

JEREMY DIBBLE, *MICHELE ESPOSITO*, Field Day Music, 3 (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010), ISBN 978-0-946755-47-9, xx+220 pp, €25

With Jeremy Dibble's volume on Michele Esposito (1855–1929), the Field Day series of biographies on Irish composers continues apace. This series, under the general editorship of Séamas de Barra and Patrick Zuk, hitherto comprised monographs on Aloys Fleischmann (by de Barra) and Raymond Deane (by Zuk), both published in 2006. The present volume was launched, together with a fourth volume by Gareth Cox on Seóirse Bodley, in July 2010 at the First International Conference on Irish Music and Musicians at the University of Durham; and, with a further two manuscripts already submitted to the publisher and others in preparation, the series is now gaining momentum.

Dibble has produced a valuable and important contribution to musical biography in Ireland. Esposito, Italian by birth and also by nature (as Dibble convincingly elaborates), was a pivotal figure in the development of piano playing in Ireland during his 46 years (1882–1928) as teacher at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM). As organizer of a path-breaking chamber-music series at the Royal Dublin Society, as founder and conductor of the Dublin Orchestral Society, and as a composer of seminal works in the history of Irish composition around the turn of the century, Esposito was undoubtedly a significant figure in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ireland. The widespread neglect of him in the decades following his death is therefore all the more incomprehensible.

Dibble's account follows a chronological structure divided into six chapters: Esposito's early life and studies in Italy (up to 1878); a period in Paris (1878–82); his establishment in Ireland as a teacher, concert pianist and, finally, composer (1882–99); his increasing involvement with contemporary Irish culture and the beginnings of the Dublin Orchestral Society (1899–1903); a period of compositional achievements despite growing uncertainty about his aims (1904–14); and a chapter on 'Final Years' (1914–29). This narrative is framed by an informative introduction and an epilogue, and the book includes an annotated catalogue of works, a bibliography and an extensive index.

It is clear that Dibble's work suffered from a lack of sources for biographical material and the author frankly (and frequently) points out either the lack of material he would have *liked* to use, or the varying degree of reliability of the sources he *has* been able to use. Two sources emerge as essential: Aiello's 1956 biography of Esposito¹ and

¹ Giuseppe Lauro Aiello, *Al musicista Michele Esposito nel primo centenario della nascita: omaggio della sua città natale* (Castellamare di Stabia, Naples: M. Mosca, 1956).

Pine and Acton's 1998 study of the history of the RIAM.² The many footnotes relating to these two studies clearly demonstrate that, without them, the writing of this biography would not have been possible. Dibble alludes to some potential inaccuracies in Aiello's text and intermingles the account of Esposito's work at the RIAM as related by Pine and Acton with numerous references to contemporary newspaper articles, concert reviews and the few biographical pieces on Esposito available in other sources, such as Hamilton Harty's 1929 memoir³ and a 1943 article in the *Irish Monthly*.⁴ Less clear to me is the extent of his reliance on unpublished theses from Irish universities: while he acknowledges Lorna Watton's 1986 dissertation (Queen's University Belfast),⁵ he doesn't mention (or list in his bibliography) Mary O'Sullivan's 1991⁶ and Patrick FitzGerald's 2003 studies (both NUI Maynooth).⁷

In addition to constructing a coherent biographical portrait, Dibble also provides an analytical overview of Esposito's compositions. This is where the author is at his most original, and a published study of this kind has been sorely missed to date. It emerges that Esposito already possessed considerable compositional talent long before he came to Ireland, evident from early piano works such as his *Album*, Op. 7, his *Alla memoria di Vincenzo Bellini*, Op. 16, the *Due pezzi*, Op. 19, etc. Although Dibble detects Esposito's indebtedness to Chopin, Brahms and senior Italian figures of his time, it appears that there are genuine instances of originality that have escaped attention so far. He also traces an outline of Esposito's development as a composer who gained proficiency in contemporary styles and displayed individuality and maturity in works originating in Ireland such as his cantata *Deirdre*, Op. 38, the Second String Quartet, Op. 60, and the opera *The Tinker and the Fairy*, Op. 53.

There are nevertheless certain places where I question Dibble's assessments, most of them relating to Esposito's exposure to Irish traditional music. For instance, Dibble passes over Opp. 56 and 57 because they 'consist of arrangements of Irish airs for

² Richard Pine and Charles Acton (eds), *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998).

³ Hamilton Harty, 'Michele Esposito', *The Irish Statesman*, 7 December 1929, 276–7.

⁴ Kees van Hoek, 'Michele Esposito: Maestro of Dublin', *Irish Monthly*, 71 (1943), 223–30.

⁵ Lorna Watton, *Michele Esposito: A Neapolitan Musician in Dublin from 1882–1928* (MA diss., Queen's University Belfast, 1986).

⁶ Mary O'Sullivan, *The Legacy of Michele Esposito to Pianist Life in Dublin* (MA diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1991).

⁷ Patrick FitzGerald, *The Violin Compositions of Michele Esposito* (MA diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2003).

violin and piano, which need not detain us here' (119). This is a pity because a consideration of Esposito's way of dealing with Irish traditional material would have been extremely interesting given that the composer was not from Ireland, and because at least one of the arrangements in question (*The Coulin*, from Op. 56) is probably his most frequently performed piece today. Esposito used Irish traditional melodies often, not only in arrangements, but also in works such as his *Irish Symphony*, Op. 50, the *Irish Suite*, Op. 55, and the operetta *The Post Bag*, Op. 52. Dibble uses expressions such as 'the introduction of a new folk tune in F major', 'the character of an energetic jig' (both on p. 92), and 'an extended melody suggestive of a lament' (93), but, although he acknowledges that the operetta 'makes extensive use of Irish folk tunes' (109), he never identifies them.⁸

When Dibble describes the programmes of the RDS chamber-music series, he mentions the standard fare of international composers whose works were played, 'as well as others whose names are less well-known today' (52). Since a few Irish composers might have been among them, the inclusion of their names would have been interesting for many reasons. The same lack of detail is true of his discussion of the programmes of the Dublin Orchestral Players. While one of Esposito's main aims was to acquaint Dublin audiences with the best of the mainstream classical repertoire, it is rather unlikely that no other Irish works apart from Harty's *Irish Symphony* and Esposito's own works were performed. One gets the impression that Dibble was perhaps more concerned with placing Esposito in an international context. When discussing Esposito's increasing involvement with the Celtic Revival and its impact on musical composition (61ff.), Dibble explains the background by referring mainly to short articles by Patrick Zuk in the *Journal of Music in Ireland* and de Barra's biography of Fleischmann (66) when he could have referred to much more extensive studies on musical nationalism in Ireland by Joseph Ryan, Harry White and others.

I was also left wondering about Esposito's early career in Italy, the circumstances of his leaving the country, and, in particular, why, despite all his obvious talent, he could not make a living in Italy while others of a similar background and profile (Palumbo, Martucci) could. For his years in Paris (1878–82) I was surprised that the 1879 review in the *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* (32) is the only one that Dibble cites when there are others available (via the digitized holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France) in *Le Ménestrel* (1–7 June 1879, 25–30 December 1881) and *Le Gaulois* (6 and 11 March 1880, with another short mention on 1 April 1882). From Dibble's

⁸ Except in the catalogue of works (Appendix 1) when the title of a traditional tune forms a constituent part of a work such as *Five Irish Melodies*, Op. 56.

description, one will not understand Esposito's attitude to Wagner: we are told on p. 33 that he denied being a Wagnerite when he met Saint-Saëns and yet a page later we learn that he declared his enthusiasm for him. Since Esposito evidently adored Wagner (and performed his works frequently in Paris), Dibble might have deduced that Esposito duped Saint-Saëns, probably harmlessly, in order to smooth contacts with this eminent figure in French musical life.

The main omission from the appendices is a discography. While Dibble may have argued that there is little recorded material to refer to, there is certainly more than the 1997 Chandos CD (p. xviii), and, if I may plug my own work in this regard, it is not as if there was no source to refer to.⁹ Any such discography for Esposito would include an early Italian song (not included in the work list) in an historical performance on the Naxos label,¹⁰ the folksong arrangement of *The Lark in the Clear Air* from his *Irish Melodies*, Op. 41,¹¹ further arrangements of traditional music for violin and piano,¹² and finally an excerpt from his *Ballade*, Op. 59.¹³

Among the formal features that are immediately striking in comparison to the first two volumes are the enhanced layout, sturdier cover, and larger print font. The positioning of music examples is not always judicious; for instance, Dibble's analysis of Esposito's second string quartet and violin sonata and their respective music examples do not appear together. And the increasing tendency in recent books in English not to divide words with hyphenation at line breaks leads unfortunately to passages where too many words are crushed into one line. I also wish that all sources quoted in the text would reappear in the bibliography (except in the case of minor concert reviews), simply to make it more comprehensive. Generally, however, the book is thoroughly edited and any very minor misprints (I particularly liked 'Charles Action' on pp. 31 and 47) do not detract from a handsomely produced volume.

Jeremy Dibble's biography of Michele Esposito is clearly more than a biography. Apart from bringing us close to the man and musician, the book also provides us with

⁹ Axel Klein, *Irish Classical Recordings: A Discography of Irish Art Music* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001).

¹⁰ *Anema e core*, recorded by Ferruccio Tagliavini in 1951, available on Naxos 8.110768 (CD, 2004).

¹¹ Recorded by Fr. Sydney MacEwan, on ASV AJA 5283 (CD, 1999).

¹² Two pieces from Esposito's *Five Irish Melodies*, Op. 56, performed by Geraldine and Eily O'Grady (EMI Ireland LEAF 7002, LP, 1973; EMI Ireland STAL 1026, LP, 1973), Fionnuala and Una Hunt (Continuum CCD 1051, CD, 1992) and Geraldine O'Grady and Margaret O'Sullivan (Cala Artists CACD 0503, CD, 1996).

¹³ *Appassionato* (*Ballade*, Op. 59 No. 1), performed by Una Hunt (RTÉ lyric fm CD 109, CD, 2006).

Jeremy Dibble, *Michele Esposito*

valuable information on the important RDS chamber-music series, that did so much to bring the vocal-minded Dublin audiences to appreciate instrumental chamber music, and on the Dublin Orchestral Society, the orchestra that Esposito founded, organized and conducted. The book was a joy to read, because it brings Esposito and his time convincingly to life and because it is an exciting account of a bygone period.

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Darmstadt