

THE IRISH COMPOSERS PROJECT: PRIMARY SOURCES FOR RESEARCH AND PROMOTION OF IRISH ART MUSIC

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Introduction

Irish contemporary art music is an often-overlooked aspect of the musical traditions of Ireland. In 1995 composer Raymond Deane (1953-) coined the term 'the honor of non-existence' to describe the condition of contemporary composers in Ireland.(1) it is telling still that in considerations Of Irish culture, such as in the interdisciplinary field of Irish studies, the emphasis has to a large extent been on one of our three main music traditions.(2) The term Irish Music for many signifies traditional music, the fold music of the people. Sometimes it is used to refer to our popular tradition, particularly rock music, but rarely will it bring to mind the current art music tradition. Perhaps this is as it should be; there will always be a smaller and specialized interest in classical music. However, that this is one of our traditions should not be forgotten. An understanding of this tradition informs an understanding of ourselves and the place of music in the Irish imaginative exploration of ideas. The role of musicology illuminating these ideas and developing wider understanding and knowledge of this music is clear; as is the role of music institutions in making this music generally known and promoting access to this part of our cultural heritage. This essay outlines a project in which both academic and cultural institutions worked in partnership to create a digital archive of Irish contemporary art music, ensuring thus primary sources for future music research, performance and wider promotion.

The academic partners included the music departments of St. Patrick's College Drumcondra, Dundalk Institute of Technology

and National University of Ireland, Maynooth, each of which has contemporary Irish music as a particular value in their work. They came together under the umbrella of An Foras Feasat (AFF), the institute for research in Irish historical and cultural traditions, which has a particular emphasis on projects in digital humanities.(3) They worked in partnership with Ireland's National Archive of New Music, The contemporary Music Center (CMC) to jointly fund, support and guide the development of a resource of mutual benefit to research and the promotion of Irish contemporary art Music.(4)

Lack of Public Awareness

The Irish writer Cohn Tóibín tells of his bumping into the Irish composer Frederick May (1911-1985) in a Dublin pub in the late 70's. Having never heard from him he thought of him simply as an old man wishing to talk. He was astounded when in exchange for a copy of John McGahern's *The Dark* May gave him a recording of his String Quartet in C minor. The London Times music critic, Felix Aprahamian said of May that if he came from any other European country he would have been a household name. It is clear that he was not then, and sadly is still now now.(5) Tóibín comments: "If you look at Ireland in the 20th century and you ask what were the great things made? Well obviously we know what they are in the literary world and I think we do know what they are in painting, but I think that this (May's) string quartet stands out as an important piece of Irish beauty.(6)

Indeed, few 20th-21st Irish composers are household names. There is in the public consciousness an awareness of 20th century Irish writers and poets, but most would be slower to retrieve or recognize the names of composers working in the same era such as Ina Boylet (1889-1967), Michael Dwyer (1862-1949), J. F. Larchet (1884-1967), or later composers to

which Frederick May belongs such as Rhoda Coghill (1903-2000), Archie Potter (1918-1980), Brian Boydell (1917-2000) and Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992) or even later composers, many still composing now, such as Seoirse Bodley (1933-), John Kinsella (1932), and Frank Corcoran (1944), and the list continues. A list answering those who assume that because they have not heard of these composers there is no worthwhile art music tradition. Klein comments that, "One therefore can hardly continue to allege an artistic poverty in Irish music as such discoveries clearly do not indicate a past musical void in this country; they say more about our failure to recognize, appreciate and promote what music there actually is."(7)

Many reasons are suggested for this: lack of exposure. attitudes to and perception of this particular genre, little primary research, limited sources for evidence, lack of a publisher for art music and therefore little access to scores for performance. The fact that Irish literature is part of general education and that there are many specialist courses in Irish literature in higher education, both in Ireland and internationally, contributes to public awareness of these writers. Until recently the same could not be said of music. However, in 1999 a new second level music curriculum was examined which for the first time included set works by Irish composers Gerald Barry (1952), John Buckley (1951) and Raymond Deane (1953). It must be noted however that music remains an optional subject in secondary education. Klein dismisses the argument that this music was ignored as it was not the music of the majority of the population or because it was perceived as Anglo-Irish rather than 'Irish-Irish'. He notes that in many countries classical music has rarely been the music of the people and until recently was strongly associated with access to higher education yet is still considered a vital part of people's cultural heritage.(8) Such an Anglo-Irish connection did not inhibit developments in literature. Zuk suggests that just

as in literature, Irish art music contributed to the Celtic revival and mentions the operas of O'Dwyer such as *Eithne*.⁽⁹⁾ May himself tells of a meeting with the poet AE as a youth and of his encouragement. These are but tantalizing glimpses of a possibility, as the research simply has not yet been done.

Zuk in 2004 comments on the difficulty faced, even by those with an interest in finding out about contemporary art music in Ireland and contrasts this with the extensive studies on Irish literature both of a general and academic nature. This is the crux of the issue. 'While musicology in Ireland has developed phenomenally over the 20 years, musicology of Irish contemporary art music is a small part of this.⁽¹⁰⁾ There are however healthy developments: the publication by Field Day of monographs on four Irish composers; the soon to be published Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland which will encompass the field of contemporary music; the increase in MA, PhD dissertations and Journal articles in this area.⁽¹¹⁾ There are also a small but growing number of books and edited publications that add to the discourse, even if they do not always concur with one another including those by White, Klein, Cox, and Zuk. There is still a lot of work to do however. As White notes, Irish musicology is at the stage when we are describing the field, examining and laying out the evidence. This includes compiling biographical material, cataloguing works, producing monographs assessing the work of individual composers, creating critical edition scores, and linking all of these to the national and international historical and musical contexts.

All of this work depends on the quality of primary sources available to and accessible by researchers. Of crucial importance is access to original scores and recordings. The vulnerability of such sources was recently brought home to me when a member of my College's administrative staff, as a result

of a domestic garage clear out, offered the scores of Michael O'Dwyer to my department.(12) Personal documents of all types including interviews broadcast are crucial to keep. It is vital for a composer to have the work published to keep it in circulation and increase the possibility of performance and recording. Performing groups are unlikely to search garages in Ireland to unearth new works, yet it is through performances that the works continue to 'live' and retain public awareness. There is a very small number of professional publishers in Ireland who also engage in promotional activities to bring works to the attention of performers and the public. A reminder: 12 years before May could get a performance of his 1936 String Quartet, first performed in 1948 recorded in 1974.(13-14)

Role of the Contemporary Music Center

The Contemporary Music Center was set up in 1986 to address some of these issues. It creates access to music through the publication and distribution of unpublished scores with the agreement of the composers and copyright successors. It also develops general and specialist awareness of this music tradition through promoting performances and recordings nationally and internationally and providing information services about these composers and contemporary music in Ireland. Their library and archive serve to preserve this music and related documents and recordings. It is open to visitors daily and CDs and scores of Irish contemporary music are also available to purchase. A series of showcase CDs *Contemporary Music From Ireland* volumes 1-10 are available free of charge and the Center carries out extensive educational audience development and music programming activities both within its premises and country wide. It is an all Ireland body and is funded by both the Irish Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and The Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

While its primary function is promotional, supporting and

developing the work of the composers that it represents throughout the republic and Northern Ireland, CMC's work is also of considerable value to music research as it documents, collects and preserves the work of Irish composers. The interests of music promotion and music research come together in much of CMC's work as both seek to foster understanding of new and recent Irish art music nationally and internationally.

The library and archive of CMC is a unique resource of this aspect of Ireland's cultural heritage. It is a continually expanding collection but currently contains approximately 7000 works by 150 composers. It also has extensive sound recordings both analogue and digital in addition to other audiovisual materials. Its earliest manuscript dates from 1907 and recordings from 1951. The Archive also includes the sound archive of the national broadcaster, RTE in relation to Irish composers from 1951-1988. This includes performances, talks, interviews and an extensive collection of programs involving Irish composers' works. It also maintains a collection of books and journals with relevance to Irish contemporary music plus concert programs, flyers, posters, reviews and newspaper articles. A perhaps hidden aspect of this archive is that it also documents the performers/conductors involved in the performance, recording and commissioning of this music at various times throughout the 20th century.

A central aspect of CMC's work is an information-rich website including composer profiles, photographs, catalogues of works and recordings as well as articles, news items and information resources for promoters and composers. The library catalogue can be searched on line. However until this project, the archive itself could only be accessed in physical form at CMC's premises. The Irish Composers Project sought to open up access to this rich resource of primary music materials for both musicians and music researchers.

The Irish Composers Project

The aims of the ICP are to work in partnership to fund, support and contribute to the development of a digital archive of all collections held by CMS in ways that: 1. enable music research, increase access to the resource and ensure the digital preservation of these works; 2. add scholarly value to the collection, furthering knowledge and understanding of Ireland's 20th-21st centuries through scholarly research; 3. work towards a platform for the digital publication of research on contemporary music in Ireland where scores and audio material can be seamlessly integrated into the text. The last stage of the project focused on the physical digitizing process. This involved inviting composers to participate in the program and agreeing to the storage of their works on CMS's servers with representative pages from the work initially being made available on line. Scanning of works was labor intensive with each score hand scanned and saved as a multi page TIFF format at a resolution of between 300-400dpi. Edits for visual clarity were made including black and white contrast or completion of stave lines where necessary. Audio samples corresponding to these scores were also created. The original scan, the edited scan and a PDF of the edited scan with associated metadata were all preserved. This called for skilled, patient and detailed work and a high standard of quality control was vital.

To date the scores and (where available) related audio material of 101 composers have been digitized. These include black and white scans of typeset scores, scans of copies of hand written scores and those that were 'born digital' as Sibelius or Finale files, a format that is increasingly used by composers. Of particular interest are a number of full color scans of original hand written manuscripts, including composer comments and annotations and a small number of composer sketches or notes.

While many of these are historical scores, the vulnerability of original scores, especially beyond the lifetime of the composer, prompted The Irish Composers Project to include more recent significant works. The original remains with the composer but a digital copy preserved in formats that take account of future technological developments ensures that if the physical score is lost a facsimile is maintained for the future. When the program is complete it will include access to over 5500 scores and 3000 sound recordings.

Access to the growing digital archive is currently provided on CMCs website. It is searchable by composer and there is a section where handwritten original scores can be viewed. A special collections area will bring together a variety of contextual documents and media with the scores and recordings of a featured composer or theme. Frederick May is the subject of the first special collection. As well as the scores and recordings, newspaper and journal articles about him by May are included. A contextual essay, archived radio interviews with the composer and recordings of broadcast performances with an introduction by the composer can all be viewed and played from the one page.⁽¹⁵⁾ More special collections will be added incrementally and will include composers and themes. Examples might be the string quartet in Irish art music or Irish women composers, among many other possibilities.

While the digitization of physical resources is ongoing, the Irish Composers Project sought to engage potential research students in the collection through funded internships. Two research internships were hosted by CMC and funded by the institutions of the research partners. The interns worked on specific tasks in the project getting to know the collection and developing an understanding of best practice in digital archiving with a view

to developing a research proposal for future doctoral research. In the process of this internship a previously undocumented work by May was discovered in the RTE score archive and included 'within the collection.

The partnership between CMC and three academic music departments has shaped a valuable and accessible resource for all who wish to engage with the historical and current tradition of Irish Art Music. Through a digital interface this music is opened up to the world and will result in a wider awareness of a music that until now could be said to be 'hidden in plain sight'. There is considerable work still to do to complete the archive and this work will be ongoing throughout the following years. The interests of both music promotion and research are closely allied in this project and the resulting archive is of mutual benefit. While physical digitization continues, the next step of the project is to promote knowledge and understanding of this music through research and performance or recordings and then to disseminate these to a wide audience in ways relevant both to specialist and general interest.

Towards a Digital Platform for Music Research

I began this essay by acknowledging that Irish Contemporary Art Music had been somewhat overlooked in the past. One of the difficulties in gaining a wider readership in the Humanities for music research, and therefore a wider awareness of these works, is the 'flatness of the page'. Writers on Irish poetry and visual arts can include examples of the artworks they discuss within the text. While extracts from scores are regularly included in music writing, these are meaningless to many people who are unable to realize them into sound. Formats that include a CD recording with the publication have been tried; however, the CD frequently remains in a pocket in the dust jacket, un-

played. A digital platform for music research is one of the ways in which a wider readership can be engaged. Because the scores and recordings are digitized it will be possible to embed them within the text. When reading a digital monograph assessing a particular composer's work, the score and music can be heard and viewed simultaneously. This will allow a seamless and meaningful reading of the text with a better understanding of the point being made by the writer. In addition any of the contextual documents that have been digitized can be immediately accessed from the text. While this may seem like the future it is to a large extent already happening now. Most scholars make extensive use of digitized publications, which may or may not have been first published in paper form. The journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland for example is currently in a wholly digital form. The digital monograph, biography or critical edition is a natural development from this. With increased accessibility there will be little excuse for research on Irish art music to be left out of the conversation concerning Ireland and her various traditions.

It was to the future that Frederick May was looking when he left his archive to Woodtown Music Publishers, knowing that when the time was right these works would be discovered, placed in context and perhaps performed. While there are many partners in the Irish Composers Project, essentially our partnership is also with the future as we strive to ensure the transmission of this cultural heritage from one generation to the next in ways that will illuminate the role of music in our tradition and continue to be accessible and understood.

Endnotes

¹Deane. R. (1995) 'The Honour of Non-Existence' in Gillen and White, *Irish Music Studies 3: Music and Irish Cultural History*

² see for example the publications and activities of the Centre for Irish Studies, Boston College or of The Glucksmann Ireland House, New York University or Susan Youens review comments on Whites book *The Progress of Music in Ireland* in JSMI vol 5, 2009

³ An Foras Feasa received funding from the Government Programme for Research in Third Level Institutions (PRTL14) as part of the consortium Humanities Serving Irish Society led by the Royal Irish Academy(RIA). This was a very significant recognition of the central role played by humanities not only in cultural areas but also in social and economic regeneration.

⁴ Funding was through An Foras Feasa, the Research Committees of the three institutions (SPCD, DKIT, NUIM) as well as both the Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon and The Arts Council of Northern Ireland.

⁵ While not a household name, May has been the subject of a number of recent articles including those by Philip Graydon and Robert Wason

⁶ from a radio Interview with Calm Tóibín broadcast by Lyric FM on June 10th 2011. ,

⁷ See Klein (2003)

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Zuk (2004)

¹⁰ See White's comments on the capacity for a Irish Journal of Musicology in the forward to the inaugural edition of *The Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland*

¹¹ The composers in question were Aloys Fleischmann, Seoirse Bodley, Raymond Deane and Brian Boydell. Carysfort press also recently published a biography of John Buckley

¹² These scores are now being researched by my colleague Sean MacLiam

¹³ First performed in the Wigmore Hall, in 1948 by The Martin String Quartet

¹⁴ Recorded by the Aeolian Quartet and released by Claddagh records. The score was published by Woodtown Music Publishing in 1976. May's Friend Garech Browne promoted both these ventures.

¹⁵ By Philip Graydon (2011) this was a version of an article to be published in the Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland

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