

BENJAMIN DWYER, *CONSTELLATIONS: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF JOHN BUCKLEY* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011). ISBN 978-1-904505-52-5, xiii+223pp, €20.

In his discussion of John Buckley's *A Thin Halo of Blue* (1990), Benjamin Dwyer cites the possible influence of Messiaen's *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964). Although there are several recordings of the Messiaen work, the Buckley piece remains unrecorded, a fact that underlines the necessity for this book on one of Ireland's leading living composers. It is very heartening that there is (at long last) a growing body of literature on Irish composition, both contemporary and historical. Dwyer's informed survey of Buckley's life and music is timely and complements the ongoing series of monographs on Irish composers published by Field Day Publications.

In this book there is a gradual shift of emphasis from biographical information to analytical studies of selected scores. The discussion of the works follows largely a chronological path, apart from the third chapter, which divides them into two separate strands, 'Towards Ireland' and 'Towards Europe'. These headings are representative of the dual aspirations of Buckley as a composer at the present time (and indeed for much of his career): to embrace a modernist aesthetic and also to allow his Irish nationality prominently to colour his choice of titles and subject matter. In some cases, such as the vocal work *I am wind on sea* (1987), the two strands can be said to converge fruitfully, resulting in a composition that is at one and the same time uniquely Irish and distinctly contemporary in its concerns. It is, perhaps, another of Dwyer's sub-headings, 'Myth and Modernism', that most accurately summarizes how Buckley invokes a mythological context within a modern sound world, as in *Oileain* for piano, for example.

Dwyer's contextualization of Buckley's work and thought is found most extensively in chapter five, in a section entitled 'The Scene in Ireland'—and to an extent in the following section, 'The Late 1980s and early 1990s'. One would wish for a more detailed consideration of the issues discussed here. There is, for example, only a very brief mention of the composer's attitude to electro-acoustic music (102–3) that could have been broadened, given the 'radiophonic' nature of *A Thin Halo of Blue* (although Buckley did make a subsequent version for live concert performance) as well as the combination of live flute and recorded flute parts that make up the more recent, and stunningly colourful, *Constellations* (2009). This last work, as well as providing Dwyer with the title for his book, bears out Buckley's comment that his electro-acoustic interests lie in the area of 'live interaction between performer and technology' (103). It also can be said to reflect a personal, and very different, adoption of the layering technique found in works of Steve Reich such as *Electric Counterpoint* and its fusion with Buckley's own compositional concerns.

The fact that the author is a composer (and a very fine one) is one of the strengths of this book and lends his discussions of the music an empathy that shines through the

writing. His comment, in relation to the collaboration with sculptor Vivienne Roche that resulted in *Tidal Erotics* (1999), that ‘sound is liberated, but form always has the last word’ (157) is one that reveals a profound insight into the creative personality of Buckley. In this respect, Dwyer’s extended commentary on *A Thin Halo of Blue* captures what he categorizes as the ‘programmatically’ nature of the work. While not narrowly programmatic, but rather atmospheric and evocative, an extra-musical stimulus played a formative role in the shaping of the piece. The title and individual sections evoke a parallel with the suggestive power of titles of works by composers such as Messiaen and Dutilleul—the latter in particular a composer Buckley greatly admires, both for his imagination and craftsmanship. Buckley provides a musical correlation for things which he has not seen or experienced personally, but the sense of wonder in the music is tangible and audible. Dwyer’s descriptive powers are also in full bloom here, suggesting that a passage ‘looks and sounds like sinews and muscles gently twisting over each other’ (125), thus capturing the textural contours of Buckley’s music, one of its most unmistakable characteristics.

Dwyer’s discussion of Symphony No. 1, finished in 1988, draws on comments from the music critic Michael Dervan and the composer Aloys Fleischmann, as well as on extensive consultation with Buckley himself. Fleischmann described it as being ‘the most sophisticated and accomplished’ work by an Irish composer (117), whereas Dervan, reviewing the premiere, criticized the aleatoric passages in the work as ‘padding’ (117). Dwyer, for his part, speaks of the wide-ranging language of the Symphony as problematic. But one could argue that this work reflects a Mahlerian view of symphonic composition. The parallels with and influences from Lutosławski (his Third Symphony, like Buckley’s, uses the pitch E as a focal pitch, albeit in a different manner) are potential starting points for further discussion.

Buckley’s engagement with performers of diverse standards has resulted in an output that ranges from repertoire for the virtuoso to that for the amateur, although understandably Dwyer has focussed on works for professionals. It is a pity that Dwyer does not discuss *Winter Music* for piano (1988) in any detail, given that he states that the work demonstrates Buckley’s ‘concern with achieving an increased refinement of sound’ (101) and is written as if the composer were ‘a pianist himself’. There is much to elaborate on here, as the work is clearly a significant one in the development of Buckley’s individual language and techniques.

Dwyer notes that the compositional circumstances related to *Rivers of Paradise* (1993) were exacting given that the work was commissioned for the opening of the University Concert Hall in Limerick and was required to be related to the occasion and educational context in its subject matter. It was performed by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland but Buckley needed to add two speakers in order to incorporate text, as he did not have solo singers or a chorus at his disposal. Another large-scale

commissioned project, the *Maynooth Te Deum*, written two years later for a large amateur chorus, small amateur male chorus, four professional soloists, a chamber choir of professional standard, symphony orchestra and organ, is, to my mind, one of Buckley's finest achievements in its blend of practicality and invention. Dwyer, from the perspective of a fellow composer, refers to the 'structural curiosity' (139) of the Organ Concerto and his valuable discussion of the harmonic ideas underpinning the Saxophone Concerto shows clearly the sophistication of the composer's handling of material in these larger-scale works. An interesting insight is provided by Dwyer's discussion of the concerto-like conception of the vocal parts in Buckley's sole venture into opera, the one-act chamber opera *The Words upon the Window Pane* (1991), noting how this vocal aspect would prove fruitful for the composer's later essays in concerto form for organ, saxophone, flute, bassoon and violin.

Dwyer is not uncritical of his subject, and in fact is quite trenchant on the subject of one of Buckley's earliest orchestral essays, the Concerto for Chamber Orchestra (1981). He refers to the work as 'problematic' and notes, after a discussion of some of its internal features, that it 'struggles to reconcile itself' (75–6). The stylistic incongruity (if one accepts Dwyer's characterization of it as accurate) is certainly not a feature of later works by the composer (with the possible exception of Symphony No. 1 and the *Maynooth Te Deum*, where, I would argue, stylistic variety is the key), but an argument that the diversity adds to the richness of the musical landscape can also be made.

There are many music examples included in the book, mostly clearly presented. In the detailed appendix of works up to 2010, almost a hundred pieces are listed chronologically, attesting to Buckley's past and ongoing productivity in a variety of genres. However, an index of the works by Buckley that are referred to in the book would have been useful; without it, it is not easy to locate passages that relate to each other. For example, Dwyer discusses both of the guitar sonatas (102 and 141) and it is instructive to use his comments (especially given that the first sonata was written expressly for him) to compare the two works. It is also curious that the bibliography omits mention of Axel Klein's seminal study, *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (1996) and three dissertations specifically on Buckley's music.

This book constitutes an assured step in developing a critical and analytical context for the discussion of Irish composers and their music, and provides the reader with an insightful introduction to the music of Buckley. Dwyer's advocacy permeates the entire book and his commentaries have the desired effect of encouraging one to go and listen to Buckley's music.

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