

'Land of Heart's Desire' – Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857–1930) and the *Songs of the Hebrides*

By Per G L Ahlander

BECHSTEIN HALL, WIGMORE STREET, W.

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 20th, 1912, at 8 p.m.

MRS.

KENNEDY-FRASER

(Daughter of David Kennedy, the Scots Singer).



WILL GIVE A
RECITAL
(Under the Direction of L. G. SHARPE)
OF THE
SONGS
OF THE
HEBRIDES,
(Including some **OSSIANIC LAYS**) which she
collected in the
WESTERN ISLES of SCOTLAND

SHE WILL BE ASSISTED BY
HER BROTHER
Mr. JOHN KENNEDY,
AND HER SISTERS, MISS
MARGARET KENNEDY,
AND
Mrs. TOBIAS MATTHAY.

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser

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Abstract

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857 – 1930), daughter of famous Scots tenor David Kennedy, was a Scottish pianist, music teacher, suffragette, and collector of Gaelic songs. She toured the world as her father's accompanist, studied singing in Milan and Paris, and read music at the University of Edinburgh. Widowed with two children to support, she taught piano and singing in Edinburgh, becoming part of the city's avant-garde Celtic Revival circles. After visiting Eriskay in 1905, she collected, arranged, and published the *Songs of the Hebrides*, in collaboration with Gaelic editor Kenneth Macleod. With English composer Granville Bantock, she created *The Seal-Woman: A Celtic Folk Opera*, premiered in Birmingham in 1924. Maligned after her death, accused of having exploited and misinterpreted Gaelic culture, her oeuvre vanished from recital programmes, but her consummate art song versions of Gaelic traditional songs would merit their place in the standard art song repertoire, giving presence both to Gaelic Scotland among the Late-Romantic voices from all corners of Europe and to a remarkable Scotswoman among British composers.

Keywords

Gaelic songs, celtic revival, art songs, folksong collecting, suffragette

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'Land of Heart's Desire'¹ – Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857–1930) and the *Songs of the Hebrides*

The Late- and Post-Romantic art song repertoire, from the late nineteenth century up to the first decades of the twentieth century, is a musical treasure trove. There is so much to choose from and there is such a variation when it comes to languages and national influences. The growing national-

ism all round Europe that came to influence both visual and applied art in this period was also present in music, very much so in the art song realm. Ethnomusicologists and composers went out looking for folk music in their different countries, folk music that at the time was thought of as a threatened cultural heritage, about to vanish for ever due to rapid changes in demography in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. Influences from the different geographical areas' folk music found their way into the oeuvre of the art song composers in varyingly obvious ways, not least in the Nordic countries, with Edvard Grieg in Norway, Jean Sibelius in Finland and Wilhelm Peterson-Berger in Sweden, and in regions of the Austro-Hungarian empire, with Leoš Janáček in Czech-speaking Moravia and Béla Bartók in Hungary. In Germany, Richard Wagner sought his inspiration not only in his homeland, but in a wider North European past of folk tales and sagas². In England, there is Ralph Vaughan Williams and Granville Bantock, among many others. This is where Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's *Songs of the Hebrides* fit in so beautifully, bringing the rich musical heritage of Gaelic Scotland into the world of art song.

Born in Perth on 1 October 1857, Marjory Kennedy was the fifth child in the family, her mother Elizabeth Fraser's second child. Her father was the famous Scots tenor David Kennedy (1825–86), also born in Perth (Figure 1), who made a successful London début at the Hanover Square Rooms in September 1862, accompanied by the then well-known pianist Edward Land. During the season that followed, he would give over one hundred recitals in London, giving up his financially secure preceptor position in Edinburgh for the risky life of a freelance singer. A career in opera and oratorio seemed

to lay wide open for him, but, instead, he would focus on Scottish songs, with a predilection for the works of Robert Burns, performed with piano accompaniments in the classical setting of the concert platform. Moving with her family to London at the age of five, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's strong links to the British capital were thus forged at an early formative age, and although living in Edinburgh for most of her adult life, she would always feel at home in London.³

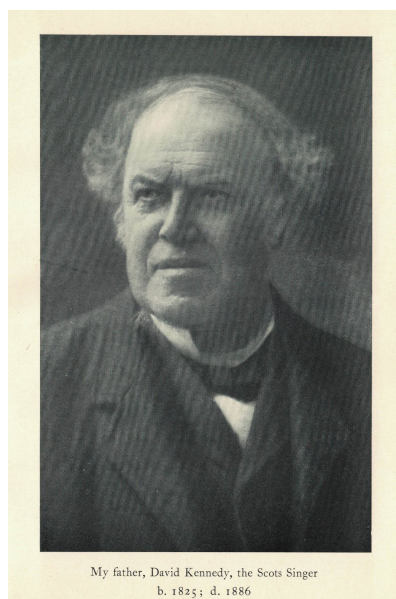


Figure 1. David Kennedy 1857–86 (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a).

Ever since David Kennedy's successful London concerts in 1862–63, Edward Land had remained his accompanist, but when planning what was to become his first American tour, he managed to turn the whole endeavour into a family concern, training his oldest daughter Helen to become his accompanist. 'He never afterwards required professional aid outside the family circle, and this gave a freedom and domestic atmosphere to his life that was its chief charm', Marjory wrote in her biography of her father (Kennedy, 1887, p. 42). Apart from the touch of charm it may have added, keeping the tours entirely within the family circle ought to have facilitated the practical arrangements considerably and, in particular, alleviated the financial burden of the undertaking. While her parents left for North America, Marjory

and her three younger sisters were temporarily lodged in Perth with Mrs Henderson, their step-grandmother. She was enthralled by all the fascinating old stories Mr Henderson told them, and she was also influenced by her strong-minded and independent maternal grand-mother, Marjory Robertson. So far, however, she had not had the opportunity to experience much Gaelic culture, Perth being on the very periphery of the Gàidhealtachd. It is true that both her parents' families did have Gaelic roots, but the old language had been long lost, and even her maternal grand-father, Charles Fraser, who had grown up a monoglot Gaelic-speaker, shunned his mother tongue in favour of English ever since his early teens.

When Elizabeth Fraser returned home from America after a year, she brought her daughters down to Edinburgh, where Marjory rapidly learnt to play the piano, making her first public appearance at the age of twelve. From the summer of 1870, thirteen-year-old Marjory Kennedy was fully established as her father's accompanist, a position she took over from her older sister Helen and which she would hold on to for the next seventeen years, until David Kennedy's sudden death in Canada in 1886. All singers know how important the accompanist is for the success of a recital, and Marjory's share in her father's hugely successful singing career ought not to be overlooked. In addition to playing for her father, she would regularly perform as a singer in the family concerts, both in ensembles and as a soloist, thus gaining an exceptionally in-depth and hands-on knowledge of the Kennedys' repertoire of vocal and instrumental Scottish Lowland music.⁴

The years that followed were a whirl of travelling and performing for Marjory Kennedy, dominated by their extensive world tour, beginning in Australia and New Zealand, continuing via Honolulu to the United States of America and Canada. In the autumn of 1879, when the family embarked on their tour of the Indian subcontinent, Marjory, instead, travelled to Milan, where her two older brothers were studying singing with Francesco Lamperti.⁵ She spent about eighteen months in Italy, mainly studying with Signora Gambardella,⁶ and this period came to mean a lot to

her, as it gave her a unique insight into the world of Italian opera and a familiarity with the international top-level singing tuition of the period. Her brief spell in Paris, where she and her sister Helen studied singing at Mathilde Marchesi's private school in the spring of 1882,⁷ added further to her overview of advanced continental vocal training methods and trends. Later in life, she would make frequent references to both her musical training in Italy and her studies with Madame Marchesi in Paris.

In 1883–84, the Kennedys embarked on a second tour of Australia and New Zealand, and when her brother Robert left the company and settled permanently in Australia, Marjory was entrusted with the important position as business manager. The entertainment industry was one of the few professions where women could aspire to an independent professional career and be on fairly equal terms with men, but many of the companies the Kennedys did business with were nevertheless surprised when she arrived to sign the contracts – ‘*Mais nous avons changé tout cela*’,⁸ she commented herself in her autobiography (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a, p. 86). By then, women's role in society had certainly changed drastically, and together with many other women of her generation, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser had been deeply involved in the battle for equality of opportunity between men and women.

Having herself had the good fortune of growing up in an environment where both men and women could develop their respective talents and skills, Marjory Kennedy must soon have realised that that was the exception rather than the rule. Moreover, her paternal and maternal grandfathers being respectively a weaver and a farm servant, she was undoubtedly also aware of her family's humble social background, in a society where class and wealth were paramount. When her father embarked on a professional singing career, the Kennedys came to belong to the classless stratum of artists. Although popularity and fame could often open doors that would otherwise have remained barred, it was a world whose inhabitants were, in a curious way, both admired

and despised, and, although society had changed considerably during the long nineteenth century, many people still held strong views on the respectability of music and musicians. The several years spent in the colonial outposts of the British Empire and in the United States – apart from being a financial necessity – did give them an opportunity to escape the more rigid social structures at home in Britain, and Marjory Kennedy thus grew up in a far more egalitarian milieu than many of her contemporaries. Seemingly at liberty, she could devote herself entirely to her career as a performer. Not that it was problematic per se for a woman to study music in the Victorian era, and the musical skills usually acquired by young women of the middle- and upper-classes in mid-nineteenth century Britain ‘were seen to add to their personal decorative charm and marriageability’ (Fuller, 1998, p. 43). However, these skills were clearly meant ‘for use within the private, domestic sphere of the home’, and ‘[f]or these women, to appear on the public, professional stage as musicians was as shocking and unorthodox as it was for their contemporaries who wanted to work as actresses’. Even in the artistic professions, however, marriage was still seen as the end of a woman's career, and since both Marjory and her sister Helen were about to get married at the time of their father's death, they both decided to give up their professional work, which meant the demise of the Kennedys' ‘Songs of Scotland’ touring company.

Sadly, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's married bliss lasted less than four years, until her mathematician husband Alec Fraser's untimely death from pulmonary tuberculosis in November 1890. Living thenceforth with her mother must have eased the situation, as, at that time, a woman who had to earn her own living, let alone provide for her children, would have found herself in a difficult position. ‘[B]y cadging odd jobs from newspapers, by reporting a donkey show here or a wedding there’, Virginia Woolf's alter ego in *A Room of One's Own* sarcastically recalled having survived, prior to coming into some money (Woolf, 1929/1977, p. 37). ‘I had

earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children in a kindergarten. Such were the chief occupations that were open to women before 1918.’ Different to Mrs Woolf's protagonist, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser, being the qualified musician she was, could fall back on music tuition, a profession where women did have a fair chance of making a decent living, and over the years, she would manage both to build a professionally successful career within teaching, performing, lecturing and writing, and to raise a family.

Ahead of her time, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, although born in mid-Victorian years, was in essence a typical Edwardian woman – one of the ‘New Women’ that were beginning to appear towards the end of the nineteenth century. A multi-talented and self-supporting professional, she was always eager to develop and broaden her skills and to further her career. From her years as a touring musician, she was accustomed to interacting with a wide range of people and to feeling comfortable in the limelight – talents and skills not too common among the women of her generation.

In the 1890s, while establishing herself as a teacher of piano and singing in Edinburgh, she studied music at the University of Edinburgh under Professor Frederick Niecks, as one of the revered institution's first women students, appearing twice in the Class Prize Lists in 1893. She soon became part of the city's artistic avant-garde circles, meeting with Alexander Carmichael, John Duncan, Patrick Geddes and Phoebe Traquair – all leading lights of the Arts & Crafts movement in Scotland. Possibly through her friendship with Patrick Geddes' wife Anna Geddes, a trained pianist like herself, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser became involved in Geddes' pioneering sociological projects in the Scottish capital, and for several years, she was an active member of the Edinburgh Social Union. Moreover, as a staff member of the Edinburgh Summer Meetings, she produced annual series of themed lecture-recitals, where she not only lectured, but also accompa-

“The secret of her success is not difficult to fathom”



nied the soloists she had engaged to provide the musical illustrations.

In March 1903, she launched her own series of public lecture-recitals on ‘Songs and Song-writers’, introducing and explaining the world of art song to Scottish audiences. Over the four seasons the series lasted, she covered important parts of the recitalists’ repertoire, and her performances were most cordially received. ‘Mrs Fraser has the happy knack of keeping her hearers spell-bound throughout these recitals’, the *Edinburgh Magazine* commented in January 1907 (‘A Visit to Bayreuth’, 1907, p. 1465). ‘The secret of her success is not difficult to fathom. It lies in her innate love and comprehensive knowledge of her subject, and being gifted with a graphic choice of artistic phraseology, she at once brings listeners and lecturer into complete *rapprochement*.’

Politics was frequently discussed around the Kennedy family table and Marjory’s lifelong passion for social justice and equality of opportunity between men and women was founded at an early age. Nowadays, she is mainly known for her *Songs of the Hebrides* collections, but when looking at her life from a different perspective, the social dimension stands out markedly against her multifarious undertakings. While teaching music, giving lecture-recital series, and working as music critic for the *Edinburgh Evening News*, she was drawn to the women’s suffrage movement, which was gaining momentum at the

time. Although vigilantly eschewing any illegal or violent activities, she was to become deeply involved in the proceedings, and many of the women she acquainted herself with while a suffragette would remain her friends for the rest of her life. Despite her own position as one of the few professional women in Scotland, she may not have been a feminist in a stricter sense; instead, her main concern was equality of opportunity more generally – for both women and men. To make music and music education more easily accessible to those with interest and talent – irrespective of social and financial background – was another heartfelt ambition of hers. ‘Music is not produced by the privileged classes, and should not be so almost exclusively the luxury of the well-to-do as it is in Scotland to-day’, she asserted in her contribution to the *Blue Blanket* in 1912 (Kennedy-Fraser, 1912, pp. 34–35). What public issues to focus on primarily, however, considering the blatantly disadvantaged position of women and children in the society in which she lived and worked, was clearly not too difficult a decision for her, and in 1910, when returned as parish councillor in Edinburgh, she came to concern herself mainly with relief matters. During the Great War, similarly, the beneficiaries of the innumerable charity recitals she gave were usually either needy women and children directly, or projects initiated by women’s organisations, like Elsie Inglis’ Scottish Women’s Hospitals. Furthermore, having by then formed close links to the Western Isles through her song-

collecting work, she also supported projects aimed specifically at providing relief for Hebridean women and children.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser had befriended Scottish painter John Duncan (1866–1945) back in 1891, through Patrick Geddes and her involvement in the Edinburgh Summer Meetings.¹¹ After some years spent in the United States, Duncan was, in Kennedy-Fraser’s own words, ‘fired with the ambition to master Gaelic and to steep himself in the atmosphere of Celticism’ (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a, p. 107), and in 1904, he settled on the isolated island of Eriskay for the summer (Figure 2), where he met with Fr Allan McDonald, Catholic priest, Celtic scholar and an authority on Celtic folklore – well-known far beyond the Hebrides. From the collector Alexander Carmichael he already knew that ‘all the verses in his *Carmina Gadelica* had tunes, but, having no knowledge of musical notation, he [Alexander Carmichael] was unable to note them’ (Hosking, 1950, p. 39). When John Duncan then ‘heard one of the islanders singing some of Carmichael’s verses, and also discovered that Father Alan Macdonald had other songs which Dr. Carmichael had not noted’, he felt that the tunes needed to be documented by a competent musician. Knowing that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser both had the necessary musical knowledge and dreamt of doing original research work in Celtic music, he tried to persuade her to join him and his artist friends there for the summer.

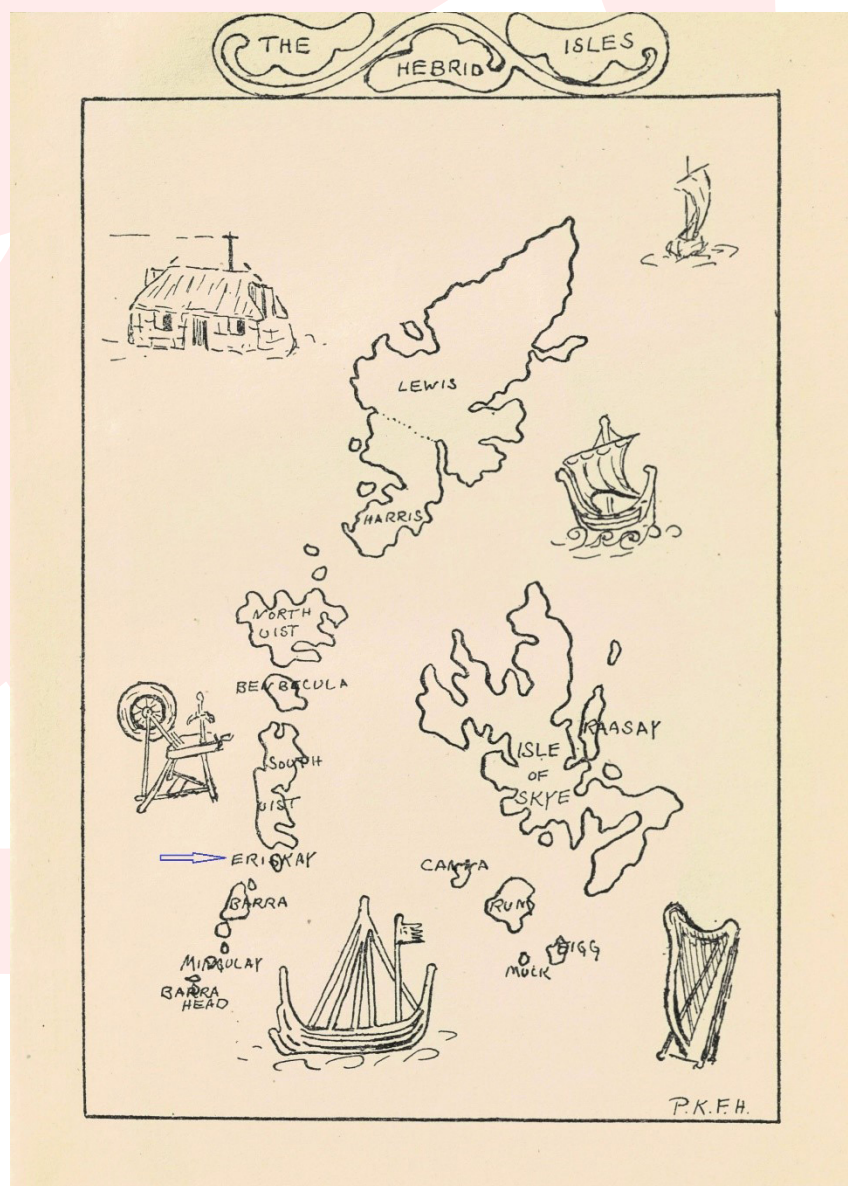


Figure 2. *The Hebrid Isles*, drawing by Patuffa Kennedy-Fraser Hood [the blue arrow pointing at the island of Eriskay is my insertion] (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a).

Kennedy-Fraser had other commitments that summer, but the following year, at the beginning of August 1905, she was finally ready to embark on her first trip to the Western Isles.

Her somewhat hasty decision to leave at that very moment was possibly also a result of a telegram from John Duncan, who had returned to paint in Eriskay for a second period of six months that summer. American musician and song collector Amy Murray was likewise spending time there in the summer of 1905, and one day she told Duncan that 'she had collected over one hundred folk-tunes on Eriskay which she intended to publish in America'. In his speedy telegram to Marjory Kennedy-Fraser, he appealed to her sense of patriotism and asked her 'to come forthwith to Eriskay to collect some of the songs and publish them in Great Britain before Amy Murray could publish hers in America' (Hosking, 1950, p. 40). '[T]his! is the place you've been looking for. The songs are here', Patuffa Kennedy-Fraser recollected John Duncan writing to her mother (Kennedy-Fraser Hood, 1965, p. 7), and the telegram evidently had the desired effect.

Music teaching may not have been Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's true passion in life, but it was a reliable source of income, crucially important for a single breadwinner, with two children to maintain. But when she landed in Eriskay at the age of forty-eight, a new phase of her life was about to begin. For many years, she had taken an interest in the songs of the Gaels and, after some language coaching sessions with the renowned Scottish poet Mary Mackellar, she had both arranged and performed several Gaelic songs as part of the Kennedys' 'Songs of Scotland' concerts. As a musician, she was thrilled by the melodic and modal richness of the musical material, and with her professional knowledge of art songs, she realised the possibilities offered by what she heard on the island. Moreover, as a champion of social equality, she saw a way of rehabilitating the reputation of the Gaels, who at the time – if noticed at all – were usually thought of as backward, uneducated and devoid of any cultural heritage

worth preserving; 'a time when the cultural inheritance of the Gael was slighted, abused and set at naught every minute of the day and in every place from Highland schoolrooms up through churches and courts to Parliament itself' (Black, 2008, p. 62).

An increased interest in national heritage in general, and in the origins of the individual European nations in particular, had been brought about by the waves of nationalism that swept over Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century, and Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's wish to speak for the Gaels was thus by no means unique, being, instead, fully in line with the Zeitgeist of the era. The Gael problem – the specifically Scottish project of 'present[ing] the Gaels as a distinct *Kulturvolk*' – was epitomised by Carmina Gadelica, the monumental life-time achievement of Alexander Carmichael, with whom Kennedy-Fraser was well acquainted (Meek, 2007, pp. 84, 104). Although a seminal work in itself, it did appear against a backdrop of the Celtic Revival movement, by then in its heyday; a movement which sought its inspiration in a remote, idealised past of Celtic art, literature, and chivalry. In this context, the *Songs of the Hebrides* volumes undoubtedly fitted in perfectly, both visually and content wise.

Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's very first Hebridean recital, drawing on what she had collected in the summer of 1905, took place in Edinburgh on Saturday 9 February 1907. With the assistance of her sister, contralto Margaret Kennedy, fourteen Hebridean songs were presented, all with piano accompaniments composed by Kennedy-Fraser, in the style of Claude Debussy. But not having noted down more than snippets of the Gaelic verses while on Eriskay, she wrote her own English words to some of the songs, something she was to regret later in life. The recital was an immediate success and, as she later remembered, 'aroused such interest that I felt justified in confining myself in the future to Hebridean research and song' (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a, p. 103). Some of her arrangements appeared in print shortly afterwards, published privately at her own risk,

and that summer, together with her daughter Patuffa, she made her second trip to Eriskay. Back in the summer of 1905, Marjory had noted down the songs entirely in paper and pencil, but this time, she brought along her newly acquired Edison Bell graphophone, which would save her much time and, more importantly, increase the accuracy of her collecting work. Although small and easily portable, the graphophone and the wax cylinders were nevertheless both fragile and sensitive to changes in humidity, and Marjory and her daughter tended not to carry their equipment around too much. Therefore, most of the recordings were made either in the Post Office, a popular venue for ceilidhs, in young fisher Gillespie Macinnes' home, or in the presbytery, where Fr Allan McDonald's successor, the Rev. John Macneill, was now in residence. Patuffa wrote in a letter that 'in the first three weeks that we were there [in Eriskay] we got a hundred different songs' (Kennedy-Fraser Hood, 1965, p. 1).

Having devoted her first Hebridean visit entirely to the small island of Eriskay, in 1907, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and her daughter Patuffa continued their journey southwards to the Barra Isles, which over the years were to become of vital importance to her song collecting work.

Although not the first in Britain to make use of recording equipment when collecting folk songs, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser was indeed one of the pioneers – Percy Grainger had made recordings in North Lincolnshire in July and August 1906, Lucy Broadwood used a phonograph in Arisaig, Scotland, in July 1907, and Cecil Sharp and Ralph Vaughan Williams made a few cylinder recordings in 1907–09. On the Continent, however, such recordings were being made already by the end of the nineteenth century; by Yevgeniya Linyova, who began recording polyphonic folk songs in the European part of Russia in 1897, and by Béla Bartók, who used the phonograph to collect folk music in Central Europe from 1906.

Following the successful Hebridean recital in Edinburgh, a similar

performance was given in Glasgow on 1 November 1907, under the auspices of Feill a' Chomuinn Ghaidhealach. Public interest remained high, and Marjory and her sister Margaret began to receive invitations to perform both around Scotland and beyond. English composer Rutland Boughton, who heard a selection of the songs at a private gathering, was mesmerised by their beauty and their atmospheric accompaniments, and Irish poet and folk song collector Alfred Perceval Graves told Arthur Boosey, the well-known music publisher in London, about Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's work and the fascinating Celtic songs she had brought to the concert platform. After performing at a Pan-Celtic gathering in London early in 1908, she was approached by Mr Boosey, who undertook to publish a collection of Hebridean songs.

Until the spring of 1908, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser had worked entirely on her own with the Hebridean material. She felt perfectly capable of dealing with the musical side of the project herself, but she did worry about the Gaelic words. She did have some basic Gaelic after her studies with Mary Mackellar back in the 1880s, and she had frequently performed Gaelic songs in the Kennedys' 'Songs of Scotland' recitals around the world, but she knew that her knowledge of the language was far from adequate and that she needed a reliable Gaelic editor. After her deal with Boosey & Co. regarding the publication of what was to become the first *Songs of the Hebrides* volume, the matter became urgent. On the advice of Professor Donald MacKinnon, the first professor of Celtic at the University of Edinburgh, she contacted Kenneth Macleod, a native Gaelic speaker and, at the time, a full-time lay missionary of the Church of Scotland. Mr Macleod accepted the invitation, and after a period of intense work, the first volume of *Songs of the Hebrides*, containing forty-five songs and dedicated 'To the Women of the Hebrides', came on the market in May 1909 (Kennedy-Fraser & Macleod, 1909).

The second volume, dedicated 'To Scots and other Celts', followed in 1917 and contained fifty-three songs

(Kennedy-Fraser & Macleod, 1917), five of which were set by Granville Bantock, with whom Mrs Kennedy-Fraser was collaborating at the time. The third and final volume in the trilogy reached the public in 1921; dedicated 'To my Sister Margaret Kennedy' it comprised a total of fifty-one songs (Kennedy-Fraser & Macleod, 1921). The completion of the trilogy did not mark the end of publishing though; further trips to Barra and the Isle of Skye resulted in a fourth collection of forty-one more songs, named *From the Hebrides: Further Gleanings of Tale and Song* and published in 1925 by Paterson's Publications in Glasgow (Kennedy-Fraser & Macleod, 1925). Like the three *Songs of the Hebrides* volumes, the fourth collection was the result of a collaboration between Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth Macleod, but when *More Songs of the Hebrides*, the fifth and final volume of eighteen new songs, was published in London by Boosey & Co. in 1929, their twenty years of working together had sadly come to an end, leaving Kennedy-Fraser the sole editor (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929b). There is no dedication in this volume, neither any introduction; instead, it opens with a musicological section entitled 'Some Tunes from my Note Books of 1926–27 in the Outer Isles', written at the specific request of French musicologist and Breton nationalist Maurice Duhamel.¹³

Marjory Kennedy-Fraser met with English composer Granville Bantock (1868–1946) for the first time in 1913, but Bantock had written to her the year before, asking her permission to arrange one of her Hebridean songs for a chorus of unaccompanied voices. Permission was duly given, and several other arrangements of her songs followed and were published and performed, including some settings for solo voice and full orchestra at the request of dramatic tenor Frank Mullings, who preferred to sing with orchestra. In their correspondence, the idea of a Gaelic folk opera surfaced for the first time in 1917, and from then on, for the next seven years, this is a project that intermittently occupies them both. Somewhere along the way, they decided on the story of the Seal-Woman, Marjory

Kennedy-Fraser was to write the libretto and decide which of her Hebridean songs were to be included, and Granville Bantock would turn it all into an opera, basing his orchestration on Kennedy-Fraser's already published piano accompaniments. The seal-woman story, possibly of Scandinavian origin (Craigie, 1896, pp. 231–233), is a well-known example of a water-being legend, which are legion in European folklore. Depending on their habitat, the creatures may differ in appearance, but the general theme is usually the same, and there is thus an obvious link between Kennedy-Fraser and Bantock's Seal-Woman character and Rusalka, the water sprite in Antonín Dvořák's much-loved opera *Rusalka* from 1900. The vocal score of *The Seal-Woman* was published by Boosey & Co. in 1924 (Kennedy-Fraser & Bantock, 1924). Marjory Kennedy-Fraser is referred to as the librettist and Granville Bantock as the composer of the opera, but it was a true collaboration, which is clearly indicated in the vocal score, stating that '[i]n all announcements and programmes [...] the names of both composers must be printed M. Kennedy-Fraser and Granville Bantock'. Although Kennedy-Fraser was responsible for the text, Bantock contributed many ideas and suggested several modifications. The orchestration was Bantock's work, but it does range from near note-for-note transcriptions of several of Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's song accompaniments to typically Bantockian orchestral interludes.

On 27 September 1924, *The Seal-Woman*, produced by Barry Jackson, opened at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. Stage design and costumes were by Paul Shelving and the conductor Adrian Boult, with Marjory Kennedy-Fraser singing the Cailleach – An old Crone (contralto), one of the leading parts. If the music was well received, the libretto was not, and the plot was considered dramaturgically deficient, but nonetheless, the fourteen consecutive performances – 'to packed houses' (Forbes, 1990, p. 97) – went well. The original cast came together once again in 1927 for a direct radio broadcast of the opera from Daventry, but since then,

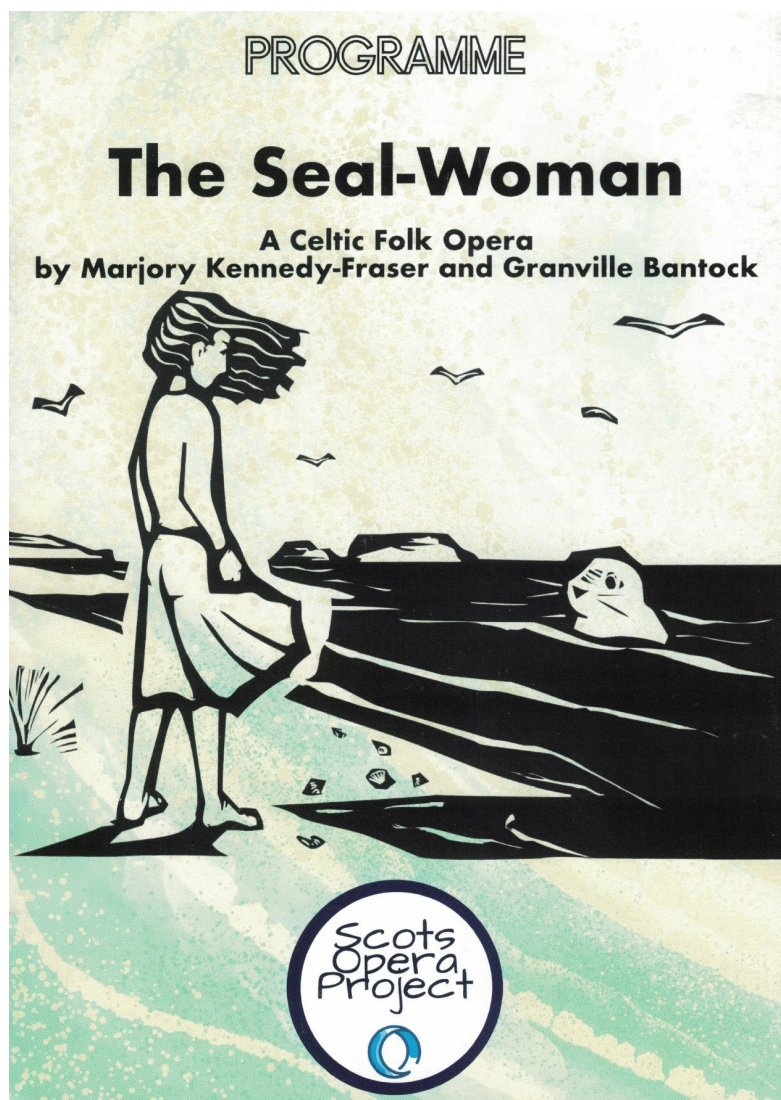


Figure 3. Opera programme for Scots Opera Project's production of *The Seal-Woman* in 2024.

dy-Fraser was successful indeed. Influential individuals of the period were fascinated by the many songs and tales she published together with Kenneth Macleod, and they both 'did a lot to popularise a more positive view of Gaeldom and boost the self-confidence of a people who had been taught for generations that their culture was worthless' (Dressler, 1998, p. 107). Her *Songs of the Hebrides* recitals became regular features of the prestigious London music scene (Figure 4), and her recitals in North America and in continental Europe, as well as her contacts with Maurice Duhamel and other international authorities on folk music, made Hebridean music known far beyond Scotland.

*On front page of the article: Figure 4. Publicity leaflet for a *Songs of the Hebrides* recital at Bechstein Hall (now Wigmore Hall) in London, on 20 March 1912.

If Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's observations relating to sociological and demographic matters were concordant with those of at least her more enlightened Scottish contemporaries, her approach to the music she came to hear in Eriskay was clearly more European than British, which is not surprising, considering how deeply influenced she was by the musical development on the Continent, in particular within the areas of opera and art song. Apart from her more theoretical academic work of analysing and systematising the musical components of the songs she collected, results of which can be found both in her extensive introductions to the published volumes of Hebridean songs and in her many articles and lectures, she saw the possibility 'of a new development in the direction of a *national Scoto-Celtic* song – an art-song that should incorporate faithfully within itself our Scoto-Celtic melodic heritage' (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a, p. 121).

there have only been a few amateur productions, and until recently, there was no commercial recording of the opera available. Over the last fifteen odd years, I have returned to this fascinating opera on several occasions in conference papers and lectures, and in 2020, Musica Scotica Trust in Glasgow published my essay on the subject (Ahlander, 2020). In 2024, the Scots Opera Project, a small professional opera company in the west of Scotland, staged the opera at venues across the country (Figure 3), and I was delighted to be asked to contribute a text to their opera programme (Scots Opera Project, 2024). The production was nominated for the International Opera Award 2024,

in the category of Rediscovered Work (International Opera Award, 2024). In the meantime, Retrospect Opera in England had decided to produce a full recording of the opera, having painstakingly recreated the orchestral material that Boosey & Hawkes managed to lose when clearing out their archives some years earlier. The complete recording, with Scottish Opera's orchestra and a fully professional cast, was released in June 2025 (Retrospect Opera, n.d.).

In her ambition to show Gaelic culture as one of the many, equally valuable and important components of Europe's cultural heritage, Kenne-

From the end of the nineteenth century, the editing of folk songs had become an everyday activity among many of her continental contemporaries. 'Folk-songs of every country play an important part in the development of music – choral (both church and lay), operatic and symphonic – to all of which they supply strikingly rich material', Russian singer and musicologist Yevgeniya Linyova once commented (Lineff, 1905, p. ii). '[A] time will come when all art music will spring from a common folk source, when we shall embrace each other in these created works by the shared experience of folk-song', Czech composer Leoš Janáček maintained in 1926, speaking at a London concert of English folk song (Stuckenschmidt, 1969, p. 158). 'Folk-song binds together all mankind in one spirit, one happiness, one salvation.' So far, however, Scottish Gaelic songs were not part of the European art song repertoire. Schubert, Weber, Grieg and Dvořák, M. N. Munro wrote in the *Celtic Review* in 1908: 'These great musicians were too wise to think the songs of their own country unworthy of their notice'. 'Let us cherish our native music as a valuable possession not only for ourselves, but for the enrichment of the treasures of European Folk-Song' (Munro, 1908, pp. 134, 146). 'Folk-song was the foundation of all national music, and if we Scots desired to be considered a musical nation, we could not afford to ignore our national heritage', Scottish baritone Robert Burnett told his audience in a lecture in 1912 ('Scottish baritone Robert Burnett', 1912, p. 53).

In Britain, attitudes changed far more slowly than on the Continent, and seemingly unaware of the surge in folk music related art songs around Europe, William Saunders averred in 1927 that '[w]hen Mr. Cecil Sharp and Mrs. Kennedy-Fraser respectively make a collection of Somerset and Hebridean Folk-Songs to-day, they are compelled to supply pianoforte accompaniments to the songs and to round them off in the conventional manner of the modern art-song in order to bring them sufficiently into line with the assumed culture of the age, and even then they are accepted only as curiosities, or as works of an entirely exotic character' (Saunders, 1927, p. 80).

Considered in the context of the extensive art song repertoire, it is striking how well the *Songs of the Hebrides* fit in among the many contemporary contributions to the genre. In a Gaelic context, however, her work was indeed a new phenomenon, a fact which was clearly pointed out by An Comunn Gaidhealach in its tribute to her in 1930: 'She created art song which was a new creation. [...] They developed a new form, and the new form which arose out of the beautiful Gaelic melodies was the art song.' ('An Comunn Gaidhealach', 1930). 'Never before had the world outside Gaeldom been so impressively and entrancingly made aware of the quantity and quality of Hebridean music', Thomas M. Murchison noted in 1988, writing about Kenneth Macleod (Murchison, 1988, pp. xxxiv–xxxv); that both Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and her collaborator 'had "processed" the "raw material" they used' was never concealed by either of them.

Both the *Songs of the Hebrides* and many of Kennedy-Fraser's other song arrangements and piano pieces remained popular and were regularly performed throughout the 1930s, but with changes in taste and preference, during and after the Second World War, they gradually began to sink into oblivion and slowly vanished from recital programmes. Some of her songs, however, having found their way into school song collections, lived on for many more years, albeit in much simplified and rather uninspired arrangements. But at about the time of her passing in 1930, both art song recitals and opera performances were beginning to be scorned for being 'high culture', dusty symbols of a bourgeois past, and large chunks of the repertoire – the Late-Romantic in particular – were relegated to the attics. In Scotland, there were additional issues that stirred up fierce controversies, and influential Scottish poet Sorley MacLean and his trendsetting entourage were particularly scornful in their comments on Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's Hebridean song arrangements. In February 1940, in a letter to Douglas Young, Scottish author George Campbell Hay praised MacLean for not having 'wandered

off into a drawingroom Tìr Nan Òg'¹⁵ at the heels of the Clàrsach Society and the Kennedy Frasers' (Hay, 2003, p. 503). Equally venomous were the attacks on Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's collaborator Kenneth Macleod, the Gaelic editor of the *Songs of the Hebrides*. Ethel Bassin's more temperate comments from the 1970s nevertheless clearly express what was often being said at the time: 'No doubt the versions of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and Kenneth MacLeod were very charming, even exciting, but it is a period charm. The two collaborators had translated their material, whether from Frances Tolmie or from other sources, into drawing-room songs that made too facile, too vogueish an appeal to last.' (Bassin, 1977, p. 143).

There were other voices heard though, even in those years; in 1957, Maurice Lindsay questioned the 'artistic value [of a song recording], lying sealed in a tin can on a University library shelf', appreciating, however, that '[t]he crack-voiced crooning of an old crone into a tape-machine may result in the discovery of new facts about the Gaelic way of life in past ages' (Lindsay, 1957, p. 44).

'Whatever critical views may have been politely expressed while the enterprise was still underway', Virginia Blankenhorn points out in her essay '*Songs of the Hebrides* and the Critics' (Blankenhorn, 2018, pp. 10–11); 'in the 1930s the gloves came off, and it became clear that a number of Gaels were happy neither with the contents of *Songs of the Hebrides*, nor with the praise that the work had received'. My own impression is that such disapproving views are still prevalent within certain circles in Scotland, where even today, the mere mentioning of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser can stir up strong emotions. Blankenhorn continues: 'The emergence of Modernism in the years following the Great War had a peculiar intensity for Scotland, and especially for Gaels: not just the carnage of the war itself, which robbed so many communities of their young men; [...] but also the unkept promises made to those who had fought, the Gaels' ongoing demand for rights to the land upon which they had lived for centuries, the continu-

ing erosion of the Gaelic language, and the mass emigration of Gaels to Canada and elsewhere – anger about all of these things energized the response of a new generation of university-educated Gaelic-speakers to what they rightly saw as the exploitation of their native arts by the same dominant culture that seemed hell-bent on destroying their way of life.’

In the eyes of some particularly influential Scots, Marjory Kennedy-Fraser ended up as the scapegoat for all of this, and her oeuvre was criticised for being enveloped in the ‘the aesthetic consciousness of the Celtic Twilight’ and it was argued that her ‘arrangements of Gaelic songs caused actual harm to native Gaelic tradition, as well as “pain and humiliation” to Gaels’, but, concludes Blankenhorn, ‘[t]hese two criticisms reflect less upon Mrs Kennedy-Fraser’s methods and motivation than upon the aesthetic values of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. The idea that [she] should be held personally responsible for the aesthetic excesses of the Celtic Revival is, plainly, ludicrous’ (Blankenhorn, 2018, p. 28). For these critics though, Mrs Kennedy-Fraser represented an ideal target, both because she was commercially successful and because she was a woman.

When forming an opinion on Kennedy-Fraser’s *Songs of the Hebrides*, they ought to be considered in their proper context, as part of the European Late-Romantic art song repertoire. But having to decide whether we prefer an art song recital, or a more traditional rendering of Gaelic songs seems to me an unnecessary exercise, since nothing hinders the same listener from appreciating both styles.

With hardly any existing recordings, an assessment of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser as a performer needs to be

based solely on opinions documented by her contemporaries. From the vast number of press reviews available, as well as from several other sources, she emerges as an outstanding performer and a most proficient pianist. Both her excellent musicianship and her artistry were always praised, but as a singer, she appears to have been less successful. Repeatedly given credit for her perfect intonation and unfaltering sense of rhythm, her voice never gave rise to any particular acclaim. But was she a composer – perhaps even an orchestral composer *manquée*? This is difficult to know. Her vast output of song arrangements, as well as her many lectures and publications dealing with the Hebridean scales and modes, clearly show that she had the necessary technical knowledge of music theory, and her several albums of piano pieces as well as her suite for violoncello and piano move in the borderland between arrangements and original compositions. However, both her song arrangements and her piano works drew on her training and experience as a pianist and singer, and as she did not have either any formal training in orchestration or any practical experience of orchestral work, she might have felt any such undertakings beyond her capacity. Being constrained to earn a living, presumably, she did not have the necessary time to spend either. She might also have been a realist, knowing very well that the few women composers of her era were, like herself, concentrating on art songs, the exception being Ethel Smyth, who had private means at her disposal. ‘The woman composer stands where the actress stood in the time of Shakespeare’, Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One’s Own*, exasperated by what Cecil Gray had written, ‘in this year of grace, 1928, of women who try to write music’ (Woolf, 1929/1977, p. 53). ‘Of Mlle Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr. Johnson’s dictum

concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music: “Sir, a woman’s composing is like a dog’s walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.” Considered apart from her sex, her music is wholly negligible.’ (Gray, 1927, pp. 245–246).

But things do change over time – even in Scotland – and new generations grow up, without the biases of their elders. ‘One of the great delights of Gaelic song is the way in which the traditional material can be used in many forms from solo singing to rock music to orchestral arrangements’, Christopher MacLeod maintained in 2002 (MacLeod, 2002, p. 77). These days, several items from the *Songs of the Hebrides* do turn up in the repertoires of modern Gaelic singers, without the piano arrangements that Marjory Kennedy-Fraser once provided for them. It thus seems that Kennedy-Fraser may be having the last laugh on her critics, with her own songs becoming ‘standards’ among modern performers, who, unaware of their origins, apparently regard them as ‘traditional’.¹⁶

In 1930, Professor Tovey wrote about the *Songs of the Hebrides* that ‘the work [...] will surely be continued as to the use of these Hebridean songs by concert singers’ (Tovey, 1930). There are some recent *Songs of the Hebrides* recordings by distinguished classical performers available,¹⁷ but Marjory Kennedy-Fraser’s consummate art song versions of Gaelic traditional songs would undoubtedly merit their permanent place in vocal recitalists’ standard art song repertoire, thereby giving presence both to Gaelic Scotland among the Late-Romantic voices from all corners of Europe and beyond and to a remarkable Scots-woman among distinguished British composers.



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Notes

¹ 'Land of Heart's Desire' is one among the best-known songs of the *Songs of the Hebrides*, named after William B. Yeats' play *The Land of Heart's Desire*, first performed in 1894. For Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's encounter with the Irish author, when invited to one of his regular gatherings at his flat in London in 1909, see her autobiography (Kennedy-Fraser, 1929a, pp. 158–59).

² For Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's thoughts about potential links between Hebridean songs and Wagnerian leitmotifs and airs – particularly Senta's ballad – see 'Richard Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer* – A Flying Hebridean in Disguise?' (Ahlander, 2013b).

³ The biographical information on the Kennedys and Marjory Kennedy(-Fraser) draws on my unpublished doctoral dissertation *Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857–1930) and Her Time: A Contextual Study* (Ahlander, 2009). For a summary, published in Swedish, see 'Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1857–1930) och Hebridernas sånger: Ett porträtt av en skotsk musiker, kulturentreprenör, suffragett och musikforskare' (Ahlander, 2010).

⁴ For a detailed description of the Kennedys' overseas tours from 1866 to 1886, together with a listing of their concert repertoire, see 'Taking 'Twa Hours at Home' to the New World: The Overseas Tours of David Kennedy's Family Music Troupe in 1866–86' (Ahlander, 2013c).

⁵ Francesco Lamperti (1811/3–92) was an Italian singing teacher and opera director, professor of singing at the Milan Conservatory 1850–75.

⁶ Elisa/Annetta] Gambardella (fl. 1840–81), pupil of Gioachino Rossini in Bologna, was an Italian soprano and singing teacher.

⁷ Mathilde Marchesi (1821–1913), pupil of Manuel García Jr, was a German mezzo-soprano and singing teacher, with her own singing academy in Paris, the École Marchesi.

⁸ 'But we have changed all that'.

⁹ For an overview of the avant-garde cultural circles in Edinburgh around 1900, see 'Celtic Revival and Arts and Crafts around 1900: Edinburgh and Dublin Connected by a Circle of Trendsetting Individuals' (Ahlander, 2013a).

¹⁰ For information about Dr Elsie Inglis' Scottish Women's Hospitals, see Elsie Inglis: *Founder of battlefield hospitals run entirely by women* (Leneman, 1998).

¹¹ John Duncan's portrait of Marjory Kennedy-Fraser from c.1922 is in the collections of the National Galleries of Scotland and on display at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/2482/marjory-kennedy-fraser-1857-1930-musician-and-collector-hebridean-songs>

¹² The three *Songs of the Hebrides* volumes are available online: <https://archive.org/details/songsofhebridesf00unse/mode/2up>

¹³ For a discussion on Marjory Kennedy-Fraser's interest in the links between Gaelic Scotland and Brittany, see 'Musical Pan-Celticism: How Breton musicologists inspired Scottish Marjory Kennedy-Fraser to collect, arrange and publish Gaelic traditional songs' (Ahlander, 2017).

¹⁴ It is worth noting that it was on Mrs Kennedy-Fraser's explicit request to Boosey & Co. that her name was printed 'M. Kennedy-Fraser' and not 'Marjory Kennedy-Fraser'.

¹⁵ 'The Land of the Young', the Scottish Gaelic name for the Celtic Otherworld.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Dr Virginia Blankenhorn for kindly sharing with me her thoughts on present-day traditional Gaelic singers' repertoires.

¹⁷ Two recommended recordings: *Land of Heart's Desire: Songs of the Hebrides* from the Collection by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser (1997), with Lisa Milne, soprano, and Sioned Williams, harp (Hyperion Records CDA66988) and *Songs of Scotland* (2000), with Marie McLaughlin, soprano, Malcolm Martineau, piano, and Isobel Frayling-Cork, clarsach (Hyperion Records CDA67106).