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Inventing Identities: The Case of Frederick May

Mark Fitzgerald

Introduction:

In the closing scene of Tom Stoppard's play *The Invention of Love*, Oscar Wilde, living in Dieppe as Sebastian Melmoth, tells A. E. Housman, the central figure of the play, that 'biography is the mesh through which our real life escapes.'¹ This meeting, of central importance to the play, never in fact occurred, but as Stoppard remarked he was 'not going to be thwarted by a mere detail like that.'² Indeed, why would he? Reality does not necessarily make great theatre and besides the lacunae in Housman's biography positively invite the writer to fill them with imaginings. Of course, the scholar is defined by their refusal to allow flights of fancy that contravene the known facts, as Houseman explains earlier in the play to his younger self: 'Poetical feelings are always a peril to scholarship. There are always poetical people ready to protest that a corrupt line is exquisite ... To be a scholar is to strike your finger on the page and say, "Thou ailest here, and here."³ And yet, scholars can be just as ready to plumb for the poetical tale when it supports an attractive idea.

This chapter focuses on the composer Frederick May (1911–85), who is acknowledged as a key figure in the history of art music in Ireland in the twentieth century. Despite this there has been no serious biographical study to date and commentary on his music has generally been relatively facile. Reconstructing May's life would pose

¹ Tom Stoppard, *The Invention of Love* (London, 1997), p. 93.

² Ira Nadel, *Double Act: A Life of Tom Stoppard* (London, 2002), p. 508.

³ Stoppard, *The Invention of Love*, pp. 36–7.

formidable challenges for any author; due to a chaotic later life marred by alcoholism when, apparently homeless, he took to sleeping at night in Grangegorman asylum in Dublin, there is no substantial body of private papers for anyone to draw on and while there are plenty of people who can remember the late years of May's life when he was to a certain extent recognized for his work, finding people who can recall the early years of May's life is far more difficult. This study is neither a new biographical study of May, nor will it analyse in detail any of the music. Instead I will take the various frayed threads of May's life, pulling at different ones to see how they have been viewed, ignored or even reset by various musicological and journalistic commentaries in the hope of illuminating both the music and the underlying concerns of musical commentators in Ireland. Rather therefore than structuring this in a conventional chronological manner I will begin by providing a brief synopsis of May's compositional career as it appears in the main musicological studies.⁴

⁴ While this narrative can be found in most recent musicological studies the main texts are Joseph Ryan, 'Nationalism and Music in Ireland', Ph.D diss, (Maynooth, 1991) and 'Frederick May' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <http://dib.cambridge.org>; Philip Graydon, 'Modernism in Ireland and its cultural context in the Music of Frederick May, Brian Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann,' M.A diss. (Maynooth, 1999) and the eponymous article in Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds), *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, Irish Musical Studies 7 (Dublin, 2003); Axel Klein, *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim, 1996), 'The Composer in the Academy II', in Charles Acton and Richard Pine (eds), *Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin, 1998) and 'Irish Composers and Foreign Education: A Study of Influences', in Patrick F. Devine and Harry White (eds), *The Maynooth International Musicological Conference 1995. Selected Proceedings: Part One*, Irish Musical Studies 4 (Dublin, 1995); Robert W. Wason, Robert W. Wason, 'Interval Cycles and Inversional Axes in Frederick May's String Quartet in C minor', in Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds), *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 2003). There are some slight variations between these particularly as regards dates and these will be examined later.

Born in Dublin, May studied music at the Royal Irish Academy of Music under the tutelage of John Larchet before studying for a Mus. B at Trinity College Dublin.⁵ He then studied composition in London at the Royal College of Music for several years with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. In 1933 his Scherzo for orchestra was performed in London, as a result of which he won a travelling scholarship. Instead of setting off at once he waited until either late 1935 or early 1936 to travel to Vienna in order to study with Alban Berg (1885–1935), but unfortunately Berg died on 23/24 December 1935.⁶ May therefore studied for some time with Egon Wellesz (1885–1974), another Schoenberg pupil, who introduced May to serialism. Simultaneously, in 1936, May was also appointed as John Larchet's successor as Director of Music at the Abbey Theatre Dublin, a post he held until 1948. At some stage between 1933 and 1936 he composed the work which is today seen as his masterpiece, the String Quartet in C minor. This was followed by a small output of pieces; *Symphonic Ballad*, *Spring Nocturne*, *Lyric Movement for Strings*, *Suite of Irish Airs*, *Songs from Prison* and a number of short songs and arrangements. His last

⁵ The extent of the possible influence of his piano teacher Michele Esposito has been overlooked though May described how Esposito 'managed to spare the time too to look through and advise on the juvenile efforts of a young would-be composer.' Frederick May 'Intermezzo', in Charles Acton and Richard Pine (eds), *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin, 1998), p. 392.

⁶ Joseph Ryan and Philip Graydon place May's arrival after the death of Berg, conjuring the poignant image of May, arriving in Vienna only to find his proposed teacher was dead: Ryan, 'Nationalism and Music in Ireland', p. 405 and 'Frederick May' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <http://dib.cambridge.org>; Graydon, 'Modernism in Ireland' in Cox and Klein (eds), *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, p. 58. Axel Klein places May's arrival slightly earlier, but at a point in 1935 when Berg was already fatally ill (i.e. post August): 'Alban Berg akzeptierte ihn als Schüler, doch war dieser schon zu krank, als May 1935 in Wien eintraf. Bis 1936 studierte er daher bei Egon Wellesz.' Klein, *Die Musik Irlands*, p. 436.

original work was an orchestral work written in 1955 entitled *Sunlight and Shadow*.⁷ From the mid-thirties onwards May suffered increasingly from otosclerosis and combined with depression this resulted in May abandoning composition. May's life is one of particularly tragic unfulfilled potential but, despite the obvious chronological problems with the outline above, in the years since his death he has been called upon to play an important role in the emerging narrative of Irish art music.

May as Modernist:

Every discipline needs its icons and also its history. The growth of musicological study in Ireland is still a relatively recent phenomenon while the serious study of Irish art music is even more recent. Whereas mainstream musicology has tended to move away from grand narrative histories and establishment of canons as a reaction to previous generations of scholarship, in Ireland these fundamental tasks had never actually happened.⁸ Much writing about twentieth century art music has therefore been about imposing an orderly narrative upon a rather disparate set of people and events, frequently entwined with agonising over issues of national identity. Two figures from the first seventy years of the century have been isolated for the role of icon, Frederick May and Seán Ó Riada. Ó Riada was the choice of the literary world, with eulogies penned by poets from Thomas Kinsella to Seamus Heaney and through his film music and work with the traditional music group Ceoltóirí Cualann he reached a much wider audience in the 60s than most composers. Fredrick May on the other hand was the composer's composer, fêted by figures as diverse as Brian

⁷ For many of these works the exact date of composition is unclear and different dates are given in different sources.

⁸ The forthcoming *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* edited by Harry White and Barra Boydell (Dublin, 2013) is the first serious attempt at establishing a positivist musical landmark; a thorough history of Irish art music has yet to be written.

Boydell and Raymond Deane; the one who, unlike Ó Riada, had bequeathed at least one important contribution to the Irish art music repertoire. While some would only see him as a forerunner of Ó Riada, for many musical commentators he marked a new period in composition in Ireland. The way in which this idea has developed can be illustrated through an examination of an exhibition held at the end of 2010 in the Irish Museum of Modern Art, to mark its twentieth anniversary, entitled ‘The Moderns.’

The visual arts were represented in a highly inclusive manner to give the clearest picture of their development in Ireland over the century and throughout the catalogue questions about whether or not modernism existed within Ireland or had largely failed in Ireland are raised by a number of commentators.⁹ Theo Dorgan writing about film blithely dismisses modernism’s existence while also noting more generally: ‘Modernism as it impinged on Ireland, chiefly in painting, was second-wave Modernism, perhaps best expressed with a lower-case “m”’.¹⁰ By contrast the section entitled literature can dispense with any lengthy forward, the names on many of the displayed book covers earning their place not just in a local study of the movement. Turning to the section on music one might expect a similar ambivalence to that found in the other non-literary arts, particularly considering the fact that application of techniques associated with the European avant-

⁹ See for example Enrique Juncosa’s ‘Foreword’ or Bruce Arnold’s essay ‘The Yeats Family and Modernism in Ireland’, in Enrique Juncosa and Christina Kennedy (eds), *The Moderns: The Arts in Ireland from the 1900s to the 1970s* (Dublin, 2011).

¹⁰ Theo Dorgan, ‘Swimming with sharks, going our own sweet way: Poetry, Modernism and Film in Ireland’, in Juncosa and Kennedy, *The Moderns*, p. 501.

garde tended to be tokenistic and lagged far behind even Britain in terms of when they appear, but instead we find a swaggering appropriation of the modernist mantle:

Frederick May was the first Irish composer to take the principles of Schoenberg seriously and write within the idiom of European modernism ... Though Berg died prior to his arrival in 1935, May remained in Vienna as a student of Egon Wellesz, consolidating his commitment to a modernist aesthetic. The immediate result of these formative experiences was his String Quartet in C minor ... completed on his return to Dublin in 1936, which sustains over three almost-self-contained sections an original voice balancing in its mood and construction Viennese atonality and serialism with pastoral elements and their associated images of loss and withdrawal.¹¹

This confident repositioning of May can be traced back through the work of a number of musicologists who, looking for a musical counterweight to Ireland's canonical literary figures, found in May abundant possibilities for symbolic development. Philip Graydon, for example, isolated May, with Brian Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann as the first modernists with May playing the role of pioneer of Irish musical modernism.¹² This is however, merely building on Joseph Ryan's idea set forth in his study of music and nationalism of a 'progressive school,' comprised of the same three composers, to whose works he frequently applies the descriptor 'modernist.'¹³ Positing May as a modernist does

¹¹ Brian Cass, 'Modern Music in Ireland' in Juncosa and Kennedy, *The Moderns*, p. 554.

¹² Graydon, 'Modernism in Ireland' (both the article and MA thesis).

¹³ Ryan, 'Nationalism and Music', pp. 431–40. The distance Boydell and Fleischmann had in reality from the European modernist movement can be gauged by their allegiances. Fleischmann travelled to Germany hoping to study with Hans Pfitzner, best known today for his stridently anti-modernist writings. Brian Boydell, in listing the main influences on his work, allied himself with the music of Bartók, Sibelius, Prokofiev and Martinů; all essentially pre-war composers whose work (with the exception of Bartók's) could be said to fall outside the modernist fold due to its links with tonality and traditional forms.

raise a number of problems. Even if we leave aside the fact that modernism itself has to be redefined to make elements such as atonality and formal and rhythmic experimentation peripheral while centralising the idea of openness to European influences (albeit those of a previous generation) and rejection of the simple superimposition of Irish traditional melodies onto symphonic structures, the trajectory of May's compositional career tends to pull against the theories superimposed upon it. May's most chromatic (and thus in a simplistic sense most modern sounding) composition is his Quartet from 1936. His later works are more clearly related to the English school of his teacher Vaughan Williams and other English composers such as Delius, Bridge or Warlock, none of them recognized modernists. Axel Klein resolves this by conjuring a paradoxical figure whose most profound influences are demonstrated in his minor compositions while the less important influences pervade his major works:

May was ... one of the first Irish composers to be influenced by the Vaughan Williams school of thought. Certainly I think this influence was stronger than his other major influence, the later study with Egon Wellesz in Vienna. The Vaughan Williams influence I would like to describe as a more or less direct 'rubbing-off' of the teacher's style, a late romantic idiom with overtones of folk melody, occasionally tinged with modal harmony. One may argue my point, since May's most important works, such as the String Quartet in C minor (1936) and the *Songs from Prison* (1941) ... lead away from this very clearly. But since May's work of the early thirties reflects the great Englishman's style, and he later returns to it in the works of the fifties, I am not convinced that those more serious works really represent his deepest musical beliefs.¹⁴

¹⁴ Klein, 'The Composer in the Academy II', p. 421.

Ryan, on the other hand, manages to solve this conundrum, partly by exaggerating the modernism of the quartet but also managing to align May even closer to the European movement via his teacher Egon Wellesz:

At the outset [of the Quartet] it appears that May is embarking on a dodecaphonic composition, but this is not consistently pursued, giving way instead to a freer atonality. This remains his most avant-garde achievement. It is telling that it was being written before he studied with Wellesz; because May's later works suggest the influence of his teacher in that they forsake Schoenbergian principals and revert to the style of Reger and Mahler just as Wellesz himself had done. After the spell in Vienna, May underwent an ascetic renunciation of the most extreme technical innovations and while his subsequent compositions are modernistic none is as determinedly so as is the String Quartet.¹⁵

Of course this theory relies on two crucial ideas; the first, that May a budding modernist travelled to Vienna to become acquainted with the dark art of serialism, and the second that the quartet was written in 1935, before he studied with Wellesz. May's own words in interview in the 1970s might suggest the shakiness of the ground underneath these ideas:

I must say I could never really understand the doctrine of the Schoenberg school ... It certainly produced some wonderful work like Berg's *Wozzeck* and so on; but if you look at the subject matter, it was all of the most horrifying nature. There seemed to be no room in their work for anything joyful like the coming of spring. Of course it's an absolutely legitimate interpretation of life but it's the very antithesis of Haydn and Mozart, isn't it? I have great respect for

¹⁵ Ryan, 'Nationalism and Music', p. 412. In reality there is nothing in the work to suggest any detailed knowledge of the serial technique, the opening passage being merely an exploration of the full chromatic spectrum. The rest of the work retains a sense of tonal rootedness throughout and contains no aural traces of contemporary Viennese modernism. Ryan's reading also rests on a distorted view of Wellesz's career.

Vaughan Williams because he made such a great effort to rescue English music from the domination of Wagner and his ilk.¹⁶

The interviewer concludes by noting that May admitted to being ‘of the romantic school’ with particular regard for the late Beethoven quartets and the music of Schubert, Mahler, Delius and Sibelius.

To deal with the second point first, the date of composition of the Quartet has been debated by a number of commentators. May himself noted in the published score that it was written ‘in 1936, shortly after I had returned from a period of study in Vienna,’ that the third movement was the first to be written and that the central section of the second movement was ‘suggested to me by the death of Alban Berg, which occurred while I was at work on the music.’¹⁷ Most recently, Robert Wason at first seems to confirm Ryan’s theory by using May’s comments to demonstrate that the work must have been composed at the height of May’s modernist phase, prior to his taking up his scholarship for the planned study with Berg.¹⁸ His theory however is based on the idea that May was a tidily methodical composer who must have written the music of most of the first and second movements prior to the central section of the second movement, and would not have sketched a few bars upon hearing of Berg’s death, incorporating them at a later stage into an appropriate part of the Quartet.¹⁹ At present there would seem to me to be no particular reason to doubt May’s contention that the majority of the work was written in 1936 and the

¹⁶ ‘Kay Kent talks to Frederick May’, *Irish Times*, 12 December, 1974.

¹⁷ Frederick May, *String Quartet in C minor* (Dublin, 1976).

¹⁸ Robert W. Wason, ‘Interval Cycles and Inversional Axes’, 81.

¹⁹ In reality, one could even argue that this passage of the second movement could have been the starting point for the entire composition.

difference in tone and formal construction between the third movement and the rest of the work would support the idea that it was composed first. While one can debate this point in several directions, the first idea is more critical. However, the question here is not why did a man with strong allegiances to Vaughan Williams, whose music demonstrates no particular leaning towards the avant-garde, wish to study with Berg but rather what evidence is there that May ever intended using his scholarship to study with Berg and that his period with Wellesz was an unfortunate result of circumstances.

The Berg scholarship story appears in a number of journalistic commentaries, including the preamble to the article by Kent quoted above. Its most colourful version is in an article marking May's death by Charles Acton, *Irish Times* critic and promulgator of a number of important Irish music narratives, including that of Ó Riada as the greatest Irish composer and author of the first Irish serial compositions:

The first shattering disappointment of his life was that when he had been accorded a travelling studentship to study with Alban Berg in Vienna in 1935, that great composer and teacher died ... Berg's death was, clearly, the biggest obvious disaster, even though he was able to work in Vienna with Berg's pupil, Egon Wellesz.²⁰

On the other hand it is striking that May never mentions this story in the introduction to the score of his quartet, even though he does refer to the impact of Berg's death on the second movement, highlighting instead the fact that in London he had been 'the pupil of Ralph Vaughan Williams, a composer for whose music I have had a life long admiration.'²¹ The

²⁰ Charles Acton, 'Frederick May: an appreciation', *Irish Times*, 10 September 1985. Wellesz was of course not a pupil of Berg's.

²¹ May, *String Quartet in C minor*.

scholarship story also fails to make an appearance in the note written by James Plunkett to accompany the recording made of the work by Cladagh; in fact it specifically states that he arrived in Vienna at the age of twenty-two, which would imply sometime between June 1933 and June 1934.²² Similarly a profile printed in 1970 gives some detail regarding May's studies in London, including a short reminiscence by Gordon Jacob before adding that May then 'went to Vienna for a period to study with Dr Egon Wellesz, the Austrian musicologist and composer.'²³

Looking back further to May's time in London, the surviving evidence is small but throws further light on the image constructed posthumously for May. May studied at the Royal College of Music from September 1930 until sometime in 1933.²⁴ He was awarded the Foli Scholarship in 1932 and the Octavia Travelling Scholarship in 1933, the latter award being announced in the *Musical Times* of October 1932.²⁵ A letter from May's father to the Royal College of Music that month requests that the Foli scholarship be given in two parts, expiring at Easter 1933 at which point the Octavia scholarship 'would come into operation.'²⁶ His Scherzo for orchestra was performed on 1 December 1933 at an open

²² James Plunkett, 'Frederick May', Cladagh Records CSM2, 1974.

²³ T.O.S. 'Spring Nocturne: A Profile of Frederick May', *Counterpoint*, ii (1970) November: 14–18 (14).

²⁴ Composition was his principal study and he was enrolled with Charles Kitson, Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob. He also studied piano with Edward Mitchell and conducting with W. H. Reed and Aylmer Buesst. I am indebted for this and the following information regarding May's time at the Royal College of Music to Mariarosaria Canzonieri, Assistant Librarian (Archives), Royal College of Music.

²⁵ 'Royal College of Music', *Musical Times*, October 1932, Vol. 73, No. 1076: 932.

²⁶ Letter from Frederick May (senior) dated 31 October 1932, Register of the Royal College of Music. At the top of the letter is written 'Agreed to terms.'

orchestral rehearsal in the Royal College of Music under the auspices of the Patron's Fund.²⁷ On 22 January 1934 his *Four Romantic Songs* for tenor, piano and string quartet were performed at a Macnaughten-Lemare concert causing the critic of the *Times* to note:

The word 'romantic' is not usually applicable to anything that is played or sung at the Macnaughten-Lemare concerts, but on Monday night at the third of the series at the Ballet Club devoted to songs and string quartets, it appeared unblushingly in the title of the first work. The Four Romantic Songs for tenor, piano and string quartet, by Frederick May, were sung by Mr Steuart Wilson and played by the Macnaughten String Quartet, with Miss Irene Kohler at the piano. They lived up to their romantic designation, being warm with impulse and diffuse in composition.²⁸

There were several opportunities for May in London to encounter some of Berg's music both in concert and via BBC broadcasts, some of the most notable events being performances by the Kolisch Quartet of the *Lyric Suite* in April 1932 and February 1933, performances of the *Three Wozzeck Fragments* under Henry Wood in May 1932 and March 1933 and under Adrian Boult in February 1934 prior to his famous broadcast of the entire opera in March of that year, and a performances of the Chamber Concerto and extracts

²⁷ The format this followed was that the works in the concert were rehearsed from 10 am until approximately 11.20 and then played straight through at 11.30. The Patron's Fund was established by Ernest Palmer in 1903 'for the encouragement of native composers by the performance of their work.'

²⁸ Review, *The Times*, 26 January 1934. The Macnaughten-Lemare concerts were founded in 1931 by Elisabeth Lutyens, Anne Macnaughten and Iris Lemare to give performances of contemporary British music. See Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (London, 1992), pp. 46–8. At the 1934 concert May shared the programme with Dorothy Gow, Alan Rawsthorne and Gerald Finzi.

from the *Lyric Suite* conducted by Webern in April 1933.²⁹ However, while Wellesz's music was not performed as often, he would not have been unknown in London circles. In 1932 he was invited to England by Sir Hugh Allen where he received an honorary doctorate for his compositions from Oxford University; as well as being a member of the University faculty, Allen was director of the Royal College of Music.³⁰ In October and November 1933, at the invitation of Sir Robert Meyer, Wellesz delivered three lectures on opera at the Royal College of Music, the Royal Academy of Music and Trinity College of Music for the University of London, the third of which covered twentieth century developments. More pertinently, an interesting pattern emerges when one examines the careers of other Vaughan Williams pupils who won the Octavia Scholarship. Grace Williams used her award in 1930 to travel to Vienna to study with Egon Wellesz and was followed by Dorothy Gow in 1932 and Peggy Glanville Hicks in 1936 both of whom also used their scholarships to study with Wellesz.

An early newspaper report of May's scholarship again does not mention Berg but states: 'In 1933 he won a travelling scholarship, after which he visited Vienna, Florence and Rome. He studied in Vienna with Egon Wellesz.'³¹ The interesting thing here is the date of the report – August 1935 – which demonstrates that May had been to Vienna, had visited Italy and returned to Dublin at least four months before Berg died, if not substantially earlier. The division of the Octavia Scholarship agreed by the Royal College

²⁹ For more detail regarding these performances see Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music 1922–1936: Shaping a Nation's Tastes* (Cambridge, 1999).

³⁰ Caroline Cepin Benser, *Egon Wellesz: Chronicle of a Twentieth-Century Musician* (New York, 1985), p. 97.

³¹ [Untitled] *Irish Independent*, 25 August, 1935: 4.

of Music with his father and the date of its award would suggest in fact that it is most likely that he travelled to Vienna in either 1933 or at the latest early 1934. The existence of a letter of introduction from Vaughan Williams to Wellesz dated 'July 13' again suggests that the latest possible date for the visit was summer 1934 and further undermines the traditional narrative while supporting the view that there was a pattern of Vaughan Williams pupils studying with Wellesz and that May's period with Wellesz was not a chance occurrence caused by Berg's death.³² Until further evidence emerges the extent of May's contact with either Berg or his music remains an unresolved question.

That this story originating in a few newspaper articles could then be taken up so enthusiastically by scholars without evidence and that it could be privileged over the actual sound of the music is probably due to the sheer power of the image; a story that forged a definite link between Ireland and canonical European masters and legitimated the newly created history. It acted as a perfect symbol of the rending of both the bonds of enslavement to English musical rule and the Irish tyranny of traditional music while also signalling the birth of a new age in Irish musical history. It also seemed to prove Irish musical engagement with one of the key artistic movements of the twentieth century even if there was little aural evidence of this in the surviving music.

Ireland, Britain, Europe:

....it is only by contact with the art of foreign nations that the art of a country gains that individual and separate life that we call nationality...³³

³² Österreichische Nationalbibliothek F13 Wellesz 1656. May's presence in Ireland in 1935 is also demonstrated by a number of radio broadcasts throughout the year.

³³ Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist Part II* (London, 2001), p. 245.

Legitimation through alignment with Europe brings us to the other major issue that has underpinned much of the writing to date; to what extent can someone like May be considered an *Irish* composer. The origins of the debate are clear enough in the clash between the insular view that Irish composition should be national in character and that this equated simplistically to the use of traditional music as guarantor of authenticity and those who felt that in an independent republic a composer should be free to use any material they might wish regardless of origin and that there was no need, in striving to be Irish, to impose a false purity which renounced anything which might bear any relation to any other culture. May himself, living through then height of these arguments, was quick to denounce the former vision:

Maudlin sentiment and barren theorising must be eschewed; musical criticism must be creative and not destructive, and one of the most destructive and useless types of criticism is that which starts out from an unwarrantable premise, such as that all good music must be demonstrably national in feeling, and then proceeds to chain down the unfortunate composer on this ready-made bed of Procrustes. This is one likely way by which the bad may be exalted and the good abased, for there is no such infallible yardstick by which we may determine what is truly of permanent value. On the contrary, we must receive all-comers in a spirit of receptive enquiry, and only examine their credentials to the extent of asking if they have acquired the requisite technique to realise fully the expression of their ideas.³⁴

What is unusual is that musicology has lagged so far behind other disciplines. In literary studies there is no longer a refusal to recognize the Irishness of Wilde because Lady Bracknell fails to speak with the poetic brogue of a character from the west of Synge-land;

³⁴ Frederick May, 'The Composer in Ireland', in *Music in Ireland: A Symposium*, Aloys Fleischmann (ed.) (Cork, 1952), 169.

indeed the discussion of Irishness has moved far beyond such surface features. However, in musicological studies the debates of the 1950s are still with us along with the simple binary opposition of the Irish and the International, and there is a strange tussle between attempts to prove the European quality of music and an equally strong urge to prove that the work is despite this still Irish and contains enough elements of traditional music to prove it. Ryan can therefore declare:

[May] was unique among his generation in the degree to which he espoused the European tradition, and he was, for most of his life, innocent of any conscious effort to fashion an Irish mode. Where there occurs a phrase which 'sounds Irish' such as the second theme of the final section [of the String Quartet] one feels that this is because May *is* Irish, that it is innate to him rather than the result of any managed contrivance.³⁵

Klein also takes this approach isolating a single bar of the Quartet (bar 477) which contains the necessary Irish DNA:

I can even hear a traditional influence in parts of the String Quartet, a work widely regarded as his most international one in character. The first motif of the third movement, for instance, with its multiple variants in the course of the piece, is a clear reference to his Irish heritage. Of course such references are much more overt in the Scherzo for orchestra (1933), his first orchestral work composed in London.³⁶

This demonstrates a similar technique to that of critic Fanny Feehan who was able to write of the quartet:

Fred May does not need folk music of this or any other country to upholster his imagination, because the mode is woven into the tapestry of the work and is integral to it. A case in point is the Lento Expressivo of this Quartet, which contains an ejaculation in the form of a triplet,

³⁵ Ryan, 'Music and Nationalism', p. 411.

³⁶ Klein, 'The Composer in the Academy II', pp. 421–2.

which is very much in the style of a sean-nós singer who adds point or pathos to a phrase or idea by the skilled inclusion of an ornament into a dying phrase.³⁷

For Ryan, unlike Klein, the ‘overtly Irish’ Scherzo for orchestra evokes not Ireland, but Mahler, and thus acts as the perfect (perhaps premeditated) calling card to Alban Berg.³⁸ In reality the most obvious influence on this student work was noted by its first reviewer who, describing the previous work in the programme as something which might have been called ‘promising’ had it been premiered some forty years earlier, added of May’s piece: ‘Frederick May’s Scherzo is rather less pleasant, but the same epithet [‘promising’] might have been used of it 20 years ago, that is, if it had appeared any time before Holst’s suite “The Planets”’.³⁹ It would seem that much of the recent critical writing has been less concerned with the detail of the music and is perhaps motivated by a wishful attempt to parallel in this reclaimed musical history the achievements of their literary forebears at the turn of the century, writers such as Wilde, Synge, Yeats and Joyce, who looked to Europe for their ideas while also using more local inspiration.⁴⁰ Ultimately these characterisations, not to mention Wason’s parallels with Berg, Schoenberg, Bartok, and May’s fellow in aural affliction Beethoven, seem to (perhaps subconsciously) perform a dual function of building a persona who marries innate natural and authentic Irishness to European achievement while also excluding England.

³⁷ Fanny Feehan, ‘The Fiery Soul’, *Hibernia*, xxxix, 10 January 1975.

³⁸ Ryan, ‘Nationalism and Music’, p. 405. Graydon weighing the two options comes down on the side of Irishness noting gapped scales in bars 94–96 and 103–104, Graydon, ‘Modernism in Ireland’ (M. Phil diss.), p. 40.

³⁹ ‘R. C. M. Patron’s Fund: New Works at Orchestral Rehearsal’, *Times*, 2 December 1933.

⁴⁰ See for example ‘Nationality or Cosmopolitanism?’, in Declan Kibberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (London, 1996), 155–65.

Thus, while much ink has been spent on Viennese connections of one sort of another and the modernism they have imparted, there has been practically no examination of how May's chromatic explorations intersect with those of his actual teacher, Vaughan Williams.⁴¹ For many only familiar with popular works such as *The Lark Ascending* or the *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis* Vaughan Williams is merely a purveyor of Englishness in its twin forms of the pastoral and recycled Tudor splendour. However, from the mid 1920s Vaughan Williams went through his own 'modernist' phase where his music became increasingly exploratory, starting with the tonal ambiguity of *Riders to the Sea* and culminating in the harsher dissonance of his Fourth Symphony, premiered in April 1935. In the middle of this period and coinciding with May's period as student came the premiere in February 1933 of his Piano Concerto, a percussive piece whose last movement is an angular 'Fuga Chromatica'. Nor has there been any study of the influence of Delius despite May's profession of admiration in the 1974 interview; indeed that his love of Delius dates back to at least the 1930s can be discerned clearly from the fact that one of the first productions he was involved with in the Abbey Theatre after his appointment was a production of James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan*, with Delius's 1923 incidental music.⁴² In an article published the same year May noted:

⁴¹ Dylan Curran makes a short passing reference to the semitonal dissonance and semitone dyads in the opening bars of the Fourth Symphony in his study of the May Quartet but does not develop the point any further. Dylan Curran, 'Frederick May's String Quartet in C minor: A Critical Analysis,' M.A diss. (Maynooth, 2009).

⁴² *Hassan* opened on 1 June 1936.

Superficially, Delius might appear to be completely self-sufficient; but in reality he is the last romantic gathering to himself all the dying glory of the movement which culminated in Tristan – his music is bathed in a gorgeous afterglow, full of autumn and sunset.⁴³

It would seem that even today the founding of a distinctive modern Irish school of composition needs for some to take place at a safe distance from the music of the former coloniser as if indebtedness to England would in some way undermine its value or its national identity.

Different meshes to cast over May: Interleaved variations in lieu of a conclusion:

The uneasy equivocations surrounding the English influence on May perhaps link to another unexplored area in the examination of Irish twentieth-century art music for there has yet to be a detailed exploration of the issue of class despite the fact that the study of music and more particularly the ability to sustain a career solely on the basis of compositional output implies the possession of adequate financial means in a country which was economically stagnant for much of the century. Most obviously the amount of musicians from so called ‘Anglo-Irish’ backgrounds has more to do with accumulation of wealth and access to facilities than any innate musicality in a particular genetic pool. However, the lack of such a study merely consolidates the striking sense that in the construction of this musical icon very little attention has been given to the known facts about May and the aspects of his life and work that might normally inform such studies in other disciplines. It is beyond the scope of this study to pursue the suggestions already

⁴³ Frederick May, ‘Music and the Nation,’ *Dublin Magazine*, xi (1936) July–September: 50–56. It is interesting to note in passing that in this article, which an editorial note tells us was written while Berg was still alive, May singles out Sibelius as the greatest living composer.

alluded to regarding the music through analytical study but instead I will conclude by pulling at two further less-frayed chords that seem particularly relevant to May's work but have been largely ignored to date to suggest other ways in which May's music might be illuminated.

Not everyone has downplayed the English influence on May. Perhaps it is no surprise that Raymond Deane, a composer who has himself genuinely engaged with high-modernism, is unequivocal in his description of May's music:

Frederick May sought again and again to match himself with the English pastoral tradition, yet approached greatness in the one work – his extraordinary and extraordinarily flawed String Quartet (1936) – in which he dramatised the incompatibility between this tradition and the Viennese modernism which had briefly seized his attention.⁴⁴

The reference to the pastoral tradition here and more pointedly Brian Cass's reference quoted earlier to 'pastoral elements and their associated images of loss and withdrawal' raises the question of what the pastoral represents in the music of May. Most descriptions of the pastoral trope in music tend to concentrate on earlier periods rather than tangle with the complicated strands of the pastoral in twentieth-century Britain. For many it is simply a pejorative term synonymous with nationalism and anti-modernism. In a more nuanced reading Eric Saylor focuses on pastoral writing relating to the First World War noting:

⁴⁴ Raymond Deane, 'Exploding the Continuum – The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition',

<http://www.raymonddeane.com/articles>. In his programme notes for the performance of May's String Quartet at the first Living Music Festival in 2002 Deane was even more direct lamenting the fact that his music had not been 'purged' of 'the lingering vestiges of English pastoral' and describing the *Songs from Prison* as 'a particular disappointment in this regard.'

Pastoral language can gain power when Arcadia is positioned, not as an escapist safe haven but as a brighter, more appealing world that exists parallel to (or interspersed within) the grimmer trappings of modernity. Though it may be possible to imagine such a prelapsarian world, or even catch occasional glimpses of it, external pressures – social, cultural, historical – preclude its sustained existence in the postlapsarian present. The attraction of the pastoral vision lies in part with the tantalizing hope that certain aspects of it, if realized, could offer a reassuring alternative to modernity's less savory elements.⁴⁵

This idea seems particularly relevant to May's work. His own stated objection to the Second Viennese School was its supposed inability to conjure 'anything joyful like the coming of Spring,' several of his songs deal with images of spring, as do the titles of works such as *Spring Nocturne*. The darker side of life is similarly evoked by the dim shades of *Sunlight and Shadow* or more starkly in the late setting of Hart Crane's *North Labrador* with its concluding image of the journey 'toward no Spring – No birth, no death, no time nor sun.' Even the String Quartet is structured around similar imagery as May himself detailed:

A little more than half of the way through [the final movement], there is a stormy and stressful section in which I seemed to see a bird of light and gay plumage flying through a sun-dappled wood, and closely pursued by another, larger and predatory, by whom it is attacked and wounded. It manages to escape, however and flies into the higher branches of a tree, singing quietly as it recovers peace ... The music comes to a serene close, something for which I can

⁴⁵ Eric Saylor, "'It's not lambkins frisking at all': English Pastoral Music and the Great War", *Musical Quarterly* (2008) 91 (1–2): 39–59.

offer no rational explanation but perhaps I was thinking subconsciously of a line of Goethe's
'Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh.'⁴⁶

Perhaps the most interesting in relation to Saylor's explorations is the concluding section of *Songs from Prison*. The first half of this work sets six extracts from *Das Schwalbenbuch* (1923) by Ernst Toller, poetry inspired by swallows that nested in his prison cell in the Niederschönenfeld penal institute, Bavaria where he was a political prisoner. The second part of the work is to a text by Erich Stadlen, friend of May and refugee from Nazi occupied Austria and is based on Toller's account of how the Governor of the prison reacted after *Das Schwalbenbuch* had been smuggled out of the prison and printed:

The Governor revenged himself in his own inimitable way. In the spring the swallows returned. They picked out our prison and began to build their nest. Then, at the Governor's command, warders clattered into the cell and callously tore down the almost completed nest. Then the swallows, bewildered and passionately eager began to build three nests simultaneously in three different cells. But they were only half finished when the warder discovered them and repeated the outrage. With the energy of despair they started six nests simultaneously. But they were all torn down. The struggle lasted for seven weeks. At the end, the swallows gave up. One evening the male swallow came alone. The female was dead.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ May, *String Quartet in C minor*. The full text of Goethe's Wanderers Nachtlied is 'Über allen Gipfeln /Ist Ruh, /In allen Wipfeln /Spürest du /Kaum einen Hauch; /Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde. /Warte nur, balde /Ruhest du auch.' This translates roughly as 'Over all the mountain tops is peace, in all the treetops you feel barely a breath of air; the little birds in the wood are silent. Wait, soon you will also be at rest.'

⁴⁷ Ernst Toller, *Letters from Prison*, trans. and ed. R. Ellis Roberts (London, 1936), p. 322. A more detailed account occurs in Toller's autobiography *I was a German*, trans. Edward Crankshaw (New York, 1981) pp. 287–91. The original is reprinted as an epilogue in Ernst Toller, *Das Schwalbenbuch: Neu herausgegeben und mit zusätzlichen Materialien*

Stadlen and May (and their English translator Nigel Heseltine) create a more lurid picture in which unnamed figures beat the prisoner, smash the nest and then hack the swallows to death. The equation of these figures with the Nazis is quite clear and due to their actions the prisoner is left hopeless while ‘the dear countryside was senseless desert.’ A declamatory section follows in which the singer denounces the blood-drunk evildoer who builds his state (Reich) with lies, death and treachery and describes the flight of birds of light from the scene of death. Unexpectedly, the work concludes with a sudden change of mood as the singer announces: ‘But spring will come; the earth waits for spring. And out of the sky legions of slender swallows come swarming back, flying for freedom on the flight of freedom.’⁴⁸ This sudden Arcadian vision at the close of the work parallels very clearly Saylor’s description of the post World War One English pastoral image

Why did May identify so closely with the plight of the Jews at a time when news of their plight was being quietly ignored or suppressed by the Irish state, and why are even his darkest visions illuminated by these pastoral tropes of hope? Brian Boydell in a radio broadcast commented:

versehen von Hans-Peter Kraus und Werner Schmitt (Herstellung und Verlag: Books on Demand GmbH, Norderstedt, 2010) pp. 69–77.

⁴⁸ The inevitability of spring’s return is stronger in the original German text than in Heseltine’s translation. ‘Doch Frühling kommt, denn immer noch kam Frühling. Und aus der Himmeln werden die Legionen der schlanken Schwalben schwärmend wider kehren. Fliegend für Freiheit auf der Freiheit Flügel.’

Fred had an ardent sympathy for those whose liberty of thought was threatened. A stay in Vienna during the traumatic years preceding the war undoubtedly had a great deal to do with this and he reacted passionately to Ernst Toller's poems, written as a political prisoner.⁴⁹

This was probably written in the belief that May had been in Vienna in 1936 rather than 1933 or 1934 and until the establishment of the exact date of May's Viennese sojourn it is impossible to know what he would have witnessed there.⁵⁰ His only contemporaneous public comments on the totalitarian menace in Europe in his study of the relation between music and nation are tied to the ideals of artistic expression rather than political reality: 'It is not surprising that in this mass war of stupidity versus intellect, artists have been singled out for specially virulent and relentless attack.'⁵¹ May's identification with the persecuted or marginalized may in turn stem from his perception of his own place in the stultifying atmosphere of the Free State, a country which had turned its back on the aspirations of revolution and replaced them with an inward looking governance where the potent blend of

⁴⁹ Brian Boydell, 'Classics of XXth-Century Music: A series of five programmes for RTÉ, 23 September 1986', unpublished scripts, Archive of the Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin.

⁵⁰ For example, in 1933 there was already high tension between the left and Christian right after the suspension of the parliament while the accession of Hitler to power in Germany increased the threat from Nazi sympathizers. If May visited in early 1934 he could have witnessed the February uprising while a visit in July would have coincided with an attempted Nazi putsch and the killing of the head of government Engelbert Dollfuss. For an account of the period see Barbara Jelavich, *Modern Austria: Empire and Republic 1815–1986* (Cambridge, 1989) pp. 192–208.

⁵¹ May, 'Music and the Nation.' By the time he came to write *Songs from Prison* he was clear that the work acted as his direct contribution to the war, conveying a deeply urgent message. See letter from May to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941, British Library, Add. 61886, ff.68. In his 1974 interview May comments more directly on the political situation stating 'I chose these poems because I thought they had great relevance to the condition of humanity under Hitler. As I was studying in Vienna in the '30s I was emotionally very involved with the whole Hitler menace.' See 'Kay Kent talks to Frederick May'.

nationalism and Catholicism were used to hold together a country unable to generate economic wealth for its people. This atmosphere affected May on a number of levels. He was someone from a Protestant background who had experienced the cosmopolitan life of European cities with strong musical tradition against which he could compare Ireland's ideological stagnation and haphazard musical infrastructure. Performance options for his music were few and far between – his string quartet only received its first Irish performance in 1949 in a performance by an English quartet as there was no adequate Irish ensemble to tackle the piece – and early performances of his larger more complex works tended to get poor reviews from Irish critics unable to comprehend music which stretched beyond the confines of a late nineteenth-century idiom. Ignorance of both the modernist music of Vienna and the English pastoral school is clearly demonstrated in Charles Acton's review of the premiere of *Sunlight and Shadow*, as the critic takes the opportunity to correct the composer for past errors:

Songs from Prison and the String Quartet belong to his Dark Night of the Soul: for all their value as expressions of personal anguish they are too prolix to live permanently. This last barren decade has been perhaps, his 'darkest hour before the dawn.' Now we have this work to mark his new day, and one hopes that he can now go forward in peace with full vision. That this is not fanciful is shown by the serene, fresh, diatonic clarity of *Sunlight and Shadow*. Mr May has left behind him the decaying jungle of dying Vienna that he explored in his dark nightmare: he can now see that there is more in life than *Wozzeck*.⁵²

The lack of audience, infrastructure and intelligent critical assessment must have exacerbated May's sense of isolation. In addition there were his well-known health

⁵² Charles Acton, 'New Work Performed at Winter Prom in Gaiety Theatre', *Irish Times*, 23 January 1956.

difficulties and a further element to May's life which has not been explored in musicological works to date, namely his homosexuality.⁵³ Richard Pine's study of broadcasting in Ireland is the only musical study in which there is any attempt to link May's work, albeit briefly, to his sexuality:

Although by 1958 serious illness had rendered May almost completely defunct as a composer, it was not only this impediment that made him speak of 'depression' and 'despair' – his own pre-war experiences, including his disappointment at the death of Berg, with whom he had intended to study, had produced his string quartet and the 'Songs from Prison', setting words by Ernst Toller. The 'Songs', in addition to embodying a cry for human dignity in general, may well have had the additional, more specific, focus of May's own homosexuality in the homophobic society of Ireland in the 1940s and after.⁵⁴

May's implicit criminal status as a homosexual could have made him identify with Toller, the political prisoner. On the other hand one could follow this train of thought further. Michael O'Sullivan in his biography of Brendan Behan describes May's infatuation for Behan, concentrating on the period of Behan's imprisonment for shooting at a policeman in Dublin in early 1942. May's *Song's from Prison* was premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra directed by Clarence Raybould with William Parsons on 14 December 1942 and at once the possibility of re-reading the work as inspired by Behan's sentencing to fourteen years' penal servitude raises its head.⁵⁵ This would however entail a Stoppardian revision of

⁵³ Philip Graydon summarizes Michael O'Sullivan's findings in passing in his dissertation but does not pursue the connection between May's life and his work; for this reason this information does not appear in his later essay for *Irish Musical Studies*.

⁵⁴ Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, (Dublin, 2005), p. 225.

⁵⁵ For an account of the premiere, see Arthur Duff, 'Songs from Prison: Frederick May', *Irish Times*, 16 December 1942.

the actual date of composition, 1941; while May's surviving manuscripts give no clues regarding the date of composition the overlap of material between this work and his incidental music for the UCD Dramatic Society's production in March 1941 of Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset* suggest a date early in 1941 and the work was complete by June 1941 when he travelled to London to show it to Sir Adrian Boult.⁵⁶ However, even this earlier date does not rule out the possibility of a personal connection with one of the themes of the work. May first became acquainted with Behan in 1938 when Behan was fifteen.⁵⁷ A year later, at the age of sixteen Behan travelled to Liverpool where he was arrested in possession of explosives. After three months in Walton Gaol he spent three years in Borstal detention before returning to Ireland in November 1941.⁵⁸ A work penned in the early part of 1941 could therefore be read as being linked to the imprisonment in England for political reasons of the boy with whom he had fallen in love. On the other hand one does not have to map the work in such a simple biographical fashion as the general themes of imprisonment, isolation, brutality, intolerance and the belief in the possibility of a better existence in some utopian spring can all be linked directly to the position of May as a homosexual in Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s where liberty of thought and liberty of action were both forbidden. There is also no doubt that in Ireland and Britain at the time Oscar Wilde's imprisonment was still a resonant image for homosexuals and so the image of the prisoner could have had

⁵⁶ The parts of May's *Winterset* music are held by Trinity College Library, Manuscripts Department, MS4918 with the timpani part catalogued as MS4939/10. His visit to London is detailed in a letter from May to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941, British Library, Add. 61886, ff.68.

⁵⁷ Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin, 1997), p. 91

⁵⁸ Colbert Kearney, 'Brendan Behan', in *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <http://dib.cambridge.org>.

an extra significance as could the imagined spring of freedom. In this context one could re-read May's 1974 comments regarding the conclusion of his *Songs from Prison*:

Now I still think that Hitler's extermination of the Jews was the most appalling crime, but I can see that if I'd been more realistic I'd have understood that Hitler's defeat did not mean that humanity would be freed from his system. If I'd known more about politics I suppose I'd have been more percipient.⁵⁹

Europe may have been freed of the spectre of the Nazis but the Free State was not to accept social liberation until long after May's death.

In an article about Arnold Bax, May described the greatest difficulty of musical criticism as being the ability to 'see a work of music through the eyes of its creator and not through the distorting mirror of one's own personal preoccupations or theories.'⁶⁰ This has been the fate of May in musicological writing to date. One could almost say that in the absence of an ideal Frederick May it was necessary for someone to invent him. Of course, May himself was not above a little myth making. A publicity piece in the *Irish Times* in November 1935, shortly before he was appointed music director at the Abbey, describing him as 'just returned' from Europe, carefully juxtaposes an impressive curriculum vitae of awards, prestigious teachers in London and the glamour of European travel before striking the necessary national note (possibly with the prize of the Abbey in mind) to conclude: 'Mr. May tells me he is going to remain in Dublin. He is deeply interested in folk music, especially Irish music, and has come back stimulated by his Viennese experiences, to steep

⁵⁹ 'Kay Kent talks to Frederick May.'

⁶⁰ Frederick May, 'The Late Sir Arnold Bax', *The Bell*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, (February, 1954): 37.

himself in the atmosphere of native music.’⁶¹ However, the reworking of May by journalists and the incorporation of this into musicological studies leaves May’s music in a position where it can be judged for failing to achieve something it never set out to achieve. The suppression of aspects of May’s life and character and the weight placed on artificial measures of Irishness in the haste to create a distinctively Irish strand of musicology can be seen ironically to maintain and support the repressive social and cultural order May was trapped by during his life. We risk being left with a rather pallid shadow-figure – unable to measure up to the modernism he once sought out, unable to marry the workings of serialism to a jig and a reel as an Irish composer must, drinking his way to failure – at which point how he could have inspired and ‘led the way’ for so many of his contemporaries becomes something of a mystery.

⁶¹ Kitty Clive, ‘Echoes of the Town’, *Irish Times*, 22 November, 1935. This interview was conceivably given just before May began work on his ‘internationalist’ quartet.