

# Aud the Deep Minded

Joanna Nicholson

A chamber opera for soprano Clíona Cassidy, clarinet Joanna Nicholson, horn Andy Saunders, electronics Alistair MacDonald with projection art by Kirsty Anderson.

**Aud the Deep Minded** is a psychological drama imagining the inner world of a Christian Viking and conflicted yet brilliant leader in 9th century Scotland. Inspired by fragments of unreliably documented history, and reframed in the present, this one act opera explores Aud's transformatory journey from oppressed to oppressor to liberator.

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## The history

The woman known as **Aud the Deep Minded** was a real person, documented in the Icelandic Sagas (and in the TV drama Vikings!). However, different historical accounts conflict over the details of her life. We can be fairly sure she was the daughter of **Ketil Flatnose**, a Norwegian military commander who oversaw areas we now call the Scottish Western Isles and Orkneys on behalf of **King Harald Fairhair**, and that, after her husband **King Olaf the White of Dublin**, and her son **Thorstein the Red**, were killed she commissioned a boat to be built in secret in the Caithness forests, which are in the north west of Scotland. She then captained this boat to Iceland - at that time an uncharted territory - crewed by members of her family and high-ranking thralls (who were slaves or servants). On settling new territories in the West, she gave the thralls their freedom and parcels of land to farm, forming a community where she lived until her natural death as an old woman. **Aud** was a Christian at a time when most Vikings were still worshipping pagan gods.

The real **Aud** is so far back in time she is blurred by storytelling, embellishment and omission, and I wondered... what if she were reincarnated, if perhaps she was a supernatural being, present throughout time? This is my imagining of her story, or what might be her story, and how she might tell it.

The text is not an exact libretto, but is the framework for a semi-improvised, part-sung and part-spoken performance.

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## Synopsis and text

### Scene 1: Dublin, Ireland

**Aud** has just learned that her husband **Olaf the White, King of Dublin**, is dead. However, she is on her way to a night out. She makes plans to seek protection for her son by visiting her father, **Ketil Flatnose**, in Orkney.

*I am Aud! I am Aud, the Deep Minded.*

My husband has just been murdered. I ought to be grieving, but I'm going out.

He was an arsehole. Rovhull!\*

*I am Aud!*

*[\*this is an ancient Norse insult – which is very satisfying to sing!]*

So, my husband - late husband, dead husband, murdered husband - he was *King Olaf the White*, of Dublin - well, that's how he styled it anyway, seemed a bit self-appointed if you ask me. I mean, he certainly bossed it about acting pretty king-y but I'd say a lot of people weren't fully on board with the concept.

According to the press release, he was killed in battle, battering some wee Pict-ish kinglet over a bit of land or some cows or something. "Slain in battle!" Oh, how he'd love that to be the story, the big stupid troll. He'd love to be away drinking with Odin in Valhalla right now, but I can guarantee you it wasn't really like that. He'll just have tripped over his big stupid troll feet in a peat bog and got trampled to death by his own men.

Han var et rovhull, haestkuk, drittsek.\*

*(\*researching ancient Norse insults has been fun!)*

*King Olaf*, makes me *Queen Aud* right? No, I don't think so, I'm just a pawn. My Dad married me off as a payment to keep the north islands. No, I'm queen for about 5 minutes before I get disposed of by the boys. It's no good. It's making me nervous. Not so much for myself, but I've got a son, *Thorstein*. He's the political threat. Fuck it, I'll take him to Orkney, me and Dad can make up. I'll swallow that if he'll protect my boy.

## Scene 2: A burial ground in the Caithness forest, Scotland

**Aud** is talking to a corpse we at first think is her husband, then learn is her son **Thorstein**. She makes an incantation in a strange language, based on Gaelic, and then she sings Christian funeral rites for Thorstein.

*Quasi-Gaelic incantation*

Media vita in morte sumus  
quem quaerimus adiutorem.  
Nihi si te, Domine,  
qui pro peccatis nostris  
juste irasceris?

Sancte Deus,  
sancte fortis,  
sancte et misericors Salvator:  
amarae morti ne tradas nos.

In te speraverunt patres nostri  
Speraverunt  
Et liberasti eos.

*[Translation:*

*In the midst of life we are in death.  
Of whom may we seek for succour,  
but of thee, O Lord,  
who for our sins  
art justly displeased?*

*Holy God,  
Holy mighty,  
Holy and merciful Saviour,  
deliver us not to a bitter death.*

*In you our fathers placed their hopes  
They placed their hopes  
And you freed them.]*

She experiences a strange episode, which might be psychosis, or might reveal that she is in fact the legendary **Morrigan**, a tripartite phantom queen and seer of Irish folklore, connected by the image of a crow or raven to her Norse roots.

She reflects on what has happened, and what is to come, and reveals her plan to sail far away.

I like it in here, in the trees. It's quiet, apart from the bloody workmen. Your dead bodies rotting beneath me notwithstanding. You've been down there a while - the grass has grown.

After Olaf's murder, Jesus Chri.....och, sorry, I've done it again, it's a bad habit, taking Your name in vain ...sorry.....but it's just...in here, this place of the ancient gods, can you even hear me?

Anyway, **Thorstein**, my lovely son **Thorstein** - after your dad died (may he rest in peace) and we went up to your Grandad **Ketil** in Orkney for protection (may he too now rest in peace) **Thorstein** boy you got cocky. So cocky - taking up with that **Jarl Sigurd Eysteinsson**. I can't believe **Ketil** encouraged that. That right there is a spent old guy's vicarious ambition - two teenage boys running about with weapons... "oh, our gang will take over Caithness, and Sutherland, and Ross, and Moray, and... blah blah.. half the territory'. Did you seriously think there wouldn't be kick back?

Ach, **Thorstein** you were too young to think. You got yourself killed. And that's all my boys gone now. So what's next, for me?

I bet you think I haven't got a plan. I have, actually. I've got the men building me a boat, here in the forest. It's a secret boat, ssh, made in the forest and of the forest. See, folk have been telling stories of new lands the sailors have seen in the north, way past Dad's islands. They say they spit out fountains of fire and cleave off great chunks of ice. What if it's real? What if this place exists, if we could escape from here, what's left of the family and thralls, escape in our wee secret boat and find these lands? I mean, God knows they'll be harsh, rocky places to farm, but maybe fertile enough, we could find a place to settle, start a farm, start a new life.

And leave the dead here.

### Scene 3 – Inside Aud’s Mind

An ancient melody drifts across Aud’s consciousness, and she begins a keening song that merges the wail of Ireland’s banshees with Viking burial rites. Her tripartite nature comes to the fore, and in an intense surge of grief and revenge, she commands the thralls to build her boat.

The things I bury you with, jewels and gold  
Hearts of Maidens  
Hammer of Thor and cross of God.

I am tripartite, I am timeless, I am everywhere  
I know your fate.  
Shapeshifter. Queen.

You said I had a trashy mind. So what if I eat horsemeat? Still Jesus loves me.  
I see who will die. It is not me.  
I wash your clothes in blood.

I am Aud, I am seer, I am crow, I am...

Oak, ash, birch, hazel, alder, oak, beech, rowan, oak.  
Elm, alder, hazel, oak, rowan, beech, wych elm, oak.  
Oak, ash, birch, axe, cleave, rowan, nail, oak.  
Hammer, nail, hammer, nail, nail, iron, wood, sweat.  
Iron, wood, sweat, nail, oak, axe.  
Axe.

I am axe, I am wood, I am rope, I am...

I am nail, I am eye, I am iron, I am...

I am Aud, I am seer, I am crow, I am...

I am Aud, I am seer, I am crow, I am...

I don’t understand what happens to me in the forest. I hear voices talking to me, and I don’t know who they are but they know me so well.

The trees close in, and I start to feel like I’m flying, I can fly - and when I’m flying I can see everything, from the past, and the future and I can see what will happen now... I can see who will die. I know they’ll die because I’m washing their clothes in a stream of blood.

Olaf, did I kill you? Did I will it, commission it somehow? Did I put out a contract on you? I saw you die, I knew it would happen, it’s what I wanted. Olaf, I think I played you - played you like you were a gameboard king.

Build my boat, boys, build it.

I am hammer, I am nail, I am Queen!  
Quem quaerimus adiutorem

#### **Scene 4: On the boat, towards Iceland, a storm at sea**

**Aud** prays and comes to understand that she has become what she most despises - an oppressor. She appeals to God to help her transcend this state, and offers the thralls their freedom: "I liberate you, I liberate myself."

Media vita in morte sumus  
quem quaerimus adiutorem  
Nihi si te, Domine,  
qui pro peccatis nostris  
juste irasceris?

Sancte Deus,  
sancte fortis,  
sancte et misericors Salvator:  
amarae morti ne tradas nos.

In te speraverunt patres nostri speraverunt  
Et liberasti eos.

In the midst of life we are in death  
Of whom may we seek for succor  
But of thee Oh Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased?

Holy God, Mighty God, Holy and merciful saviour  
Deliver us not to death

In me men place hope  
Deus, liberabo eos, liberare me  
I free you, I liberate myself.  
I am...  
Sancte Deus, Sancte fortis  
I am Aud.

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## Source material

I derived all the musical material from two existing melodies which represent the ancient nature of the story, and its mix of cultures – the responsorium *Media Vita* (In the midst of life we are in death) attributed to a Benedictine monk, **Notker the Stammerer**, and a Norwegian folk song.

Early on during workshopping sessions, the performers struggled to pronounce “Aud” in a way that might have sounded Viking – our instinctive English-speaker handling of the vowel became a source of distress to the Norwegian language coach, as we couldn’t get it in the right place on the palate. And that’s just the Norwegian pronunciation, what about the Icelandic version, and Gaelic (Irish and Scots), and wouldn’t it have been in Old Norse anyway...? I have used different ways of pronouncing Aud’s name to reflect on her multifaceted identity as an immigrant, as well as her dual Christian and Viking religious and spiritual influences. She speaks to us in English, to God in Latin, is possessed by her ancient, mystic self in a fantasy Gaelic, and swears in Norwegian.

Her use of the assertion “I am” has echoes in a range of philosophical and religious texts.

All of the electronic material, with the exception of the birdsong, is generated from live and recorded samples of the musicians.

The three instruments – voice, horn and clarinet – represent Aud’s tripartite nature as the Morrigan. In folklore, the Morrigan can be represented as three sisters, or as a beautiful young woman, an old crone and a crow. She is a prophetess, queen and seer.

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Programme notes by Joanna Nicholson

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