

HARRY WHITE, *THE PROGRESS OF MUSIC IN IRELAND* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), ISBN 1-85182-879-6, 208pp, €45/£40/\$45.

When I was asked to write this review, I initially demurred. While I seize with relish upon every opportunity to come to Ireland, I am not of Irish extraction and my own field of study is German song—not the best preparation for reviewing a book entitled *The Progress of Music in Ireland*. But on second thought, I wondered selfishly whether this book might enable me to understand better the context in which I live and work in America, as well as the state of music in a distant country I happen to love. I teach at a university that, although founded by a French missionary order (Université de Notre Dame du Lac was its full moniker back then), has long identified itself with the Irish in America. A bellicose leprechaun with its dukes up is the school emblem, and my classes are filled with the descendants of Irish immigrants to the States, with Seáns and Erins and Kathleens and O'Connors. We are one of the few universities in America with a flourishing Irish Language and Literature department, and we send many of our students to Dublin for experience abroad. But it has struck me forcibly over the span of two decades in the Midwest that classical music—Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, my own beloved Schubert—is a Johnny-come-lately to this Irish-identified American institution and that my colleagues associate 'Irish music' exclusively with traditional Irish folk dances and songs. A little over a year ago, it made *The New York Times* when the university built its first ever performing arts centre and undertook the kind of cultural dissemination long taken for granted elsewhere, that is, the educational mission by which culturally-deprived undergraduates are given the opportunity to hear string quartets, visiting orchestras, ballet, opera, sitar virtuosos, early music ensembles, new music, and more. On one rather bizarre occasion, this initiative—still in its raw youth, with many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip—joined forces with the commonplace notion on my campus that Irish music consists only of the traditional repertory (or its commercialized manifestations) when the Notre Dame Orchestra played with The Chieftains at Carnegie Hall last March, an event ballyhooed for weeks before the concert. 'How did this conjunction come to be, and why did my own place of employment only realize so late in the game that the great classical European musical tradition matters?', I asked myself. Why is it that Irish composers of 'art music' are not names as familiar on my campus as The Chieftains? After reading Harry White's book, I have a much better understanding of how this came to be.

Where this book is most useful to non-Irish readers is in the precise delineation of, first, uniquely Irish problems of differentiation between colonial and ethnic ideologies of music; second, the intricacies of postcolonial thought about imperialism's imprint both upon music and subsequent scholarship about music; and third, thorny issues of nationalism and ethnicity in Irish music. White has thought long and hard about these issues from two sides of the aisle, as it were, from his deep engagement with Wagner's

music and from his Irish affiliations, and he has much to say about both. (Here, I want to applaud his refusal of either/or formulations about the study of any music. It should be possible, White says and I agree, to regard music both as an autonomous work of art and as a player in human affairs, in politics, society, changing notions of subjectivity, behaviour, and so forth.) From c1789 onward, music was often harnessed to the agendas of nation states and followed certain general rules, such as the privileging of folk music as a register of national identity. Both in the German-speaking world and elsewhere in Europe, peripheral ethnic traditions and the central traditions of 'cutting edge' art music converged, with the latter the dominant end-product—except in Ireland, where nationalistic concerns prevented the merger evident elsewhere. To pursue the matter further, White contrasts the sort of nationalism evident in the music of Dvořák on the Vienna-Prague axis and of Charles Villiers Stanford on the London-Dublin axis, both men having strong ties to the German world. The Czech composer successfully located his own ethnicity within the international idioms of symphony, opera, etc., while the Irish Stanford could not manage the merger of 'the aboriginal Celt and the Professor,' his learned self hailing from Germany. Instead, what Stanford bequeathed his country, in White's analysis, was a sort of exoticism that could not serve either Ireland's indigenous music or its European artistic aspirations—a failure with a very long half-life indeed.

If Ireland's relationship to the European musical canon is somewhat fraught, that repertory exerted a powerful grip on the Irish literary imagination past and present. At the centre of White's book is a series of chapters about the symbolic force of music in works by Friel, Beckett, and Joyce as 'case studies' in the frontiers where language at its most intense meets music at its most intense; that the two sign systems entail different contracts with readers and listeners results in various complex dances *à deux*. (I liked the analogy by which Joyce's prodigious verbal richness and Beckett's austere diminutions are compared to Schoenberg and Webern respectively.) Friel's use of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto is, White observes, the structural model for the interplay between a gnarled, virtuosic inner dialogue and those who interrogate the main character in tutti-esque clarity, while Beckett's structural precision is conjoined with rebellion against past models of verbal meaning after a manner analogous to serialism's counterplay of exactitude and radicalism. White, not incidentally, displays the effect of Irish literary eminence when he produces scholarly works that are *written* to the hilt, whose pleasures for the reader belong not just in the realm of new insights but in language both crystal-clear and vivid at one and the same time. I detest runic or sibylline utterances not meant to be understood, the reader implicitly enjoined to assume profundity precisely because he or she can't 'get it', and scholarship has ever made room for such types. For all my admiration of the 'new musicology' on many occasions, it has also fostered instances of impenetrable prose, but White's vision (and

practice) of scholarship that is as much embedded in its historical time and place as the music it seeks to elucidate does not sin in such manner.

As someone who has just endured a forced restructuring (read: diminishment and gutting) of the undergraduate music curriculum at my own university, I am very familiar with the trans-Atlantic version of the dilemmas White and others have been debating in Ireland. Courses on popular music can now ‘satisfy,’ in the administration’s eyes if not mine, the one semester of Fine Arts required of general students; without broadening their perspective at all, they hear yet again what they listen to anyway. And for those who major in music, the new approach is to have them perform in numerous ensembles, give as many informal recitals as possible, and take an inadequate slate of theory and history courses, with little or no thought for the proper sequence of events. In the business model of universities nowadays, with professors cast as ‘service providers’ and students as ‘consumers,’ the inhabitants of our classrooms and studios are entertained, if not educated with any real thoroughness, and will presumably donate richly to their alma maters when they have achieved a *Brotarbeit* that rakes in more cash than music does. Here, as so often, money is the root of this particular evil. More than that, educational institutions at every level have, as Prof. White observes, abdicated their responsibility to teach people how to listen to classical music, have ceased building the necessary bridges that enable those new to this great experience to have access to its many meanings. What is so interesting about White’s disquisition on this matter and on musicology in Ireland is his exposition both of ‘origin stories’ (how these things came to be) and of subsequent development. His pride in the burgeoning growth of musicology in Ireland—it is an astonishing tale—is coupled to explanations of why certain factors, certain directions, are either unique to Ireland or should be encouraged; there is, for example, his oft-reiterated assertion (for this, White cares deeply) that Ireland should acknowledge more fully its membership in European traditions past and present, whether in the making of music or in scholarship. In some instances, what he propounds should obtain not only in his homeland but elsewhere, even everywhere. From my country, where disciplinary walls are still far too high and far too thick, where theorists snipe at musicologists and vice versa, where people ‘don’t do windows’ if they belong to a particular enclave, I can only applaud White’s call for catholicity in scholarship. Would we could all respect the different ways in which we variously try to explain what moves us in the music we most love.

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