

2021

Mogu and the Unicorn: Frederick May's Music for the Gate Theatre

Mark Fitzgerald

Technological University Dublin, mark.fitzgerald@tudublin.ie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aacomusbk>



Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Mark. "Mogu and the Unicorn: Frederick May's Music for the Gate Theatre." In *A Stage of Emancipation: Change and Progress at the Dublin Gate Theatre*, edited by Marguérite Corporaal and Ruud van den Beuken, 151–66. Liverpool University Press, 2021. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv1kwxfgd.14

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Conservatory of Music and Drama at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Books/Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact arrow.admin@tudublin.ie, aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie, gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

A STAGE OF
EMANCIPATION

*Change and Progress
at the Dublin Gate Theatre*

edited by
Margu rite Corporaal
and
Ruud van den Beuken

LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS

First published 2021 by
Liverpool University Press
4 Cambridge Street
Liverpool
L69 7ZU

Copyright © 2021 Liverpool University Press

The right of Marguérite Corporaal and Ruud van den Beuken to be identified as the editors of this book has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

An Open Access edition of this book is available on the Liverpool University Press website and the OAPEN library.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication data
A British Library CIP record is available

ISBN 978-1-80085-951-7 cased
ISBN 978-1-80085-610-3 limp
eISBN 978-1-80085-862-6

Typeset by Carnegie Book Production, Lancaster

Mogu and the Unicorn

Frederick May's Music for the Gate Theatre

Mark Fitzgerald

On 26 December 1931, a new production of Padraic Colum's play *Mogu of the Desert* opened at the Gate Theatre. Recalling the production fifteen years later, Micheál mac Liammóir ruefully noted:

On [Colum's] lips spoken with that slow Midwestern voice of his in the quiet grey summer afternoon among stone walls and fields that were yellow with buttercups and fairy horses, the story had pulsed with glowing alien enchantments; a magical Arabian carpet seemed to unroll itself before us, gay with flowers and jewels, alive with impossible adventure. On the stage it lost much: the story was involved, the characters shadowy, the imagery forced and derivative as in so many pseudo-Oriental plays. I think he felt this too, and shared with us a certain disappointment, though he never blamed us for our part in a production that showed no one at his best, and was only memorable for Hilton's grand bulging, lecherous, oily performance as Ali the Beggar, the incidental music by a new Irish composer called Frederick May, and Orson Welles's astonishing makeup as the Grand-Vizier, which involved several pounds of nose putty, a white turban at least two and half feet in diameter, and three inch fingernails of peacock-blue and silver.¹

Frederick May (1911–85) was indeed a 'new' composer for Irish audiences, as this was the first important commission the twenty-year-old

¹ Mac Liammóir, *All for Hecuba*, 145. In reality, Edwards had played the part of Mogu and Welles was the King of Persia.

had received. In a country with no musical infrastructure, the Gate acted as an important launch-pad for the young composer, offering opportunities and experience that someone at his stage could not otherwise have obtained in Ireland. It was also to play an important role in shaping May's later career. Examining the music for the two productions to which May was asked to contribute in the early 1930s gives us interesting insights not just into his development as a composer, but also into working conditions at the Gate at this period. The theatre's promotion of a young and inexperienced gay artist via such substantial and high-profile theatrical commissions is demonstrative of the emancipatory role the Gate played in the wider artistic scene of Dublin in this period.

It is currently impossible to determine exactly how May came to the attention of the Gate Theatre's directors. The connection could have come via musical, literary or, as May was gay, homosexual circles in Dublin. On the literary side, May had been commissioned to write a song for a broadcast in memory of Katherine Tynan given by Lennox Robinson earlier in 1931.² May's recollection in a late interview that, around 1929, Irene Haugh asked Æ (George Russell) to arrange a meeting with James Stephens on his behalf, when he wished to get permission to set Stephens's poem 'Hesperus' to music, might also suggest connections with the Dublin literary scene, though it may simply be a reflection of his friendship with Haugh's brother Kevin.³ May's younger sister Sheila was later to become an actor working at the Gate and other Dublin theatres, which could suggest a familial interest in theatre. On the musical front, May could have been recommended by his teacher John Larchet (1884–1967), who was director of music at the Abbey Theatre and had also provided music for some early Gate productions.⁴ Furthermore, Pigott and Co. had published a song by May setting a text by Douglas Hyde in a translation by Lady Gregory in 1930, which might have caught someone's attention.⁵ Unfortunately, no details of May's private life from this period survive, owing partly to the

² The song was entitled 'Drought.' For further information see Lennox Robinson papers, 1/4/MSS 091 Series: Non-fiction writings, 1919–24: Box 12, Folder 2, III – Katherine Tynan, 9.

³ Ó Dúlaing, 'Interview with Frederick May.' Kevin O'Hanrahan Haugh was later to become Attorney General and judge in the High and Supreme Courts. The poet Irene Haugh studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and worked for AE at the *Irish Statesman*, for which she also provided music criticism. See White, 'Irene Haugh.'

⁴ See for example Lally, Clare and Van den Beuken, 'Gate Theatre Chronology,' 343.

⁵ May, *An Irish Love Song*.

illegality of homosexuality in the period, but also to the decision of fellow composer Brian Boydell (1917–2000) to consign May's personal papers to the bin rather than to the Manuscripts Library of Trinity College in the 1970s.⁶

The circumstances for a young composer trying to start a career in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century were entirely unpropitious. Radio Éireann had formed an ensemble that would eventually become the first permanent full-time symphony orchestra in Ireland, but in 1931 consisted of five string players and a pianist.⁷ A Dublin Philharmonic Society functioned between 1927 and 1936, but it would seem its infrequent concerts were marred by poor execution as large sections of the orchestra were filled by amateur musicians, while new music by young composers was not a feature of their performances.⁸ Even composing for smaller formations was problematic due to a dearth of professionally trained musicians, as May was himself to discover: his String Quartet of 1936 had to wait until 1949 for its first Irish performance, when it was given by a visiting English quartet.⁹ Opportunities to obtain the type of thorough technical musical education necessary to be a composer or professional performer were limited, not just (as they are today) to those with the economic capacity to invest in local specialised education, but only to those who were in a position to travel abroad to complete their study. May was lucky to win a new scholarship at the Feis Ceoil in 1930 worth £100 to be spent on further study abroad and registered as a composition student in the Royal College of Music London, where Ralph Vaughan Williams was his principal composition teacher.¹⁰ In this context, the larger Dublin theatres provided rare opportunities for a young composer to have their work performed in front of a potentially large audience over a number of nights. Admittedly the evidence suggests that the performance standard of the musicians involved in some of these ventures was also variable, though at least the repetition of work over a number of performances presumably led to increased confidence of delivery.

⁶ See the correspondence between Brian Boydell and Ralph G. Walker of Hayes and Sons Solicitors, TCD MS 11128/1/23/66–70.

⁷ Kehoe, 'Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra,' 31.

⁸ See Dibble, *Michele Esposito*, 171–72, and Fitzgerald, 'A Belated Arrival,' 349.

⁹ Fitzgerald, 'Retrieving the Real Frederick May,' 48.

¹⁰ Dorothy Stokes, honorary secretary of the Student's Musical Union at the Royal Irish Academy of Music congratulated May on receiving the scholarship to study in London in their annual report, noting that 'Dublin cannot offer the same advantages.' For more on this period of May's education see Fitzgerald, 'Retrieving the Real Frederick May,' 33–36.

For the production of *Mogu of the Desert*, May was asked to provide music for a group consisting of flute, violin, cello, double bass and piano, while the various songs were to be performed by the actors.¹¹ For a twenty-year-old with no experience of working in the theatre, the commission to compose music for *Mogu* was a very large and potentially daunting task. It may be seen to indicate a measure of confidence in this young composer on the part of the directors, or it may simply be the case that by choosing someone young and inexperienced, the company was able to get a substantial amount of music for little or no money. By the winter of 1931, May had embarked on his second year of studies in London, but he had returned to Dublin in December to take his final exam for the Bachelor in Music (Mus. B.) at Trinity College Dublin, which at the time was an external degree.¹² The degree was conferred on 10 December, and on the same day May began work on the music for *Mogu*.¹³

The surviving sketches, score, and parts for the music give some interesting insights into the manner in which the production was put together. While today the play is problematic, containing as it does all the worst orientalist tropes of violent sadistic male rulers, barbarous practices, and sexually objectified women lumbered with names such as 'Moon-of-Love' or 'Food-of-Hearts,' this would not have been problematic at the time. Indeed, Colum was convinced that Edward Knoblock's hit play *Kismet* (1911), which went on to become a successful musical in the 1950s, was based on ideas taken from the first version of his *Mogu*.¹⁴ The problems for the Gate audience were rather more fundamental. It is evident that once work began on the production, it dawned on producer Hilton Edwards that the play, which traces the rise of the vagabond Mogu to the position of Vizier after his daughter attracts the love of the King of Persia and the subsequent reversal of his fortunes, was lacking in the individual characterisation or strength of plot that might have made it stage-worthy. A decision had therefore been taken to enliven the work with a series of songs for the principal characters, drawing the play closer to the world of the musical and potentially making it more inviting for a post-Christmas

¹¹ The full score and sketches for the *Mogu* music are held by the Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library, TCD MS 11495/5/1/1–7.

¹² Fitzgerald, 'Retrieving the Real Frederick May,' 37.

¹³ May, 'Music for *Mogu*,' TCD MS 11495/5/1/1.

¹⁴ See 'Colum's Secret Lay in Bare and Stony Tracks of Connaught Bogs,' *Irish Times*, 19 January 1972, which records mac Liammóir's comments at Colum's funeral regarding *Kismet*. See also 'Kismet and Mr Padraic Colum,' *Irish Times*, 2 April 1912, and a further letter from Colum printed alongside one from Thomas Kettle, 'Kismet and Mr Padraic Colum,' *Irish Times*, 6 April 1912.

theatre audience. One of these songs, sung by Mogu's daughter Narji, took its text from a passage in the first act of Colum's play where she recalls what she describes as 'the words in the song.'¹⁵ This was then moved to the opening of the work to provide a vocal curtain raiser, its text focusing on a dream of escape from ordinary life ('I perceive it was only a dream, the thought that came to me / The thought that the desert was passed, that we were on the couches / I thought we had dainty food, that singing and wine were around us'), and perhaps also acting as a subliminal 'author's apology' for the orientalist fantasy that followed. An 'Ethiopian Chant' for two Ethiopian captives also took its text from Colum, transplanting lines of a conversation from the end of his third act to the second act. For the rest of the songs, new words not relating to anything in the Colum play were written by an unknown hand, providing May with a range of texts of dubious quality to set. Mogu therefore introduces himself with a 'Desert Song,' beginning:

I come from lands are [*sic*] hard and bare, the desert lands
 Where scanty fruits are thorn encased, in desert lands,
 where they are lone the beasts that prowl
 From shade to shade across the waste
 of desert lands

Where the mad ostrich wheels in haste through desert lands
 Where men are like the desert rocks
 that yield no herbage to the flocks
 Men that for hopes have stripes and mocks
 in desert lands.¹⁶

An even greater challenge for the composer was provided by the texts to a 'Mouse Song' ('O little runner on four feet, / spirit of unobtrusiveness / Thou who are always at a task / Who hast wise eyes and modest dress') and a 'Nose Song' ('O nose that is the king of kings / O nose of Mogu firm and high / O'er all the noses of mankind / This song gives thee supremacy / No force can ever cut thee off / Nor root thee up O deep based nose'), also sung by Mogu.¹⁷

¹⁵ Colum, *Mogu the Wanderer or The Desert*, 17.

¹⁶ May, 'Music for *Mogu*,' TCD MS 11495/5/1/1.

¹⁷ May, 'Music for *Mogu*,' TCD MS 11495/5/1/1. At some point in the rehearsals the first four lines seem to have been cut, judging by the vocal parts. The bizarre words relate to a twist in the plot whereby Mogu finds, after he has agreed to

May's sketches show that he initially composed ten pieces for the play. These can be divided into songs for the principal actors, scene-setting pieces, and short instrumental pieces required directly by the text. In the first category come four songs for Mogu (the 'Desert Song' and 'Song of deliverance from the desert' in the first act and the 'Mouse' and 'Nose' songs in the third), Narji's Song 'I perceive it was only a dream,' court poet Nuseyr's song 'O forest bird,' and the duet for two of the Ethiopian Captives (Ethiopian Chant: 'Our boat floats on the water'). In terms of more general scene setting, a short 'Fruit Seller's Cry,' which is used to enliven the lengthy first scene, takes its cue from a stage direction that refers to a passing fruit seller. A chorus titled 'The Mighty Indian' is used at the end of Act I to indicate Mogu's transformation from vagabond to Vizier while also providing a suitably loud ending to the act and is used again as an effective curtain number to close the first scene of the last act and a second time as Mogu's status is reversed. A flute solo is required directly by the text as Mogu in Act III asks the Vizier's Historiographer Kassim-Farraj to play something on the flute to soothe him.¹⁸

By the time the play had gone into production, a number of other pieces had been added to the score. A 'Persian Dance' is used to signal the presence of Chosroes, the King of Persia. It is heard at his first appearance and is used again at the opening of the second act, which begins with a scene between Chosroes and Nuseyr. It also appears after Narji has been chosen by Chosroes to be his wife, as she exits stating 'the King awaits me at the Pavilion.' A short passage titled 'Melodrama' seems to have been used to accompany a portion of the scene for the Ethiopian slaves, but a substantial amount of this scene may have been cut, as other musical cues relating to it are crossed out on the running order. A second flute solo was also provided. A 'Butterfly Dance,' which in Colum's text is performed by Narji in the first act, seems to have been used instead for the dance at the Act III banquet performed by the slave Moon-of-Love. While this piece is included in May's full score, the handwriting is John Larchet's, suggesting that he was the author. The *Irish Times* review mentions that John Larchet composed one song for the production and some of the parts for this piece entitled 'Kisses of Women' are to be found inserted loosely

marry Gazeleh, a woman of the King's harem, that men who marry ladies from the harem must have their nose cut off. While the number of songs for Mogu reflects the centrality of the role, it also takes advantage of the fact that Edwards had been trained vocally, unlike some of the other actors. See Fitz-Simon, *The Boys*, 47–49.

¹⁸ May, 'Music for *Mogu*,' TCD MS 11495/5/1/1–3.

in the instrumental part-books.¹⁹ It was placed after a scene between Mogu and Gazelah, a woman from the King's harem with whom Mogu has fallen in love.

In total, the surviving full score of the music indicates that there were thirty separate musical cues, and a further three that were deleted at some point in the rehearsals.²⁰ Many of these consisted of repetitions of earlier cues or sections of the songs, sometimes played as purely instrumental pieces. Both this, and the fact that several of the shorter pieces such as the 'Fruit Seller's Cry' or 'The Mighty Indian' have notes on the score to say they have to be played through twice, suggests that, as rehearsals progressed, more music was incrementally added to enliven the production. The cuts to the second act and the decision to alter it from a three-act to a four-act production all took place at a relatively late point. The fact that Larchet had to assist with the provision of music also suggests that the various additional pieces were requested at the last minute, leaving May without enough time to complete the work himself. Perhaps more interestingly, in May's sketch for the 'Ethiopian Chant,' the vocal line alternates between a group of men, a group of women and passages for both, indicating that May was unaware that this was a text for two male slaves and not a large group of actors. This suggests that, while composing the main cues, May was not actually certain how these specially written texts were to fit into the dramatic action of the play.

While the use of the Phrygian scale for the 'Persian March' and its alternation between harmonised and unharmonised phrases could be seen to have given the music a mildly 'orientalist' sound, most of the songs are composed in May's customary musical language, which is indebted to contemporary English music, somewhat lushly harmonised and chromatic. That May briefly considered making his music sound in some way exotic is suggested by a note at the top of the sketch for Nuseyr's song, which states: 'In a Persian mode.' However, this was crossed out and no attempt was made to make the song sound in any way Persian. True grand opera orientalism was reserved for the intervals; after Act II, violinist Bay Jellet performed solos from the Camille Saint-Saëns opera *Samson and Delilah*,

¹⁹ The *Irish Times* review states: 'The music of *Mogu of the Desert* is the work of Dr J.F. Larchet and Mr Fred M. May, Dr Larchet's contribution being the setting of one song and Mr May's the settings of several beautiful lyrics.' See '*Mogu of the Desert*: New Play at Gate Theatre.'

²⁰ This includes an overture, listed in the index, which does not appear in the score. Presumably this role was played by one of the other pieces from the score, possibly an instrumental version of Narji's song.

while in between the scenes of the final act an arrangement by Larchet for the ensemble of the 'Song of the Indian Guest' from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko* was performed.²¹

May made a number of concessions to the fact that he was not writing for professional musicians. The violin is used to double the solo voices in all the songs to aid the actors with pitching the melody and in general the string and flute parts are quite straightforward. Despite this, one or two slightly more challenging moments in the cello line had to be rewritten and simplified, presumably to suit the capability of the player. Also, it seems that the careful doubling did not save all of the actors, as the *Irish Times* noted that John Stephenson, who played Nuseyr, 'did get somewhat out of tune in his singing.'²²

While reviews seem to have mentioned the music favourably, not everyone was impressed by this refashioning of the play. In George Yeats's scathing report to her husband, she notes:

It was a bad performance, the music was quite intolerable, it turned the play into something approaching light opera although there was not a great deal of it. The music should have been flute only, the songs almost spoken. No difference was made between the dressing of the Romans and that of the Persians, nor was their acting different so one lost a most necessary sense of balance in the first act and in the 3rd. Hilton Edwards played Mogu as he played the jew in *Jew Suss*, the women were atrocious, the scenery and lighting excellent, the dresses and colours ditto; Colum said to me as we were going out 'I don't recognise my play'. (They had cut an essential part of the second act, he told me.)²³

While Colum's bewilderment at the cutting, reordering and wholesale alteration of the play is understandable, George Yeats's comments can be seen as a reflection of some of W.B. Yeats's earlier pronouncements on music and certainly, in this case, the quality of the words would suggest that a clear declamation would not have been any help to the success of the production. May himself was happy with at least some of the music, as Nuseyr's song 'O forest bird' from Act II was a feature in recitals May gave four years later in 1935. Mac Liammóir and Edwards must also have

²¹ The flute part for the Rimsky-Korsakov arrangement is to be found in the instrumental part-books entitled 'Hindoo Song.'

²² '*Mogu of the Desert*: New play at Gate Theatre.'

²³ See Saddlemeier, "Yours affly, Dobbs," 294.

been happy with May's music, as in 1933 he was asked to provide music for the first production of a new play by Denis Johnston, *A Bride for the Unicorn*.

From a surviving letter that May sent to Johnston after the initial run, we can gather some facts about the preparation for the production. May notes that while he was at one, or possibly more, of the early rehearsals, he could not stay in Dublin to see the performances, as he had to return to college in London. In addition, he notes, 'I read the play over in such a hurry that I only received a confused impression from it, and I very much hope it will be produced in London.'²⁴ It would seem that, once more, there was not a lot of time for May to compose the music. Unlike *Mogu*, where the music was draped hastily over Colum's text to hide some of its inadequacies, in *A Bride for the Unicorn*, the music was intended as an integral structural element from the outset. Johnston's subtitle for the 1933 version of the play was 'fantasia and fugue in two parts' – two musical terms referring to both a free form (fantasia) and a strict contrapuntal form: in other words, music with two or more independent voices combined. In an essay on production, Hilton Edwards drew explicit links to this idea of musical form, describing the play as a development of 'the symphonic form' of *The Old Lady Says 'No!'*, and observed that the themes of the play unfolded 'simultaneously in the manner of counterpoint.'²⁵ He added that 'this contrapuntal construction depended upon the audience receiving a general impression such as one receives at the first hearing of a musical work rather than a concise unfolding of a story.'²⁶

The self-conscious linking of the play to musical forms by author and producer was also a reflection of the importance actual music played in the unfolding of the performance. It is clear that Johnston did not write the play with the Gate Theatre in mind, as his stage directions indicate a larger theatre with much greater musical and technical resources. The play begins with an overture that Johnston requests should consist of 'slow music in chords of modern timbre that are intimately connected with the plot – cold wintry music.' He adds that 'as the orchestra draws to its climax, the theme is taken up by an unseen Player at a piano. To a series of arpeggios, a spotlight rises upon a baby grand piano downstage, at which a girl is seated.' Having described the set, the player, and an elderly gentleman who sits by her, additional descriptions of the music state that it rises 'to a series of chords faintly suggestive of the chiming

²⁴ May, 'Letter to Denis Johnston, 7 June 1933,' TCD MS 10066/287/2083.

²⁵ Edwards, 'Production,' 36.

²⁶ Edwards, 'Production,' 36.

of the hours.' At this point, the Player stumbles over a phrase, retries it and writes on the manuscript from which she is playing, like a woman practising diligently at home. Further attempts follow, before 'the phrase she is attempting is taken up and played through successfully upon an unseen piano in the Orchestra.'²⁷ After a passage in which the two pianos play in duet, the Player on stage finds that there is 'a well-dressed man in party clothes, seated at another piano' in the orchestra.²⁸ Even if we interpret the word orchestra liberally to mean a small group such as that used for *Mogu*, the use of two pianos in addition to the orchestra would present issues of space and expense for a small theatre like the Gate. The orchestra and pianos have to provide music in a wide range of musical styles, some of it drawn from pre-existing sources such as Wagner's 'Wedding March' and any 'well-known hotel air,' while at another point Johnston requests 'the dreary strains of a provincial orchestra.' In addition to this, the eleventh scene requires a group playing dance music behind a curtain on the upper level of the stage. Various passages were designated to be sung by the actors and one of the characters, Egbert the Eccentric, has to play the violin at two points in the play.

Faced with such demands, a series of practical and innovative solutions had to be found. May was commissioned to write music for two pianos and timpani as well as a solo violin piece for Egbert. With no orchestra available for the opening, Johnston's production notes state that 'the orchestral introduction for the first Dublin production had to be played upon an electric gramophone wired for three loudspeakers.'²⁹ The music was the first side of a recording on 78s of 'Uranus' from Gustav Holst's suite *The Planets*.³⁰ The opening brass and timpani figure would certainly convey a sense of cinematic drama as the house lights were dimmed, but it is harder to reconcile the genial music that follows with Johnston's request for cold wintry music and slow chords. At the climactic moment of the eleventh scene, when midnight strikes and the Masked Woman reappears, Johnston notes 'orchestral music is preferable to the piano' and adds that, in the first production, the last side of 'Neptune' from Holst's

²⁷ All indications are taken from the unpublished 1933 version of Johnston, *A Bride for the Unicorn*, TCD MS 10066/3/1.

²⁸ Johnston, *A Bride for the Unicorn*, TCD MS 10066/3/1.

²⁹ Johnston, 'Notes for music of *A Bride*,' TCD MS 10066/3/55.

³⁰ This was presumably Holst's 1926 recording with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus, though it may have been a copy of his earlier acoustic recording with the same forces. Johnston's consistent misspelling of the composer's name in his notes suggests the 78s may have been provided by Edwards and mac Liammóir.

The Planets was used. In this case, the unusual harmonic and orchestral textures (including a distant female choir) would have been extremely novel, modern, and unusual for a Dublin audience in 1933.³¹ When one considers the surface noise of the 78s and the further distortion created by the amplification process one can imagine how this contributed to what one critic described as the violently experimental form of the play.³²

May provided five pieces of original music for the play. The first piece, entitled 'Clock theme,' was to be played as the side of 'Uranus' came to an end. It is not clear if May was aware that his music would be prefaced by an extract from 'Uranus,' but it is possible that he was, as the low B to which Holst's music descends at the natural point where one could cut it off (bars 108–16) forms the bass of the first of the series of harmonically ambiguous chords with which May's music begins. It would also explain why, after only four bars, he moves to a series of chords directed to be played 'with a chime-like sonority,' corresponding with the second paragraph of Johnston's directions. After seventeen bars of this music, we hear a simple phrase in octaves that seems to be the phrase that the on-stage Player has to stumble over and try repeatedly. Scrawled out in the manuscript are a series of variations on this phrase, presumably to guide the Player in playing it *incorrectly*. The second part of the cue then consists of a piano duet that is based on this little phrase, again corresponding to Johnston's directions.

The other cues composed by May offer fewer complications. There is a monumental setting for the chorus of the seven companions of the hero John Phosphorus at the close of the first scene, titled 'Sing, oh children of triumphant Zeus.' Johnston's stage directions indicate that they should be accompanied by both pianos, the on-stage piano to be played by Egbert the Eccentric. May provides a setting for the two pianos and timpani in which the on-stage piano closely follows the sung parts, while the orchestra piano has a more independent harmonic function, thus following the stage direction while also helping to ensure the chorus of actors stays together and in tune. In the third scene, the Drunken Swell has a song called 'The shoes stand sentry at the door,' which is scored for voice and piano. For the

³¹ There was a performance of five of the movements in Belfast in 1931 by a specially augmented BBC orchestra. See 'In the Northern Capital: A Holst Masterpiece.' While three movements (Venus, Mercury, and Jupiter) were performed by the Radio Éireann Symphony orchestra in 1949 and Mars was performed (with Jupiter) in 1954, it would seem the first complete Dublin performance of *The Planets* took place only in 1963. See Kehoe, 'The Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra,' 303 and 356, and Acton, 'R.E. concert at Gaiety Theatre.'

³² D.M. 'New Play's Success.'

tenth scene, May provided a short violin solo which is played by Egbert. The remainder of May's cues belong to the final scene, a largely musical coda in which a chorus titled 'Woe, woe, Adonis is dead!' is followed by a short song for the Drunken Swell, 'The sun has set,' before the play ends with a repeat of the first scene chorus ('Sing, oh children of triumphant Zeus'). Apart from the use of pre-existing music, as with the *Mogu* music, extracts of May's cues were used at other points in the play. For example, in the eleventh scene, which begins with 'a blare of any new popular dance tune,' Johnston asks for 'a syncopated version of Triumphant Zeus played softly by the dance orchestra.'³³ In May's scrawled list of cues, there is a note that this is 'to be played in the same key as the [gramophone] dance,' so it seems that the pianist had to fill the role of Johnston's dance orchestra, taking over from a recording of a dance tune.³⁴

By the time May composed the music for *A Bride for the Unicorn*, he had developed substantially as a composer. He had almost completed his training at the Royal College of Music and his first orchestral work, the *Scherzo for Orchestra*, had been rehearsed in public in London.³⁵ The music reflects this growing confidence and is more individual in character than much of the music for *Mogu*. Unfortunately for May, the ambitious nature of his settings caused problems for the cast. As he had returned to London, he was not able to provide solutions to the difficulties caused in particular by his flamboyant setting of 'The shoes stand sentry in the hall,' in which the piano has a strongly independent role rather than acting as sympathetic support for an amateur singer. Art Ó Murnaghan, who was playing Egbert (a character that has to play the piano in the first scene and mime playing the violin in the tenth scene) was drafted in to compose an alternative easier setting of 'The shoes stand sentry.'³⁶ He preceded this with a short, almost atonal instrumental passage to mark the point where John enters the bedroom of the mysterious lady, which contrasts bizarrely with his plain and undemanding setting of 'The shoes stand sentry in the hall.' Ó Murnaghan also provided a simple chant setting of a text in the fourth scene that was originally to be recited 'in unison with stiff stylised gestures,'³⁷ presumably as the decision to chant the text was taken after May's departure. Despite these problems, it is notable that the most positive

³³ Johnston, 'Notes for music of *A Bride*,' TCD MS 10066/3/55.

³⁴ May, 'Sing O Children' and sequence of cues, TCD MS 10066/3/16.

³⁵ Fitzgerald, 'Retrieving the Real Frederick May,' 39.

³⁶ Ó Murnaghan also worked at the Gate in a variety of other capacities including stage manager and designer.

³⁷ Johnston, 'Notes for music of *A Bride*,' TCD MS 10066/3/55.

of the reviews not only singled out 'the gravely poetic lament for Adonis,' but also highlighted the way in which 'music and rhythmic sounds played on our nerves,'³⁸ indicating the vital part the music played in conjunction with the challenging text, dazzling scenography, and flexible direction to 'cut clean away from the old 'realistic' stage tradition.'³⁹

The play itself was not successful and Johnston decided to rewrite it, publishing the new version in 1935.⁴⁰ A production was mounted at the Gate in April of that year. Due to the substantive nature of the revisions, new music was required and a decision was taken to commission this from Arthur Duff (1899–1956) rather than from May. It is possible that May was not in Ireland at the time the work went into production, but it is also possible that the problems posed by some of his settings were responsible for the change of composer. On the other hand, it is possible that Duff was put forward by Johnston, who had heard and admired some of his earlier work.⁴¹ That May never composed for any Gate production after this date may be due to the fact that in January 1936 he became director of music at the Abbey Theatre, having already deputised there for John Larchet at the end of 1935. It is not impossible that there was some personal falling out between May and the directors of the Gate; his next recorded appearance at the Theatre was in a song and piano recital presented by Lord Longford in 1937, at which he performed a number of piano works, while the singer Hamlyn Benson premiered a song by May titled 'By the bivouac's fitful flame.'⁴²

Whatever the reason for May's lack of further engagement with the Gate Theatre, the two commissions he received in the early 1930s were extremely important in bringing the young composer's music to the attention of the wider Dublin audience.⁴³ Undoubtedly the experience he gained was crucial in helping him to secure the job at the Abbey Theatre ahead of other candidates such as Arthur Duff, who had worked with Yeats at the Abbey on the music for *The King of the Great Clock Tower* and *Resurrection* and who had also composed a ballet for the Abbey School of Ballet.⁴⁴ The appointment at the Abbey, while providing a secure income,

³⁸ D.M., 'New Play's Success.'

³⁹ 'Mr Johnston's New Play *A Bride for the Unicorn*.'

⁴⁰ Johnston, *Storm Song and A Bride for the Unicorn*.

⁴¹ Duff, undated letter to Denis Johnston, TCD 10066/287/1126.

⁴² 'Gate Theatre: Song and Piano Recital.'

⁴³ The *Irish Independent* review of *Mogu*, for example, after naming the composers, stated that 'the songs are among the best things in the play.' D.S., 'Gate Players Have Difficult Task.'

⁴⁴ O'Meara, 'A Gentle Musician: Arthur Duff,' 19.

proved to be artistically unfulfilling as well as personally very difficult for May. His principal duty was not to provide incidental music but rather to provide musical entertainment during the intervals of plays as director of the grandly named Abbey 'orchestra' – at the time of May's appointment, this group had been reduced from five players to three, namely May at the piano, a violinist, and a cellist. The music performed during the intervals usually consisted of popular classical pieces in reduced arrangements and some Irish airs.⁴⁵ The surviving manuscripts in the TCD (Trinity College Dublin) and Abbey archives suggest that, for most productions that May was involved in, he was only required to provide short cues, a handful of bars in length, to set a mood or cover a scene change. On no instance did he have to provide a score as substantial as had been required at the Gate, illustrating perhaps the difference between the role of music as part of the overall experience in each theatre at this time. The Gate Theatre had provided a young gay composer with his first professional engagements, the freedom to compose a wide variety of music and, in the Johnston production, the experience of engaging with innovative theatre practice all of which was undoubtedly invaluable for his development as a composer.

Bibliography

- Acton, Charles. 'R.E. concert at Gaiety Theatre.' *Irish Times*, 14 October 1963.
- Boydell, Brian. 'Letters to Ralph G Walker of Hayes and Sons Solicitors.' Brian Boydell Papers, TCD MS 11128/1/23/66–70. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- Colum, Padraic. *Mogu the Wanderer or The Desert: A Fantastic Comedy in Three Acts*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1917.
- 'Colum's Secret Lay in Bare and Stony Tracks of Connaught Bogs.' *Irish Times*, 19 January 1972.
- D.M. 'New Play's Success: Brilliant Experiment at the Gate.' *Irish Press*, 10 May 1933.
- D.S. 'Gate Players Have Difficult Task: *Mogu of the Desert*.' *Irish Independent*, 28 December 1931.
- Dibble, Jeremy. *Michele Esposito*. Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010.
- Duff, Arthur. Undated letter to Denis Johnston. Denis Johnston Papers, TCD 10066/287/1126. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.

⁴⁵ Full details of the music performed at the intervals in Abbey Theatre performances can be found at the online database compiled by Dr Maria McHale: www.abbeytheatremusic.ie.

- Edwards, Hilton. 'Production.' In *The Gate Theatre*, edited by Bulmer Hobson, 21–45. Dublin: The Gate Theatre, 1934.
- Fitzgerald, Mark. 'A Belated Arrival: The Delayed Acceptance of Musical Modernity in Irish Composition.' *Irish Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (2018): 347–60.
- Fitzgerald, Mark. 'Retrieving the Real Frederick May.' *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* 14 (2019): 31–73.
- Fitz-Simon, Christopher. *The Boys: A Biography of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards*. Dublin: New Island Books, 2002.
- 'Gate Theatre: Song and Piano Recital.' *Irish Times*, 5 April 1937.
- 'In the Northern Capital: A Holst Masterpiece.' *Irish Times*, 16 June 1931.
- Johnston, Denis. *A Bride for the Unicorn*. Unpublished, 1933. Denis Johnston Papers, TCD MS 10066/3/12–24. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- Johnston, Denis. 'Notes for music of *A Bride*.' Denis Johnston Papers, TCD MS 10066/3/55. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- Johnston, Denis. *Storm Song and A Bride for the Unicorn*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1935.
- Kehoe, Patrick Joseph. 'The Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra, 1926–1954.' PhD dissertation, Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017.
- 'Kismet and Mr Padraic Colum.' *Irish Times*, 2 April 1912.
- 'Kismet and Mr Padraic Colum.' *Irish Times*, 6 April 1912.
- Lally, Des, David Clare, and Ruud van den Beuken. 'Gate Theatre Chronology (1928–1982): The Edwards–macLiammóir and Longford Directorates.' In *The Gate Theatre, Dublin: Inspiration and Craft*, edited by David Clare, Des Lally, and Patrick Lonergan, 341–85. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018.
- Lennox Robinson papers, 1/4/MSS 091. Non-fiction writings, 1919–24: Box 12, Folder 2, III – Katherine Tynan, 9. Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.
- Mac Liammóir, Micheál. *All for Hecuba*. Dublin: Progress House, 1961.
- May, Frederick. 'Frederick May's Music for *A Bride for the Unicorn*.' Denis Johnston Papers, TCD MS 10066/3/12–24. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- May, Frederick. *An Irish Love Song*. Dublin: Pigott and Co., 1930.
- May, Frederick. 'Letter to Denis Johnston, 7 June 1933.' Denis Johnston Papers, TCD MS 10066/287/2083. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- May, Frederick. 'Music for *A Bride for the Unicorn*.' Frederick May Papers, TCD MS 11495/5/2/1–2. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.
- May, Frederick. 'Music for *Mogu the Wanderer*.' Frederick May Papers, TCD MS 11495/5/1/1–7. Manuscripts and Archives Department of Trinity College Dublin Library.

- '*Mogu of the Desert*: New Play at Gate Theatre.' *Irish Times*, 28 December 1931.
- 'Mr Johnston's New Play *A Bride for the Unicorn*: Expressionism at the Gate.' *Irish Times*, 10 May 1933.
- Ó Dúlaing, Donncha. 'Interview with Frederick May, Three-O-One.' 18 February 1975. Contemporary Music Centre Library Ireland, uncatalogued.
- O'Meara, Evin. 'A Gentle Musician: Arthur Duff.' B Mus Ed dissertation, Dublin Institute of Technology, 1999.
- Saddlemeyer, Ann. "'Yours affly, Dobbs": George Yeats to her Husband, Winter 1931–32.' In *Essays for Richard Ellmann: Omnium Gatherum*, edited by Susan Dick, Declan Kiberd, Dougald McMillan, and Joseph Ronsley, 280–303. Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1989.
- White, W.J. 'Irene Haugh.' In *Catholic Authors: Contemporary Biographical Sketches*, Vol. 2, edited by Matthew Hoehn, 238. New Jersey: St Mary's Abbey, 1952.