

# The Herald

## Fresh flute fom Sweden

ROWENA SMITH

October 17 200

At the end of a humdrum day of bus stations, airports and motorways, the final stage of the journey to Sharon Bezaly's Swedish home combines romance and adventure; a midnight voyage to an island in the Stockholm archipelago with stars overhead and the stillness broken only by the sound of the water against the boat and the put-put of the outboard motor (not working properly).

Morning reveals a landscape of birches and wooden houses and views across the water to wooded slopes and the outskirts of Stockholm. It's an idyllic location and, I can't help thinking, an appropriate spot in which to meet a musician whose recently released recording is entitled Nordic Spell.

When not acting as ferryman for late-night visitors to her home, Bezaly is a flautist of some distinction. In this country, her name may not yet ring the bells that would accompany mention of James Galway, the man with the golden flute. With every new recording, however, her international profile increases.

In France she has been called the Paganini of the flute, while her playing has also been likened to legendary musicians such as violinist David Oistrakh and pianist Vladimir Horowitz.

Aside from her talent, and formidable technique, what is striking about Bezaly is her commitment to creating new works for her instrument. Not contemporary works in the scary, rigorously intellectual and unapproachable sense, but valuable modern additions to the repertoire. A lack of concerto-type works is a standard problem for modern-day flautists, who still rely on Mozart's concertos as the cornerstone of their repertoire.

Never mind the monotony of such restrictions; relying on works written by a composer indifferent to your instrument can't do much for a musician's morale. Mozart only succeeded in completing two-thirds of a lucrative commission for three flute concertos and, even in the second of these, he cheated by simply transcribing an existing oboe concerto.

While many flautists have, nevertheless, made a successful career out of playing what little concerto repertoire there is, it was precisely this gap that prompted Bezaly

to start commissioning new works. "I didn't want to spend the rest of my life only playing the Mozart concertos," she says. "They're wonderful and I love them, but I also wanted to do other things."

What Bezaly laments most is the lack of romantic repertoire for flute and orchestra. "Everyone in the nineteenth century was too busy writing piano concertos," she says, not something she can do much about today. She is, however, doing what she can. To date, she has had seven concertos written for her, with a further six in the pipeline in various stages of planning and completion, not bad for a musician in her early 30s.

The newly released Nordic Spell is the fruit of this commissioning project. Featuring three concertos dedicated to Bezaly by northern European composers; Kalevi Aho, Haukur Tómasson and Christian Lindberg, the recording has so far received favourable reviews – Editor's Choice in Gramophone and Choc de la Musique in this month's Monde de la Musique magazine.

Unusually, the works are approachable and attractive, as well as varied. Lindberg's concerto is technically dazzling and great fun, Aho's piece is darker hued and melancholy. Bezaly is conscious of their accessibility. "I played a lot of contemporary works as a student, but I didn't always like them," she explains. "Sometimes it seemed to be all about effects and very little to do with music. For me, music is very much about the emotions, so if it leaves me cold as a performer, the public are bound to feel the same way." While three concertos by Nordic composers seems an appropriate starting point for a musician who has made Sweden her home in recent years (Bezaly is Israeli by birth), there is a further significance in the choice of Aho's concerto. It was his work that got the commissioning project rolling in the first place.

The story starts some years ago, when Bezaly was discussing a potential project of solo flute music with her record company, BIS. The company was looking for a theme around which to build the recordings and was unwilling to suggest a particular period or composer ("doing all six Vienne sonatas? It would be so boring!") Bezaly came up with the "slightly crazy" idea of an A to Z for solo flute. Having persuaded BIS though, she found herself short of flute pieces. She asked BIS founder and managing director, Robert von Bahr (who has since become her husband and is the reason behind her move to Sweden) if he could suggest any works. He came up with Finnish composer Aho, who had, he said, written a flute solo some years ago, but withdrew it because no-one could play it fast enough. Intrigued and game for a challenge, Bezaly requested the music.

"It arrived six weeks before the recording, just as I was going off on tour and the paper was just about black, there were so many notes," she recalls. "I told Robert I wasn't sure about doing it because I didn't have time to learn it, but he said 'I've already promised Aho you'll do it'. So, there was no getting out of it."

Having played a section of the piece, Solo III, down the telephone to Aho to get his permission to record it, Bezaly and her producer then brought the first edit to his

home in Finland to seek further approval before releasing it. "He played it through once with a poker face – not one blink, not one word," she recalls. "At the end, all he said was 'can I hear it one more time?'. I was so nervous I started to walk around the room and bite my nails. After the fourth play through, by which point I almost didn't have any nails left, he started speaking in Finnish. I didn't understand but the producer later translated for me – in every man's life there is a miracle and it happens very rarely, this is one of these days. Then he asked if I would like him to write me a concerto."

The positive reception of the first A to Z volume led to offers from composers all over the world, many of whom were dazzled by the technical brilliance of Aho's Solo III. Admits Bezaly somewhat ruefully, they have tried hard to surpass it in terms of technical difficulty. The recording – evidence that here was a player who could surpass the usual limitations of the instrument – also persuaded Sofia Gubaidulina to make time to write her flute concerto. Already in the can, this piece will be released on the second CD of new concertos, alongside works dedicated to Bezaly by two other female composers, Mari Takano from Japan and Scottish-based Sally Beamish. The premiere of the latter's concerto, Callisto, is being given by Bezaly and the Royal Scottish National Orchestra in Glasgow at the end of this month, after which it is being recorded.

Not content simply to record the concertos, Bezaly is increasingly being asked to play them. The week before my visit, she'd been performing Lindberg in Iceland, the following week, Aho in Finland. Future concerts include Aho with Osmo Vänskä and the Minnesota Orchestra, Gubaidulina in London and concerts in Japan, to name but a few.

"The idea is definitely not just to play these concertos once and record them," she says emphatically. "People are keen to have them performed, especially once they hear that they're not contemporary in a scary sense, but just great music. I'm sure that at least some of them are going to become standard repertoire of the future."