



Editor's comments or alterations are in square brackets; composer's names (Tschaikowsky, Rimsky Korsakoff, Balakireff and Glazounoff) have been adjusted to current usage; long sections have been subdivided into shorter paragraphs for clarity's sake.

This article, published in two parts, is by 'William Donn', the pen-name of the Coleraine-born critic (*Rathcol* of the *Belfast Evening Telegraph*) and composer William Brown Reynolds (1874-1925). He was a leading light in the Ulster Literary Theatre (ULT), devising plans for a new theatre, and writing under the pen-name William Donn (*donn* is Irish for brown (hair)).

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## A Hope for Arrested Development . .

### Where Ireland stands Musically.

"The possibility is not in itself excluded that there still exist, somewhere in Europe, *remains* of stronger races, men typically inopportune: from thence a *delayed* beauty and perfection even for music might still be hoped for."

— Nietzsche: "The Case of Wagner."

THE above pregnant sentence from a profound book is of a kind to make two nations, Russia and Ireland, pause a moment and measure their souls. Russia is at work, has been at work these thirty or forty years; but we do not know Russia by her most characteristic composers. We have taken Tchaikovsky and all the frenetic, hopeless, abysmal outlook of his music to represent Russia; but Russia holds greater men than Tchaikovsky. Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, Balakirev, Arensky, and Glazunov are comparatively unknown; yet there is little doubt they are healthier and greater musicians than Tchaikovsky.

The music of Borodin is full of an earnest simpleness; it is hewn out of the primitive, native, embedded ground-rock of his own land. In technique it is not greatly different from that of the Bruchs, the Brahms[es], the Goldmarks of Germany; not more different than any two men's technique is bound to be.

But there is a tremendous difference in the actual content of the music, its individuality, its "bite," its ultimate worth as expression. Where Brahms undoubtedly labours along conscientiously at making music, recollecting how it has been done, amplifying that in the manner of the dilettante, the connoisseur, never the creator, the artist, Borodin apparently lets the music make itself. Brahms' ancestry has laid a burden on him, and it is wearying to watch how laboriously he carries that about with him everywhere, instead of dipping oftener into that minor, ballad-like, reverie-haunted mood which is so charming with him, so natural, so Brahms-like; the delicate, twilight minor poetry of music.

But Brahms must ape Beethoven, and even surpass Beethoven; he must carry on the Beethoven tradition, forgetting that Beethoven cast the metal and broke the mould. Brahms is

typically decadent German. But in Russia, where no musty organ-lofts are thick with the piled-up dust of two centuries on forgotten masterpieces, where the peasant still sings his folksongs and the great folk-soul is still speaking in childish prattle, where the wastes are still vast and the hearth a centre for returning and not dispersion, the rude nurture of a native art has been found, an art that speaks a fresh, vital, spontaneous life, something different from any that has gone before, and something that the world is the richer for.

It all comes from the great virgin forests and steppes and those that feel their littleness and loneliness there, and the great mystery that broods over life. It speaks all this wonder, big-eyed, wistful, earnest, profound; it has not been touched by the blasé, superficial, common, matter-of-fact life of more western Europe, where things go and come as crazes of the moment, and where folk have forgotten how to wait and listen, to be patient and suffer, to be frank and joyous. The overloaded, enriched-to-nausea, spurred-to-fatigue, stimulated-to-delirium life of the over-civilised spots around Vienna, Paris, London, and New York (the Americans took good care to leave Washington comparatively a quiet city) cannot wait on the exquisite moment, the profoundly still moment, the moment of ecstatic aloofness that comes to the haunts of rivers and mountains and sea-shore.

Not that the inhabitants of the spots around the cities above-mentioned do not go to the rivers, mountains, and sea-shore; but that these represent to them merely tedium in another way, and that all their art has lost touch with the folk-tradition, and the obscure wisdom of the cottage hearth is true. Their arts are highly spiced, superficial recrudescences on the surface of a highly artificial town-life in which the tragic issues are constantly being shirked and the fine sensibilities blunted. Art with them is dilettante in the most detestable sense, a sort of prostitute, and subject to the whim and abuse of a moment. In place of the folk-instinct which is always true, there rules the mob-instinct which is always false.

The old aristocracy which once made its taste felt now no longer distinguishes; it has long since joined issue with the mob, and against such a conspiracy what art could possibly remain? Everything is thus dead against a virile strong art of music which can never be coaxed, bribed, or compelled by wealth, influence, or crowds, but comes unbidden, unchallenged, almost unexpected, and often unwelcomed.

Young men have gone up from the country with work of some promise under their arm; soon they were drawn into the vortex of life in the towns; all their sincerity of purpose left them, pitifully, unaccountably, irretrievably, and presently nothing was left but to ape and pose the grand manner which did not suit them and in which they certainly did not speak effectively or naturally; they had to cave in defeated, disillusioned, and undone in the end. We all remember instances of this — instances full of a terrible pity and regret.

No, there must be some connecting link with the home-hearth, or a great living and persistent tradition to keep the passion for creation integrate and persistent. No amount of merely self-consciousness of purpose can do this; only the virgin impulse of eager, insatiable lust for expression. And that only exists in a not over-civilised people. Russia possesses it; what of Ireland?

William Donn.

*(To be continued.)* [see next page]

## Where Ireland stands Musically.

(Concluded)

THERE are three young Ulstermen whose original music may matter from the national standpoint some day. But each will have to mend his way of going if his talent is to ripen to any purpose in that direction. Each presents, indeed, at the present moment, an example of a particular way of going wrong. It is not my business here to keep right individuals who know so very much more about it than I do myself. But as their wrong-doing, if exposed with suitable virulence and exasperation, may deter others, though they themselves persist still in their own bad courses, I shall give a short analysis of their cases, and fit, by ample generalisation, these to the case of others.

One case is that of a young man [this is likely to be Hamilton Harty] who left his home and went up to the Vortex, London, thinking that there fame and fortune were to be won. Something lucky happened to him there — I well remember what it was, but here it does not matter — and fortune was his [Great success as an accompanist and/or Harty's 1904 marriage to Agnes Nicholls, 'the distinguished vocalist?']. He wrote some music, and one piece, cast in a big mould and founded on traditional airs [*Irish Symphony*, 1904?], considerably impressed some of us. There was a song, too, which I tremendously admired [*Sea Wrack*, c.1902, pub. 1905 or *The Song of Glen Dun*, 1902?]; and some other things.

Since then he has written more music, but that was after his good fortune. Listening to his later music, there is one thing borne in on me: it lacks grit and sincerity. It has the honesty of the drawing-room ballad — that is to say, the honesty of a prostitute art. So that the good fortune which introduced him into drawing-rooms, made polite people at home to him, and helped him to forget, except in terms of the pretty, conventional sentimentalism that obtains in his new circle, his home and the country and Ireland calling to him deep in the heart — this good fortune of his has been the ruin of his inspiration [Harty enjoyed success at Chappell's Ballad Concerts and at society soirées for wealthy patrons].

Perhaps there never was the possibility of distinction in his work, and perhaps my impression of those early compositions was a bit rosier than their real worth. But at anyrate, it is a pity that, in place of a garb of genuineness, there should now be all the tinsel of a music-hall glitter; of course, he himself does not realise this. With the easy politeness of a man of the world he goes through life in the most comfortable circumstances; if a dose of hardship and bohemianism would save him, I should advise revolt against his good fortune and casting it adrift. But people cannot be saved; their fate is always worthy of them because it is incipient, inherent in their own personality. Terrible, but true!

[This dressing down might be coloured by the little local difficulty occasioned by Harty's 1905 setting of *My Lagan Love*, a melody collected by Herbert Hughes, set to words by the poet Joseph Campbell and published in *Songs of Uladh*, August 1904 (Reynolds, the Campbell brothers and Hughes were all closely associated with the 1904 Feis of the Glens). Jeremy Dibble, in *Hamilton Harty: Musical Polymath* (Boydell Press, 2013) writes, 'Protective of his discovery of the tune of *My Lagan Love*, Hughes was surprised to see that Harty had made his own arrangement. A Belfast music critic [surely Reynolds?] was more vocal in his disapproval which provoked Bigger [Francis Joseph Bigger (1863-1926)] somewhat precipitately, to persuade Hughes to sue Harty for breach of copyright. From the outset the case had no substance – folk song has no copyright – and was speedily dismissed. Happily, Hughes's suit was no cause of animosity between him and Harty ...' ]

Another case is where a young man [this is likely to be Herbert Hughes (1882-1937) – see his mention in the final paragraph of this article] went to study in London, and, to some extent, accommodated himself to the drawing-room of the Vortex [Hughes studied at the RCM in London, graduating in 1901, and appeared at Chappell's Ballad Concerts in London in Nov 1904 to accompany his setting of *The Ninepenny Fiddle* – words by Joseph Campbell]. The fine, virgin impulse, the real pretext to create which his native land would have supplied and kept nourished and healthy, was a trifle lamed presently; it lacked strength and virility. This young man must take the first boat home, and listen to the wind in some Irish glen for a while. Maybe then he will find the music for Deirdre's case, or Cuchullin's, or Diarmuid and Grania's, or he may voice the joys and sorrows of Peggy Maguire and Patsy Glynn in dance and song. He'll never do it in London, where Mr. George Edwardes still wonders why people fail to see "musical" comedy as comedy and his lavish expenditure a strong argument in its favour as an art product [In fact Hughes would write the music for J B Fagan's comedy *And So to Bed*, based on the life of Samuel Pepys, and produced in Manchester (the Opera House) and London (Queen's Theatre, transferring to the Savoy Theatre) in 1926].

Our first case has gone wrong through seductive inducements to mediocre work, our second through absence of proper inducements to good work; and both in London, in the Vortex. Our third, having, and I think rightly so, spent many youthful years abroad [this is surely Monnier Harper (1886-1916), violinist, composer and, eventually, aviation pioneer – see the final paragraph of this article for a namecheck. He studied in Brussels with César Thomson and Eugène Ysaÿe], has returned with a wide musical culture, a remarkable accomplishment, and a knowledge of technique as the humble servant of expression which never could have been got at home, but only in a Continental centre throbbing with musical life and activity. Now stranded high and dry at home, with a few pupils and ample leisure, he proposes to waste time and energy on Greek classic subjects [the piano trio suite from Monnier Harper's three act (also 5 act!) opera *Eros et Psyché* is dated July 1902; there must also be more Eros in his *Poème* for orchestra and solo cello entitled *Péleasse & Mélisànde*], while the fine, virgin material of the legends of his native land go a-begging for musical treatment.

His great hope of salvation lies in the awakening of his imagination to the beauty and significance of the Irish legends and folk-lore, and its identity with something within him, with the hills and the valleys, the shore and the streams, the sunshine, the vegetation, and the winds about him. Every hill with its story, its exploit, its hero; every glen with its battle or its love-song; every river, every wood, every town, every cove in the rocky shore with its tale of strength, of love, of hate: or of woe — he must learn to assimilate all this, to take it as his native air and nourishment; and when the great awakening comes, as it must in his case some day, there will be a new light thrown on all these homely and heroic things, a new personality and significance imparted into them, a re-creation of them, that will constitute an epoch in musico-dramatic art, to be taken account of by future historians and set in its place in the unbroken chain of developments.

The time has come for a reaction of some sort. The glorious egotism of the romantic school, starting with Mozart's latter works and second-period Beethoven, and culminating in the music dramas of Wagner, is no longer a vital factor in musical art. And the abortive attempt to borrow life from another art for the symphonic poems of Liszt, Berlioz, and R. Strauss has only accentuated their poverty in genuine musical inventiveness — they lacked thematic material, and without thematic material all pretext for a long composition is non-existent. Often their episodic matter is of vastly greater interest than their technical themes.

All this has, however, been thrashed out long ago; I only refer to it here to emphasise the fact that these men have led the musical world up a blind alley, and it behoves us to get back and find a clear path of our own. A word, perhaps, about Strauss may show the way back. Richard Strauss is imposing, devoid of imaginative qualities, of a sense of beauty, of thematic inventiveness, of delicate characterisation, and of genuinely sympathetic traits. That some have acclaimed his “themes” as original and characteristic is only another proof of the prevailing poverty of the time.

As a writer in *Ulad* (No.2) said [Herbert Hughes, *The Celtic Leit-motif*, Vol.1, No.2, Feb.1905, pp.15-17], the psychological in music is played out. And if he means by “psychological” the modern spirit intensely conscious of its internal mental machinery, a purely scientific analysis of processes, I shall agree with him; and further, that a return to simplicity of manner and matter is the thing desirable. What with a revival of the religious instinct all around us, a growing interest in pre-Mozartean music, and in the inimitable masters who flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, in England, in the Netherlands, in France, and in Italy, a sincere and simple utterance may become possible.

Those who have heard M. Arnold Dolmetsch play the music of that time on the instruments for which it was composed, will have noted a singular similarity in spirit with the folk-music of Ireland. The gaiety, the joyousness, the wistfulness, and the passion of the one is perhaps a bit more delicately expressed, and, in the other, has all the frank energy and abandon of the folk tradition; but beyond this difference in quality, due to technical methods, a great similarity of spirit, as I say, can be traced between them. This comes, in the one case, of a grave deference to the polite circle around, and, in the other, is due to a profound deference to living tradition and the past.

There it is — Tradition and the Past — our watchword, the keystone of the edifice of the coming Irish musical art. An instinct that refers back and assimilates; that urges forward and re-creates, will be the chief characteristic in the young Irish musician whose work matters. If **Herbert Hughes** and **Monnier Harper** [the boldening of these names is editorial!], and the others who have not arrived so far, let out their talents to tradition and the past, technique, an orchestra, a new imaginative horizon, a fresh message, and a renewed impulse will all coalesce to urge their work to more splendid issues, profounder significances, loftier and prouder flights. It will no longer be the London prize-opera, but a work wrung from the composer by the very pain of enthusiasm, a work into which he will put part of his life; a work which in its execution will serve as a safety-valve for the surplus energy every creative spirit has in more or less degree. And the result will be native, personal, and original — perhaps a world’s masterpiece.

William Donn.