

2013

Gerald Barry

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Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, M. (2013). Gerald Barry. UCD Press. DOI: 10.21427/W4VJ-7W17

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Barry, Gerald (b Clare, 28 Apr. 1952). Composer. At the age of 14 Barry received violin lessons from John Joe Casey. He also studied organ with GERARD GILLEN and Piet Kee and piano with ELIZABETH HUBAN. He obtained undergraduate and masters degrees from UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN. Barry first came to prominence with a setting of SAMUEL BECKETT's *Lessness*, which won the DUBLIN SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA Composers' Competition in 1972. In 1973–74 he studied composition with Peter Schat in Amsterdam. This was followed in 1975–76 by a period of study with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Cologne Hochschule für Musik on a DAAD Fellowship. After Stockhausen abandoned teaching, Barry studied music theatre with Mauricio Kagel. From Schat's tuition Barry felt he developed a more refined sense of harmony and sonority. While he felt completely out of sympathy with Stockhausen's pre-compositional planning and constructivism, Stockhausen's abolition of neat hierarchies of foreground and background was important for Barry, as was his sense of musical structuring. Kagel's musical influence on Barry was negligible, but he awakened his latent theatricality, and stage works have dominated Barry's output from the late 1970s onwards. Although Barry also enrolled with Friedrich Cerha for further study in 1977 this was merely a formality to enable him to collect a further grant, and contact was limited to the supervision of harmonics in *Things that gain by being painted*, the earliest work Barry now acknowledges. Cerha commissioned a work for his ensemble Die Reihe and the result '_____ ' was one of two pieces with graphic titles inspired by the paintings of Mark Rothko. This was selected by Kagel to represent the younger generation at the Festival St Denis in Paris in 1980. In the same year Barry was commissioned by the City of Bremen Theatre to compose music for Reinhild Hoffman's ballet *Unkrautgarten*. The ballet subsequently toured Germany as well as Brussels, Paris and Venice. Two virtuoso piano pieces, *Sur les Points* and *Au Milieu*, were composed for Herbert Henck before Barry returned to Ireland in 1981.

From 1982 to 1986 Barry held a lectureship at UNIVERSITY COLLEGE CORK, a position he relinquished upon election to AOSDÁNA. In Britain his music was featured in several concerts promoted by the Institute for Contemporary Arts, and in 1985 he was signed to Oxford University Press, publishers of all his music up to 2009. Since 2009 Barry's music has been published by Schott. The 1980s were dominated by work on his first opera, *The Intelligence Park*, and an orchestral work commissioned by the BBC for the 1988 Henry Wood Promenade Concerts, *Chevaux-de-frise*. German and Russian premieres of *Chevaux-de-frise* followed in later years with the Frankfurt Radio and Kirov (Mariinsky) Orchestras. The BBC also commissioned *The Conquest of Ireland*, his setting of lines from GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS (1995), *Hard D* for Orkest de Volharding (1992), *The Eternal Recurrence* (2000) and *Day* (2005). A second opera *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit* was composed for Channel 4 Television in 1990–91. Stage and concert performances of the work have subsequently taken place in Aldeburgh, London, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, New York and Los Angeles. His orchestral work *The Road* was commissioned by the Frankfurt Radio Orchestra in 1997. A strong relationship with the Birmingham Contemporary Music Group has resulted in three commissions, *Wiener Blut* (2000), *Dead March* (2002) and *Beethoven* (2009). Other important commissions have included *Flamboys* for the quatercentenary of TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN (1991, later retitled *From The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit*), *God Save the Queen* commissioned by the London Sinfonietta for the 50th birthday of the Royal Festival Hall

London (2001), and *Lisbon* for the 25th anniversary of the Nieuw Ensemble of Amsterdam (2006).

His third opera *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* was a co-commission from RTÉ and English National Opera. Following its concert premiere in Dublin, it was staged in London and Basle (2005). This was followed by a short one-act opera *La Plus Forte* commissioned by Radio France for the Festival Présences (2007) and further performed in Dublin, Miami, Amsterdam, Toronto and London. His fifth opera, based on Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, commissioned by the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Barbican, will be premiered in Los Angeles in 2011, to be followed by the European premiere at the Barbican in London in 2012. BEETHOVEN has always been an important presence for Barry; *Beethoven's Woo80*, a large scale music theatre work now withdrawn, was premiered in Cologne in 1976. From 2008 onwards, came a further series of works dealing with Beethoven: *Le Vieux Sourd* (The Old Deaf One) for solo piano, commissioned by Betty Freeman; *Beethoven* for bass and ensemble (2009), a setting of the Immortal Beloved letter; and *Schott and Sons, Mainz* (2010) for bass and choir, concerning Beethoven's dealings with his publisher towards the end of his life. 2011 will also see the premiere of *Feldman's Six-Penny Editions* for ensemble.

A number of elements have remained constant in Barry's style throughout his career. He eschews the use of introductions or other gradual processes at the opening of his works and also avoids the use of transitions. Instead, his music is constructed in blocks which are starkly juxtaposed in a manner he has compared to 16th-century keyboard music. The music tends to combine freneticism (he links this to his own temperament and early exposure to Irish traditional music – his uncle was the concertina player, Paddy Murphy and Barry recalls set dancing aged 12 on Inis Oírr, one of the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland, across from which he now lives much of the time), with passages of withdrawn tenderness. Although in his early work the dissonance level can be quite high due to the collision of independent lines, in all his music the primary emphasis is placed on melody. Barry has related one of his approaches to orchestration in his earlier music to the garish doubling of lines characteristic of CÉILI BANDS but it can also be linked to his training as organist where changes of registration mark off sections of the work and much use is made of octave doublings. Subversive humour also tends to play a role in Barry's compositions. While in Cologne he wrote a manifesto with KEVIN VOLANS and English composer Christopher Newman emphasising the right of the composer to draw freely from any available source. His music in the past has drawn upon a range of composers from DOWLAND and Beethoven to Schoenberg, though such material often tends to undergo intensive transformation before it is used, rendering it unrecognisable. This was an approach innate in Barry from an early age. When he was 15 he won a prize for a piano piece which was in fact a Mozart sonata cut into small pieces and re-sewn under Barry's name; for the young Barry this seemed a natural thing to do. While commentators are inclined to highlight some of the more *outré* sources Barry has used for pitch material, such as the BBC shipping forecast for sections of *The Intelligence Park*, the more important point is that any source can be raided to generate charts of pre-compositional pitch material. This eclecticism is subjected to a range of processes which may be abandoned at any point to obtain satisfactory melodic material. From the time of *Things that Gain by being Painted*, which was the first work in which Barry felt he had achieved the type of harmony desired, the music uses a sort of non-centred tonality; tonal

combinations can be used but like other conventional components such as octave doubling, they are stripped of their hierarchical significance or traditional harmonic context.

Barry's early music was greatly influenced by the clarity, virtuosity, precision and approach to colour in the performance practice of early music groups such as Musica Antiqua Köln, and while in Cologne Barry studied the viol. He was also the organist in Protestant and Catholic churches in Cologne and its environs. The paintings of the abstract expressionists and the music of Morton Feldman also had a significant impact on Barry's aesthetic outlook. Music from this period tends to focus obsessively on single ideas. A number of works share common material and are also available in a variety of guises scored for different combinations of instruments, each one giving a 'different view' of the material. His use of silence in this period is also very marked; an extreme example can be found at the opening of *Ø* for two pianos (each playing identical material simultaneously), where the opening two notes are separated from the rest of the piece by a silence lasting more than 30 seconds, helping to invest them with a unique significance within the piece. Such use of silence can be linked to Barry's interest in Beckett, as can the painterly quality, typical of Beckett's late plays, found in Barry's *Three Fairy Tales*. A rhythmic uniformity which is disrupted at seemingly random intervals is also customary for large passages of his early work. Many of the traits of the early music also form the basis of *The Intelligence Park*. The music alternates between passages of two independent lines with orchestral instruments doubling the vocal line at the unison, and four-part writing. The work is controlled harmonically by the use of passing chords from Bach chorale harmonisations to generate much of the material. Barry's text setting tends to move against the grain of the highly wrought and artificial libretto provided by Vincent Deane, with stresses displaced and words splintered to fit the musical lines, which in some cases were composed separately from the text. This opera, which deals with the loss and recovery of power, provoked the critic of the London *Times* to write 'Never mind what the piece is about: it just quite shockingly is. It exists. The gestation has been long—almost ten years—but the child can be pronounced in rude good health, even if it looks like nothing one has ever seen.'

In *Chevaux-de-frise* Barry used canon to thicken the texture, though this is not necessarily audible due to the rhythmic uniformity of much of the work and his practice of disguising the voice entries. However, the use of canon here was a springboard for the next phase in Barry's output in which it became the dominant technical device. This culminated in his second opera, *The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit*, a witty and erotic inversion of the plot of HANDEL's *The Triumph of Time and Truth*. Here the underlying theme of time and its destructive power triggers an orgy of polymetric canonic activity. A more variegated approach to rhythm is noticeable in this period. Also in contrast to earlier works, rather than taking a single idea as far as it will go, many pieces from this period cut more rapidly between blocks of material.

With the composition of *The Road* (1998) Barry began to concentrate for longer periods on single ideas, something that was perhaps reinforced by time spent the following year re-engaging with earlier works which were now being recorded by Black Box. The single-minded, intense scrutiny of material in the string quartet *1998* and its existence in a variety of scorings make it seem at first encounter closer in conceptual terms to his earliest acknowledged compositions than those of the late 1990s. This period

also produced a series of rather bewilderingly different pieces, such as *The Eternal Recurrence*, a setting of Nietzsche in C major, and *Wiener Blut*, with its unusually dense contrapuntal slow sections. From this time onwards Barry's work employs an increasing use of ordinary musical gestures which are stripped of their traditional context, elevated to foreground status and given an ecstatic quality through repetition. Examples range from the poise of the classical cadential gestures in *Lisbon* to the wildly careering diminished tetrachords in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. With the shift to more everyday text in *Petra von Kant*, there is a parallel modification in Barry's approach to text setting. Gone is the more extreme fragmenting of text in favour of a rapid conversational parlando, a feature that is carried over to *La Plus Forte*, though this work may represent something of an extreme in comparison with more recent vocal works such as *Beethoven* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

In a recent interview Barry said that he had never reached the age of reason. It would be hard to find a better image for his music.

SELECT COMPOSITIONS

(MSS held in *IRL-Dtc*)

STAGE

Things that Gain by being Painted (text Sei Shōnagon) (1977) S, spkr, vc, pf; Three Fairy Tales (Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White) (1980–81) 4 performers, 5 bass drums, tape; The Intelligence Park (text Vincent Deane) (1982–88); The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit (text Meredith Oakes) (1991–92); The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (text Rainer Werner Fassbinder) (2001–05); La Plus Forte (text August Strindberg) (2006); The Importance of Being Earnest (text Oscar Wilde) (2009–10)

ORCHESTRA

Diner (1980); From the Intelligence Park (1986 - formerly called 'Of Queens' Gardens'); Chevaux-de-frise (1988); From The Triumph of Beauty and Deceit (1991 - formerly called 'Flamboys'); La Jalousie Taciturne (1996) str; The Road (1998); Wiener Blut (2000 rescored 2002); No Other People (2009)

SOLOIST(S) WITH ORCHESTRA

Kitty lie over across from the wall (1977 rev. 2000) pf, orch; L'Agitation des Observateurs, le Tremblement des Voyeurs (2003) tpt solo, afl, cor ang, cl, bcl, bn, hn, trb, pf, 2vn, va, vc, db; Lisbon (2006) pf solo, fl+afl+pic, ob+cor ang, cl+bcl, mandolin, gui, hp, b drum, vn, va, vc, db

CHAMBER ENSEMBLE

' _____ ' (1979) cl, 2cl+bcl, hpd+pf, 2va, 2vc/(rescored 1987) 2cl+bcl, pf, marimba, va, vc; Ø (1979) 2pf/piano quartet; Sur les points (1980) 2cl, 2bn, 2asax, 2hn, 2tpt, trbn, btrbn, pf; Handel's Favourite Song (1981) cl, fl, tpt, trbn, pf, gui, db; Five Chorales from the Intelligence Park (1984) 2 pf; String Quartet no. 1 (1985 rev. 1994); Oboe Quartet (1988); Bob (1989) 2cl+bcl, pf, marimba, vn vc; Low (1991) cl, pf; Hard D (1992) fl+afl+pic, hn, s+bar sax, 2s+a+bar sax, 3tpt, 3trbn, pf, db; Piano Quartet no. 1 (1992); Sextet (1992–93) cl+bcl, tpt, 2 marimbas, pf, db; Quintet (1994) cor ang, cl+bcl, vc, db, pf; Octet fl, afl, cl, bcl, vn, vc, pf, marimba; Piano Quartet no. 2 (1996); Before the Road (1997) 4cls/4sax; 1998—String Quartet no. 2 (1998); 1998 (1999) vn, pf; Snow is White (1999) vn, va, vc, pf; Wiener Blut (2000) fl, ob, cl, bcl, bn, 2hn, tpt, trbn, 2vn, va, vc, db; In the Asylum vn, vc, pf/vn, pf; Six Marches (String Quartet no. 3) (2000); Dead

March (2002) fl, ob, 2cl, bn, 2hn, tpt, trbn, pf, perc, 2vn, va, vc, db; The Pond (2002) 2 treb, 2 bass instr; First Sorrow (String Quartet no. 4) (2007); Aeneas and Dido (2007) fl, cl, pf; Triorchic Blues (1990 rescored 2008) vn, vc, pf ; Feldman's Six-Penny Editions (2009) fl, ob, cl, bcl, bn, 2hn, tpt, trbn, pf, cel, 2vn,va, vc, db

UNACCOMPANIED SOLO INSTRUMENT

Ø (1979) vc; Things that Gain (1994) pf; Au Milieu (1981) pf; Sur les Pointes (1981) pf; Sur les Pointes—first section (1981) hpd/org/gui & hpd; Swinging Tripes and Trillibubkins (1986) pf; Triorchic Blues (1990) pf, rescored vn 1992, vc 2001; The Chair (1994) org; 1998 (1999) pf; Snow is White (1999) pf, Root Position (2000) pf (publ. Associated Board); Ø (1979 rescored 2002) vc; Trumpeter (2003) tpt; Agnes von Hohenstaufen (2004) pf (publ. Associated Board); Le Vieux Sourd (2008) pf

CHOIR

Carol (1986) high & low vv pf/org/hpd; O Lord How Vain (1995) S solo, satb; The Ring (1996) SATB, 2pic, 7cl, a+t sax, bn, 2hn, 5cornet, bar, 2euphonium, 2trbn, 2bass, perc, bells; The Coming of Winter (1997) SATB; God Save the Queen (2001) children's vv, fl, ob, 2cl, bn, 2hn, tpt, trbn, perc, 2vn, va, vc, db; Schott and Sons, Mainz (2010) B solo, satb

VOICE

Water Parted (1988) Countertenor/A/S, pf; The Conquest of Ireland (1995) B, orch; The Eternal Recurrence (1999) S, orch; Karlheinz Stockhausen (2008) v, pf or pf; Beethoven (2008) B, fl, cor ang, cl, bcl, cbn, hn, tpt, trbn, pf, 2vn, va, vc, db

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