Melangell Variations

Words by Gwyneth Lewis

1. The Story
Not that the hunting wasn’t hard that day –
the greyhounds running whole rivers of scents –
not that we’d let much get away
not that the hare wasn’t innocent
But canny as we ran her to ground
into a thicket. Not that she cried
more than they do . . . but that she found
a girl in a thornbush and tried to hide
herself in her petticoats, sun under cloud.
She sat there, a letter, the start of a tome
about stillness. The master allowed
the dogs to calm down. They settled, at home
watching the virgin in her shaking tree.
Her silence made the cool glade burn.
The seeker’s found. Melangell, teach me,
the hunter you coursed and caught, where to turn.

2. Her Silence
Breathe in.
Melangell, in your box of lead,
she’s quiet as a mist on moss.
Breathe out,
subtle as a burning bog.
Breathe in . . .
The sea sighs as she holds quite still
storms ride on her breath, a gale
of nothing. Breathe in.
Breathe out.
Words fall in a drop from thorn . . .
. . . and out
. . . earth hums its tone as planets turn
around her. Breathe in.
Her gravity holds us. Hush. Her thought
gives us a world — breathe out —
where insects move like juggernauts
Breathe in.
We swim
to drown, Melangell, in your breath
which drags us from our land-bound doubt

3. A Cloud of Witnesses
Breathe in.
Melangell, in your box of lead,
find us.
Brynach, Bueno, Tudno, Llyr.
The earth’s your sleeping hare, will jump
to greet you.
Tysul, Teilo, Gwynllyw . . . Rain
will rub its pelt of weather hard
against blind windscreens . . .
Padarn, Maelog, Gwendolen . . .
until we feel the mountains move
. . . towards you, Twrog, Rhystud, Llawen, Gwaur.
in company, the light grows great
around you — headlamps shine across the dark
from Cadfan, Rhydian, Sannan teg
and through the gloom of space we see
the sun take shelter in your spirit’s sky
and you surrounded by the daylight stars
of other saints who shall not die —
Cynog, Padarn, Ederyn Fawr.
From time, our hunter, guard us with your prayer
Melangell, strongest steel and softest air.

FESTIVAL TALK:
Composer in Conversation

Dr. Rhiannon Mathias
in conversation with
Hilary Tann
who discuss her music and career.

Monday 28 May 2018
3:00pm Beaumaris Leisure Centre
‘Festival Talk’ Tickets £6.
There will be a performance of
“Melangell Variations”
at the Leisure Centre at 7.30pm during the
Beaumaris Bank Holiday Concert
by the strings of the Welsh Chamber Orchestra
conducted by Anthony Hose,
soloists Karen Coker Merritt (soprano)
and Jeremy Huw Williams (baritone).

See Concert Poster for further details
**Hilary Tann**

Welsh-born composer, Hilary Tann, lives in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains in Upstate New York where she chairs the Music Department and is the John Howard Payne Professor at Union College, Schenectady.

Recent composer-residencies include the 2011 Eastman School of Music *Women in Music Festival*, 2013 *Women Composers Festival of Hartford*, and 2015 *Welsh Music Center*.

Her work has been supported by numerous organizations, including the Welsh Arts Council, New York State Council on the Arts, Hanson Institute for American Music, Vaughan Williams Trust, Holst Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, and Meet the Composer Arts Endowment Commissioning Music USA. Praised for its lyricism (“lyrical work” – *Classical Music Web*) and formal balance (“in the formal balance of this music, there is great beauty ...” – *Welsh Music*), her music is influenced by a strong identification with the natural world. These two interests combine in her enjoyment of haiku (she is a published haiku poet) and in text selections from Welsh poets. A deep interest in the traditional music of Japan has led to private study of the *shakuhachi* and guest visits to Japan, Korea, and China. Her compositions have been widely performed and recorded by ensembles such as the European Women’ Orchestra, Tenebrae, Lontano, Marsyas Trio, Thai Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, and KBS Philharmonic in Seoul, Korea.

Website: hilarytann.com.

**Programme Note:**

Several years ago it was my good fortune to be introduced to the Shrine Church of Saint Melangell, at Pennant Melangell, deep in the Berwyn Mountains of Wales. While there, I purchased a book of poems about St. Melangell, “The Hare That Hides Within,” and was immediately drawn to a set of six poems by former Welsh poet laureate, Gwyneth Lewis. I subsequently met Gwyneth Lewis and she graciously gave me permission to set three of these poems (I, II, and VI) as my own work of the same name, “Melangell Variations.” The words of Gwyneth Lewis capture the ancient story of a young female hermit whose grace and piety led her to shelter a hare in her robes while keeping a hunter’s hounds at bay. Melangell would eventually become the abbess of a sanctuary, now a place of pilgrimage. The titles of the three linked movements of the piece speak for themselves: I. The Story; II. Her Silence; III. A Cloud of Witnesses. As a composer I have been inspired by poetry, nature, and spiritual values. In “Melangell Variations” all three elements find a home.

*Hilary Tann*

*“Melangell Variations”* was commissioned by Jeremy Huw Williams and the Welsh Chamber Orchestra with the assistance of the Ralph Vaughan Williams Trust and Ty Cerrdd. Première May 28 2018, at the Beaumaris Festival, by the strings of the Welsh Chamber Orchestra conducted by Anthony Hose, with soloists Karen Coker Merritt (soprano) and Jeremy Huw Williams (baritone).