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Scott Macmillan's Suite Silver Dart to soar in Glace Bay

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN

With a wave or two of his pen, Halifax composer-guitarist Scott Macmillan lends wings to Symphony Nova Scotia tonight in Glace Bay's Savoy Theatre at 7:30 p.m.

It's a Celtic Colours special event as SNS and six featured instrumental and vocal soloists perform the world premiere of Macmillan's Suite Silver Dart under the baton of SNS resident conductor, Cape Breton's own Martin MacDonald.

The Silver Dart, piloted by J. A. Douglas McCurdy over Baddeck Bay on Feb. 23, 1909, flew into history 100 years ago as the first airplane flight in Canada.

"Three years ago this Thanksgiving, Sharon Morrow from Parks Canada, Alexander Graham Bell Historical site in Baddeck approached me," Macmillan said in his composer's notes.

"She was thinking out loud about how special it would be if there could be a piece of music composed celebrating Alexander Graham Bell, the Aerial Experiment Association and the 100th anniversary of manned flight in Canada."

It didn't take Macmillan long to seize upon the idea and set to work. He decided to make only one of four movements descriptive of the flight. Thirty years ago he wrote a love song for Bell and his wife Mabel for the Mulgrave Road Theatre production of Beinn Bhreagh. The play was based on Bell's life and borrowed its title from his imposing mansion and estate on a hill overlooking Baddeck Bay, visible from the town where the Bell Museum stands today.

Bell was an accomplished piano player. Beethoven and Mendelssohn were two of his favourite composers. He also loved Cape Breton fiddle music and the songs of Harry Lauder. Macmillan wanted to recognize all of Bell's musical tastes in his new work.

But how could he integrate two such different kinds of music?

Inspiration struck when he noticed that Bell's initials and those of the association spelled AGBAEA. Play them on the piano with fiddle rhythm and you have the opening notes of a tune. Macmillan immediately made a strathspey out of them.

Serendipity struck when he discovered that elements of Beethoven's Eighth Piano Sonata, the Pathétique, one of Bell's favourite pieces to play on the piano, could be mapped into his strathspey, providing rhythmic and harmonic support as well as a shape and a counter melody.

"The strathspey has an A and a B (sections, repeated), then two more variations, so really six turns," Macmillan said in an interview just prior to the first rehearsal with SNS Wednesday

morning.

"There were six people in the AEA, Mabel, Alex, McCurdy, F. W. 'Casey' Baldwin, Glenn Curtiss and American air force Lt. Thomas Selfridge."

At age 29, Curtiss, who specialized in the construction of light gasoline motors, was the eldest.

"Then I figured out the characters. The piano is Bell, the solo fiddle is Mabel (just as a representation) and the string orchestra is the other guys. Then myself on guitar and the harp are sort of the rhythm section, not necessarily character roles as such."

With SNS providing the string orchestra, soloists for tonight's performance include pianist Paula Jane Francis, violinist Chris Stout, harpist Catriona McKay, tenor Peter Gillis and soprano Laurel Browne.

The program will include three Mendelssohn songs as well as his Hebridean Overture (full orchestra), the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, a set of traditional fiddle tunes and two Harry Lauder favourites, Roamin' in the Gloamin' and Keep Right on to the End of the Road.

The concert will also feature five student compositions arranged for orchestra by Macmillan, as The Sky's The Limit Centennial of Flight Project.

"Bell was always interested in education," Macmillan said. "We contacted five schools with music teachers we knew were good musicians: Glace Bay Senior High School (Barbara Stetter), Baddeck Academy (Fred Green), Cape Breton Highlands Academy (Lawrence Cameron), NDA School in Cheticamp (Michel Aucoin) and Waycobah First Nations Mi'kmaq School (Norma Gould and Andrea Currie)."

In a one-day composition project held in the Bell Museum last April, five student teams from each school met with Macmillan for a crash course in composing.

"I told them they had 45 minutes to write a song," Macmillan said. "I ran around to each group. Then we met together in a common room and they performed for each other. I recorded it."

The entire project, orchestrated for SNS by Macmillan will have its debut performance tonight in Glace Bay, and again Saturday afternoon at 2 p.m. in Strathspey Place in Mabou. The youth will also be presenting their creations during a school performance-open rehearsal with SNS in Baddeck at 10 a.m. today.

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