

## Mai and the Magical Blackbird - Notes on the Music

When we tell the story of Mai and the Magical Blackbird together, we are drawing on a wide range of music. Some of this music we have created in our workshops, while other music will be drawn from the rich tradition of Celtic folk music from Wales and Brittany, as well as classical music which links to our Welsh and Breton/French themes.

Chloe's recordings of the music for harp can be found on our website, [mwmt.org.uk/our-projects/mai-and-the-blackbird](http://mwmt.org.uk/our-projects/mai-and-the-blackbird). You can also listen again to all the music we have featured by simply searching for it on spotify, itunes or youtube.

- **Traditional Harp Music of Wales and Brittany**

The harp is an instrument at the heart of a lot of traditional Welsh and Breton and wider Celtic folk music. Sinfonia Cymru harpist Chloe Powell-Davies has chosen a selection of pieces for the small Celtic harp that come from Wales and Brittany, and that tell the stories of oxen, sheep, horses and a blackbird, just like in our story.

This map shows the different Celtic nations, including Cymru (Wales) and Briezh (Brittany).



- **'Blackbird' - The Beatles**

The guitar part of this famous song was inspired by a composition by Johann Sebastian Bach for the lute (an early form of the guitar), called *Bourrée in E minor*. Paul McCartney, who wrote the song in 1968, said that he was inspired by the sounds of a blackbird that he had heard in India, but he also said that the song was a response to the civil rights movement in America, where the blackbird was a symbol of the struggle of black people against the racism that they faced in their everyday lives. The original recorded song features Paul's voice and guitar, as well as the sounds of a blackbird singing in the background.

- **Sonata for Flute, Viola and Harp - Claude Debussy**

Brittany is a region of France, and the French composer Claude Debussy wrote this piece in 1915, for a grouping of flute, viola and harp, which was quite unusual at the time. Many composers have since been so inspired by this composition and the combination of instruments that they have gone on to write their own music for flute, viola and harp - Sally Beamish, William Mathias and Toru Takemitsu for example, whose music we are also using to tell the story of Mai and the Magical Blackbird. Debussy was famous for writing music that was colourful and *impressionistic* - linking to the art movement of the same name. His music often describes hazy, colourful, magical moods and atmospheres, with a link often made to nature. This piece is no different, and we thought it was perfect to help us tell Mai's story.

- **La Merle Noir [The Blackbird] - Olivier Messiaen**

The French composer Olivier Messiaen was passionate about birdsong. He used to spend hours in the countryside making notes of the actual sounds that he heard birds sing. Then he would go home and write pieces of music that mixed up the 'real' birdsong with his own creative ideas. *La Merle Noir* is French for 'The Blackbird', and was



written in 1952. It's a perfect example of Messiaen's unique way of composing, and was originally written for flute and piano. We are using just the solo flute parts of the piece in our project to give voice to the Blackbird that Mai encounters in the story.

- **'Between Earth and Sea' - Sally Beamish**



Sally Beamish wrote this piece in 1997 for a famous group of musicians called the Nash Ensemble. It is written for Flute, Viola and Harp, just like Debussy's Sonata (see above). Beamish explains that the music is inspired by our Celtic past and is based on an ancient Celtic lament or *Caione* (a Gaelic word that is related to 'cân' meaning song in Welsh). The particular *Caione* that she uses is based on a bird called the Redshank

which can be found on the coastline. In Scottish folklore the Redshank was believed to 'live on the edge of the land on which man lives, and the ocean which represents eternal life'. This is very similar to Mai's magical blackbird and the magical creatures who come from the ocean in our story.

- **Zodiac Trio for Flute, Viola and Harp - William Mathias**

Mathias was a Welsh composer. He was born in Carmarthenshire, and became head of music at the University of Wales in Bangor. The Zodiac Trio, written in 1976 is another piece written for Flute, Viola and Harp, the combination of instruments initially made popular by Claude Debussy's Sonata. Mathias dedicated this piece to three musician friends, all of whom were born under different signs of the Zodiac. He used these three signs as the titles to the three parts of his piece. We are using music from part 2, 'Aries', which is the Latin word for 'Ram'.



- **'and then I knew 'twas wind' - Toru Takemitsu**



Here is another piece written for Flute, Viola and Harp - and we know that the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu loved the music that Debussy and Messiaen wrote – he described Debussy as his 'great mentor', a kind of musical hero. Like Debussy, his music has a dreamy feel to it, and he is often inspired by the natural world. In this piece, written in 1992, Takemitsu tries to capture the 'quality of the wind' - both in the sense of the actual wind in the natural world, but also the idea of the wind as a symbol for change in the human soul.