

MICHAEL MURPHY AND JAN SMACZNY (EDS.), *MUSIC IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRELAND* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), ISBN 978-1-84682-024-3, 336pp, €55

Let me start by declaring my colours. I come to this volume as a scholar of British music history, and one who has been occasionally puzzled by the lukewarm interest shown by musicologists in the relationships between Irish and British musical affairs in the Victorian period, despite the immediacy of cultural matters relating to Ireland (particularly Dublin) and its people in just about any London newspaper of the time, and the historical reality of a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland after the Act of Union of 1800. This blind spot appears particularly to affect specialists in British musical life, especially those from British backgrounds (some perhaps carrying pre-conceptions about the shape and identity of Britain and Ireland that have been forged in more recent times), Stanford biographers and a few others excepted. Our Irish counterparts, and probably most of the readers of this journal, on the other hand, seem far more willing to reach out and make connections, as has been demonstrated by the growing presence of speakers on Irish topics at the biennial Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain conference—usually scholars hailing from or working in Ireland.

The roll-call of authors in Michael Murphy's and Jan Smaczny's edited volume of fifteen essays on music in nineteenth-century Ireland bears out these observations, with all but one, to my knowledge, having strong connections with Ireland, and a few teasing out relationships between the two cultures in their contributions. There is discussion, for example, of the social and musical modelling of the Dublin Society of Antient Concerts on the London Concerts of Antient Music (by Paul Rodmell); of the ways in which mid-century English painters depicted Irish rural music-making in sanitized and comfortable fashion to erase the harsh realities of the Potato Famine, reported widely in the London press, and to ease middle-class English consciences (Barra Boydell); and of the construction of a mode of Irishness on the English operatic stage through the works of Michael Balfe, Vincent Wallace and Julius Benedict which Stanford later transferred back into his *Shamus O'Brien* (Harry White). In other words, this is more than a book about Ireland, and while it will rightly have strong appeal for musicians and historians in Ireland with an interest in the 'past-ness' of their own culture, it ought also to warrant the attention of historians of music in Britain. And beyond, too: Belgium, Germany and the Czech-speaking lands all have a part to play.

But first, the book requires some introduction as to its scope, organization and content. Sensibly, the editors choose a conception of the nineteenth century that is deliberately 'long' and fuzzy, and they cluster the essays in six appropriate thematic groups, headed Nationality; The folk tradition in transmission; Church music and musicians; Education and society; Musical institutions; and European perspectives. The whole is rounded off by a useful seven-page chronology of significant Irish

musical events from 1792 (Belfast Harp Festival) to 1902 (foundation of the Palestrina Choir), a select bibliography and an index. The book is produced on high quality paper and the illustrations reproduce well. Proof-reading and copy-editing are mostly good, but there are some unfortunate glitches, including an error with music examples in chapter 4. That aside, there is much to admire in this 336-page volume in terms of weight of research and contribution to knowledge: the chapters, which cover such varied topics as folk-music collecting, Belfast's concert halls, and the impact of immigrant Belgian and German church organists, deliver many observations about the function and meaning of Irish musical life, supported by careful footnoting and other appropriate apparatus. The essays also display a variety of approaches to the art of historical writing, running the gamut in quality from simple reports of findings, or chronological surveys of events, to essays that satisfy as well-argued and mature history.

Those in this last category are notable for tracing change over time, for determining typicality versus atypicality, and for not shying away from those big and difficult, but ultimately historical, questions that probe why things happened as they did and what cultural meanings can be ascribed to them; or how and why events and phenomena came to be represented in words, music or images. For instance, Joachim Fischer, in his cultural and political contextualization of Irish attitudes to Wagner, 1880–1918, shows how the idea of Wagner fed into broader perceptions of Germany that were sustained by rising nationalism, and ably dismantles the idea that novelist George Moore's well-known views on Wagner are representative of Irish Wagnerism. This piece also embodies a classic 'given' of reception history, through its demonstration of how several sections of Irish society were able to appropriate Wagner differently for their own political agendas. Related issues emerge in an ambitious and wide-ranging piece about the Irish musical press by Michael Murphy, who traces, among other things, a qualitative change in journalistic standards around 1870, identifying various possible causes but attributing much to the furious public discussion of Wagner.

Issues of reception history inevitably surface again and again, one of my favourites being Barra Boydell's copiously illustrated discussion of how folk music was sentimentalized and politicized in literature and painting. Having addressed the cultural symbolism of the harp in Sydney Owenson's novel *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806), Boydell focuses on the visual depiction of indigenous rural music-making, especially the figure of the Irish piper, exploring how folk 'musicking' came to be romanticized by artists to accommodate the sensitivities of their audiences, whether in Ireland, England or America. As to why these artists chose to create an exotic and sanitized identity for Ireland's folk-music traditions is a complicated question, which the author begins to address towards the end of the chapter by invoking issues of class and the role of incipient nationalism. In many respects, David Cooper's chapter (which follows on)

provides an apt counterpoint to Boydell's findings. Largely a musicological survey of Edward Bunting's well-known published collections of Irish folk tunes arranged for the newly fashionable piano (1796, 1809, 1840), this essay shows how, for all Bunting's antiquarian posturing about his goals of preserving folk music, the process of arrangement boldly reshaped the tunes for the middle-class drawing room, making only limited efforts to retain such *echt* elements as drone basses and harp idiom while absorbing the tunes into the world of nineteenth-century amateur pianism and elevating them into the serious genre of high art music. Indeed, Cooper argues for the quality of Bunting's song settings, and makes a strong case for setting them on a par with Haydn's folksong arrangements.

Meanwhile, surely the most original contribution to historical writing in the volume is the opening, challenging essay by Harry White, 'Cultural theory, nostalgia and the historical record: opera in Ireland and the Irishness of opera during the nineteenth century'. White, whose *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland 1770–1970* (Cork, 1998) is a springboard for many of the other contributors, here suggests a new way of thinking 'out of the box' about Ireland's supposedly dismal operatic past, by avoiding genre history altogether and considering that opera in Ireland impacted far more on fiction and drama than it did on musical compositions *per se*. In developing this thesis, White lights on the question of the Irishness (or not) of opera by native composers, and constructs a revealing case study of Stanford's *Shamus* (mentioned above), tantalizingly leaving demonstration of opera's trace on literature 'for another day'. If in this respect the piece ultimately disappoints, there is compensation in White's periodic but insightful critique of the historiography of English and Irish music, and his estimation of the job of the historian—essential and stimulating fodder for any newcomer to the field. Another fresh approach is Jan Smaczny's comparative history of musical traditions in Ireland with those in the Czech lands (a subject on which Smaczny has published extensively). A treatment inspired by White's own discussion (in his *Progress of Music in Ireland*, 2005) of Czech traditions 'from an Irish point of view', and focussing on the musical infrastructures of Dublin and Prague, it proves a productive way of identifying what was distinctive about the Irish situation—particularly as regards the interaction of nationalism and urbanization—and what was part of broader European trends.

There are other noteworthy contributions to the broader historical picture. Of these I draw attention to two: Maria McHale's detailed account of how the sight-singing movement was annexed to the cause of temperance, a national phenomenon that gripped the country in the late 1830s (between three and five million people took the abstinence pledge) and became fused with concepts of national morality, patriotism and religion; and Marie McCarthy's systematic unravelling of the social, political and religious issues that underpinned the imposition of song repertoires (or 'canons')

across the nation's schools from 1831, creating bodies of music and cultures of singing that linked together generations of children who never knew one another, and demonstrating the importance of factoring education into any discussion of how cultural values are forged.

Each one of the fifteen essays will repay a second or third reading, particularly where a surfeit of detail threatens to obscure underlying themes and arguments—a famous hazard of writing histories of music in society and one which several contributors do not overcome—or where broader conclusions remain implicit rather than explicit. (In this respect, the volume displays an unevenness which a stronger editorial hand might have smoothed out.) Moreover, the attentive reader will find myriad connections across the volume, with particular themes and phenomena recurring, and not just the inevitable ones of patriotism, cultural nationalism and religious politics. The dearth of musical infrastructure and financial patronage in Ireland, and the absence of adequate national training grounds for musicians are raised in a few places, hinting at directions for further research. Meanwhile, if ever demonstration of the wide cultural significance of Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies* were needed, this volume certainly provides it.

I began with a wistful suggestion for more dialogue between historians of music in nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland, and the hope that British-oriented scholars would read this book. Such a possibility does, of course, beg the question as to how accessible this volume is to non-Irish specialists, and I suppose some potential readers may be put off by the fact that there is no handy introductory essay setting out the significant socio-cultural trends and landmark events of the century, the implication somehow being that the target audience is the national one (a failing, incidentally, of much British music history too). But close reading quickly reveals much, and the essays by Smaczny, McCarthy and White fill in much of the broader picture, so 'newcomers' may find it helpful to start there. I hope they do, because we scholars of British music need to start thinking out of the box, in all sorts of ways. In that regard, this new volume throws down a challenge.

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