

The Contemporary Music Centre, Ireland

Irish Composers and their Music

Music in Ireland: the air is full of it. Traditional music in the pubs and at the summer festivals, young rock bands everywhere, hoping to be the next international superstars. Wherever you go in Ireland you'll come across live music. And wherever you go outside Ireland you'll find Irish performers: The Corrs, The Chieftains, U2, Riverdance... Is there any corner of the globe where this music isn't heard?

Strange, then, that with so much musical activity very few people can name an Irish composer, although most can name at least three famous Irish writers. Why are our composers still relatively unknown?

Historical context

To understand the reasons, we must consider the historical and social context. When Turlough Carolan, the last of the great harpers, died in 1738 (only four years before the first performance of Handel's Messiah in Dublin), the native tradition of composition which he represented was struggling to survive. Dublin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the second city to London in the British Isles, but its musical reputation rested largely on visiting foreign performers and composers. By the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, a native art music tradition was virtually non-existent and any form of classical music was considered to be the preserve of the Anglo-Irish landed gentry alone. This created a difficult climate for would-be composers and it is not surprising that, in the early decades of the twentieth century, their numbers were few.

The 1930s and 1940s

The first to overcome these difficulties and establish a reputation with their music were Aloys Fleischmann, Frederick May and Brian Boydell. Frederick May is generously credited by Boydell as being 'the first to break away from what could be described as the Stanford tradition of taking Irish melodies (or inventing ones with a stage-Irish accent) and setting them in the uncomfortable context of nineteenth-century Teutonic harmony'. May was influenced by new trends in Europe, and the music which he and his colleagues wrote during the 1930s and 1940s expresses the spirit of that time, an important one in the development of the newly-independent Irish state.

The 1950s and 1960s

After the Second World War and during the 1950s the economic climate began to improve and this, together with greatly improved opportunities for access to classical music, produced a new generation of composers including A. J. Potter and Gerard Victory. Seóirse Bodley, John Kinsella and James Wilson were also part of this group and remain active in composition. Between them they have produced an immense body of large-scale orchestral, choral and operatic works: to date, eight symphonies from Kinsella, five from Bodley and six operas from Wilson.

The 1970s and 1980s

In the 1970s, a new and influential generation appeared. The most well-known are Gerald Barry, John Buckley and Raymond Deane. Unlike their predecessors, these composers were able to benefit from the existence of a now firmly-established compositional

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tradition, as well as from a funding infrastructure which was beginning to be set in place by the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon. While stylistically very different, they are now among Ireland's leading composers. Barry, in particular, has gained an international reputation with his frenetic and highly idiosyncratic music.

The composer Jane O'Leary is also from this generation. One of the most active participants in the Irish new music scene through the chamber ensemble, Concorde, of which she is artistic director, O'Leary continues a solid tradition of women composers which begins at the turn of the century with Ina Boyle, a prolific and now sadly neglected composer, and Joan Trimble, both of whom were students of Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London.

Also active in composition since the 1970s are Eric Sweeney, Philip Martin and Frank Corcoran. These composers are very different from one another in style, Sweeney's music being influenced by minimalism in contrast to Martin's unashamedly lyrical romanticism, while Corcoran takes what he describes as 'the Irish dream landscape' and reinterprets it in abstract forms.

Electro-acoustic music is not a large field in Ireland, but Roger Doyle has made a particular impact with his major work, *The Babel Project*. The young composer Donnacha Dennehy is also producing interesting electro-acoustic and mixed media works.

Into the Millennium

The number of Irish musicians turning to composition has increased considerably in recent years and there is now a promising crop of younger composers. Fergus Johnston, Ian Wilson and Stephen Gardner are firmly established, each with a substantial body of works to their credit. Other names to note are Eibhlís Farrell, Kevin O'Connell, Elaine Agnew, Benjamin Dwyer, Michael Alcorn, Gráinne Mulvey and Deirdre Gribbin.

Now that we have entered the twenty-first century, the boundaries for Irish art music have become blurred by their proximity to the cultural extremes of a thriving, internationally-based rock scene and a constantly-renewed folk heritage. The level of musical activity is greater than at any time in the past and embraces a healthy variety of styles. Irish composers are at last making a real impact.

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