

Benjamin Dwyer

Different Voices:
Irish Music and
Music in Ireland

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Dedicated to my father Benjamin Dwyer

Preface

Different Voices: What is Irish Music or Music in Ireland?

This book has an unusual format. It offers an essay that overviews the trajectory of classical music in Ireland from the 18th century to the present as a contextualizing prologue to twelve interviews with living composers who were either born in Ireland or who have made Ireland their home. It attempts to provide a historical overview as a means of understanding the conditions within which music is created today. This accounts for the title and subtitle, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland*, which I hope serves two functions. Firstly, I want to recognize the considerable degree of external influence to which music in Ireland has been subjected. Secondly, I want to problematize essentialist notions of what Irish music should be. The twelve composers interviewed in this book represent a *bricolage* of contemporary composition in Ireland that can only be seen as an open flux of styles, genres, philosophies and aesthetics that nonetheless constitutes a living *gestalt*. This is not a unified movement of shared ideas, but a disparate collection of musical practices that remain both of this time and place, and which are open-ended and constantly vulnerable to outside political, cultural, economic and artistic influence.

However, the insistence upon non-essentialist readings of music in Ireland invites all sorts of difficulties in relation to nomenclature and codification. *Different Voices* offers a platform to living composers who work within a field of music production that is generally understood to be the current manifestation of the classical music tradition. However, such a prescribed and canonized lineage may very well restrict the broad musical fields and aesthetic practices that can currently be observed in Ireland. Furthermore, if I use the term 'art music', which also generally classifies the creative activities of many contemporary composers, such nomenclature brings with it a variety of historical and cultural notions that may not fit well within certain aesthetic, intellectual or socio-political perspectives. The term also potentially sidelines other music forms and genres through the unintended implication that they are somehow of less artistic worth. Thus, I embark upon this project in full awareness that any attempt to categorize composers, genres, identities, socio-political stances and socio-cultural positions, that is, to trace a musico-cultural seismology of contemporary Ireland, are all likely to fall short in one way or another. If my strategic use of the term 'contemporary music' indicates accurately enough that the work of these composers is both music and 'of our time', I know that it may also inadequately serve to fully describe either specific aesthetics or genre characteristics.

A quick perusal of the website of Ireland's national archive of composers, the Contemporary Music Centre, immediately demonstrates other challenges in defining what 'Irish' music might or might not be. In the alphabetized archive, the first three composers encountered are Elaine Agnew (b. 1967), Michael Alcorn (b. 1962) and Farid Allawerdi (1927-2007). In many ways, these composers are indicative of the complexity of the current Irish art music scene and the challenge at hand with *Different Voices*. These three composers represent three different religious denominations.¹ Two of the composers hail from Northern Ireland,² and the third was born in Iraq. Ironically, none of our three sample composers was born in the Republic of Ireland. To further complicate matters, there are numerous Irish-born composers who live permanently outside the country. Additionally, since the 1970s the number of women composers has greatly increased within the Irish scene. However, this situation has developed out of a fraternity that traditionally held little or no place for women as professionals. Thus, before we even come to discussions of the music itself, we are confronted with challenges of negotiating themes of identity and definition, of immigration and diaspora, of essentialism and integration, of political jurisdiction and tribal affiliation, and of gender and equality.

In *Different Voices*, I have made my selection of composers with consideration to gender and age, and on an all-Ireland basis. I have decidedly not made choices in accordance with my own preferences of style or genre. Indeed, I insist that a different group of twelve composers could provide an equally interesting and diverse set of opinions and themes. The interviews therefore represent a snapshot of contemporary Irish music, but one that I hope will reflect the fundamental complexity of this under-represented form of cultural expression in Ireland.

I did not insist upon a strict methodology when conducting these interviews, as I wanted the composers to choose the methods and mediums that they felt best suited their purposes. Twelve interviews were conducted between November 2006 and June 2014. Some of these were carried out on a one-to-one basis in one sitting (Seóirse Bodley, Kevin O'Connell, Jane O'Leary, Siobhán Cleary, Nick Roth and Dorone Paris). Others took place on a one-to-one basis that extended into more than one sitting (Gráinne Mulvey and Frank Corcoran). The interviews with John McLachlan and John Buckley were conducted over email. Barry Guy's interview is a combination of a previously published one that I undertook in late 2006 for the January 2007 edition of the *Journal of Music in Ireland*, and a subsequent inter-

1 Naturally, I have no interest in the religious practices or preferences of these or any other composers, unless such affiliations directly impact their music. However, in light of the cross-cultural makeup of contemporary Irish life and the question of identity that lies at the heart of this investigation, I make reference to religious, political and cultural backgrounds to identify and underscore the complexity of the Irish musico-cultural arena.

2 Northern Ireland comprises the six counties of Ireland in the province of Ulster that remain part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

view conducted over email. The interview I gave is also a combination of one that Kevin O'Connell conducted with me live at the National Concert Hall, Dublin, in December 2012 and a subsequent interview conducted over email. The main aim of these interviews was to draw out the beliefs and opinions of the interviewees regarding their music, its aesthetic makeup, its reception, and its cultural and political imperatives. While I did have prepared questions, I was also happy to allow composers to take the interviews wherever they might go. Using this method, I hoped that their different voices would shine through rather than be restricted by the Procrustean bed of a formalized process.

While the contextualizing essay in this book provides an overview of music in Ireland, it does not constitute a chronological history. Its narratives are neither wholly sequential nor encyclopedic. I bring together and interpret a range of secondary sources that have themselves collated primary source data and also draw upon my perspectives as an Irish composer who has been working in the Irish scene and internationally for the past thirty years. Instead of offering a comprehensive social history of music in Ireland, which I hope will one day be written, I employ alternative methodologies and read the story of Irish music through philosophical, political, colonial and post-colonial perspectives. Such an approach places an additional burden on a writer attempting to engage with this subject, as it generates an array of themes relating to identity, class, religion, nationalism, historical revisionism, counter-revisionism, popular reception and globalization, all of which need to be integrated coherently into the debate.

This study falls into four main sections (with numerous sub-divisions) that overview the 18th century, the 19th century, the period of the Irish Free State and Republic of Ireland (which scans the 20th century), and a final section comprising themes arising from the interviews conducted with the featured composers in this book. These themes include topics of myth, sectarianism, identity, politics, feminism and globalization, which are often interrelated.

Additionally, the study's trajectory and focus are influenced by recent cultural debates. Nineteenth-century Irish nationalism has long been considered a culprit in the impediment of a strong musical culture. This subject has greatly preoccupied many musicologists, composers and cultural commentators.³ The dominance

3 For an overview of debates on the subject of nationalism and music in Ireland, see, among others, Gareth Cox, Axel Klein et al., eds., *The Life and Music of Brian Boydell* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003); Raymond Deane, "The Honour of non-Existence: Classical Composers in Irish Society," in *Irish Musical Studies* (3), eds. Harry White and Gerard Gillen (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995); Benjamin Dwyer, "Review of *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*," *Journal of Music*, Sept./Oct., 2003; Benjamin Dwyer, "Review of *The Life and Music of Brian Boydell*," *Journal of Music*, Sept./Oct., 2004; Gerard Gillen and Harry White, eds., *Music and Irish Cultural History* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995); Axel Klein, "Roots and Directions in Twentieth-Century Irish Art Music," in *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Joseph Ryan, "Nationalism and Irish Music," in

of this thesis, its disseminative prowess (evidenced by its frequent citation in several cultural histories) and the formidable intellectual debate it has engendered amongst numerous commentators, point to a fundamental divergence of perspectives surrounding music in Ireland, particularly in the contexts of identity, politics, colonialism and nationalism. For this reason, the relationship of Irish nationalism and English colonialism to music receives particular attention here.

Ireland's current socio-political condition is one derived from hundreds of years of colonial rule, efforts (often violent) toward self-determination and all the attendant political strife and social destabilization that such friction and conflict bring. To view music historically in Ireland from a colonial perspective is to vividly observe that the production and reception of music was of necessity conducted either through or against institutional sites that were active instruments of religious and social inclusivity and legitimacy on the part of the colonial power. Historically, these sites were found in cities (such as Dublin, Cork, Kilkenny, Wexford and Belfast) where the bureaucracies of imperial power were most entrenched, bureaucracies that could, if required, engage in intensive military coercion to maintain political and cultural hegemony. Any music emanating from within such locations enjoyed the benefits of privilege. Music that emerged from outside (from 'the outsiders within'—the native Irish) was inevitably 'othered' because it was part of a cultural matrix whose narratives were not afforded complete validity. As Edward Said explains, 'the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.'⁴ Thus, the troubled nature of the production, performance and reception of music in Ireland, within the context of colonial dominance, forms a central and pervasive element of this study.

Since English colonization was initiated over seven hundred years ago, Ireland has been struggling for a sense of itself.⁵ As a powerful colonial presence

Irish Musical Studies 3: Music and Irish Cultural History, eds. Gerard Gillen and Harry White (Blackrock: Irish Academic Press, 1995); Joseph J. Ryan, "Opera in Ireland before 1925," in *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Barra Ó Séaghdha, "Musical Texts of the Élités," *Journal of Music*, July/Aug., 2005; Barra Ó Séaghdha, "Music Ideas and History," *Journal of Music*, May/June., 2007; Barra Ó Séaghdha, "Home Sweet Home: Classical Music Culture in Ireland, Britain & America," *Journal of Music*, Nov./Dec., 2006; Barra Ó Séaghdha, "Review of *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*," *Journal of Music*, May/April., 2007; Richard Pine, ed. *Music in Ireland 1848-1998* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998); Joseph Ryan, "Nationalism and music in Ireland," (unpublished PhD dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1992); Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770-1970* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998); Harry White: *The Divided Imagination: music in Ireland after Ó Ráda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Harry White and Barra Boydell, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2013).

4 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), xiii.

5 As this discussion centres upon the transformation of music within the various historical contexts pertaining to Ireland, including colonialism, it is important to understand clearly the main protagonists. To this end, I take my starting point from Thomas Bartlett's read-

in Ireland, England implemented systematic land confiscation, new class structures, ethnic cleansing and plantation, political disenfranchisement and a division according to religious affiliations that effectively created locations of power and subservience. As a result, Ireland has undergone a lengthy series of social upheavals and cultural transformations signposted by treaties, laws and political events. These include the near-realization of total colonial suppression throughout the island during the Tudor and Stuart reigns,⁶ the Constitution of 1782, the uprisings of 1798 and 1803, the Act of Union in 1800, O'Connell's campaigns for Catholic Emancipation and Repeal, the Famine, the various Home Rule Bills that dominated the 'Irish Question' for decades, the 1916 Rebellion, the partition of the island in 1920, the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1922 and the subsequent civil war.

Further social changes occurred when the Free State, always traditionalist, emerged as a deeply conservative, church-dominated Republic inaugurated in 1949, whose slow industrialization eventually underwent some modernization during the 1960s. Ireland's entry into the E.E.C. in 1973 and its subsequent assumption into European and global fiscal structures in the latter quarter of the 20th century marked a new phase that left behind years of economic stagnation. In more recent times, the post-Celtic-Tiger financial crash has catapulted Ireland again into grievous long-term debt and innumerable social and economic catastrophes. Its sovereignty is yet again under threat from powerful fiscal entities. It would seem that the present is as unstable as the past has ever been.

In Ireland today, it is patently clear that there are still many problems relating to music education, infrastructure and media reception within Irish cultural consciousness. An Arts Council-commissioned report (*Deaf Ears?*, 1985) found that 'the young Irish person has the worst of all "musical worlds"'. A subsequent report (*MEND*, 1998), reinforced the 'depressing findings' of *Deaf Ears?* and added its own call for improvements, which have only been partially realized in the inter-

ing of Ireland's colonial history when he states categorically that 'what happened was an invasion, followed by a conquest of a large portion of the island; all attempts to portray the invaders as if they were guests of an Irish king, or medieval tourists...fail to recognise the determination of the invaders [who] proudly described their action as a conquest (*expugnation*) for centuries thereafter...It was an English invasion...: all talk of the "Normans", or the "Anglo-Normans", or "Anglo-French", or even the "Cambro-Normans" coming to Ireland is simply ahistorical. The invaders called themselves English (Engleis, Angli), were called Saxon (= English) or *Gaill* (= foreigner) by the Irish, and for the next seven hundred years were designated as English in the historical literature. Contemporaries never described them as Norman, Anglo-Norman...Only in the late nineteenth century, and largely on grounds of political sensitivity, was the identity of the English invaders fudged by these non-historical terms.' See Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 34.

6 In the one hundred years or so following the Battle of Kinsale in 1601 about 85% of Irish land had been seized by English colonists.

vening years.⁷ The enduringly poor reception of art music in Ireland remains frustrating and irreconcilable with the effusive activity that is presently taking place in Irish cultural arenas and international platforms. This study makes a direct correlation between the extensive failure of Irish literature to carry the baton of experimentalism as wrought by Joyce, Flann O'Brien and Beckett, and the broad failure of cultural commentators to value the inherent experimentalism of contemporary music in Ireland since the late 1960s. Emerging from an 'uneven modernity', Irish literature's gravitational pull towards realism and an Irish geographical locus has resulted in a rather conservative, post-colonial nostalgia. On the other hand, in its abstraction and aesthetic complexity, at its best, Irish art music since the 1960s has largely circumvented such symptoms of creative nostalgia to annex new territories and modes of cultural expression.

To speak of contemporary Irish culture is to discuss a venture that functions within the paradigm and under the direct influence of late capitalism. In this sense 'we are all Americans now' regardless of our political affiliations; such are the prevailing conditions within which Irish composers work, happily or grudgingly. Michel Peillon is correct when he states that 'culture has become an object of economic government'.⁸ In this context, culture, musical culture included, now runs the risk of being merely an accomplice in the activity of consumption, which is central to the rationale of capitalism. As he clarifies:

The capitalisation of culture, although not new, has now intensified. Very few aspects of cultural production escape the commodity form. Information and images are nowadays treated as premium commodities, as are opinions and memories. Even critical discourses have acquired a market value. Only a few pockets of cultural production have managed to remain outside the process of capitalist accumulation and are animated by different dynamics.⁹

Given this state of affairs, it could be argued that the impressively eclectic nature—stylistic, technical, expressive—of contemporary Irish music, even in the small cross-section of composers represented in this book, belies the 'commodity form', that such a globalized hegemony would seek to impose. Much contemporary Irish music, despite being exposed to powerful political and cultural forces that entice everything into a homogeneity forged out of the loss of individual creativity, continues to resist reductionist pressures toward commodification. That

7 Donald Herron, *Deaf Ears?—A Report on the provision of music education in Irish schools* (Dublin: The Arts Council, 1985), 41, cited in Frank Heneghan, "Music in Ireland: Performance in Music Education," in *Music in Ireland 1848-1998*, ed. Richard Pine (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998), 87-97. MEND (Music Education National Debate) was an extended initiative of the entire music education lobby that reached its intensity of deliberations between 1994 and 1996.

8 Michel Peillon, "Culture and State in Ireland's New Economy," in *Reinventing Ireland*, eds. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 38-53.

9 *Ibid.*, 50.

said, such neo-liberalism appears to show signs of impact within this field and will, one fears, continue to make powerful headway. To understand and recognize the unique characteristics contemporary Irish music still insists upon within this hegemonic, global Ireland, it is important to take a retrospective view. In so doing, we can see the specific historical, cultural and political factors and narratives that not only shaped the past from which composers in Ireland have emerged, but which continue currently to fashion their work, no matter how subliminally.

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A dedicated website developed by the Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland) provides additional resources related to the featured composers including scores, audio and video, as well as additional interviews and biographical information.

Interested readers should visit: www.differentvoices.ie