

Aud the Deep Minded – reviews and audience comments

Cromarty Arts Trust:

A spellbinding performance that interprets Aud the Deep Minded's life with depth and musical intensity. A powerful blend of music, storytelling and light.

EdFringe/Made in Scotland Showcase 2025 Audience comments:

Katy L (Audience member)

A most unique and atmospheric production! It is filled with intrigue, dramatic dialogue, expressive melodies and outstanding French horn, singing and clarinet playing against stunning backdrops that transport the audience along on Aud the Deep Minded's epic journey. A very memorable and enjoyable Fringe experience.

Mathieu Steelandt (Audience member)

Amazing musicians!

Anonymous (Audience member)

The show was fantastic the story and music was concise and blended together very well. The imagery shown in the background really help to immerse the viewer. My only issue is that if you are someone with sensory issues especially with loud noises like myself then I would recommend bring in ear defenders or something alike, as parts of the show can become loud and overwhelming.

Jenny House (Audience member)

Mesmerising show. The clarinet and horn were played imaginatively and to the highest standard. Sit centrally if you can to really enjoy the movement and landscapes created by the lighting. Don't miss this show in a lovely venue.

James Gordon (Audience member)

A piece that fits neatly into no existing sub-genre, but rather creates its own, compellingly successfully. It could be described as a concert performance of a 21st century chamber opera, but this doesn't do justice to the visual element, the swirling, nature-suggestive coloured patterns projected almost constantly onto a black backdrop and the 4 performers' white costumes. This is a multi-layered work, incorporating live solo instruments and singing (in several languages, ancient and modern, real and imagined), spoken narration, electronic sampling and recorded birdsong, spanning several decades and voyaging from Viking Dublin to Ceshire and Orkney and on almost to Iceland, yet it never feels dense or indigestible. There's too much to absorb at one hearing but 'Aud' is immensely rewarding nonetheless, and elusively beautiful as a northern seascape or forest. Catch the last performance tomorrow.

Stuart MacRae (Audience member)

I loved this new music theatre work - really atmospheric storytelling, simply but effectively staged, and sections highlighting each of the superb musicians' skills in a way that drew me deeper into the emotions of the story! The music runs the gamut from adventurous to beautiful and from haunting to overwhelming. A unique experience.

John Rendall (Audience member)

Beautiful performance of a stunningly original piece. Attentive and precise musicianship; imaginative story-telling; sensitive blending of words, sounds and images.

Charlotte (Audience member)

Such a clever and enjoyable show. A hypnotic soundscape presented by excellent performers. This show offers a unique Fringe experience - well worth the watch!

Rachelle Mandik (Audience member)

Simply stunning. This is exactly why I came to Fringe, to find a show like this. The musicians are superb, the sound engineering and lighting design perfectly tuned to the purpose, and the story surreal and captivating. I would see this again and again. I might, actually. Do not miss this one!!!

Sarah Cook (Audience member)

Mesmerising, absorbing... beautiful music, visually stunning- a dreamlike journey into Aud's world (with funny bits too!) And it's a Scottish production too!

Kate Brown (Audience member)

The journey of Aud from the death of her terrible husband, the Viking king of Dublin, to independence and freedom in Iceland via a wild wood in Caithness, is wonderfully told through music and projections. The otherworldly voice of Cliona Cassidy, the altogether more worldly spoken narrative and expressive clarinet of Joanna Nicholson, combined with Andy Saunders' extraordinary horn playing and the beautiful projections and soundscapes of Kirsty Anderson and Alistair MacDonald, make this an intense and haunting experience. New music in an innovative staging, Joanna Nicholson's music drama deserves a wide audience.

AR (Audience member)

Don't miss this fantastic show! I felt transported into mystical forests and rough seas by this refreshing and brilliantly performed contemporary opera. The singer, musicians, and electronic music blended perfectly with the visuals to take the audience on an emotional, empowering, and sometimes funny journey. Even if you're not into opera or contemporary music, this show is a great choice for anyone and features some incredible talent from Scotland. It's also the

perfect way to experience professional classical musicians perform close-up and outside the EIF.

FC (Audience member)

Performances of real quality, mesmerising visuals and sound effects, and all telling quite a story, beautifully written.

PC (Audience member)

Amazing - quite the most innovative and unforgettable performance I've seen yet this year on the Fringe. The combination of the music and the visual / sound effects is mesmerising and haunting. Thoroughly recommended!

EdFringe/Made in Scotland Showcase 2025 Reviews:

Morning Star (Ewan Cameron)

★★★★★

<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/between-smut-and-sincerity>

Aud The Deep Minded is an original chamber opera composed by Joanna Nicholson who also plays the clarinet in the quartet also composed of horn, soprano and electronic music. Telling the story of Aud, a 9th century Viking leader, across towns, forests and seas, we are taken on a journey across a soundscape that is unashamedly loud and yet dreamily serene. I'd love to see this on a bigger stage next year.

ThreeWeeks (Louise Rodgers)

★★★★★

<https://threeweeksedinburgh.com/article/aud-the-deep-minded-joanna-nicholson/>

In this Made In Scotland Showcase, an early medieval tale was retold as a short opera through modern, magical storytelling using electronics, sound, projection art and music. Composer Joanna Nicholson – who spoke heroine Aud's speeches and played the clarinet – put us straight about deceased Viking King Olaf The White – “He was an arsehole!” – and so the scene was set to dramatise how his strong widow Aud would deal with the aftermath of his murder. The representations of woodland using projection art (the performers wore white), French Horn and electronic sounds were particularly effective. Distinguished Soprano, Clíona Cassidy, sang in ancient, well-researched tongues – including references from medieval Benedictine plainchant authority Notker The Stammerer – in a score alive with symbolism and timeless musicality.

Sinners' Review (Ian Cole)

★★★★★

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lb9_LP7J6Kg

From the very first note, *Aud The Deep-Minded* envelopes you in a world where history, myth, and the present collide. This groundbreaking musical drama, created by Scottish New Music Award-shortlisted composer Joanna Nicholson, is inspired by fragments of unreliable historical accounts and reimagines the story of Aud the Deep-Minded—a real-life Christian Viking and conflicted leader in 9th-century Scotland.

Combining projections, voice, electronic soundscapes, clarinet, and horn, Nicholson crafts a psychological journey through Odd's transformation: oppressed to oppressor, and ultimately, liberator. The staging is as striking as the music—performers clad in white against a black backdrop become living canvases for Kirsty Anderson's atmospheric projection art, merging seamlessly with the story's shifting landscapes. Soprano Cleona Cassidy's voice soars over Andy Saunders' horn, Nicholson's own clarinet, and Alistair MacDonald's intricate electronic textures. The sound balance is impeccable, enveloping the audience in an immersive, otherworldly soundscape that blurs the lines between past and present. Spoken-word passages interlace with song, grounding the piece in narrative while keeping its mystique intact.

The work is presented in three acts, each with its own emotional and thematic arc—details that can be explored in the accompanying synopsis via QR code. While reading this enriches the experience, the performance is powerful enough to stand entirely on its own.

At just 40 minutes, this Made in Scotland showcase piece is a masterclass in concision: no moment feels wasted, and the intensity never wanes. Its premiere performance was flawless—no technical hitches, just pure, immersive artistry.

Sadly, *Aud The Deep-Minded* has a brief Fringe run, but it is a production that demands a wider life. It is rare to see contemporary music-theatre executed with such vision and precision. This is not just one of the best shows at the Fringe this year—it's one of the most original and affecting pieces of music-theatre in recent memory.

A must-see for anyone craving innovative, atmospheric, and emotionally resonant performance.

The QR (Will Quinn)

★★★★★

<https://theqr.co.uk/2025/08/25/edfringe-review-aud-the-deep-minded/>

Clarinetist and composer, Joanna Nicholson, brought her debut creation, *Aud the Deep Minded*, to theSPACE Triplex this Fringe. Billed as a “groundbreaking new chamber opera”, I would say it more than lives up to that description.

So what or who is Aud? Well, Aud the Deep Minded was a 9th-century Viking leader, Icelandic settler, and mother of great battlechiefs. That's right, mother, Aud was also a woman. Nicholson's Opera tries to look behind the legend to find the human being beneath.

It's an intensely modern experience, which pushed operatic boundaries even whilst preserving conventions such as aria and recitative. The all-encompassing blend of 9th-century church music, Norwegian folk, and electronica, along with Kirsty Anderson's dream-like projection, invites an audience into a unique space.

For its debut, Nicholson recruited a crack team of musicians. Alongside herself on Clarinet were Soprano Cliona Cassidy, Andy Saunders on Horn, and Alistair MacDonald on Electronics. Between them, they wove quite a spell, a tumbling river of melodic currents and eddies which I suspect requires stretches of technical imagination beyond a typical day on the classical stage.

The story that emerges is tripartite, alluding to the Aud as Triple Goddess: Maiden, Mother, and Crone, her person split between Cassidy's beautifully nuanced song, Nicholson's spry Clarinet, and Saunders's gently forceful Horn.

That's not the only division, however, which also seeks to separate myth from human being via Nicholson's wry interventions, which interrogate Aud's interior monologue with a distinctly modern Scots voice.

If all these parts weren't so organically integrated, it would be far too much to throw at a 40-minute piece. Nicholson and her collaborators have done magnificently to fold all of this technical and artistic ambition into one immersive and undeniably magical experience. There is, I think, too little narrative underpinning the final sequence, but otherwise *Aud the Deep Minded* is pitch-perfect.

In the end, Nicholson's most magnificent achievement was in creating a vivid sense of a complicated, living, breathing person and the ancient landscape surrounding them. This is art going where neither the humanities nor science can begin to tread.

EdFringe Review (James Platt)

★★★★

<https://www.edfringereview.com/review/e/GTJMcEWkupAPiaJR2msi>

Aud the Deep Minded is described as a chamber opera: a small scale opera with a soprano voice accompanied by french horn, clarinet and electronically manipulated soundscape. Joanna Nicholson's haunting story blends fact and fiction to reimagine the story of the real-life Viking Queen, Aud the Deep Minded, as a figure persisting through time and space, simultaneously escaping persecution at the hands of the vikings and speaking to us in the present day.

The small scale approach gives each performer space to flourish in their own right: space that was certainly deserved. Nicholson on the clarinet and Andy Saunders on the french horn both produce an incredible tone, and their overlapping accompaniment to soprano Cliona Cassidy is haunting and beautiful. Cassidy's voice is clear and perfectly suited for the wild, bracing atmosphere of the Viking wilderness. The most beautiful moments of the piece are the stretches of voice accompanied by clarinet and horn, creating a soundscape that encapsulates the power and enormity of Aud's life and will. I particularly enjoyed the ending as Cassidy sang "I liberate you, I liberate myself", and the electronic manipulation that Alistair MacDonald, the fourth member of cast, did onstage.

MacDonald adds effects like echoes and distortion to all the instruments, as well as bringing in other music, all recorded by those onstage, to add a beautiful complexity to the sound. His work transforms the piece into something ethereal, bringing it into, through and then past reality. His presence also allows the rest of the instruments to become much more versatile: I especially liked how the horn was used to create a kind of rasping breathing sound during some of the more climatic moments.

Nicholson also provides some narration at key points in the story, speaking in the voice of Aud as she experiences horrors and grows into someone taking back her own life. In just a few words, Nicholson illustrates Aud as a powerful, wise figure, able to understand the world she lived in and what she needed to do to protect herself. However, the show may benefit from a little more of this narration, as at times the story becomes a little unanchored from the music, however beautiful it is. As programme notes were provided before the show, this was less of an issue than it could've been, although for someone wanting to go in spoiler-free I am not confident the story would make sense. More context could also be provided by Cassidy's lyrics, but these are often in Norwegian: something I enjoyed as it gives the sense of being deep in the thoughts of the historic figure, but leaves communication rather lacking. More narration may also emphasise the contemporary lens the opera suggests it has. I found this hard to grasp, apart from one lyric calling Aud's late husband "an arsehole" which was pretty enjoyable, but quite anachronistic as the modernity didn't really stick. I feel that the story Nicholson has weaved and the music she has composed stand firmly on their own two feet: they speak to the audience in a much more subtle and moving way than any attempt to bring Aud's story into a world we recognise.

Visually, the show is also very interesting. Kirsty Anderson, the projection artist, has created a series of visuals which are projected onto the actors and backdrop, creating a liminal, unreal impression and taking the actors fully into the story. This is accentuated by their timeless, ephemeral costumes, which are plain white, allowing the projections to be fully visible. I almost wish more was done with the concept of projecting images and patterns onto the actors themselves, allowing them to be seen as both a canvas and artists in their own right. The projection allows the piece to be mostly static, meaning the performers can play their instruments to the best of their ability while still being engaging and enjoyable to watch. Although it would have been nice to see a more dynamic staging, this should not be at the cost of a sacrifice in terms of sound, and the projections allow the piece to shine both audibly and visually.

Aud the Deep Minded is a beautiful, haunting watch by a very talented composer, and a bracing gust of Icelandic fresh air for those looking for something less comedic at the Fringe.

EdFringe Review (Serena Shah)

★★★★

<https://www.edfringereview.com/review/e/GTJMcEWkupAPiaJR2msi>

Joanna Nicholson's 40-minute chamber opera, *Aud the Deep Minded* compresses centuries of historiography, and folklore into a taut psychological drama that lingers long after the final note. It is small and simple, but incredibly effective storytelling, combining a soprano voice, French horn, clarinet, and electronic sound, to tell Nicholson's re-imagining of Aud the Deep Minded, a 9th century Viking Christian Queen, as an internally conflicted leader.

What begins as an immediately captivating duet between horn, played by Andy Saunders, and clarinet, by Nicholson, is soon joined by the strong voice of soprano, Clíona Cassidy. She introduces herself, 'I am Aud'. The two women lead the imagining, with Nicholson also acting as a narrative voice, informing the audience that Aud has just learned of the death of her husband, Olaf the White, King of Dublin, (where we are comically reminded that 'he is an arsehole!', a somewhat lonely contemporary gimmick). Nicholson gives voice to Aud's inner reckoning, with a measured, unflinching wisdom. These spoken moments are delivered amongst surges of beautiful music, letting the audience glimpse the leader as both myth, and woman.

The opera's multilingual score is key to its spell. Aud speaks to us in English, prays to God in solemn Latin, slips into a fantasy Gaelic when possessed by her ancient self, and spits her rage in Norwegian. The shifts are seamless yet transformative: each language a doorway into another facet of her fractured, time-spanning identity. Even when the meaning is obscured, the emotional truth is unmistakable, the sound of the words becomes part of the music's texture, carrying centuries of belief, grief, and power in its vowels. However, audience members who are less well-versed in 9th century Viking leadership might find the piece easier to follow with more of Nicholson's storytelling, as her moments of recitation are few and far-between, and certainly necessary. It is aided by a plot summary given to audience members prior to the start of the opera, but one feels that without that, the central story gets slightly lost in the music.

The instrumentation is sparse, but striking. Cassidy, Andy Saunders on French horn, Joanna Nicholson on clarinet and Alistair MacDonald on live electronics - the sound they conjure feels vast and untamed, like the Viking seas Aud once sailed. Saunders and Nicholson's lines intertwine and pull apart, sometimes meeting in a single haunting breath of harmony, sometimes diverging into tension, like the opposing voices of Aud's own mind. Cassidy's voice rises above with clarity and power, equally at home in the unearthly stillness of a lament and the bracing wildness of a storm-tossed prayer. MacDonald's live electronic work is pure alchemy, echoes, distortions, and layers spun entirely from the instruments onstage, save for the birdsong, which slips in fleetingly and

hauntingly. His technical work is central to the intensity of the opera, creating the moments of climax and calamity throughout the re-imagining. The beauty is otherworldly: a music that belongs as much to the Morrigan's realm as to ours.

Kirsty Anderson's projection art adds an almost archaeological dimension. There is no literal illustration, rather layered visual strata – forest shadows, or the shifting sea, which elevates the sparsity and simplicity of the staging, and the all-white costumes, into a living canvas. The staging's stillness allows the music to dominate, yet the interplay of light and body creates a dreamlike, time-suspended atmosphere.

Aud the Deep Minded is not just beautiful, it is phenomenal. It is bewitching, a tale that transcends temporal limits through its use of music and language.