensemble in London's Temple Church on the 28th of May.

Savourna's current commissions include her largest project to date: a work for piano and orchestra named *The Secret Life of a Piano*.