

Music And Mountains

Composer and hill walker Matilda Brown found a way to link her two great passions

by FIONA RUSSELL



THE hills and mountains of Scotland have long held inspiration for writers, poets and musicians – and now composer Matilda Brown takes this inspiration to a whole new level.

Matilda is influenced both by an ever-changing scenery through the seasons and, as she puts it, “Scotland’s very variable weather”.

“The outcome,” she reveals, “is probably best described as moody landscape music.”

Music and mountains seems like a match made in heaven, but it wasn’t until her early 30s, some 10 years ago, that Matilda was first struck by the idea to combine her love of walking with music.

“Until then, I saw my composing and walking as separate. I recognised that they inspired each other but I didn’t put the two together as a profession,” she says.

Matilda, 43, who grew up in England

and now lives in the former Scottish mining village of Leadhills in South Lanarkshire, had an innate attraction to both music and the outdoors from childhood.

“Strangely, despite my mum, dad and sister being non-musical, I was naturally drawn to music,” she says. “The first sign of this was when I was very young and I would bash out my own tunes on my great aunt’s piano whenever we visited her.

“My parents then organised piano lessons but it was all rather on-off.”

Looking for alternative outlets for their daughter’s creativity, they enrolled Matilda in dance lessons in the family’s home village of Blakesley, in Northamptonshire.

“I did enjoy dance but I still had a passion for music,” she says. “I listened to a lot of music, such as Pink Floyd, Frank Zappa and 1970s film music. I continued to compose my own tunes for the piano and vocals.”



Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*

Walking away
from Glendhu



Left: Matilda with
her dog Jasper



The Aonach
Eagach



“Matilda’s love of the great outdoors strengthened and deepened”

It was at secondary school that Matilda’s musical talent was spotted by two teachers. She went on to receive more formal instruction, learning to play the guitar, as well as tuition in piano and vocals.

“I progressed through the formal musical grades to the highest level but I can’t say I enjoyed this too much. I preferred creating my own music. In retrospect, a lot of my music and composing was self-taught.”

Attending university to study music, first at Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts and then a post-graduate degree at the University of Edinburgh, Matilda was able to focus on developing her own compositional style.

“It wasn’t until university that I properly learned and understood musical theory and writing my music down. Until then, a lot of what I composed was in my head.”

This led to a range of exciting commissions in her early career with the London Symphony Orchestra, BBC Concert Orchestra, The London Jazz Festival and BBC Radio 3, among others. At the same time, Matilda’s love

of the great outdoors strengthened and deepened.

“My parents encouraged me to spend time outdoors when I was small and then my best friend at school, Anna, became my adventure companion.

As young as 14, Matilda and Anna, would head off on their own to explore.

“One time I remember we got the train to Snowdonia National Park and walked Snowdon,” Matilda says.

“When I was 15, we headed to Fort William and got a taxi late at night to Glen Coe to stay at a youth hostel. My first Scottish walk was the Aonach Eagach. After that we thought all the mountains in Scotland would be as scary, although, thankfully, we were wrong.”

This passion for exploring stayed with her, and Matilda continued her walking trips while she was studying in Liverpool – heading farther and farther afield.

“I did my first major multi-day walk from Dalwhinnie to Culra Bothy, then on to Ben Alder and Loch Rannoch when I was 19.” >>



Setting off with Jasper



Winter view across Loch Garry

Matilda also hitch-hiked all the way to Morocco to walk the Atlas Mountains, and became the first woman to complete an arduous trek in the Rocky Mountains.

“I was very adventurous from an early age.”

In 2010, a project funded by the Scottish Arts Council first saw Matilda combining her two biggest passions.

“I think this was when I made that connection with walking and music for work.

“I embarked on a walking and bothy trip through Scotland’s last wilderness area, Knoydart, in winter. The result was a Scottish tour of synchronised film and music that was directed and composed by me and performed with other musicians.”

A second “Bothy Project” the following spring gave Matilda further opportunity to compose several pieces of music, which are still part of her repertoire.

She formed the Matilda Brown Ensemble, which tours playing music inspired by her Highland adventures.

“Each concert is a musical and visual tale grounded in the physical experiences of the wilderness.”

Then, in 2014, Matilda received further funding – partly from Forestry Commission Scotland – for another walking and music project, this time on the 400km (250-mile) Cape Wrath Trail in the Highlands.

The results of the Cape Wrath project, in collaboration with choreographer Joan Clevillé, was *Footsteps Marking Time*. The final performance took place in Ullapool, the mid-point of the trail.

More recently, Matilda completed a more ambitious solo adventure, *Alongside Autumn: A Composer’s Walk*.

In autumn 2019, with her dog Jasper, she walked and camped more than 850km (528 miles) from Annan in southern Scotland, to reach Durness in Sutherland. Her route included recognised trails, but was mostly her own.

“My aim was to take on my biggest adventure and to write music along the way. I performed with musicians



Pictures: REXSHUTTERSTOCK, ALAMY



Above: A performance at Leadhills Primary School

Main: The start of the Cape Wrath Trail

in six unique venues – Corryhully Bothy at Glenfinnan was my favourite – during the walk.

“It’s not easy to describe how the landscape inspires my music although I write quite intense music once I get back, especially if the weather has been bad.

“While I was on the trip through Scotland, I wrote a lot of sketches because I was too tired and busy walking to write full pieces of music. These shorter pieces captured what I was feeling in the moment, the people I met and the landscapes I passed through.”

While Covid-19 has halted some of Matilda’s touring plans, she still hopes to perform in the future with a series of short pieces inspired by the autumn walk. She is also making an album and book of her journey.

Another part of Matilda’s work is in education and the community. “Matilda’s Music and Mountains” is a learning music project for young people aiming to create original compositions inspired by the Scottish landscape.

“Each project involves pupils generating ideas and translating them into music and artistic expression and performing them.”

In addition, she works with the education departments at Drake Music Scotland, Scottish Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra. And the urge to take on another walk is always there.

“I would love to walk the length of Britain. I would follow my own route, bringing in the musical element and performances along the way.” 🎵

Visit our website to see videos of Matilda’s live performances at Ben Dronaig bothy. Go to www.scotsmagazine.com/article/music-and-mountains