

Address by Professor Seóirse Bodley on the occasion of the presentation to him by President of Ireland, Mrs Mary McAleese, of a gold Torc as insignia of the office of Saoi of Aosdána.

24 November 2008

President, Members of the Arts Council, *Saoithe* and members of *Aosdána*, friends & relatives

The person who is generous to others is in a position to connect with them in a very direct and special manner. My experience of the generosity of my fellow-composers has been one of the most pleasant aspects of being a composer in *Aosdána*. On occasion, composers have passed on commissions to me, or arranged for performances of my work, in a most kind and openhanded way. To give just two examples: Raymond Deane mounted the first performance in 30 years of my orchestral piece, *Configurations*, and Jane O'Leary passed to me the commission for my fourth symphony for the excellent Arturo Toscanini orchestra of Parma, Italy.

Imagine, therefore, how I appreciated the campaign for my election as *Saoi* of *Aosdána*, the first composer to be so elected. Following on from this initial support within the music discipline was the great assistance from the other arts, particular practitioners of which have, so I gather, been quite invaluable in the process: among the composers, I should like to name in particular John Buckley, who was with the project from its conception to the very end and Michael Holohan, who at a later stage was of such great assistance in contacting members of *Aosdána*. Among supporters from the other arts, the knowledgeable and quite indefatigable Mary Fitzgerald and my dear friend, Micheal O'Siadhail gave staunch and invaluable help. To each of these, and all the other supporters, I give my most heartfelt thanks.

I need hardly say how grateful I am to those who made possible the great honour of becoming a *Saoi* of *Aosdána*. While on a personal level I am filled with gratitude, I should like also to step back a little and look at the larger picture and the good I see coming out of this.

Before 1820 the music which was generally performed was the music of the present, along with some works by composers of one or two preceding generations. Today this position is completely reversed: 19th century repertoire dominates the music of our concert halls worldwide and only on occasion is a new work included in the regular concert season.

When a composer writes a work in Ireland, the most he or she can expect is to receive one performance; if the composer is lucky the work might be recorded once. In comparison with music of earlier periods, where there are often a

multitude of recordings exploring different interpretations of the work, this single recording of a modern work remains the only living record beyond the score. This is not the case with the other performing arts: when a play is written, for example, it runs for a matter of weeks, often receives further performances by professional and amateur groups and can expect a full one-page article in the *Weekend Review of The Irish Times*, for example. And rightly so! In Ireland, frequently the most a composer can hope for is one tiny review, a column of 100 words where one paragraph is dedicated to the new work.

One of the reasons for the lack of performances of works by Irish composers is that music publishing has been very limited in Ireland and is often carried out by publishers not solely dedicated to music. Personally however, I am extremely grateful to Carysfort Press (also supported by the Arts Council) for their publications of works of mine as apographs, which are special editions prepared with the help of the composer, with learned and searching commentary by my wife, Lorraine. Indeed musicological comment on Irish composition has been increasing in recent years. One thinks of the excellent books on Aloys Fleischmann and Raymond Deane by Seamus de Barra and Patrick Zuk - and in my own case the forthcoming book, now almost finished, by Gareth Cox.

Looking back on the trail of changes in my musical life, I can, of course, see a development of support for composition in Ireland. It was not that new music was totally neglected during my formative years. As a teenager I attended regularly the two free symphony concerts given each week in the Phoenix Hall in Dublin's Exchequer Street: it was here, for example, that I first heard live performances of the music of Schoenberg and Alban Berg. I also recall the founding of what is now our National Symphony Orchestra at a time of financial difficulty in Ireland in the aftermath of World War 2. Some three decades or so later, in 1981, I was honoured to receive the commission for the opening of our National Concert Hall in Dublin. To receive today the honour of being the first composer elected as a *Saoi* of Aosdána is another landmark – not only in my life – but in the national support of composition in Ireland.

In such a cultural climate it is historically most significant that Aosdána have had the great foresight to elect a composer to the position of *Saoi* and to welcome our President to mark this historic occasion. In the music discipline of Aosdána we are a relatively small body of composers. To have a composer as *Saoi* in the highest level of Aosdána helps to raise the profile of Irish musical composition, both within the organization and outside – and I hope that my fellow-composers, who have supported me most generously, will also gain from this.

From the point of view of Aosdána itself there is in addition the advantage that another discipline is now, for the first time, represented within the *Saoithe*. From the point of view of musical progress in Ireland, it is singularly important that composition is awarded such a significant place. We need to maintain and increase this level of support for the sake of my fellow composers and composers of future generations.

Finally, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts on the receipt of this most signal honour. My heartfelt gratitude goes out to all who have made this occasion possible.

Seóirse Bodley