

Writing Through an Instrument: Benjamin Dwyer

Walter Rudeloff: By way of background for our readers, how would you place your music in the vast range of contemporary composition?

Benjamin Dwyer: Many people ask me this question, and it's never easy to answer. I am very much an autodidact, and composition came late to the university in Ireland. As such, my formative years as a young composer were conducted largely free from dominant schools, ideologies and trends. I was, however, strongly influenced by the fact that I was a professional performer, and I have always developed close relationships with specific players as a core process of my composition. Writing *through* an instrument, and not against it, or merely for it, is important for me. Not unlike Benjamin Britten, I tend to absorb different musical styles into a personal 'signature' that is unified; so while there is a certain eclecticism in my music, I like to think that it is also coherent, technically robust and individual.

Now this engagement with eclectic materials might suggest that I compose a type of postmodern *bric-à-brac*. However, I see my music as functioning like a kind of re-evaluation of modernist ideals. It's the modernists that have inspired me most; not just the early modernists like Debussy, Ives, Stravinsky and Schönberg, but also the high modernists of the mid-century and after such as Berio, Stockhausen, Boulez and Ligeti. Indeed, I'm a little skeptical of postmodernism's ephemeral nature and its easy association with neo-liberalism, which in musical terms has led to an inflated emphasis on motionless tonality and repetitive structures. It is true that the grand narratives of the Enlightenment, and even of modernism, had to be re-assessed. And in music, it's also true that modernism articulated narratives for some while leaving many on the periphery – Boulez tended to isolate figures such as Maurice Ohana; Darmstadt rejected the lyricism of composers like Henze and Britten, and while serialism and neoclassicism vied to dominate the American scene, mavericks such as Harry Partch and Conlon Nanarrow were sidelined for years. On the other hand, postmodernism tends to reduce everything to irrelevance. In deconstructing the grand narratives, postmodernism de-essentialises *all* narratives. An overriding insistence within postmodern music of what might be called 'event avoidance' leaves me with the impression that it is happy to plod along without the least concern for real life and its events. This is not an aversion to stasis in music, but a critique of what I see as a tendency in some postmodern music that seeks to reach a vast listenership but insists upon a total disengagement from what actually happens in the world.

So, like the modernists, I value an engagement with themes that matter rather than an outright dismissal of them. This explains my interest in aesthetic developments from the past that have established cohesive languages (be they tonal or otherwise), in textural depth as an essential component of that language, and in schemata wherein things happen. Myth is also important for me, as is the notion that music may have a role in addressing the socio-political events that affect us all.

This stance explains my thematic choices over the past 15 years or so in my large-scale works such as 'Scenes from Crow' (based on Ted Hughes's Crow sequence) with all its mythical and symbolic richness; 'Umbilical' (a version of the Oedipus myth that recalibrates the story to the perspective of Jocasta, wife and mother of Oedipus); and a work I have recently completed, '*Sacrum Profanum*', which is a large-scale multimedia composition and accompanying art works that respond to the enigmatic sheela-na-gigs – stone carvings of naked female figures that prominently display the vulva, and which are found only in Ireland and parts of Britain, primarily on churches. These works explore big themes from the past and attempt to critique the present through (post)colonial, feminist and other political lenses.

WR: Is there any general impetus that sparks your creativity, or is each work *sui generis* in terms of inspiration?

BD: I draw inspiration from various sources, and this points my music in different directions. And as I've just mentioned, I also tend to work on large projects influenced by a given theme, which often take many years to bring to fruition. So, for example, my 'Twelve Études' for solo guitar was a project to create a series of concert études that would build upon the famous *Douze Études* by the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, which form a cornerstone of the guitar repertoire. This project took 10 years to complete and was the result of a focused study of études by many composers including Chopin, Alkan, Debussy and Ligeti, among others.

Works such as my 'Twelve Études' represent one side of my compositional output – that which is connected with purely musical concerns; music that revels in its own world, as it were. Another side of my work is that which, as I've indicated, responds to literary, political or mythical sources of inspiration. This exploration can take you into unexpected creative areas. For example, '*Sacrum Profanum*' has challenged me to engage for the first time with traditional Irish materials – sean-nós singing,¹ *port a'bhéil*² and the Irish language. Apart from directly engaging with modal material, ethnic performance practices and a language under grave threat, the historical treatment of the sheela-na-gig statues (upon which '*Sacrum Profanum*' is based) forced me to confront elements of how colonialism and other institutional powers such as the Catholic Church have negatively impacted Ireland's Gaelic social and political structures that had been firmly established for centuries. Rather than creating a music that represents traditional Irish sources and myths in ways that are wholesome and vibrant, I felt it necessary to engage with these materials through what I call an 'aesthetics of damage'. Any other approach would, in my view, disregard the historical fact of the near complete destruction of Gaelic civilisation. Thus, in '*Sacrum Profanum*' I have tried to create music that is both beautiful and ugly – a difficult and strange preoccupation.

WR: The Fidelio Piano Trio will be giving the premiere performance of your new work this October. Could you tell us a bit about the background of the piece, its in-semination, influences and road to completion?

BD: A big factor in my work is the way in which my performing activities and my academic research infiltrate into my compositional practice. I've performed all the guitar works by Britten for many years, and my extended research on these pieces is published in 'Britten and the Guitar – Critical Perspectives for Performers' (Carysfort Press, Dublin). My engagement with Britten's music through both performing it and analyzing it has definitely impacted my compositional techniques. For example, Britten's work for solo guitar is of course his famous 'Nocturnal, after John Dowland', Op. 70. It's a set of variations and an extended passacaglia based on Dowland's lute song, 'Come Heavy Sleep'. One of the most special features of the work is that the variations and passacaglia precede the theme, which emerges only at the very end of the work after the music has gone through many transformations and explorations.

I decided to pay homage to Britten in my piece by employing a theme from his opera 'Gloriana – the Second Lute Song of the Earl of Essex' (from Act I, scene ii). However, this work is only Britten's through appropriation, as it is itself based on a madrigal by the English composer Thomas Wilbye (1574-1638) called 'Happy, Oh Happy He' from his 'Second Book of Madrigals' (1608). So my

¹ Sean-nós in Irish means 'old style', and is a highly ornamented mode of unaccompanied traditional Irish singing.

² Literally 'mouth music', *port a'bhéil* is a traditional form of song native to the Gaelic speaking areas of Ireland and Scotland. Also known as liltin, it originated where communities were repressed or desperately poor. It was often sung as a memory aid or alternative to instrumental music. Highly rhythmic and melodic, *port a'bhéil* uses non-linguistic vocalisations extensively.

'Nocturnal' functions structurally and thematically like a kind of palimpsest in that if you scrape away at the score you discover older music (Britten's), and if you continue scraping you find even older music again (Wilbye's). On one level, my 'Nocturnal' is a kind of archeological dig into English music.

A core aspect of this, however, is my familiarity with Britten's 'Nocturnal'. I should say that I consider it the most significant work in the entire guitar repertoire, and as I've mentioned, I know it intimately as a performer, musicologist and composer. As a core method of composing my 'Nocturnal', I wanted not only to draw upon this deep familiarity with Britten's Op. 70, but also to tap into my intuitive experience of the work. In so doing, I have employed the exact same structure – seven variations, a passacaglia and the theme at the end. By using this X-ray as a basis for my own work, I wish to engage with Britten with as much intensity as he has with Dowland, and indeed other Elizabethan composers. This is the best way I know to pay homage to a composer who brought so much to the guitar.

WR: The LCMS audience for the most part is not very familiar with your music. Can you tell us a little about your overall work in the genre of chamber music and the position of this new trio with your other works?

BD: While I have written for nearly all formats from solo to orchestral, most of my music is for small or mid-size combinations. However, these generally do not fit within established formats such as the string quartet or the piano trio. Theme-led chamber pieces such as '*Al-Andalus*', '*Scenes from Crow*' and '*Sacrum Profanum*', to mention just three, have compelled me to employ rather unusual mixed ensembles. 'Nocturnal, after Benjamin Britten' is different, however, as it challenged me to engage with the work of a major composer through a medium that has a long tradition dating back to the classical period. I would be lying if I didn't admit to a certain apprehension in the face of such a task. This is my second work for piano trio; the first is an early, student piece, so it more or less felt like I was tackling the piano trio format for the first time. On the other hand, the large-scale work I mentioned earlier, 'Umbilical', I think has been a useful experience. Almost an hour in length, 'Umbilical' was written for harpsichordist David Adams, Baroque violinist Maya Homburger and double bassist Barry Guy. While this is by no means a piano trio, it does work upon similar instrumental relationships to 'Nocturnal'.

WR: I believe the Fidelio Trio is an Irish group and is known for their performances of Irish composers. Would you say they have a particular affinity for contemporary Irish music? Is there anything you want to say about an Irish connection?

BD: One member of the Fidelio is not Irish, and I don't really think that contemporary Irish music has any particular essentialist qualities – my 'Nocturnal', after all, is deeply rooted in 17th- and 20th-century English music. So the question for me is less about affinity – any style of music the Fidelio Trio plays is rendered with great affinity – than about dedicated nurturing. Contemporary Irish music struggles to be recognised not only internationally but also within Ireland itself. On the one hand, new Irish literature (buoyed upon the reputations of our great modernists Joyce, Beckett and Flann O'Brien) enjoys an extraordinary international reputation that is often hard to understand given its rather tiring nostalgia for wakes, alcoholism and diaspora – all rendered through a realist lens, despite our modernist heritage and developments in international literature. On the other hand, international recognition of Irish music is restricted to American-style rock (U2, The Cranberries, et al.) and traditional Irish music (unfortunately, often presented in crass commercial formats). As much contemporary Irish music does not overtly engage with recognisably 'Irish' traits (whatever they might actually be) and often demands more than mere passive listening, it tends to exist in the shadow of other more ideal cultural 'exports'. Though it's interesting to note how well some

contemporary Irish music – that which has absorbed the more easy-listening traits of American minimalism – is doing both nationally and internationally.

This is where the Fidelio Trio has made such an extraordinary contribution. They have tirelessly advocated for new Irish music, not only giving performances of technical and interpretative excellence, but also building an extraordinary catalogue of recordings of contemporary Irish music creating both a broader international audience and an invaluable archive of a cultural activity that struggles to be heard.

WR: Are you working on anything at the moment? Can you tell us what's 'in the pipeline'?

BD: I've been working on '*SacrumProfanum*' for about five years now. As I've mentioned, it deals with big themes such as colonialism, feminism and the loss of identities. After having spent such a long engagement with subject matter that weighs heavily on me, I feel it's time to revert to pure music, which is why I'm returning to the guitar again in a compositional project I call '*Tiento*'. *Tiento* is both a Spanish word meaning 'touch' and a musical form prevalent in the Renaissance and Baroque periods that emerged out of virtuosic instrumental performance practices. To prepare for this project, I've started playing a number of *tientos* from the Spanish Renaissance vihuela repertoire (the vihuela is a forerunner to the Baroque guitar). I want to employ both historical performance practice and modern improvisation to renovate the *tiento* form as a new, contemporary mode of performance-informed composition. So my *tientos* will be about exploring the guitar through touch. My compositional process will be guided as much by the hands' local knowledge as by any applied compositional method I will use. It's really important that composers don't lose touch (there's that core idea again) with making music, that the compositional process does not become detached from the simple act of making music happen. This is another thing that Britten teaches us, and I'm happy that my *tiento* project will allow me to return to music through performing – it will be making by doing!

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