

BENJAMIN DWYER, *MUSIC AUTOPSIES: ESSAYS AND INTERVIEWS* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2023). ISBN 978-3-95593-138-4, 240 pp, €28.00 (paperback).

The title of this book is explained by the author at the end of the first essay (on the broad canvas behind his recent work *Sacrum Profanum*): that 'music can conduct autopsies on received historical narratives ... it can tell things as they were, as they are, and, perhaps, as they could be' (53). This is what Dwyer articulates across the wide range of subjects and topics found in this volume. Readers may be familiar with his distinctive approach and reaction to the Irish musical context as expressed in *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland*,<sup>1</sup> which also consists of interviews and commentary, although the balance therein is much toward the former. As the title of the present volume indicates, there are two strands presented here. There are essays (or 'Autopsies' as Dwyer might prefer to call them) on a wide range of topics, from Samuel Beckett to Ted Hughes, and from Sheela-na-Gigs and the Oedipus myth to the transcendent aspect of improvisation. Fellow composers Frank Corcoran and Kevin Volans feature respectively in an insightful essay and probing interview. There are, in addition, shorter, succinct commentaries on György Ligeti, Barry Guy, and Leonard Bernstein, as well as a more substantial consideration of the correspondence between Alban Berg and Theodor Adorno.

The book contains two sections, one based around Ireland, and the other more international, although this distinction is playfully blurred in the titles of the two respective parts: 'Ireland and Beyond' and 'Beyond Ireland'. There is a consistency of approach and thematic content found across these two parts, with overriding concerns with and explorations of the following: ideas and commentaries on exile, the related idea of an outsider, the re-investigation of the past (the 'Autopsies'), and the influence of extra-musical factors (literature in Dwyer's case) on musical composition.

The interviews can be considered supplemental to those found in the earlier 2014 publication. There are four included here, two in each section of the collection. In the 'Ireland and Beyond' portion of the book there is the previously noted interview with Kevin Volans (with Dwyer as interviewer), as well as an interview with Dwyer conducted by Jonathan Creasy. The 'Beyond Ireland' section contains interviews with Mats Gustafsson, the Swedish saxophonist and improviser, and the American composer George Crumb (along with guitarist David Starobin).

The 'Introduction' by Barra Ó Seaghdha provides a well-argued contextualization of the contents and how Dwyer's ideas have evolved and diversified over the years

---

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014).

covered by the writings contained here. The earliest is the 1999 interview with George Crumb and David Starobin, whereas 'Towards a Transcendental Philosophy of Free Improvisation' is an expansion of a paper delivered by Dwyer at a conference hosted by Middlesex University in 2021.<sup>2</sup> The collection is framed by two commentaries on the context and scope of some of his most recent music: first, the piece *Sacrum Profanum*, and last, the idea of transcendence (another recurring motif) in his recent and ongoing exploration of improvisation. These two topics provide a structural frame for the diverse inner contents.

The anthology provides testimony to the interests and passions of the author, whether in the realm of composition, performance or broad musicological research. Dwyer reveals much about himself in his writings on others. He describes himself as 'a composer who needs to do a lot of thinking around my music before I can think in it' (26). This is reflected in the fact that many of the articles present an exploration of the context for the music discussed, whether by Dwyer himself or the other composers who figure here. There are no analytical commentaries, but rather explorations of the ideas behind the works being discussed. The discussions may appear initially to have a tangential connection with music, but Dwyer approaches the work under discussion from a broad contextual viewpoint. What results from this is quite a full picture of the thinking around many of Dwyer's pieces, from the immersion in the 'Crow' poems of Ted Hughes, through to the Oedipus myth and its relation to *Umbilical*, and the 'aesthetics of damage' in *Sacrum Profanum*. Dwyer is revealed as a composer who has reflected deeply on music as language, as well as on the connection between literature, its use of language, and the language of music.

In many respects the interview with Dwyer conducted by Jonathan Creasy is a core part of the book. This could even have been placed at the forefront of the 'Ireland and Beyond' section, as so many ideas throughout the collection expand from what is expressed therein: ideas on Beckett and Hughes in particular are given detailed and focused exposition by Dwyer's comments. The central role of literature in much of Dwyer's output is articulated clearly and with insight. He elucidates how in relation to Hughes or Beckett 'I immerse myself *in* that writer's world' while generally eschewing the most common way of doing this for a composer; by setting the words to music. He explains how the study of Hughes expanded into a study of myth, and that of Beckett to that of Racine. His intellectual curiosity is prevalent and infectious. The notion of exile—for Beckett, but also Joyce (as well as Frank Corcoran and Dwyer himself)—is also commented on centrally. There is a provocative parallel drawn (of all things)

---

<sup>2</sup> The inaugural New Pathways in Improvisation conference event, Middlesex University, 2021.

between Beckett and the Maharshi Yogi and Transcendental Meditation. As Dwyer has stated 'connections in the process behind losing the mantra during meditation and the process of Beckett losing the sentences, chronicity, narrative, and asking, *what is the word?*' (95). This gets to the core of what Dwyer explores and searches for in his music, and how his research as a musicologist is fueled by his creative explorations and passions.

The section titled '... eleven reflections on Beckett, music and silence ...' is one of the highlights of the collection in that it is a unique perspective on the relationship between the eponymous writer, music, and the idea of silence. It almost comes across as a text that could be given a musical setting (in Dwyer's terms particularly this refers to providing a musical equivalent rather than setting the words). It reads beautifully and is very thoughtful and insightful, bordering on the poetic. Dwyer writes that 'Music is carved out of silence, *a niente* — diminuendos into it, weaves itself around it, holds it tight ... before release' (101). This could be a musical description of poetry or a poetic description of music. The layout on the page also effectively implies the use of silence in the spacing (and pacing) of the reflections. The correspondence between this and a musical work in eleven sections is clear. Dwyer the writer and Dwyer the composer both play a part in shaping this section. It is also symptomatic of Dwyer's engagement with literature and music (and their interrelationship), albeit from the rather unique perspective of a piece of writing which uses language in a way that strongly suggests music and musical structuring.

Dwyer describes music in the section on his work *Umbilical* as capable of being 'simultaneously a communal and a private experience' (143). This is also of importance when considering Dwyer's activities as a performer (and latterly, as improviser). He concerns himself with what happens during improvisation in the final essay of the book, focusing on the notion of improvisation as an event that seems to defy description or categorization. He quotes Lévi-Strauss's comment that 'music is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable' (225) and testifies that collective improvisation 'sets in motion new transcendental operations that reach to the boundaries of our knowledge, and, crucially, beyond' (227). This is essentially an artistic credo.

The mixture of the personal and the very wide context within which this volume (and his music) functions establishes the tone and breadth of his writing, as *agent provocateur* as well as scholar, creative, and interpretative force. Dwyer is unafraid of being sharply critical at times; Jørgen Andersen and Paul Griffiths both receive a stinging critical response to some of their writings on Ireland in the opening commentary on *Sacrum Profanum*.

Even in the briefer items there is always a kernel of exploration in the commentary which provides insight into Dwyer the composer (this is perhaps the greatest asset of the book). There are subtle links between seemingly disparate topics, such as a quotation from Ted Hughes's poem 'Soliloquy' which refers to 'women who grimace'; a clear connection with the nature of the Sheela-na-Gig. There are other strands which the alert reader will find intriguing; these include links which are in the nature of subtle thematic transformations and references within a musical narrative.

There are a couple of minor errors; for example, Mahler died in 1911, not 1910 (190), and there is an odd reference to sport in the article on the Berg/Adorno correspondence (of all places!). Here Dwyer describes European politics in the 1930s as developing 'into a game of two halves: the Fascistic Right and the Marxist Left' (151). While the idea of two opposing ideologies is discussed here, the idea of a game of two halves involves a complete swing from one team to the other successively. Europe of the 1930s did not experience such a (metaphorical) half-time switch; the polar-opposites were in simultaneous existence, and often violent opposition.

It is debatable whether the book should be read through from cover to cover or dipped into—perhaps both. The most intriguing thing for this reader is the relationship between a diverse range of topics within which there are clear unifying threads, and which present a vivid picture of both Dwyer's intellectual curiosity, and the consistency of his commentary on the investigations undertaken. This is perhaps best understood as a companion to the music of Dwyer, even though there are many parts of the book which relate more to other composers; his comments tell us much about his own nature as a composer, and the reader emerges provoked as well as enlightened.

Dr Martin O'Leary

Maynooth University