

GARETH COX, *SEÓIRSE BODLEY*, Field Day Music, 4 (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010), ISBN 978-0-946755-48-6, xi+204 pp, €25

Gareth Cox's biography of Seóirse Bodley is the fourth volume in the Field Day series devoted to biographies of Irish composers. Under the general editorship of the composer/academics Séamus de Barra (Cork) and Patrick Zuk (Durham), the series is being published in pairs of volumes, with one book dedicated to an historical composer and one to a contemporary one. This biography on the very-much-alive Seóirse Bodley (born Dublin, 1933) appeared at the same time as a study by Jeremy Dibble of Michele Esposito, who died in 1929 (see the review by Axel Klein, elsewhere in this volume). The twin ideals of the series are thus to promote the work of living Irish composers while at the same time shedding light on the history of composition in Ireland. The tension in any nation's art between tradition and innovation remains a fundamental aesthetic issue, and one which is at the heart of this ambitious and important biographical series.

Bodley's career as a composer, teacher, arranger, accompanist, adjudicator, broadcaster, and conductor has unfolded over the past six decades. Cox notes in the preface to this volume that Bodley's music has been 'a source of pleasure, but also a multi-faceted challenge' to him since the 1970s (xi). Cox has wrestled with that challenge and has presented the results of his studies of Bodley's music in numerous conference presentations and several published articles before this book. He has read all that has been written about Bodley by others (including Bodley himself, as well as other music scholars and critics), he has studied and analysed Bodley's music, and has interviewed him on several occasions in preparation for writing this book. The result is a comprehensive and even-handed (perhaps *too* even-handed, as we shall see) appraisal of the entire range of Bodley's career achievements. The principal focus is on Bodley the composer, but his many other activities are not neglected.

The overriding aesthetic issue in Bodley's work as a composer has been the question of how to reconcile Irish traditional music with the European art-music heritage. A constant strain running through this biographical study involves Bodley's complicated relationship with Irishness in general and Irish traditional music in particular. Cox notes that Bodley was educated at an Irish-speaking Christian Brothers school, and legally changed his name from George to Seóirse at the age of 19 (though after trying on Bodlaí for size, he decided to keep the English spelling of his surname). Bodley often sets Irish texts to music (ranging from the 11th century to Yeats and beyond, with a special emphasis on the poetry of Brendan Kennelly and Micheal O'Siadhail), he helped to found the Folk Music Society of Ireland in 1970, and he has a serious scholarly interest in *sean nós* singing. A crucial issue, then, is how all this has

influenced his musical idiom. What use did he make of Irish traditional music in his own compositions? And how 'Irish' do they sound as a result?

Without coming down squarely on one side or the other of this issue, Cox often notes the ambivalent reception accorded to Bodley's music in terms of its Irishness. Those critical of Bodley's use of Irish traditional elements in his works include fellow composers Raymond Deane ('the merest clichés' (122)) and Frank Corcoran ('trying too hard, too self-consciously, to be [Irish]' (120)), and the critic Douglas Sealy ('a mixture of Hindemith and The Chieftains, a marriage never made in heaven' (81)). On the other hand, the Dublin music critic Charles Acton urged Bodley from the beginning to become 'Ireland's equivalent of Sibelius or Bartók' (12) and advised him to 'make a detailed study of the recordings of Irish traditional music to ... learn the grammar of our folk music' (25). Cox also quotes Axel Klein on this subject. Klein notes that Bodley did not attempt to fuse traditional and classical idioms; rather, in his compositions, 'both remained uncompromisingly intact, a unique achievement' (122).

In this context, the career of Seán Ó Riada (who was two years older than Bodley) offers instructive grounds for comparison. Cox informs us that Bodley had little professional contact with Ó Riada, aside from a brief spell in 1970 when both taught at a summer school in University College Cork. But both men confronted the artistic divide in Irish music (between traditional music and art music), with diametrically opposed results. For Bodley, notwithstanding his very serious attention to Irish traditional music, that idiom was to remain but one colour in a varied palette that he applied in his own compositions, whereas for Ó Riada it became the canvas on which he painted. If Ó Riada is correct that 'the first thing to note about Irish music is that it is not European',¹ then what Bodley was attempting was a reconciliation of opposites — no easy task. The reader is left uncertain as to Cox's own views on this important issue. Cox cites the opinions of those who support and those who attacked Bodley's engagement with Irish musical materials, without ultimately endorsing one side or the other.

In common with many other composers of his generation, Bodley was profoundly affected (for better or for worse, depending on one's view of post-serial music) by the Darmstadt aesthetic. There was little in Bodley's early training to prepare him for a confrontation with the post-war avant garde. In his youth, piano studies at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM) were supplemented by private composition lessons (generously given for free) with the Dublin-based German choral conductor Hans

¹ Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, ed. Thomas Kinsella (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1982), 20.

Waldemar Rosen. Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra concerts introduced him to the standard orchestral repertoire, with occasional forays into more adventurous works (e.g., music of the Second Viennese School conducted by the Schoenberg pupil Winfried Zillig). Studies in music at University College Dublin under John Larchet resulted in a first-class honours BMus degree in 1955. A characteristic composition from this early period in Bodley's life is *Music for Strings* (1952), which Cox terms his 'first significant work' (7). Cox notes the influence of Shostakovich in this work; Bodley himself points out that it combines 'the diatonic modality characteristic of Irish [traditional] melody with dissonant [harmonic] elements' (7). While it remains one of his most often played pieces, it is a conservative work in the context of what was soon to issue from the composer's pen.

Two years of music study in Stuttgart (1957–59), including composition lessons with the Austrian composer Johann Nepomuk David, enhanced Bodley's traditional craft (David stressed Mozart and Bach as models), but also exposed him for the first time to the music of Boulez, Stockhausen and Nono. Unlike his fellow David pupil Helmut Lachenmann, who left Stuttgart for private studies with Nono in Venice, Bodley stayed the course with David and then returned to Dublin in 1959 to begin teaching at his alma mater, University College Dublin, where he would remain until his retirement in 1998 (and, beyond retirement, as a part-time teacher until 2004).

Bodley's real immersion in the Darmstadt aesthetic did not take place until the early 1960s, when he spent three summers at the *Ferienkurse* and heard many works by the leading avant-garde composers of the day, as well as lectures by Stockhausen and Ligeti, among others. Cox notes that it was 'the spirit of Darmstadt that inspired him rather than any specific composer or musical idiom' (39). It was the attempt to integrate an international avant-garde idiom with elements of traditional Irish music which led to the harsh criticisms noted above. Bodley himself has compared this balancing act to the image of a tightrope walker, constantly in danger of falling off on one side (the avant garde) or the other (folk music clichés). This image lent itself to the title of one of Bodley's best known and most often performed works, the piano solo piece *The Tightrope Walker Presents a Rose* (1976), known to many Irish music students thanks to its recent inclusion on the RIAM Grade VII piano syllabus.

Having swung over to the avant-garde side in the 1960s and 1970s, Bodley the tightrope walker leaned to the other side in the 1980s, evidently taking to heart the observation attributed to Schoenberg that there is still much good music to be written in C major. Indeed, Cox notes that several works from this time include much music literally in the key of C major, including large sections of Symphony No. 3 (*Ceol*) of 1981, in which Bodley intends that C major should 'symbolise the inner core of music itself' (105). The embrace of tonality corresponded with an attempt at a more accessible

and audience-friendly idiom, a move that some critics found as difficult to accept as they had found Bodley's avant-garde works from the 1960s and 1970s. The composer's *Gebrauchsmusik* aesthetic led him to write music for films, music for amateur performers, and music for the church (including three settings of the Mass). With *Mass of Peace* (1976), Bodley reached his largest live audience; parts of the work were performed during the Papal Mass celebrated by John Paul II in Phoenix Park in 1979, with over one million people in attendance.

In the late 1990s, Bodley turned away from the new accessibility and Irish traditional music to embrace again avant-garde idioms influenced by the Darmstadt aesthetic. Cox cites in this regard the piano piece *Chiaroscuro* (2000), a test piece for the Dublin International Piano Competition that was inspired by a painting by Caravaggio. Noting the similarity to the music of Boulez and Stockhausen in the work, Cox writes 'Nothing could be further from the style of *The Tightrope Walker Presents a Rose* of 1976 than *Chiaroscuro*; they could have been written by two different composers' (147). Bodley switched styles again in his String Quartet No. 4 (2007); as Cox notes, it is 'pervaded by strong tonal references of a kind that are almost unprecedented in his previous work' (163–4). Questioned by Cox about the discontinuities and inconsistencies in his musical idiom, Bodley responds: 'I do not feel that changes [in style] are of more than secondary importance in the greater musical scheme of things' (164). The continuity of personal expression through radically different stylistic idioms reminds one of Stravinsky, a comparison that Bodley himself endorses at the very end of Cox's biography (166).

Cox manages to mention and comment on every major work by Bodley, with substantial (and beautifully engraved) music examples for those works that are subject to a more extended discussion. Three appendices provide a complete work list subdivided by genre, a discography and a list of Bodley's published writings. However, the treatment of Bodley's life story is much less detailed by comparison: a brother, two parents, three spouses and six children are only mentioned in passing in the text; some are referred to only obliquely in footnotes. Cox looks out from the perspective of Bodley and his music, rather than in from the vantage point of those around him. Cox is also somewhat reluctant to offer his own opinions about the music, perhaps because of his own close association with the composer. Often we are given only the opinions of various music critics about key works, and inevitably these do not give a uniform perspective on Bodley's achievements. One critic, for instance, finds Bodley's String Quartet No. 2 (1992) to be 'music of real power and originality', whereas another finds in it 'empty melodic gestures' and a 'permeating greyness' (129). Even when offering his own opinions, Cox at times equivocates, as when he delineates at some length the weaknesses of the String Quartet No. 1 (1968), but then concludes that the work has 'suffered undeserved neglect' (64).

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Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book's many strengths are abundantly evident. Cox's writing style is gracious, fluent and easy to read. He eschews specialist music-theory jargon in favour of describing the music in terms that the average musically educated reader can follow with ease. There are many insights into Bodley's working methods, his philosophy of composition and aesthetic views, and the competing claims of national and individual identity that he has wrestled with over the course of his distinguished career. The book is an admirably thorough treatment of its subject, and a handsome addition to this significant series.

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