

## Ailsa Dixon

Ailsa Dixon - daughter of Little Missenden Festival founder Pat Harrison - followed a musical career, with an enduring interest in composing. She died last year.

Several of her works were premiered at the Festival during the 1980s, including songs and duets performed by Ian Partridge and Lynne Dawson, *Nocturnal Scherzo* by the Brindisi Quartet, and *Shining Cold* by Sally Harrison and Cynthia Millar.

We're delighted that Sansara will sing her choral anthem *These things shall be* at this year's Festival on 12th October 2018.



*Ailsa Dixon (with lute) and some of her contemporaries at Durham University in the 1950s*

Ailsa Dixon grew up in Little Missenden, where her early interest in composition emerged under the watchful eye of her ancestor Felix Janiewitz, a Polish composer and violinist from the early nineteenth century, whose portrait hung next to the piano in Dering Cottage.

That interest was developed while reading music at university in Durham in the 1950s, where she wrote the first of several pieces for string quartet.

Over the next 30 years her musical life took a different turn, singing, playing the lute, working as a singing teacher, and giving classes in music appreciation. After producing Handel's *Theodora* with a cast of singing pupils, Ailsa returned to composition in the 1980s and conceived an opera of her own.

*Letter to Philemon* dramatises an episode in the life of St Paul, inspired by childhood conversations with her grandfather, a theologian and scholar of Paul's epistles. Performed in 1984, the opera marked the beginning of her most creative years, in which she developed her compositional style under the tutelage of Paul Patterson, Professor of Composition at the Royal Academy. Asked, during an interview in 2017, about the influences on her work, she cited Fauré (for his harmonic suppleness), Britten (for his powers of evocation and empathy) and Bartok (for his lively variations of time signature and elasticity of musical motifs).

In the years after *Philemon*, she wrote songs, chamber music, three works for string quartet, a sonata for piano duet, and two anthems for choir. It was from these works that her Festival premieres were drawn.



*Dobrinka Tabakova, Ailsa Dixon, and Cheryl Frances Hoad at the London Oriana Choir's concert in July 2017 (Courtesy of the London Oriana Choir/Kathleen Holman)*

With no agent and little interest in self-promotion, a large proportion of Ailsa's work never saw the light of day, with many pieces only coming to light within the musical archive she has left us.

Among them *These things shall be* - to be sung by Sansara at this year's Festival - lay in manuscript for 30 years until it was chosen for performance in London as part of the Five15 project highlighting the work of women composers. It was premiered in July 2017 by the London Oriana Choir - in the spectacular glass-roofed concert hall surrounding the keel of the Cutty Sark - shortly before Ailsa died at the age of 85.

Further performances followed at concerts of remembrance in London and in Bristol - where she was born.

The words she chose to set - by the late Victorian poet John Addington Symonds - captured her religious imagination with a prophetic vision of a future in which - in the closing words of the piece - 'every life shall be a song, when all the earth is paradise'.

Ailsa was, as Robert Hugill put it, "One of a number of composers, often female, whose work has taken place quietly, with performances by friends and contacts, without any great fanfare. Thankfully we are beginning to discover Ailsa Dixon's music."

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Find out more about Ailsa Dixon (including dates of forthcoming performances of her music) at: [www.ailsadixon.co.uk](http://www.ailsadixon.co.uk)

For more about Sansara's performance of *These things shall be* go to: <http://little-missenden.org/sansara.html>

We are indebted to Ailsa's daughter, Josie Dixon, for the information contained in these notes.

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