

Program note:

FINGAL'S LAST PINT & FINGAL'S AWAKENING

A friend of mine from Nova Scotia with whom I played Celtic music told me the story of a sleeping giant that was legendary in the Maritimes. The story he said was used to warn noisy children at bedtime to be quiet and go to sleep lest they wake the giant. The Giant referred to is Fingal, an Irish-Scottish mythical giant. Here the giant is cast as "Guardian of good behaviour" and is also sung about in Stan Rogers' song, "The Giant". Stan was a Canadian folksinger-songwriter whom I had the pleasure to meet prior to his untimely death in 1983.

Here's how I remember the story as told by my friend from Truro, Nova Scotia:

Taken from Irish popular folklore, Fingal the magical, benevolent giant is Fionn mac Cumhail (also known as "Finn McCool"). As it happened, Finn had an ongoing rivalry with the Scottish giant Benandonner (sometimes called Cuhullin). The two giants would yell insults to each other from across the seas between Ireland and Scotland. Being angry, MacCool scooped up a chunk of earth and threw it at Benandonner, but it missed and fell into the Irish Sea forming the Isle of Man, while the crater left behind filled with water to form Lough Neagh.

The Scottish giant retaliated with a rock back to Finn shouting that if he could get his hands on him, he would make sure that Finn would never fight again. Accepting the challenge and not wanting to get his feet wet, Finn tore large pieces from the cliffs, pushing stones into the ocean bed, making a sturdy causeway to Scotland. When he had finished he shouted, "Now you'll have no excuse to come over and do your best".

When Finn sees the giant Cuhullin coming to fight him, he grows afraid. As Cuhullin gets closer, he appears to be much bigger and stronger than Finn originally thought. So acting quickly, Finn asks his wife Oona to help him. She dresses her husband as a baby and hides him in a cradle. When Cuhullin arrives, Oona tells him Finn is out hunting, but will be back shortly. As Cuhullin waits, Oona serves him stout, which she also pours into a bottle for the baby. Cuhullin is stunned by the enormous size of the baby as well as the significant amount of stout the baby is able to consume! When Cuhullin is no longer able to drink anymore stout, Oona scolds him for being weak (saying her baby never tires of it). In this story, Cuhullin is scared off by the size of the baby's body and his ability to drink so much stout without falling asleep. Because of this he thinks Finn must be a much more powerful giant than he had first imagined and he would surely lose should he fight him.

Therefore, Cuhullin quickly takes his leave, tearing up the causeway behind him, as he escapes back to Scotland, so the giant Finn McCool will be unable or unwilling to come after him. Now groggy from drink, his strength spent, Cuhullin lies down and sleeps; some say in Fingal's cave, or as transplanted to the Maritimes... on the beach in Cape Breton, until such time as he is stirred and awoken to rise and fight again.

I have written 2-pieces for the Brandon Community Orchestra. The first, "Fingal's Last Pint" opens with the brass section to herald the story-telling of the giants. The triangle almost sounds like a dinner-bell calling people to the table. The trumpets backed by snare drum usher in the giants and their bravado for taunting each other. Following this display, there is a moment of repose during which the challenge is considered and taken. Now the brass and triangle call us to listen to the almost waltz-like, lullaby that represents Finn's cottage and Oona's plan to hide her husband as a baby while she clouds Cuhullin's mind with

stout. You can almost hear their conversation as the Scottish giant asks, “Where is Finn?” and Oona’s reply, “He’s out hunting, but will be back shortly”. Now the tune happens again, this time with some grace-note type variation accompanied by plucked strings and percussion that perhaps sounds like a baby’s rattle? Finally, repose happens again as Cuhullin decides to head on back to Scotland.

The giants now sleep, so the second piece called “Fingal’s Awakening” imagines the unfolding of the story... the name “Fingal” being an almost generic term for any mythical giant... The idea of “giant” is often associated with thoughts of “protector”, strong-leader, or the phrase, “Giant among Men”. As the Fingal legend goes, giants are instilled with human characteristics, such as boastfulness, bravery, strength, ingenuity, and a touch of heroic cowardice.

Fingal is called out of a deep sleep by the brass section and bass drum as a melody in the woodwind and string sections alarm him of a growing evil presence or threat. Now he begins to stir, rising from where he lay on the beach or taking leave of his retreat in the cave, to squint into the sun and try and behold what danger lurks or what threats there be to his kingdom. The call of the drum heard from afar cries for help as the brass and woodwind sections remind him of his duty. And so the giant’s march begins as Fingal protector of good and defender of foreign invaders is awake and on the move!

I really enjoyed writing these pieces and am delighted that Chris and the orchestra chose to take them on during this past season. It is with pleasure that I dedicate these pieces to Chris McConnell and the Brandon Community Orchestra.