

LEITH DAVIS, *MUSIC, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND GENDER. THE CONSTRUCTION OF IRISH NATIONAL IDENTITY, 1724–1874* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), ISBN 0-268-02577-0 (cloth, €60); ISBN 0-268-02578-9 (paperback, €30), xiv + 323pp.

The intimacy between music and letters in Irish cultural history has often promoted the idea that consideration of one naturally entails contemplation of the other, at least to the extent that it is difficult to write any kind of Irish musical history without some cognizance of this immensely rich relationship. In this book, Leith Davis has refined this relationship under the multiple rubric of postcolonialism, gender theory and identity in order to examine afresh the reception history of Irish traditional music from 1724 to 1855, together with a consideration of the afterlife of this music in Britain and the United States later in the nineteenth century. The book closes with a compelling 'Afterword' on the current state of Irish traditional music as 'world music' and the implications thereof in the context of new modes of global marketing, musical identity and (indeed) sheer musical invention.

'Irish traditional music': the phrase itself reminds me of Jack Nicholson's sardonic reply to Tom Cruise in the film *A Few Good Men*, when the latter cross-examines him. 'Did you consider yourself to be in *real* danger?' Cruise asks, to which Nicholson answers: 'Is there any other kind?' One might be forgiven for asking a similar question of music in Ireland, but not of this book. It is only fair to add that Davis's rather restricted address on art music can be explained by her explicit focus on the reception history of traditional music in its decisive contribution to Irish identity. Nevertheless, a figure such as Handel (who appears fleetingly in the text but who doesn't make it to the index) deserves perhaps a more comprehensive consideration than the one he receives here, if only because his presence (literal and figurative) in Ireland was constituent of Anglo-Irish musical identity, a factor which encouraged Joseph Cooper Walker's urgent (if implausible) comparison between Handel and Carolan late in the eighteenth century.

This small reservation to one side, *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender* nevertheless comprises a sequence of brilliant readings (of Walker, Charlotte Brooke, Edward Bunting, Sydney Owenson, Thomas Moore, James Hardiman, Thomas Davis and George Petrie in particular) which confirms the author's pervasive analysis of Irish music as the great 'other' in colonial relations between Britain and Ireland. This other is variously construed throughout the book, but as a marker of identity, the function of music in Irish cultural history easily rivals (and usually supervenes) the function of language in this reading. Among much else, Davis shows that if there was a language question in Ireland throughout much of its recent history, there was also a no less important music question.

The finest chapters, perhaps, are devoted to Brooke and Moore, insofar as they advance more persuasively than elsewhere the gendered condition of musical culture as an essential part of Irish identity. Davis quotes a passage from Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* (1789)—it is astonishing to think that this appeared just three years after Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*—which also apostrophizes the fundamental problem of Irish music in its tantalizing proximity to literature:

It is scarcely possible that any language can be more adapted to Lyric poetry than the Irish. *The poetry of many of our Songs is indeed already Musick, without the aid of a tune; so great is the smoothness, and harmony of its cadences....* (82, emphasis mine)

As soon as that insight attained general currency, the impulse to create a new Irish literature in English, that might also be 'already music', amounted to a principle of Irish cultural history, with fateful consequences for music itself. Davis shows that Brooke was instrumental in the formation of this idea, in which respect she anticipates not only Moore, but the Literary Revival of the 1890s. Brooke's own anxiety to 'recreate [Carolan] as a man of letters' (83), and her rendition of Irish poetry in smoothly finished iambic pentameters (by contrast with the ebullient 'anapaestic trimeter' of Walker's translations) are both enlisted by Davis in confirmation of this tendency.

Davis's reading of Moore is at the heart of this study: although I have difficulties in accepting that the original publication of the *Irish Melodies* 'posed a national threat not just because of their appeal to an Irish population that was politically disruptive to the foundation of the British constitution but because of their appeal to a female population that was potentially disruptive to the British republic of letters' (160), the sources adduced by Davis in this argument leave no doubt as to the feminization of Irish musical culture through Moore's influence.

This process—and here I diverge from Davis—does not seem to have impeded in any significant way whatever Ireland's case for self-regulation, if only because those ideologues of cultural integrity who followed Moore insisted upon a distinction between his soft politics and the real thing. In musical terms, moreover, their interventions were often well-intentioned but correspondingly implausible ('Davis had a good heart, but a cloth ear', as Seamus Deane remarked over twenty years ago), which is not to suggest that these interventions were without consequence. On the contrary, I would argue that the reception and reformulation of Moore which Leith Davis so arrestingly discloses in Hardiman, (Thomas) Davis and Petrie, entailed a more general repudiation of Irish music in the formation of cultural identity, except as an idealized or petrified 'preservation' which would last until the revival of Irish traditional music in the 1950s. The other revival, in the meantime, adroitly filled the vacuum left by the impoverished condition of music of any kind in Ireland for over a

century. This is not to gainsay for one moment the abiding *symbolic* presence of music in Irish cultural affairs during the same period, a presence which harmonizes with Davis's own diagnosis of identity-formation through music, and not only in Ireland.

The closing chapter of this book extends this diagnosis to Britain and America. I would like to know more about Moore's influence in the United States. Davis cites Charles Hamm's assertion that the *Melodies* were 'the most popular songs in America during the second and third decades of the nineteenth century' and that they were 'instrumental in shaping indigenous popular music' there (207): these are strong claims, but they are perhaps most relevant to this study insofar as Moore's songs instituted the (Irish) nation as a lost Paradise, a trait which one also finds in the songs of Percy French. French's songs seem to me very closely dependent (musically and textually) on the precedent of the *Melodies*, and they also place those charges of sentimentality which are levelled against Moore in perspective.

Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender ends with a thought-provoking essay on the new context of 'Irish music' as a species of 'world music', which might well spark a monograph devoted to this subject in the future. As it is, this essay tends to press home the underlying argument of the book as a whole, which is that music was both formative and primary in the creation of Irish cultural and political identity. In that enterprise, it is to be very warmly welcomed.

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