

2018

A belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition

Mark Fitzgerald

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



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

This Article 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 Articles 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 belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition

Mark Fitzgerald

To cite this article: Mark Fitzgerald (2018) A belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition, *Irish Studies Review*, 26:3, 347-360, DOI: [10.1080/09670882.2018.1474738](https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2018.1474738)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09670882.2018.1474738>



Published online: 18 May 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 329



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



A belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition

Mark Fitzgerald

DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

The chronic lack of investment in the capital needed to foster the development of music during the period of colonial governance in Ireland and the early years of the Free State, combined with Ireland's peripheral position in relation to the centres of musical modernism, resulted in composers in Ireland adopting modernist ideas at a very late stage, particularly in comparison with the chronology of Irish literary modernism. Previous literature on the subject of Irish musical modernism has frequently obscured any clear sense of the real extent of this delay through the conflation of the concept of "modernism" with styles that may have been perceived by Irish contemporaries as "modern" at a particular historical juncture. This essay surveys the work of the key figures of twentieth-century Irish composition, examining the degree to which they may or may not have been interested in or engaged by international ideas of modernism. It re-evaluates composers frequently regarded as modernist in the literature such as Frederick May, Brian Boydell and Seán Ó Riada; discusses the important of Seóirse Bodley's work from the 1960s; and posits the idea of an Irish avant-garde emerging in the 1970s. The essay concludes by noting the continued relevance of modernist ideas for a number of today's composers.

KEYWORDS

Irish composition; Frederick May; Brian Boydell; Aloys Fleischmann; Gerard Victory; Seán Ó Riada; Seóirse Bodley; Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music

The development of composition in Ireland has been more fragmented and complex than that of literature, and its adoption of modernist trends has taken place at a later chronological stage. This is a result not just of Ireland's peripheral position in relation to the centres of modernism in music, but also of a chronic lack of investment in the extensive capital needed to foster the development of music during the period of colonial governance in Ireland. The parlous finances of the country in the early years of the Free State were not favourable for investment in the arts, and the fact that there were no secure foundations for a musical infrastructure meant that music was at a considerable disadvantage in the new state. The lack of access to advanced musical education within Ireland greatly impeded the development of potential composers unless they were of a social class which could afford to travel abroad for education.¹

There was no permanent full-size professional orchestra in Ireland during this period, and while a number of short-lived ventures (such as the Dublin Orchestral Society, founded by

Michele Esposito in 1899) provided sporadic access to pieces from the core repertoire, the standard of performance was probably quite low. Hamilton Harty laconically noted of the Dublin Orchestral Society: “At Dublin I was admitted into the local orchestra as a violist, a very inferior violist, but the orchestra itself was not superlative”, while John Larchet recalled that many of the wind instruments were constructed at an older concert pitch which was approximately a semi-tone too high and that Esposito created an “astonishingly good ensemble from the most unpromising material”.² Rhoda Coghill noted of the later Dublin Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Colonel Fritz Brase:

I can hardly call myself a “Bass Player”, as I was self taught with a three-string instrument [...] Some time after I joined [the Dublin Philharmonic Society] I obtained the use of a four-string bass and a modern bow; and when Mr. Stott of the Halle Orchestra joined us for our final performances at our concerts, I had a few lessons from him, so that I was able to scrape away more confidently at the recitatives in the Choral Symphony, covered up by our two other amateur lady bass players and Mr. Stott.³

With the foundation of Radio Éireann there was a gradual move over two decades towards the formation of a permanent professional symphony orchestra, starting with just five string instruments and piano in 1926 and culminating in a formation of 62 players in 1948.⁴ While the orchestra did not reach anything approximating full-size until 1990, its impact on the development of composition, particularly from the 1940s onwards, was considerable. Unlike the speedier dissemination of literary works (even in the context of widespread censorship), this absence of infrastructure meant that new music travelled slowly. Although Esposito’s ensemble had programmed some recent music, including Debussy’s *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* (1894), performances of modern music in Ireland in the 1920s and 1930s were rare and as a result were often met with bewilderment by a critical establishment which frequently had very little musical experience or knowledge. Lack of expression, formal incoherence and unnecessary striving after new effects were recurring tropes in criticism of new and modernist music along with a strong suspicion of anything that smacked of intellectual engagement on the part of the composer. As late as 1937, the *Irish Times* critic could describe Stravinsky’s far from modernist *Trois Mouvements de Pétrouchka* (1911, arr. 1921) as being “in a language beyond ordinary human understanding”; *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) did not receive its first Irish performance until 1962.⁵ Whereas some of Stravinsky’s music eventually became a part of the regular repertoire in Ireland, the music of the Second Viennese School has fared less well – indeed, Alban Berg’s two operas *Wozzeck* (1925) and *Lulu* (1935) have yet to receive an Irish performance. This may at first seem something of an ancillary point but it was frequently the live performances of modernist works that provoked a shift in Irish composers’ approach to composition.

In such circumstances, it is not surprising that throughout the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century most musicians of any talent moved abroad due to the lack of opportunities in Ireland. Several of these musical emigrants played important roles in Britain. The two most prominent Irish composers at the time of independence, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924) and Hamilton Harty (1879–1941), each made an important contribution to Britain’s evolving musical infrastructure – the former as professor of music at the Royal College of Music, London and Cambridge; the latter as pianist and conductor of the Hallé Orchestra and the London Symphony Orchestra. However, both were also highly conservative in their musical outlook. It is not perhaps particularly surprising that a Victorian

establishment figure like Stanford would dismiss modern idioms in pseudo-psychological terms:

There is often, in these days of quick travelling, rapid action, and high pressure, a hankering after something to tickle jaded palates, and to astonish rather than to elevate taste. Anything which gives a shock is liable to appeal to this hysterical tendency. The music which ministers to this abnormal craving is doing infinite mischief to those who sit and listen to it, and the degradation of good clean art is certain to ensue.⁶

It is perhaps more surprising that Harty, born more than a quarter of a century later, would be similarly reactionary in outlook, rejecting Debussy as a “limited talent” and denouncing the works by composers such as Stravinsky or Scriabin in terms redolent of Stanford:

these works seem to be founded on something thoroughly unhealthy and decadent [...] Sensuality, hysteria, brutality, are qualities which cannot exist in great art, and I know of nothing really decadent which has lived in music.⁷

Harty was a frequent examiner of the composition competitions at the *Feis Ceoil* in Dublin and so his views on composition would have had a practical dissemination in Ireland. This is not, however, to argue that Ireland was completely lacking in musicians with an interest in current international trends. An interesting figure from this period is Rhoda Coghill (1903–2000) who was later to become *repetiteur* at Radio Éireann. In 1923 she composed *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* for tenor, chorus and orchestra, to a text by Walt Whitman. Harmonically adventurous in comparison with other Irish work of its time, it was influenced by her own experience of performing music by Debussy and Scriabin. She also later recalled that she had studied some of Stravinsky’s orchestral scores though she had not had the opportunity to hear any of the music performed.⁸ While not without flaws the work is notable for passages of harmonic ambiguity, particularly in its unresolved ending. However, it was not until 1939 that a performance with reduced orchestra and solo singers was given by Radio Éireann, and astonishingly not until 1990 that a performance of the score as intended was given. Coghill composed very little after this and she became an overlooked figure in the history of modern Irish music.⁹

The first Irish modernists?

It is typical of revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods that there is debate regarding the path that the arts should take, and music in the Irish Free State during the 1920s and 1930s was no different. Inevitably some of this debate focussed on the issue of national identity and the question of whether a national music should adopt some sonic image of essentialised Irishness or whether Irish identity was compatible with an international outlook.¹⁰ At a time when there was an emphasis on national identification it is also easy to see how some could perceive classical composition as non-national due to the ways in which access to advanced music education had been limited by class, wealth and (in fact or by implication) religion. Such debates have persevered within the world of Irish music criticism and musicology for an unusually long period. What is more surprising is the bald dichotomy between classical and traditional music that tends to be used. A notable example was an article by Denis Donohue from 1955 in which he argued that there was no Irish composer “whose works an intelligent European musician must know” and that the reason for this was the influence of traditional music, or as he more colourfully phrased it “the trap of folk music”.¹¹ An irony not lost on composers such as Frederick May (1911–1985) was that

Donohue's proposed solution to the "problem" was to invite a composer such as Vaughan Williams to live in Ireland to encourage the natives, presumably without considering the enormous influence the "folk trap" had had on Vaughan Williams's own music. Despite this, the idea of the pernicious influence of traditional music was to become a recurring trope. In the gap created by a lack of critical musicological commentary, composer Brian Boydell (1917–2000) created a narrative of the development of composition in Ireland, retrospectively placing himself at the vanguard of Irish modernity. For Boydell, who self-identified as Anglo-Irish, the advent of modernity was as much, if not more, to do with a rejection of the influence of traditional music as it was with the use of any modernist techniques.¹² He described Fredrick May as the composer who "led the way" in this turn away from a stylistic misalliance which he traced back to Stanford, and added:

I suppose I can say I was the next one, following along with Freddie May to make music an international language but reflecting our own viewpoint, our own ideas. You didn't eschew the national outlook, but you wrote in a language which was universal. Also Aloys Fleischmann, although he was tottering on the brink for some time [...] but Freddie and I dragged him into our camp!¹³

This idea was developed further in the work of Joseph Ryan who grouped May, Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann (1910–1992) together as a "progressive school" to whose works he frequently applied the descriptor "modernist" – an opinion argued more emphatically by Philip Graydon who described the same composers as the first Irish modernists.¹⁴ The equation of these figures to leading composers from the continental mainstream helped legitimise Irish music as a topic worthy of research but the underlying resentment that there is no early twentieth-century figure to pit directly against Yeats or Joyce led to the construction of a narrative of failure.¹⁵ More problematically, the types of comparisons made by Ryan and Graydon between these three composers and their European contemporaries are in many respects quite unrealistic and this makes it easy to dismiss the claims entirely as farfetched.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly in this context, Joe Cleary in his overview of Irish modernism, ducking the challenges posed by the lack of a reliable critical literature on musical modernism, refers to the existence of May, Boydell and Fleischmann as "the most talented Irish-based exponents of Irish modernist art music" before discussing in more detail the American composer Henry Cowell whose father was an Irish immigrant.¹⁷

A closer examination of the work of these three composers reveals the misleading nature of their critical construction as a coherent Irish modernist movement in music. While their lives did overlap to an extent, and while they each played different roles in the construction of an infrastructure for music in Ireland, there are many fundamental differences in their approaches. Even their compositional careers do not overlap: Boydell, for example, only launched his career as a composer in 1944, whereas May had essentially ceased to compose two years earlier. More fundamentally, it also raises the question of what exactly is meant by "modernism" in Irish music, and how such a designation relates to the root from which it derives but with which it maintains such a problematic relationship: the "modern".¹⁸ Much of the literature to date has applied the term merely because the music may have seemed modern in the Ireland of the 1930s or 1940s even though aesthetically it does not in any way conform to or align with the radical rethinking of form and content which is an essential component of the international modernist movement. A similar issue informs studies of modernity in British music. Traditionally Britain was seen as a country which eschewed modernism in music until the emergence of the "Manchester School" of Alexander Goehr, Harrison

Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies in the 1950s.¹⁹ However, recent studies have broadened the meaning of modernism to encompass a more general reaction against the conventions of the Victorian age either via an openness to continental influence or through the use of folksong, popular music or parody as material for compositions.²⁰ To use a specific example, Vaughan Williams's *Fourth Symphony* (1935) is frequently cited as an example of English modernism. Yet despite the surface chromaticism and dissonance, at no point in the piece is the underlying tonality of the work in doubt and formally the work is indebted to nineteenth-century precedent (most notably in the elision of the third and fourth movements closely modelled on the example of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*).²¹

It is questionable whether two of the three so-called Irish modernists had any real interest in modernism at all. Aloys Fleischmann travelled to Germany in 1932 hoping to study with Hans Pfitzner, probably best known today for his stridently anti-modernist writings.²² Fleischmann's *Piano Quartet* (1938) demonstrates his engagement with a late romantic language and approach to cyclic form inherited from Franz Liszt, César Franck and Richard Strauss. While the somewhat over-loaded textures of this work were to be stripped back in later compositions such as the *Sinfonia Votiva*, Fleischmann's work remained traditional in its outlook, his lack of sympathy with the European avant-garde indicated by his composition of a satirical piece for pianist-actor entitled *Le Balai de Plume* in which he parodies the avant-garde, using quotations from Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke II*.²³

Boydell's interest in modernity, beyond the idea of eschewing the influence of traditional music, was limited. On the one hand he declared an interest in surrealism and took lessons in painting from Manie Jellett; he also exhibited some paintings with the White Stag group, wrote a surreal puppet play and set some of Thurloe Connolly's vaguely surreal texts in his early song cycle *The Feather of Death* (1943).²⁴ It is difficult to gauge how seriously he actually took these endeavours, however. A favourite parlour game was creating what he called "surrealoids" (short meaningless verses) which were "to be read with great importance and solemnity".²⁵ He described how his first "shocking" piece of music was composed "with my tongue in my cheek" after he had heard a recording of Soviet composer Mosolov's *Zavod*, adding "I remember talking about this with some of my friends and saying how easy it is to write this sort of thing".²⁶ He recalled finding a performance of Webern's *Drei kleine Stücke* op. 11 "rather funny actually, because of the whole set-up; they were so earnest", before adding: "I never really took to Schoenberg or Webern".²⁷ His early compositions in fact stem directly from the English pastoral school and he later aligned himself with 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. An interest in octotonic writing (music based on a scale of alternating tones and semitones) was inspired by performances in Dublin by the French conductor Jean Martinon of two early pieces by Olivier Messiaen – *Les Offrandes Oubliées* (1930) and *L'Ascension* (1932–3) – in 1948 and 1949. Even his application of this was far from rigorous, however, with Gareth Cox perhaps charitably suggesting that Boydell's "antipathy toward the Schoenberg school and any "systems" explains his rather anarchic treatment of the scale".²⁸ Once Boydell had forged his style by the early 1950s, it remained unchanged and he remained an outspoken opponent of the European avant-garde as public speaker and as a lecturer in Trinity College.²⁹

Although the extent of his commitment to a modernist aesthetic has been likewise overstated, Frederick May stands somewhat apart from the other members of this triumvirate.

Unlike Boydell, he was open to modernist ideas and having spent some time in Vienna studying with Egon Wellesz, he later contacted Alban Berg, mainly, it would seem, on the basis of some knowledge of his *Wozzeck*. He counted Peter Stadlen (who premiered Anton Webern's *Variationen* op. 27) among his friends, and one of his larger works sets a text by Ernst Toller. However, he later admitted that he did not understand the aesthetic espoused by the Viennese composers and his comments in interviews indicate a hazy grasp of the details of their technical approach.

May's *String Quartet* (1936) has always been seen as a key work in any history of musical modernism in Ireland, a piece which particularly in its first two movements, experiments with a tauter, more chromatic language than one finds in most of his later output. While one cannot overlook the indebtedness to the English pastoral tradition and the more chromatic music his principal composition teacher Vaughan Williams was producing in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it may be regarded as the highpoint of May's creative engagement with modernity. The *String Quartet* was not premiered until 1948 when it was performed at the Wigmore Hall, London, followed by a further performance in Dublin the following year. This delay and the savage reviews it received indicate the lack of informed reception for a work with even mildly modernist tendencies, while from a purely practical standpoint the performers were all English as there was no quartet of sufficient standard in Ireland at the time to take the work into its repertoire.³⁰ Later works by May, such as *Spring Nocturne* are more overtly indebted to conservative English models (in this case the elegies of George Butterworth) but even these compositions had a problematic reception in Ireland, with conductor Eimear Ó Broin recalling a performance of *Spring Nocturne* being greeted by a bewildered audience with "inward laughing and embarrassed applause".³¹

To describe these composers as modernist, therefore, one needs to define modernism as a general openness to ideas from international figures of previous (rather than current) generations. Another key issue in assessing the work from this period is that while some Irish composers had an impressive technical facility many others were partially if not fully self-taught and as a result their work suffered from technical problems, in particular with structure. While Boydell, for example, clearly wished to write in a traditional late nineteenth-century developmental style (he confided to Aloys Fleischmann that he considered his music to be "central European"), technically he found it difficult to move convincingly from one idea to the next, and one frequently finds static repetition of motives instead of any real development.³² Composers such as James Wilson (1922–2005), Gerard Victory (1921–95) and John Kinsella (b. 1932) were largely if not entirely self-taught. Additionally, in the first half of the century in particular, the crucial learning aspect of hearing one's work in performance was frequently absent and if there was a performance it may not have been given by the forces for which the work was intended or of a high enough standard of execution to enable a composer to identify the structural problems in the work.

This issue becomes more acute with the work of Séan Ó Riada (1931–71). Despite claims that he studied composition with Aloys Fleischmann's father (also named Aloys), it is clear that he merely took a standard undergraduate BMus degree.³³ Stories about visits to Paris and meetings, even lessons, with various prominent figures were carefully propagated by Ó Riada but none, apparently, were true. The piece on which much of his reputation as a composer is based, *Nomos 1: Hercules Dux Ferrariae* illustrates the fundamental problems with Ó Riada's classical work. In eight short movements, the work contains an array of different ideas, several of them very striking, but it becomes clear that Ó Riada lacked the

technique to do anything substantial with any of them and so each is quickly dropped. The experience of listening to *Nomos 1* is akin to listening to the work of a student who has creative potential but has yet to obtain the technical facility necessary to create a convincing large-scale piece. This becomes an even more pressing concern in *Nomos 2* where the composer stretches his material (particularly in the final movement) much further than it can actually go before ending the work with an almost comically bathetic chorus of dominant-tonic progressions. Ó Riada depicted himself as the first Irish composer to utilise Schoenberg's serial technique in his works; in reality there is no evidence in his work of any understanding of the technique, and several of his so-called "serial" works merely contain sections in which the orchestra dutifully plods through the twelve notes of the chromatic scale unharmonised and in a uniform rhythm.³⁴

The emergence of these works coincided with a period when the main critical voice of the time, *Irish Times* music critic Charles Acton (1914–1999), shifted his position from being completely disparaging of modernity and serialism to being a firm advocate. In 1956 he could dismiss Frederick May's *Quartet* and *Songs from Prison* as belonging to "the decaying jungle of dying Vienna that he explored in his dark nightmare", and serial composition as "musically barren".³⁵ By 1961, however, he was ready to take the opposite viewpoint, declaring:

Every listener, who is unwilling to admit to fossilisation, must come to some sort of terms with atonal serialism ... It was all very well a quarter of a century ago for us to regard 12-note music as a passing eccentricity and to denounce it as fundamentally contrary to the laws of physics and physiology. To maintain that attitude now is an indication either of arrested development or premature senescence.³⁶

That Acton's grasp of serialism was hazy is indicated not just by his bizarre declaration that the technique had been used by Vaughan Williams but also by the fact that he was easily taken in by composers' extravagant claims for their work. When A.J. Potter (1918–80) mischievously told him that his tonal set of variations on *The Wild Colonial Boy* was serial Acton dutifully repeated this as fact in a number of articles.³⁷ He was also convinced that Ó Riada's *Nomoi* were serial and hailed them repeatedly as particularly successful serial works – "memorable, moving, attractive and full of character, which is more than can be said for most international serialism" – while of *Nomos 4* he noted:

Unlike so many serialist works, this fourth *Nomos* is abundantly interesting. There is no sense of aridity, of "formalism" or even of cleverness. And while it is an absorbing essay in strange timbres these are obviously inherent necessities of the music and not just superficial ingenuities ... [He] has created about the best work we have had from an Irish pen.³⁸

The nomination of Ó Riada as the leading composer – in some accounts, the *only* composer – who might stand comparison with international figures due to his supposed fluency in modernist techniques is clearly problematic, overlooking as it does the basic flaws in Ó Riada's compositional technique. It seems that this re-positioning of Ó Riada, however, combined with the popular success he achieved with his film music, may have been one of the things which persuaded other composers in the 1960s of the necessity of being seen to use serial techniques, even when they had no innate sympathy for atonal, let alone serial, writing.³⁹ Indeed, most composers active in the 1960s and 1970s including Gerard Victory, A.J. Potter, James Wilson and John Kinsella dabbled to some degree with 12-note pitch collections, sometimes as the basis of serial writing and sometimes as the basis of simpler variation and motivic techniques. As Gareth Cox has noted in his study of Irish serialism, however,

these composers rarely move beyond “mere dutiful experimentation”.⁴⁰ Composer Jane O’Leary (b. 1946) arrived in Ireland in 1972 from the United States, where she had studied with Milton Babbitt, and her description of the Irish scene illustrates how, apart from individual instances, little had changed. Noting that she was initially shocked to find how few people really knew about serialism she adds:

On enquiry, I realised that Ireland had completely skipped over twelve-tone music. Frederick May was the only one who was receptive [...] he was also dismissed by the Irish public as being not really significant at that time, and they didn’t play his music. If there was any hint of academic rigour or delving into the music seriously, it was dismissed. It wasn’t Irish.⁴¹

In any event, while a basic use of twelve note pitch collections might have been the epitome of modernity in Ireland, in Europe and America things had moved in radically different directions.

Darmstadt

The one composer who stands out for initially embracing not just the pre-war serial techniques of Schoenberg but also the integral serialism of the post-war avant-garde is Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933). Bodley later recalled that one of the things which aroused his interest in modernism was the visit to Dublin of conductor Winfried Zillig in 1953 when, among other activities, he conducted the Irish premiere of Berg’s *Drei Bruchstücke aus Wozzeck*.⁴² However, it was not until 1962 when he was awarded a Macauley Fellowship that he began to explore modernism in detail, travelling first to see *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* in London and then between 1963 and 1965 to the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt where he was able to attend lectures given by figures such as Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen and György Ligeti.⁴³

Although the effect on Bodley’s music was in some ways the characteristic experience of the composer from a peripheral area encountering the avant-garde, the speed with which he moved through different techniques from one composition to the next is perhaps more unusual. The *Chamber Symphony* of 1964 still mixes serial writing with freer sections and the influence of the neo-classical Stravinsky is very audible. His dramatic Yeats song cycle *Never to Have Lived is Best* from 1965 was followed by a break of some months while Bodley studied new techniques in more detail before composing *Configurations* in 1967. This piece, for a spatially organised orchestra, utilises integral serialism (or the application of serial procedures to all parameters of the composition) inspired in particular by Stockhausen’s *Gruppen für drei Orchester* (1956). It was followed by the *String Quartet no 1* (1968) and *Ariel’s Songs* (1969) in which very limited aleatoric (chance) elements are introduced alongside integral serialism, and *Meditations on Lines from Patrick Kavanagh* (1971) in which Bodley felt he had fully assimilated the techniques and ideas he had absorbed into his own language.

Bodley’s compositions from this period demonstrate a creative ambition and a fluency of technique but one could also argue that group composition, integral serialism and aleatoricism were the innovations of the 1950s rather than the late 1960s and thus Ireland was only beginning to experience these ideas as they were being abandoned elsewhere. Perhaps conscious of this issue, but also concerned with some of the challenges of construction posed by his use of integral serialism, Bodley began rapidly to move away from modernism in the early 1970s.⁴⁴ Initially he was attempting to counter or disrupt the regularity of the irregularity inherent in his serial music. A key influence was the collage-style works of Bernd

Alois Zimmermann, a composer who stood somewhat apart from the Darmstadt avant-garde movement. In particular, his *Monologue* for two pianos (1963–64) which collides quotations of Bach and others against highly dissonant material provided the concept for Bodley's first work in this new style. *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1972) for two pianos juxtaposes atonal blocks of material against passages in a stylised *sean nós* style (literally *old-style* but used to describe unaccompanied vocal music in the Irish language). However, the radical implications of this colliding of two different musical styles against each other were set aside as Bodley rejected modernism in favour of a neo-romantic tonal language inflected with Irish traditional music and it was not until the late 1990s that he returned to a more atonal language.

An Irish avant-garde

The *Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music* which was first held in 1969 played an important role in the stylistic development of a generation of composers in the 1970s and 1980s, giving Irish composers the opportunity to hear the latest international works performed by specialist performers.⁴⁵ Due to changes in education and the increased availability of funding, this period also saw an increase in young composers travelling abroad to further their musical education; several, in fact, studied for periods with key figures from the era of high modernism. For example, Raymond Deane (b. 1953) travelled to the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* in Darmstadt in 1969 when he was aged sixteen, and Gerald Barry (b. 1952) studied first with Boulez pupil Peter Schat before moving to Cologne to study with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Mauricio Kagel. Crucially this generation of composers was no longer in the position of scrambling to catch up with the achievements of a previous generation of international composers. As a consequence, the anxieties regarding serialism which had characterised the more recent work of the older generation of composers were for them irrelevant. Having experienced the avant-garde at first hand they also felt free to question many of the assumptions which had underpinned the post-war modernist movement.

Raymond Deane, for example, was attracted certainly to the sound-world and intellectual rigour of the European avant-garde; however, he reacted against the purity of language which had been a feature of one strand of modernism, and rejected the idea of a simple dualistic opposition of tonality and atonality. Minimalism suggested another possible pathway but he wanted to avoid the flat undifferentiated surface without perspective and find a way to reactivate a dialectical drama within music without recourse to the nostalgia of a neo-romantic language. His earliest surviving compositions from the 1970s reflect the experience of encountering such pieces as Berio's *Sequenza VII* (1969) or Terry Riley's *In C* (1964) at Darmstadt. Short and highly concentrated works such as *Idols* or *Embers* signalled a shift in Irish music to a different type of radical art that clearly influenced a number of other young composers.

A different approach is found in the work of Gerald Barry whom Deane has described as completely untouched by the nineteenth century and its aesthetic.⁴⁶ The language used is not radical but the objectivity with which it is manipulated, the pressure it is put under and the by-passing of traditional form and expressivity that one finds in Barry's work from the 1970s and 1980s, give the work a critical resistance which one associates with modernist movements. The extent to which these and later composers can be allied to an aesthetic of modernism as opposed to, say, postmodernism is in many ways one of semantics, as

increasingly musicological work posits the postmodern as a transformed modernism or even a self-reflective strand of modernism. For example, although Kevin Volans' (b. 1949) music has frequently been aligned to postmodernism or minimalism or what is sometimes referred to as "the new simplicity", he has described himself as a "committed modernist"; and if one was to take Julian Johnson's categories of two strands of twentieth-century modernism – radical particularity and radical abstraction – one could isolate pieces by Volans which would fit both the first category (the early string quartets) and the second (the *Sixth Quartet* or pieces such as *Viola and Piano*).⁴⁷

The demise of the *Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music* was a severe blow to the developing contemporary classical music scene and it was only with the foundation of the Crash Ensemble in 1997 by Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970) that the scene received a comparable impact from any single entity. Crash soon spearheaded a shift in the orientation of much Irish composition with young composers looking increasingly to the United States instead of Europe for ideas. Despite this trend, the late engagement in Ireland with post-nineteenth-century ideas has resulted in a music scene that is still unusually diverse at a time when many other countries have suffered from a homogenisation of approach. Non-western musics, electronic music and popular music which had had little or no influence on composition in the earlier decades of the twentieth century have had an increased presence in more recent years. Modernist ideas are still the basis of the work of many composers; for some composers such as Gráinne Mulvey (b. 1966) or Ann Cleare (b. 1983) these form part of a radical aesthetic, while for others they are utilised in a more historicist manner. There are also those who harbour anti-modernist and neo-Romantic aesthetics which rather than offering a critique of society provide what could be seen in modernist terms as either a compromised art or just a degree of escapism. A wittily creative response to the historical absence of modernism in Ireland can be heard in the *Aisteach* project (2014) curated by composer Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974) in which she and a number of other composers and writers created a fake musical history complete with compositions which can be heard at the *Aisteach* website.⁴⁸

This late engagement with modernism has created an anomalous situation not just in relation to accounts of modernism in Western music but also in relation to the standard narrative of Irish – predominantly literary – modernism. However, as Benjamin Dwyer has noted, the emergence of a radical group of composers in the 1970s can be contrasted with the retrenchment generally found in literature, where the experimentation of Joyce or Beckett has in the main been rejected in favour of

an often brilliantly wrought realism firmly connected to a circumscribed Irish locus and cultural consciousness [...] far removed from the multiplicity, eclecticism and complexity of contemporary globalised Ireland [but] highly amenable to commercial markets.⁴⁹

Perhaps a new history of Irish modernism will be constructed around an examination of how modernism, abandoned by practitioners in literature, migrated instead at a later junction to other art forms.

Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of these issues see Dwyer, *Different Voices*, 32–58.
2. C., "Hamilton Harty" (227), and John Larchet, "Michele Esposito" (430–1) in Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*.

3. Ryan, "Nationalism and Music in Ireland", 386.
4. For more on the early development and expansion of the orchestra see Kehoe, "The Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra".
5. "Peter Stadlen at RDS Ballsbridge", *Irish Times* (23 November 1937).
6. Stanford, "Sanity and Insanity", 78–9.
7. Harty, "Modern Composers and Modern Composition", 330.
8. In fact, it seems that at this point she had never actually heard an orchestra perform live. See Klein, *Die Musik Irlands*, 184.
9. For more on Rhoda Coghill see Watson, "Epitaph for a Musician".
10. One can see similar debates regarding national versus international with the complication of class considerations in 1920s Russia. See for example Frolova-Walker, *Music and Soviet Power, 1917–1932*.
11. Donohue, "The Future of Irish Music", 109–14.
12. For example in 1966, commenting on his commission to write a piece to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising, Boydell described it as "a tremendous sign of the coming maturity in the country that an Anglo-Irishman should be invited to do this, rather than someone who was known to be, shall we say, an ardent Gael". *RTV Guide*, 8 April 1966.
13. Dungan, "Team Games", 11. For a more accurate account of Fleischmann's views see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*. May's views on traditional music are examined in Fitzgerald, "Retrieving the Real Frederick May".
14. Ryan, "Nationalism and Music in Ireland" (1999), and Graydon, "Modernism in Ireland" (2003). Works by Axel Klein tend to be more generous in the attributing of modernity to any figure writing music which does not reference traditional music in the twentieth century. See for example Klein, "No State for Music". Brian Cass in his essay to accompany the Irish Museum of Modern Arts exhibition "The Moderns" reflects the arguments of these writers. See Cass, "Modern Music in Ireland".
15. See for example the concluding chapter of White's *The Keeper's Recital*.
16. See for example Ryan's assertion of stylistic equivalence between May's *Scherzo* and the work of Mahler or the *String Quartet* and the music of the Second Viennese School. Ryan, "Nationalism and Music in Ireland", 405–12. Ryan's contextual argument that nationalism had a stifling effect on music in Ireland is similarly problematic and lacking in empirical evidence. His argument also entails considerable misrepresentation of May and Fleischmann. For more on the problematic elements of Ryan's work see Ó Ciosáin, "Missing Pieces" and Ó Seaghdha, "Reframing the history of Classical Music in Ireland".
17. Cleary, *Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, 5–6. It is notable however that in the chronology that prefaces the volume, the only musical works mentioned are Seán Ó Riada's *Nomos 2* and his score for the film *Mise Éire*. It also notes the foundation of the Music Association of Ireland in 1948, an organisation which played a fundamental role in the establishment of an infrastructure for music in Ireland.
18. For this essay, I define twentieth-century modernism as the radical aesthetic of language and form typified by composers such as Schoenberg and Stravinsky at the beginning of the century, with a second wave of post-war modernism associated with the European avant-garde, American experimental composers and early minimalism prior to its divergence into a neo-romantic style.
19. For an account of the emergence of these composers which also considers such concepts as national music, British modernism and the idea of a time-lag in the transference of aesthetic ideas from mainland Europe see Rupprecht, *British Musical Modernism*.
20. See for example Riley, *British Musical Modernism*.
21. For contrasting views of this work as parody with un-modernist features, aggressively modernistic or as an example of Anglo-Sibelian symphonic modernism see, respectively, Harper Scott "Vaughan Williams's antic symphony", 175–196; Frogley, "Constructing Englishness in music", 1–22; and Horton, "The later symphonies", 199–227. May's *String Quartet* poses similar questions due to its combination of surface dissonance and formal innovation with a more traditional and English influenced pastoralism.



22. The most notable of these are Pfitzner, *Futuristengefahr: Bei Gelegeheit von Busonis Ästhetik* and Pfitzner, *Die neue Aesthetik, der musikalischen Impotenz, Ein Verwesungssymptom?* In the latter modernism is denounced as international, the artistic equivalent of Bolshevism, Jewish and impotent.
23. A full description of the work is given in de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 132.
24. Klein notes that Boydell abandoned art when he realised “he would never quite achieve enough facility in draughtsmanship”. Klein, “Brian Boydell: of man and music”, 4–5. For contemporary critical reaction to his play see “Play for puppets”, *Irish Times*, 16 November 1944, and D.S. “Puppet show at the Peacock”, *Irish Independent*, 16 November 1944.
25. Pine, *Charles: The Life and World of Charles Acton*, 189.
26. Taylor, “An interview with Brian Boydell”, 78. *Zavod* (Music of Machines / Iron Foundry) is one of a number of pieces from the early years of the twentieth century that imitates to some degree sounds associated with the industrial world.
27. Taylor, “An interview with Brian Boydell”, 71.
28. Cox, “Octatonicism in the String Quartets of Brian Boydell”, 266. Boydell also took some composition lessons from Martinon at this time.
29. Raymond Deane recalls a lecture on modern music given by Boydell ca. 1969–70 in which he “posited Sibelius and Bartok as the greatest modern composers, before pooh-pooing the “artificiality” of Schoenberg’s techniques and playing an extract from Stockhausen’s *Song of the Youths* which, he declared derisively, was invalidated by the fact that it reminded “one” of digestive noises”. Deane, *In My Own Light*, 140.
30. For the contemporary critical response see for example B, “Composer attends R.D.S. recital”, *Irish Times*, 25 January 1949.
31. Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 91. Pine incorrectly states that this performance was part of a concert under Adrian Boult on 26 April 1942. Bowles conducted *Spring Nocturne* in concerts on 27 November 1941 and 29 October 1944. See Kehoe, “The evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra”, Appendix A.
32. For Boydell’s letter to Fleischmann see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 99.
33. Fleischmann in a letter to Acton, 28 February 1973 states “He never studied harmony with my father, and never had any coaching in composition, other than what he did for the B Mus course”. Charles Acton Archive, National Library of Ireland, Acc 6797. Acton, clearly not understanding the difference between an undergraduate techniques class and composition tuition, dismissed Fleischmann’s clarification.
34. See for example the opening of *Nomos 2* or the central section of *Seoladh na nGamhan*.
35. Charles Acton, “New work performed at Winter Prom in Gaiety Theatre”, *Irish Times*, 23 January 1956 and “R.E. Orchestra at Phoenix Hall”, *Irish Times*, 4 July 1956.
36. Charles Acton, “New notes for old”, *Irish Times*, 22 November 1961.
37. See for example Charles Acton, “New notes for old”, and “Music Makers”, *Irish Times*, 2 July 1960. For more on Potter’s limited experimentation with twelve-note collections see Zuk, “The “serial” works of A.J. Potter”.
38. Charles Acton, “Prom concert at the Gaiety Theatre”, *Irish Times*, 2 November 1959. It is interesting that “cleverness” is still singled out as an undesirable feature of music.
39. Discussion of Ó Riada’s music for *Mise Éire* falls outside the remit of an essay on modernism as it consists of arrangements for orchestra in an idiom derived from nineteenth-century romantic music and thus is more closely aligned to the music of a figure such as Stanford than anything from the twentieth century.
40. Cox, “The Bar of Legitimacy?”, 201. Victory also made a tentative approach to integral serialism in his *Cinque Correlazioni* (1966) in which the number 5 controls elements of pitch, duration and dynamics (*ibid.*, 196–7).
41. Dwyer, *Different Voices*, 121. O’Leary founded the contemporary music ensemble Concorde in 1976 to tackle the deficit in the performance of new music in Ireland.
42. *Ibid.*, 84.
43. Cox, *Seóirse Bodley*, 38.

44. See for example Byrne Bodley, "A Hazardous Melody", xiii, where she notes that Bodley rejected modernism having concluded that the compositional methods he had been utilising "did not satisfy the development of [his] artistic ideas".
45. The festival was biannual from 1970 until its demise in 1986. Featured composers included Peter Maxwell Davies, Witold Lutosławski, Elliott Carter, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Mauricio Kagel.
46. Deane, "Exploding the continuum".
47. Johnson, "Return of the Repressed", 46–50. For Volans's own comments see Volans, "Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments etc", 5. For an Adornian evaluation of modernism in the work of Deane, Barry and Volans see Smith, "The Preservation of Subjectivity through Form".
48. See <http://www.aisteach.org>.
49. Dwyer, *Different Voices*, 73.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Bibliography

- Byrne Bodley, Lorraine (ed.). *A Hazardous Melody of Being: Seóirse Bodley's Song Cycles on the Poems of Micheal O'Siadhail*. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2008.
- de Barra, Séamas. *Aloys Fleischmann*. Dublin: Field Day, 2006.
- C. "Hamilton Harty." *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 61, no. 926 (1 April 1920): 227–230.
- Cass, Brian. "Modern Music in Ireland." In *The Moderns*, edited by Enrique Juncosa and Christina Kennedy, 551–559. Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2011.
- Cleary, Joe. "Introduction." In *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Modernism*, edited by Joe Cleary, 1–18. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Cox, Gareth. "Octatonicism in the String Quartets of Brian Boydell." In *Irish Musical Studies 4: The Maynooth International Musicological Conference: Selected Proceedings Part One*, edited by Patrick F Devine and Harry White, 263–270. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996.
- Cox, Gareth. "The Bar of Legitimacy? Serialism in Ireland." In *Irish Musical Studies 11: Irish Music Analysis*, edited by Gareth Cox and Julian Horton, 187–201. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014.
- Cox, Gareth. *Seóirse Bodley*. Dublin: Field Day, 2010.
- Deane, Raymond. *In my Own Light*. Dublin: Liffey Press, 2014.
- Deane, Raymond. "Exploding the Continuum – The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition." *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate* (Special Issue: Culture in the Republic, Part 2) 4, no. 4 (2005): 100–115.
- Donohue, Denis. "The Future of Irish Music." *Studies* 44 (1955): 109–114.
- Dungan, Michael. "Everything except Team Games and Horse-racing." *New Music News* (February 1997): 9–11.
- Dwyer, Benjamin. *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland*. Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014.
- Fitzgerald, Mark. "Retrieving the Real Frederick May" (forthcoming).
- Fleischmann, Aloys. Letter to Charles Acton, 28 February 1973. Charles Acton Archive, National Library of Ireland, Acc 6797.
- Frogley, Alain. "Constructing Englishness in Music: National Character and the Reception of Ralph Vaughan Williams." In *Vaughan Williams Studies*, edited by Alain Frogley, 1–22. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Frolova-Walker, Marina. *Music and Soviet Power 1917–1932*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2012.
- Graydon, Philip. "Modernism in Ireland and its Cultural Context in the Music of Frederick May, Brian Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann." MA diss., Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 1999.
- Graydon, Philip. "Modernism in Ireland and its Cultural Context in the Music of Frederick May, Brian Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann." In *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Gareth Cox and Axel Klein, 56–79. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003.

- Harper Scott, J. P. E. "Vaughan Williams's Antic Symphony." In *British Musical Modernism*, edited by Matthew Riley, 175–196. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- Harty, Hamilton. "Modern Composers and Modern Composition." *The Musical Times* 65 no. 974 (1 April 1924): 328–332.
- Horton, Julian. "The Later Symphonies." In *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, edited by Alain Frogley and Aidan J Thomson, 199–228. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Johnson, Julian. "Return of the Repressed: Particularity in Early and Late Modernism." In *Transformations of Musical Modernism*, edited by Erling G Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson, 36–52. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Kehoe, Patrick Joseph. *The Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra 1926–1954*. PhD Diss. Dublin: DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, 2017.
- Klein, Axel. *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1996.
- Klein, Axel. "No State for Music." In *The Invisible Art: A Century of Music in Ireland 1916–2016*, edited by Michael Dervan, 47–68. Dublin: New Island, 2016.
- Klein, Axel. "Brian Boydell: of Man and Music." In *The Life and Music of Brian Boydell*, edited by Gareth Cox, Axel Klein and Michael Taylor, 1–24. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004.
- Ó Ciosáin, Niall. "Missing Pieces." *The Journal of Music*. Accessed July 23, 2017. <http://www.journalofmusic.com/focus/missing-pieces>
- Ó Seaghdha, Barra. *Reframing the History of Classical Music in Ireland 1820–1920*. PhD diss. Dublin: Dublin City University, 2017.
- Pfütznner, Hans. *Futuristengefahr: Bei Gelegenheit von Busonis Ästhetik*. Munich: Verlag der Süddeutschen Monatshefte, 1917.
- Pfütznner, Hans. *Die neue Aesthetik, der musikalischen Impotenz, Ein Verwesungssymptom?*. Munich: Verlag der Süddeutschen Monatshefte, 1920.
- Pine, Richard. *Charles: The Life and World of Charles Acton*. Dublin: Lilliput, 2010.
- Pine, Richard. *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland since 1926*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005.
- Riley, Matthew (ed.). *British Musical Modernism 1895–1960*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010.
- Rupprecht, Philip. *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Ryan, Joseph. *Nationalism and Music in Ireland*. PhD diss. Maynooth: National University of Ireland, 1992.
- Smith, Adrian. *The Preservation of Subjectivity through Form: The Radical Restructuring of Disintegrated Material in the Music of Gerald Barry, Kevin Volans and Raymond Deane*. PhD diss. Dublin: DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, 2014.
- Stanford, Sir Charles Villiers. "Sanity and Insanity in Modern Musical Composition." *Musical Herald* (1 March 1917): 78–79.
- Taylor, Michael. "An Interview with Brian Boydell." In *The Life and Music of Brian Boydell*, edited by Gareth Cox, Axel Klein and Michael Taylor, 63–95. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2004.
- Volans, Kevin. "Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments etc." Notes for Compact Disc Chandos CHAN 9563, 1999.
- Watson, Laura. "Epitaph for a Musician: Rhoda Coghill as pianist, composer and poet." *Journal of the Society of Musicology in Ireland* 11 (2015–16).
- White, Harry. *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1998.
- Zuk, Patrick. "The 'serial' works of A.J. Potter." In *Irish Musical Studies 11: Irish Music Analysis*, edited by Gareth Cox and Julian Horton, 202–222. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014.