

MUSICAL EVENTS OCTOBER 26, 2020 ISSUE

JENNIFER WALSHE'S SUBLIME CHAOS

The Irish composer and vocalist gives emotional shape to the barrage of information that attends online life.

By Alex Ross

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Walshe is in the lineage of composer-performers like Laurie Anderson. Illustration by Anja Slibar

The Irish composer Jennifer Walshe nails down, better than any artist I know, the antic, raucous, confessional, sordid, semi-sublime texture of modern digitized life. At the age of forty-six, she has

established herself not only as a composer but also as an electrifying vocalist, a sly comedian and storyteller, a fertile maker of videos and visual art. Yet she comes across less as an all-knowing mastermind than as a free-spirited instigator of happenings that threaten to spiral out of control. One of the last live events I saw before the pandemic shutdown was a performance, in March, of her 2016 work “EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT,” for vocalist and string quartet, at National Sawdust, in Brooklyn. It ends with abrasive timbres on violin and viola, mournful sustained fifths on the cello, a chant of “U.S.A.!” and shouts of “Geronimo!” When I first saw a video of the piece, at the end of 2016, it struck me as an encapsulation of that year’s dark delirium. Thinking back to the event in March, at which Walshe appeared alongside members of the Mivos Quartet, I hear it as a panicky prophecy of things to come.

Chaos is Walshe’s natural habitat; she seems to revel in the insensate barrage of information that many of us struggle to tune out. She has written that her work “ALL THE MANY PEOPLES,” from 2011, addresses the following subjects:

Lojban, a language constructed entirely according to the rules of predicate logic; the cast of *Lohengrin*; certain sections from *Watt* by Samuel Beckett constituting the first examples of process composition; *The Public Enemy* (1931) starring James Cagney; KRS-One; U.S. and British soldiers making cell-phone videos of themselves blowing things up and uploading the videos to YouTube; *Even Dwarfs Started Small*; Amazon.com message boards about vampire physiology; Dashboard Confessional; sferics; conspiracy theorist Francis E. Dec; detritus from video game voice-overs; Jackie Stallone; August Strindberg’s *Inferno*; Cymbalta Discontinuation Syndrome; a Hibernian version of “The Signifying Monkey” as response to the 19th century practice of describing/depicting the Irish as “simian”/apes; *The Typing of the Dead*; cult Irish martial arts film *Fatal Deviation*; the collective unconscious as evidenced by Google Autocomplete; Courage Wolf; 4Chan.

Walshe’s vast, vehement body of work also includes “set phasers on KILL!,” “XXX_LIVE_NUDE_GIRLS!!!,” and “THIS IS WHY PEOPLE O.D. ON PILLS/AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE.” The COVID-19 pandemic has not slowed her down. In September, she presented a big new piece, “Ireland: A Dataset,” at the National Concert Hall, in Dublin, which meditates on Irish identity, myth, and kitsch.


What gives real heft to Walshe’s work is the narrative force that shapes the swirl of material. Many of her large-scale creations take a decisive, emotionally charged turn in their final minutes. The social-media cacophony of “EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT” devolves into a funereal apocalypse; automatic-weapons fire cuts short the zany stream of consciousness of “ALL THE MANY PEOPLES”; in “Ireland: A Dataset,” absurdist skits give way to an atmosphere of remembrance and grief. Walshe’s revelation of urgency and purpose is a good definition of what composers do, in whatever period and style: they lead us through labyrinths of
d, giving us the exhilaration of finding an exit, no matter how dark the terminus.

Walshe was born in Dublin in 1974. Her parents, who came from working-class backgrounds and had passionate artistic interests, encouraged their children's pursuits. Walshe played trumpet in Irish youth orchestras, then turned toward composition while studying at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Pursuing a doctorate at Northwestern University, in Chicago, she delved into American experimental traditions, discovering such unclassifiable composer-performers as Laurie Anderson and Diamanda Galas. You can detect traces of both artists in Walshe's sensibility: Anderson's deadpan irony, Galas's shamanistic fury. Walshe never formally studied singing, but her voice has proved to be a formidable and flexible instrument: she emits pure tones and also raw noise; she slips into various popular styles; she assumes various accents, from Irish bard to California surfer girl.

I first encountered Walshe's work in 2009, when I received in the mail two CDs claiming to present scores by the avant-garde Irish collective Grúpat. The group included a sculptor and a sound artist named Turf Boon, the inventor of an instrument called the Kuscheltiermarimbaphon, an array of stuffed animals to be struck with mallets, and the Dowager Marchylove, a drag artist whose compositions included "Oh! Tom Cruise!" and "The Wasistas of Thereswhere." All of them turned out to be alter egos of Walshe's. The jargon-ridden biographies on the Grúpat Web site suggest satirical intent—"Detleva Verens works to explore the spatialization of sound and the sonorousness of space"—yet the music itself has a quietly entrancing aura, marked by Walshe's fondness for drone-based minimalism. One of her early collaborators was the late composer and sound artist Tony Conrad, a magician of hypnotically seething textures.

In 2015, Walshe unveiled a sprawling archival project titled "Aisteach: Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde." (*Aisteach* is Irish for "strange" or "queer.") It honored the likes of the Guinness Dadaists, the Kilkenny Engagists, and the outsider artist Chancey Briggs, who launched "a series of inevitably doomed attempts to put together Ireland's first gay Brechtian cabaret showband in the 1960s." All this was fiction as well: Walshe and a crew of co-conspirators had invented not only compositions but also films, art works, sketches, and critical reviews. "Aisteach" has been mounted several times as a gallery exhibition, and can also be experienced as a richly stocked Web site.

There is serious intent behind Walshe's games and gags. She has said, "One thing that 'Aisteach' tries to talk about is: Who gets to curate? Who gets to choose what an artistic canon is and why?" The procession of female and radical-queer artists who make up "Aisteach" would hardly have been able to participate in Irish artistic life had they actually existed. Walshe has contrived her own heritage, one that more closely resembles her own milieu. This longing for a different past becomes, by extension, a dream for the future.

An artist so attuned to virtual realms might have been expected to thrive in the online regimen that the pandemic has forced on the performing arts. When I called Walshe at her studio, in London,

though, she told me that she disliked streaming concerts and desperately missed the live arena. Only reluctantly had she acceded to the reality that “Ireland: A Dataset,” which she began assembling at the beginning of 2020, would have to unfold without a live audience. Still, she had been able to spend an extended rehearsal period with the principal performers: members of the experimental vocal group Tonnta and the saxophonist Nick Roth. The National Concert Hall also placed a sophisticated eight-camera setup at her disposal.

“Ireland” unfolds for most of its hour-long duration as a gleeful deconstruction of national cultural clichés. The opening section exposes the fabrications that went into Robert J. Flaherty’s famous 1934 documentary, “Man of Aran.” Later, a pair of airheaded talk-show hosts demonstrate how to make yourself up as a bewhiskered stage Irishman, and a pair of airheaded Irish-American tourists seek magical emanations from ancient sites. The skits veer into abrupt non sequiturs, recalling the surrealist comedy of Monty Python and Vic Reeves. As the members of Tonnta speak and sing, they manipulate noisemaking devices, in the manner of an old-time radio play.

The score also includes a series of precisely notated musical interludes, which Walshe generated by feeding a motley array of audio samples—Enya, the folk band Dubliners, “Riverdance,” melismatic *sean-nós* singing—into an artificial-intelligence composing program. The results are at once nonsensical and oddly charming: Walshe seems to be suggesting that randomization can restore mystery to traditional material. She applies similar A.I. procedures on a somewhat confounding recent album, “A Late Anthology of Early Music, Vol. 1: Ancient to Renaissance,” which reconfigures composers from Hildegard von Bingen to Palestrina.

The final segment of “Ireland,” different in tone not only from the rest of the piece but also from most of Walshe’s savagely anarchic output, is inspired by a visit that Walshe made with her mother to Malin Head, the northernmost tip of Ireland, in 2019. Looking down from the cliffs, the two saw a man clambering over the rocks below, and wondered whether he was in danger or trying to commit suicide. Eventually, the man climbed to safety. Walshe wove the memory of that “white speck” into a story about a sickly child who wants to see locations where scenes from “Game of Thrones” and the recent “Star Wars” films were shot. A voice-over says, “The child hadn’t believed that the alien lands were his land. That these other worlds were here, in his home.” The music, too, changes character: electronic tones gather into sustained chords and clusters, with the singers tracing fragmentary, ethereal melodies against them.

The sudden transformation of mood is heart-catching, and it elaborates one of Walshe’s favorite themes. Even as she dismantles institutionalized Irishness, she remains fond of local legends: runes, standing
s, holy wells. She told me, “When I was younger, I wanted to run away from Irish identity, which at

times can be so narrow and confining and politically problematic. But it's part of me, and it belongs to everyone here. So I thought of a kid who has an intense relationship with Irish places because of the movies, which other people might say were a corruption of the precious aura. We don't get to decide that one experience is more authentic and privileged than another. We should be free to make our own folklore." ♦

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