

The Music of the Forest



The stage is set for the world premiere of a new choral Song Cycle rooted in the landscape and history of the Forest written by William, 16th Lord of Bowland and set to music by the acclaimed Lakeland composer Christopher Gibbs

The finishing touches are being applied to an ambitious new cycle of songs whose maiden performance will take place in summer 2017 in the heart of the landscape which inspired it.

Chronicling more than a 1,000 years of often turbulent history and delving still further back into the mists of Celtic and Norse legend, the Songs of Bowland were commissioned by William Bowland and set to music by Lakeland composer Christopher Gibbs.

Almost two years in the making, the four-part work spans a colossal historical arc, stretching from the medieval Lord Kings of Bowland to the modern day and even Celtic influences which shaped the region.

Here William Bowland and composer Chris Gibbs explain how landscape and history, myth and legend are fused in a stirring evocation of the spirit of Bowland in music and song.

Q. Where did the idea for a choral work originate?

WB: I knew Chris Gibbs' Forest of Bowland Suite and asked him if he would come and deliver the Lord of Bowland's Annual Lecture in 2015 and it struck me that because Chris obviously has a great passion for Bowland, I should commission a piece from him to celebrate the history of the Lordship, but also of the Forest itself. But given my musical tastes, these songs would perhaps be musically rather less conservative than the Suite.

Q. How did you approach the composition – is it loosely based on Chris' existing works inspired by Bowland or have you taken a completely different tack?

WB: I wrote the lyrics for the piece and Chris has set it to music. Chris is wonderful to work with – he actively engaged me with the process of composition throughout and I think our collaboration has yielded rich fruit. I am grateful for his patience!

There are four songs: Anthem to the Lord Kings of Bowland, which celebrates the monarchs who were also Lords of Bowland throughout the late medieval and early modern period; Bowland Sun, an intensely personal piece which intimates a desire for my son and heir Henry to share my deep attachment to the Forest; In Agmundr's Land, which refers to the Viking warlord who ruled the area in the 10th Century – more than 100 years before the Norman Conquest; and finally, Sons of Setanta, which reaches still further back in time to prehistory when Bowland would have fallen under the rule of Setanta,

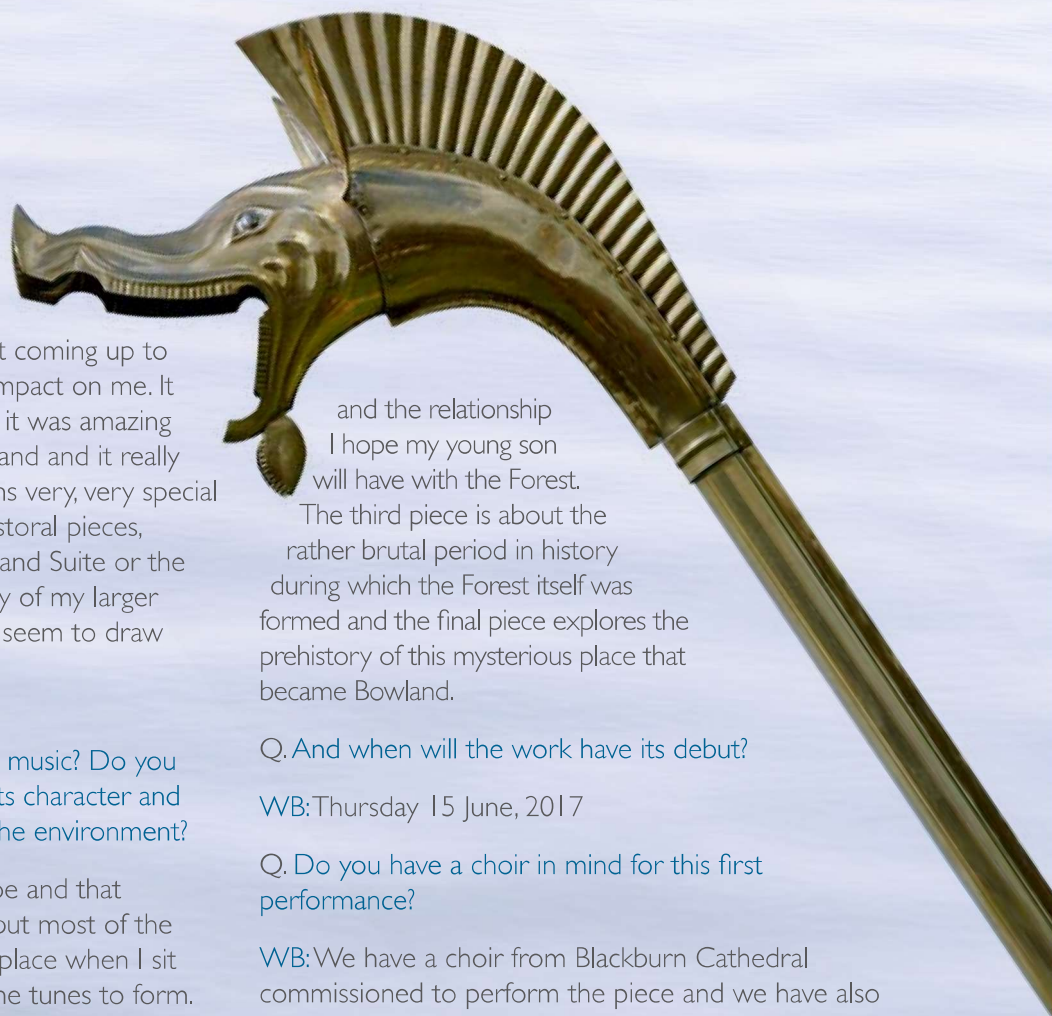
known in Celtic mythology as Cú Chulainn, who held sway over a vast swathe of Scotland and northern England, the Isle of Man and the east coast of Ireland.

So while the Lordship was only formally granted following the Norman Conquest, Bowland had established its own identity long before then and although some of it is speculative, the piece explores elements of this vast sweep of history stretching across two millennia.

CG: My initial Forest of Bowland Suite was born out of many visits to Bowland and walks through the landscape and the villages. It all started on top of Pendle Hill, when I was up there looking across to the Bowland Fells and the music seemed to start coming out of the air. But when William asked me to write this new piece, it really was a case of revisiting the landscape, re-absorbing the wonderful scenery and bringing new influences and ideas into the composition.

Q. How well do you know Bowland? How much time have you spent here researching the composition?

WB: I'm from Lancashire originally and I have known Bowland for many years. I visit the area at least once a year for several days and travel throughout the Forest to perform various duties. I have a deep passion for the place and although it is relatively unknown, in my view, Bowland is one of the glories of England and I feel very privileged to be the Lord of Bowland. I draw inspiration from both the natural and the man-made landscape – the two are equal influences.



CG: I was born and raised in Surrey, but coming up to Lancashire for the first time had a real impact on me. It was like a veil being lifted from my eyes: it was amazing to discover the beauty of northern England and it really struck a chord with me. Bowland remains very, very special to me and while I've written shorter pastoral pieces, there's nothing on the scale of the Bowland Suite or the Song Cycle, in spite of the fact that many of my larger works, such as the Violin Concerto, also seem to draw inspiration from the English landscape in general.

Q: How do you translate landscape into music? Do you spend time in the landscape observing its character and sampling some of the natural voices in the environment?

CG: I spend a lot of time in the landscape and that experience on Pendle Hill was visceral, but most of the time, it's a case of recalling the sense of place when I sit down to write the music and allowing the tunes to form. When you are really composing, music doesn't come from the intellect: the actual inspiration comes from outside, from the spirit of the land – the composer is just a conduit.

Q: Are there any specific places where you found special inspiration? The valleys, the craggy gritstone outcrops, the streams, the fell tops?

WB: Bowland Knotts – the gritstone crags lowering above what was once called Raw Moor – is probably my favourite place: the commanding views it offers over the Forest are supreme. But in terms of the man-made environment, Whitewell is the ancient centre of the Forest. There is some evidence to suggest Whitewell could have been home to the Lord's Forest courts as far back as the 12th century. There's a huge earthen mound there – Hall Hill on the old maps - that's completely masked in trees. A fascinating spot, highly atmospheric.

CG: I've tried to write the music to reflect the Forest's strong sense of place as a whole. After all, Bowland is geographically quite small, but the outstanding beauty of the landscape evokes an idealised version of rural England and it's that atmosphere that I have attempted to weave into the music.

Q: Which unique characteristics do you feel the piece captures especially well?

WB: Each of the four pieces has a different mood, tempo and style. The first piece is about the grandeur of the Lordship, the second is about my relationship with Bowland

and the relationship I hope my young son will have with the Forest.

The third piece is about the rather brutal period in history during which the Forest itself was formed and the final piece explores the prehistory of this mysterious place that became Bowland.

Q: And when will the work have its debut?

WB: Thursday 15 June, 2017

Q: Do you have a choir in mind for this first performance?

WB: We have a choir from Blackburn Cathedral commissioned to perform the piece and we have also engaged something of a star performer in a musician called John Kenny, who will be playing an ancient Celtic war horn called the carnyx. It will almost certainly be the first time this extraordinary instrument will have been heard in Bowland for more than 1,000 years and we think it will make a dramatic climax to the cycle.

CG: The carnyx really is a spectacular instrument which makes a most amazing sound. It must have been truly terrifying for opposing forces when they heard the bellowing of three or four of these huge horns echoing across the battlefield. It really will raise the roof of the concert venue!

Q: And on the subject of a venue, where will the work be performed for the first time?

CG: This first performance definitely should be in the Forest – we have several venues in mind but while the most important factor will be the acoustics and the availability of a concert piano, we also have to take practical factors like audience capacity and parking into account.

Q: Do you have any thoughts on using the work within a multi-media piece designed for sharing in the social media age? Could the cycle be overlaid with some local voices and sounds or perhaps used as an accompaniment to a video or assemblage of images?

WB: It's crucial that we get the performance recorded and there are plans afoot to make sure that happens and then I think we need to look at publishing the piece in some way – maybe as a live video stream or CD – otherwise it risks simply disappearing into the ether.



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Bowland Sun

Song for Henry of Bowland

"You are the sun
Chasing shadows from the fells
Flaring at dusk down a dark lane
The sudden rainbow after rain

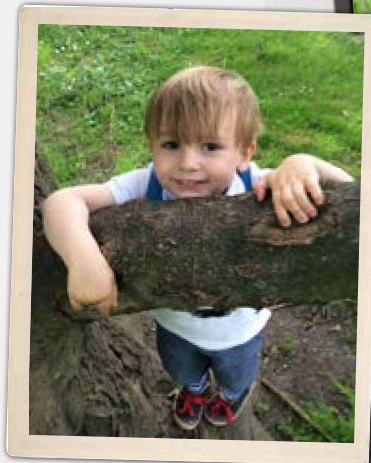
You are the young green
Freshening the tree
A startling glimmer
Of eternity

You are the star rising over the moor
The hawk soaring
Through silence
Vast and raw

You are the air
Driving clouds brightly across the land
One tiny hand
Enfolding a forest

You are my air
My sun
With whom forest, fells and moors are
One."

Extract from the Bowland Song Cycle reproduced
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William Bowland

Age: 56

Home: Cambridge and London

Family: Married with a son of two:
Henry of Bowland.

Occupation: Cambridge don

Interests: Avant garde music,
collecting rare books, C18th
art, shooting

Favourite part of Bowland: Bowland Knotts and
Whitewell



Chris Gibbs

Age: 78

Home: Grange over Sands

Family: Married to Jenny, son
Ingolf, living in Sweden and
daughter Saga living in New
Zealand, grandson Steffan
(known as Tarone) who is a
musician, composer and guitarist in Lancashire.

Occupation: Composer

Interests: Music, art, poetry, novels, languages,
history, drama, travel, psychology, philosophy, trains

Favourite part of Bowland: Downham or Slaidburn

