



Music in mind

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

**Rebecca Allison
and Nia Williams**

**Photographs:
Antony Moore**

Rebecca Allison and Nia Williams first met in 2004 and it was musical attraction at first sight. As Mezzopiano, the duo were soon delighting audiences in and around Oxford and London. But when, in 2010, Rebecca suffered a sudden hearing loss, it appeared their partnership was threatened, writes Sylvia Vetta

Nia Williams

Music was central to Nia Williams' life from an early age, but her career path seemed set to take her in a completely different direction – with a detour into journalism and publishing.

Born into a Welsh-speaking family in Cardiff in 1961, Nia's father was the radio presenter, Alun Williams, who became one of the best known voices on BBC radio when he commented on the Coronation in 1953.

He also played the piano and passed on his love of music to both his daughters.

"He was always the life and soul of the party – a big personality," said Nia. "My mother, Perrie, was a quieter personality, but she was a great communicator and storyteller. My childhood memories are of family stories that were passed down to her, especially from her grandmother Elizabeth Williams, who was a very influential character in our family."

As a reminder of this childhood Nia considered taking a memoir written by her great-grandmother called *Siaced Fraith* (*Coat of Many Colours*) to our desert island.

Nia said: "It is an account of her life with her six brothers in rural 19th-century Wales. Her father was a slate miner and her mother, who died young, was a great believer in education. Elizabeth's eldest brother established the first school in the village of Garn in Snowdonia when he was just 21. Elizabeth went there as a pupil teacher at 13.

"When she was in her eighties, and my mother was starting a family, she was persuaded to write her autobiography, which

eventually ran to three volumes. I never knew her, of course, but these are the family stories I grew up with."

Elizabeth's daughter Gwladys, became an educationalist, and their daughter, Perrie, Nia's mother, carried on the family tradition of education, teaching every age in the course of her career, from primary to university, where she was a philosophy tutor.

"I learned a lot from my mother about storytelling and teaching," Nia said.

"Words and music are both important parts of my work – the words come from my mother and the music from my father."

"The house was always full of music. My brother Rhys would be watching *Top of the Pops*, my sister getting me to sing or play the piano with her, dad conducting his LPs or boogying away at *Tiger Rag* on the piano."

Nia's love of the piano started the moment she could stretch up and reach the keyboard.

Her sister Eli, who is nine years older and studied music, began showing her how to play

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tunes. After that I could not wait to start lessons. Eli recently found some old tape recordings of the family singing and playing together. She put them on a CD for me and called it *Front Room Songs*. That would be a lovely memory to take to the island."

Aged 18, Nia took a history degree at Exeter University, followed by a print and radio journalism course at Darlington.

"After that I temped for the Parkinson's Disease Society, then started working for a trade magazine called *The Chemist and Druggist*. I wanted to write, so working for a magazine was good training, but it did feel as if I had gone off course a bit.

"The first big step for me was just admitting that I wanted to write fiction. I expected people to laugh at me, but actually most people just said 'yes, me too'."

Nia worked as an editor and writer for various publishers, writing a guide to Normandy and contributing to several books on popular history and travel.

In the evenings she worked as a rehearsal pianist. Her partner, Tony Evans, whom she had met at Exeter, was working as a social worker, and when he was appointed part of the psychiatric social work team at Rampton secure hospital in 1997, the couple moved to a cottage on the hospital estate in rural Nottinghamshire.

"It was a remote spot, and I am a city-dweller by choice. I decided to use the opportunity to concentrate on knuckling down to finishing my first novel," Nia said.

The Pierglass, published by Honno in 2001,

Continued on page 11



Nia Williams and the CD of her family singing

Photographs:
Antony Moore

Rebecca Allison was born in Kennington in 1968 and attended the local primary school, followed by St Helen's in Abingdon. Her father, Philip Martin, as well as being an artist and graphic designer has always loved singing and acting.

When Kennington Amateur Dramatic Society started in 1979, for many years Philip played the pantomime dame and recruited his daughters Rebecca and Sarah into the chorus.

Rebecca said: "Music was a part of my life as long as I can remember. It was not long before I joined my father in the church choir. When I was 12 the concert pianist Patricia Loveland encouraged me to perform with adults in my first proper concert.

Rebecca Allison

"A sentimental choice for the desert island would be a painting that my father did of that concert. He gave it to me for Christmas that year. After that there was no stopping me. I could not imagine life without singing."

Last year, movie-goers may have seen Patricia Loveland (aged 76) in *Quartet* – her first Hollywood movie.

Rebecca is secretary of Kennington Overseas Aid and is organising the music for the KOA opening event on April 5 which in this centenary year will appropriately have a First World War theme.

Rebecca and Nia, both of whose grandfathers served in the trenches, will perform at the event, along with colleagues from their cabaret group Panjandrum.

Rebecca never met her paternal grandfather Ernest Harry Martin, a sergeant in the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry. but his story was recorded in the pages of *Oxfordshire Limited Edition* in 2007.

Sometime after his death aged 72, in 1966, the family discovered a beautifully written

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account of his time in the trenches taken from diary entries. Such detailed accounts were not uncommon among officers.

The story of her mother's family has another tale of survival against the odds.

Rebecca explained: "My Chinese great-grandfather left Shanghai in 1939, but the boat he was on was torpedoed.

"After some time in the sea, he was lucky to be hauled into a lifeboat and eventually arrived in England. Immigration did not understand Chinese names. They registered him as Tom Song. That's the only name we knew him by.

"Tom settled in Soho and became a chef at the Café de Paris. He married a local girl and his son Albert told me how, as a child, he used to hang around at the café.

"When Josephine Baker performed there she used two lion cubs in her act. Albert said she let him hold their leads when they were off stage.

"Wheeler of St James's head-hunted Tom from the Savoy to be their head chef and we have a jeroboam signed by Prince Philip who was a regular customer – so that could be a good bottle to have on the island.

"Tom helped so many Chinese immigrants to find work and accommodation that when he died the Chinese businesses in the East End closed for two days."

Tom's grand-daughter, Valerie, married Rebecca's father Philip and they had two children, Sarah, now a GP in Headington and their musical daughter Rebecca.

"Once I was at St Helen's there were lots of opportunities to participate in music festivals and productions. I never wanted to do anything except sing so I was so happy when I received a scholarship to study at the Guildhall School of Music," Rebecca said.

Continued on page 13

From page 9

Nia kept up her piano practice in Nottinghamshire, and when Tony was appointed a social work lecturer at Oxford Brookes in 1999, she was able to start building the freelance career she had always aimed to pursue.

"I wanted to combine my love of words and music, and started to look for work in both fields. When I heard that Rebecca needed an accompanist I stalked her by e-mail. We met and discovered that we had similar musical tastes. We both love different kinds of music – opera, lieder, but also West End musicals, jazz and cabaret. So that was the beginning of our partnership in music."



The box made by Rebecca's Chinese grandfather

From page 11

“During my time at Guildhall I became a member of the *ad hoc* BBC Singers and of the Covent Garden extra chorus and briefly considered making a career in opera. But I was put off by the nomadic lifestyle and felt that my voice was more suitable for lieder and other, intimate forms of music.

“I decided to teach for a while and became a peripatetic teacher of music mostly at St Helen’s and at St Edward’s School in Oxford.”

Rebecca had met her future husband, James Allison, at school, but he didn’t share her interest in music.

She said: “James is totally unmusical – his oratorio is the sound of Formula One cars racing. I remember once when we were dating, I was performing an oratorio in Oxford Town Hall and I looked into the audience and there he was not looking at the stage but at a massive book on Formula One.

“We married in 1992 and had Emily in 1993, Matt in 1996 and Jonathan in 1999. Once the children were born James had the excuse of babysitting to get out of coming to listen to me,” Rebecca laughed.

“In 2000, when James started to work for Ferrari as an aerodynamic engineer, I gave up teaching and we moved to the village of Castelvetro, near Bologna in Italy. During those four years in Italy I was a full-time mother and so had to start again when James took up a post with Renault at Enstone and we bought a house in Marcham, near Abingdon.”

James has since returned to Ferrari as its technical director and now commutes back home at weekends.

In 2004, Rebecca was eager to resume her career in music. She said: “I was lucky on my return to meet Stephen (baritone) and Claire Barratt (soprano) and 18 months later, they founded Charity Opera.

“Charity Opera performs concerts of opera, operetta, and songs from the shows using only professionally trained singers including Stephen’s brother Ian (tenor).”

The musical partnership

Nia and Rebecca got together in 2004. Both were rebuilding their careers in music. “Since Rebecca first used me as an accompanist we have often worked together – and with Sarah Leatherbarrow, an Oxford-based soprano, we formed the trio Terzina,” said Nia.

The trio performed in a variety of venues, including a lunchtime recital at St-Martin-at-the-Fields and the opening of the new Pegasus Theatre in Oxford in 2011.

Along with mezzo Jane Hainsworth and production team Steve Mellin and Paul Burgum, they went on to stage Nia’s musical *Daddy’s Girls*, first at the Burton-Taylor Theatre and then at the Old Fire Station.

Then a health problem threatened to bring Rebecca’s career to a sudden end.

“In April 2010, we were preparing for an event which would commemorate the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic* for Kennington Overseas Aid. I had an infection which made my ears feel full of wax. They were syringed but I could not hear a thing in my left ear,” Rebecca said.

“I eventually saw a specialist and he diagnosed it as sudden sensory hearing loss



**Nia Williams
and Rebecca
Allison**

caused by a virus similar to labyrinthitis. It attacks the nerve endings. I can still hear low sounds but my upper registers have gone. It also caused tinnitus, vertigo and vomiting. It was difficult to judge the sound I was making, so when we performed at Kennington, I kept asking Nia if I was in tune.

“If you cannot hear yourself, it is hard to sing. I lost confidence and it threatened to bring an end to my teaching career too.

“Someone suggested that I go to see Gill Purse, a musician who has devised a technique called ‘overtone chanting’, which has its basis in Tibetan chanting and has been proven to help tinnitus sufferers. It worked remarkably well and now I find my tinnitus much easier to control.

“I also have help from a specialist at the John Radcliffe who makes tinnitus aids for musicians, blocking out certain frequencies of sound,” Rebecca added.

With Nia’s help, Rebecca carried on singing and her determination led to a *tour de force* in March last year at the Old Fire Station. It all began with a Mezzopiano concert in London’s Fleet Street, when the duo decided to include 20th-century songs, including work by Kurt Weill, in their repertoire.

Rebecca said it was the start of an interest in German cabaret and led to Nia writing and arranging a concert entitled *Smoke and Mirrors* based around songs by Weill, for Oxford International Women’s Festival. Two sisters, born into poverty in Berlin in 1900, separate and embark on two very different journeys, which follow a similar path to Weill’s own. One sister has to flee from Berlin and the Nazis, and she finishes up in California, where she becomes involved in the war effort.

The other goes to Paris, so her story becomes entwined with the jazz age of the 1920s and the subsequent occupation by the Nazis.

It was a huge challenge for Rebecca, who sang the parts of both sisters – two very different characters – as well as singing in three languages, German, French and English.

She was also on stage throughout the entire piece, with no interval.

We had reached the time when both women had to make a final choice of object for our desert island. Rebecca said: “My Chinese great-grandfather, Albert had a shed at the bottom of his garden where he made lots of things including this box he carved for me. It would remind me of all his stories.”

And Nia?

“At the age of 12 my hero was Fred Astaire. BBC2 showed a series of Astaire/Rogers films and I was riveted. If there is no way of showing his films on the island, maybe I could take his top hat and a pair of tap shoes.”

The dance theme is relevant to a current project which Nia is involved with called Dance for Parkinson’s.

In 2013, Nia and dancer Kate Hartley started the Oxford pilot of the English National Ballet’s (ENB) class in movement and dance for people with Parkinson’s Disease. The sessions are based on music and characters from the ENB’s productions and meets weekly at the Old Fire Station in George Street, Oxford.

Nia said: “It is partly about building confidence. I teach vocals and some music theory and background, as well as playing for the movement.”

Instead of a ballet score, though, Nia would choose a particular edition of Bach’s *Preludes and Fugues* for the island, to remind her of her father, whose copy it was, and of her Cardiff piano teacher Clifford Lewis.

“It is quite moving when I open these pages and see the fingerings (the choice of which fingers and hand positions to use when playing) he has written. He had a very gentle and generous approach to teaching. He used to say ‘mistakes are not crimes – they are how we learn’.”

■ *Rebecca and Nia will be musical directors of the Music Youth Company of Oxford’s summer concert (July 12-13). For more information, visit the website: www.myco.org.uk*