

Joanna Borrett: *Clan*

A narrative piece for viola and piano

This collection of ten pieces for viola and piano is the composer's own transcription of her orchestral suite for strings, under the same title.

My starting point to this work was to listen to the string orchestra version, which is a beautiful collection of ten short works, highly evocative of the Celtic influences that inspired it. Recorded last summer, *Clan* is well worth exploring by any mid- to advanced-standard string orchestra; listen at open.spotify.com/album/73N9tTWuvmG4hvyLwfW2GU.

Joanna Borrett, a cellist, has had a number of pieces published, including some on examination syllabuses. Her style is relaxed and free, containing elements of both the classical and folk traditions, and reflects her recent divergence towards exploration of improvisation on the cello, for which she offers free lessons via Facebook.

Emotional depth and beautiful melodic line

The ten pieces in this collection all fall around the Grade 4–6 level of technical ability, but the emotional depth and sheer beauty of melodic line found within them make them an ideal addition to a more intimate style of recital programming, at any level. Within the collection, a player can explore a range of techniques, including harmonics, col legno, ponticello, tapping, pizzicato, and even singing (or humming), alongside exploring the rich legato

and bel canto qualities of their instrument.

The suite of the ten pieces is excellently crafted, many being successful as stand-alone works, and telling the story of an 'ancient indigenous Scottish clan'.

The opening of the set, **One Morning**, provides a perfect opportunity for a rich and sonorous melodic dialogue between the solo instrument and piano. I feel instinctively that a violist may, where appropriate, lower some of their lines down an octave, matching the original pitches of the cello version, thus being faithful to the intended original colour palette in the solo transcription; but it still works beautifully for the viola at the published pitch, and is more in line with the orchestral version. A cello/piano performance can be accessed via the link joannaborrett.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Clan-1-One-Morning.mp3.

The second of the set, **Reel**, perhaps loses some of the folk-style authenticity when compared to the orchestral version, with the first rendition of the tune being on the piano. It has tricky tapping techniques from the outset, but is a fun piece, retaining the rhythmic vitality of the ensemble version.

Starting with ethereal harmonics, **Us** travels through a soundworld of wide-open spaces, with slow moving melodies and harmonies. The violist could once again explore taking much of the solo line down an octave, the lower registers adding a certain depth of emotion; but it is also successful at the written pitches.

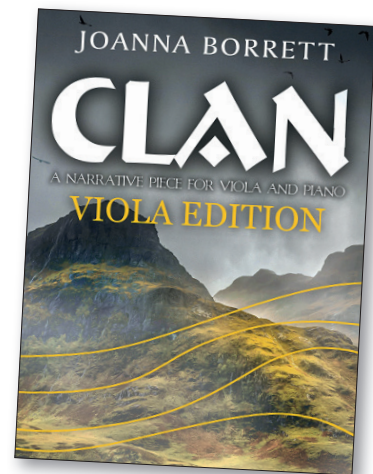
Ceilidh begins with a strong rhythmic tapping technique on the piano for the first five bars, but a talented pianist could keep this rhythmic impetus going until bar 21, as in the ensemble version. It is fast-moving and rhythmically driven, giving much opportunity for whimsical interplay between the parts.

Highlands includes some wonderful interplay between the two instruments, with the string line having the expansive melody to start (again, this could be put down an octave on the viola to great effect), and then swapping roles, with the piano having the sweeping lines and the string instrument the running accompanying passages. This is another gem of a piece, heard in its cello version at joannaborrett.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Clan-Cello-5-Highlands.mp3.

Betrayal takes us to new sound palettes, with lots of suspense and some wonderfully clashing sounds, the beautifully crafted writing creating a tension that invokes the title of the movement.

Armour and **Battlefield**, although written as separate movements, segue into each other and are designed to be played as a pair. Within the context of the suite, these continue to build on the tensions created in the previous movement and need to remain within the greater context of the whole work when performing them.

A very resonant **Chant** gives an instruction for the instrumentalists to either sing or hum alongside strumming string chords, finally joined by some piano harmonies towards the end. This is another piece that will probably work best



within the context of the suite in performance.

Circle, beginning with a reworking of 'Morning has Broken', provides a reflective and somewhat melancholic end to the suite, climaxing towards sweeping downward pizzicato chords and a final held G in octaves.

Cello or viola?

As a violist, I explored the version for my instrument, but the deeper and fuller sonorities of the cello bring out the melodic lines and melancholic sonorities of the pieces with added success. Indeed, some aspects are better suited to the cello, such as the tapping techniques used at the start of 'Reel', the soundboard of the cello being more resonant, and the singing element of 'Chant' also benefiting from the strumming accompaniment at the lower octave; but violists will work around this, producing their own idiomatic interpretations.

The publication is clearly laid out, easy to read from both the solo instrumental part and piano score, not cluttered with excessive fingerings and bowings, and gives a clean copy for the inclusion of the performer's own annotations. **MT**

MATHEW LEE

CLAN: A NARRATIVE PIECE FOR VIOLA AND PIANO

Joanna Borrett

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