



contemporary composers

A Troubles Archive Essay

David Byers



Cover Image: Robert Peters – Uccello of the Potato Field (2007)

From the collection of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland

About the Author

David Byers was the Manson Scholar in Composition at the Royal Academy of Music in London 1968-72, winning many prizes for composition and organ. The Macauley Fellowship from the Irish Arts Council in 1972 and a Belgian Government Scholarship then enabled him to study with Henri Pousseur at the Liège Conservatoire. In 1984 he was awarded an ARAM for his contribution to the music profession, and also appointed a member of the Irish Arts Council, An Chomhairle Ealaíon, for five years. He was a Governor of the Royal Irish Academy of Music for over 20 years and has served on many boards and committees, including Wexford Festival Opera, the National Concert Hall, Dublin, and the Ulster Youth Choir. He was a founding committee member of the *Sonorities* Festival. After 25 years he retired from the BBC in 2002 as Chief Producer, Music and Arts, and was then appointed Chief Executive of the Ulster Orchestra, retiring in 2010. He continues to compose, write articles and prepare editions of music from earlier eras. His works cover many genres and have been performed and broadcast across Europe, in the USA and Australia.

Contemporary Composers

Few of us can escape our island's shared history. The troubles of the past have never been far away from most people in Northern Ireland, no matter where they lived. I grew up with centuries-old, but close-to-home, stories of sectarian bitterness in the border regions of Cavan and Fermanagh. My father's first shop was on Belfast's lower Newtownards Road, an area which had been seriously traumatised in the 1920s and continued to be a friction point during his time there from the late 1940s and indeed to this day.

Closer to home, well away from the major areas of trouble, I remember someone being blown up on the Belmont Road, probably in the late 1950s, as they tried to bomb a small telephone exchange near the Old Hollywood Road where we lived. And during the more recent 'Troubles' my mother and two sisters were held at gunpoint in their own home, terrorised and threatened with rape until my youngest sister and my father returned with the day's takings from his shop. The hooded gunmen, callous yobs never caught, claimed to be from the UVF.

Then there was a policeman cousin of my mother's, returning one evening to his family and their Fermanagh home. He was shot in the back and killed by an IRA gunman lying in wait for him.

Belfast-born composer Stephen Gardner grew up in a loyalist housing estate. His Uncle Hughie, on the inner council of the UDA, was murdered in 1975. "Naturally enough", says Gardner, "when it came to writing music, it all fed in. Sometimes, I directly addressed it in specific works".

"Naturally enough", he says, but how does anyone, let alone a composer, make sense of other's insanity and inhumanity? And how have contemporary composers responded in such a tangled mess of past, present and, for a long time to come, future?

Over many years working at the BBC, I was asked by several different Controllers and Heads of Programmes what music I had written about the Troubles. It wasn't meant as such, but I felt the question was also an accusation. It implied that not to have done so was an avoidance of relevant contemporary issues. Ivory tower and head in sand come to mind.

Then there was the divided society in which we all worked. However much you occupied a space in the middle ground, you had to be labelled as one or the other, Protestant or Catholic. No matter that you worshipped the Grand Dandelion or none, when it came to assessing Fair Employment, it was a legal requirement to be documented as a Protestant Dandelion or a Catholic Dandelion, a Protestant Atheist or a Catholic Atheist. The public's perception of you was, and remains, all important and dependent on the schools you attended, where you lived, what your name was.

That division is reflected in an anecdote told by Kevin O'Connell about his *From the Besieged City*, for mezzo-soprano and orchestra, commissioned by Derry City Council to commemorate the Tercentenary of the Siege of Derry, 1688-89, and performed by the Ulster Orchestra in Belfast and then Derry/Londonderry:

"There was a piquancy to this that only someone from Ulster would appreciate: David Jones, who conducted both performances, came from the 'other side' in Derry. Preposterous to me and David to see it that way: we were old

class mates from Trinity College Dublin. But there were aspects to it that now rather amuse me. David's mother, God rest her, was one of the small west bank Derry Protestant community, and Derry City Council was, shall we say, not on her Christmas list. She stayed away from the Guildhall première. I'm still fond of this work, and I think its style, pared back but sometimes expanding into strident baroque flourishes, does capture something of the tensions of that time."

Composer Alec Macdonald believes that, whereas in so many areas the Troubles further polarised communities, for composers they "brought about a closer working-together, the strengthening of the idea of the 'Irish' composer, regardless of religion, politics or geography".

Yes, the number of composers from Northern Ireland has blossomed over the past 30 years and made a remarkable impact. But other art forms can more readily address the Troubles whether tangentially or head on – if that is indeed seen as an essential requirement. Across the past 40 years, writers for television, radio and the theatre have had a field day. The Troubles were grist to their mill. So much so, that the subject became over-exposed; audiences became inured to it, war weary, more likely to switch off, no matter what the artistic merits or insights might have been.

The spoken word, the written word, the singer, the dancer and the visual artist can examine and respond. They can offer interpretation, argued defence or condemnation, and eventually perhaps the considered assessment, contextualisation or resolution. Things are different in the world, which for clarity's sake, is here labelled as 'classical' music.

Instrumental music, music without words, is an abstraction. No matter what the composer aims to convey as emotional content, there is so often an ambiguity both in interpretation and understanding. Much can depend on other layerings: a title, a programme note, perhaps one or more musical quotations, the public's perception and the context of the performance.

Adding words can change everything. The previously abstract music becomes a heightened interpretation of those words – which is why opera is several steps removed, on a separate and special pedestal, sitting as it does betwixt, between and mixing so many other art forms.

Curtain up

Classical music in Northern Ireland has not been immune from the more obvious effects of the Troubles: traffic disruption, closed roads, interrupted performances, smaller than expected audiences and tragic loss. The death of Stephen Parker, a member of the City of Belfast Youth Orchestra, immediately comes to mind.

The Northern Ireland Opera Trust and its successor, Opera Northern Ireland, had some difficult experiences. Alongside hotel bombings, the use of venues such as the ABC cinema (formerly the Ritz), the school hall at RBAI ('Inst') and, in 1993, the Klondyke Building (the Gasworks), there were the memorable 1992 ABC performances of *Rigoletto* (three interruptions one night) and *Faust* with a complete audience evacuation – and return – during Act II. The ABC was burnt down some months later.

During an ONI performance of Mozart's *Il Seraglio* in 1988, Randall Shannon, then ONI's General Manager, tells of "an explosion, audible in the Grand Opera House auditorium (I think it was the bombing of the Forensic Science lab), immediately followed by Pedrillo's aria which started with the words 'Only cowards are afraid', causing great hilarity – and bemusement on the part of the singer who hadn't heard the bang".

I have vivid memories of avoiding some rather lax security early one morning in 1992 to climb the stairs to the 15th floor of a severely damaged Windsor House to retrieve the Ulster Orchestra's music for a BBC recording session. "On mature reflection", as they say, and despite Pedrillo's taunts, I wouldn't do it again!

But the band played on across the entire Troubles period. Some Ulster Orchestra rehearsals were disrupted, a few concerts delayed, but I don't recall one cancellation. Thankfully the Ulster Hall continued in use despite bomb damage to the front of the building.

Elaine Agnew remembers the interrupted première of her Ulster Youth Orchestra commission *Straight to the Point* in Newry Town Hall in August 2000. "We are all sitting upstairs, concert going well, then they start my piece.

Towards the end of it, I have a three-minute percussion and harp improvisation cadenza-type section. In the middle of this the fire alarm goes off. The percussion section and harpists keep playing as normal and the audience thinks it's all part of the piece and they sit on. Next thing, we hear footsteps. Someone is running up the wooden staircase. A woman screams through the door to get out. The audience still sits on (they must think that that is also part of the piece!). Then we all exit. We return about 30 minutes later once it's all checked out. Everyone back in their seats, the orchestra on stage, conductor Andrew Shulman starts at the point where we had just stopped and the young players beautifully and professionally carry on as if nothing had happened!"

Piers Hellawell brought a concert of music by Elliott Carter and Bartók to the Orchard Gallery in Derry/Londonderry around 1982. It was the night of a local election result with large gains for Sinn Féin and people glued to their television sets. One lone man turned up for the concert. And even that was a misunderstanding. He'd thought there was a conference on, but stayed to provide an audience of one, was given his money back, and treated to a whiskey.

Dark clouds

Some of the worst atrocities can never be erased from the memory. Deirdre McKay worked with the first Pushkin Trust summer camp in Tyrone. It began just the day after the Omagh bomb in August 1998. "It was led by the Duchess of Abercorn's own vision and belief in imparting to the children the importance of creativity over destruction," says Deirdre, "I still think about her courage in doing so".

Ian Wilson has described growing up during the Troubles as a constant; almost like wallpaper, very much part of the fabric of my life. "I was five when it started and I think if it had happened when I was older I might have had something to rail against, a time to remember when it was different. It was actually only when I left Northern Ireland (1998) that I became more 'politicised' (with a small 'p'); the irony of leaving NI and moving to Belgrade and within a year finding myself in the middle of an actual military action was not lost on me! The Omagh bombing happened a few months after my move and I had a friend who was teaching in that town so I was quite affected by that event. I had just started writing my piano concerto, *Limena*, and so the middle section of that piece became a 'lament', directly influenced by the events in Omagh."

Others describe the same constant wallpaper. Philip Flood was well aware of areas that were "out of bounds" and that "it was unwise to venture out". He arranged performances of his music but he "had to think carefully about where these could take place. So areas around the University were most likely the safest areas ... you never knew what disruption might lie ahead".

For Eibhlis Farrell, the Troubles were "always there, hanging like a dark cloud you wished would disappear". And the musical outcome? "My creative response has been one I think of as escapism, of trying to rise above the nastiness and doing this through my music. I felt I could not indulge in the message of the Troubles and write directly on their specific hurt and pain. Rather than reflect the Troubles, I believe my music transcends them and I consciously chose to do that."

Engaging with the Troubles

Composers living through the Troubles, however different one from another, cannot help but soak up the tainted air around and about. Future generations might more readily hear the influence of these troubled times in our music than we can just now. But that is quite distinct from writing specifically Troubles-related works. "The creation of a new work must never be opportunistic, or parasitically feed off the Troubles as a rich, emotive source", says Deirdre McKay, "but no more so Northern Ireland's troubles, than unrest in any other part of the world".

Looking for the bigger picture is essential. It's not enough to apply a Troubles title to a sad piece. However genuine the expression may be, the concept is open to accusations of jumping on bandwagons. Adrian Thomas echoes something of this: "I have a general antipathy to such contemporary connections. I had my fill of it in Poland, and when Penderecki and Kilar wrote pretty trashy pieces connected to 9/11, I completely revolted against the gratuitous memorialisation."

Kevin O'Connell would agree with him: "I don't think that I have ever written a work that directly engages with the Troubles ... my feeling is that art derived in that way is not likely to be very good".

"I did not hear anything coming out of 9/11 that was of much interest artistically. But some [of my] pieces have had an indirect relation to the situation in the North. *From the Besieged City* [1988/89] for example. The influence here was partly negative: I did not want to write a piece of heritage art about 1689 and all that. This necessarily meant taking a contemporary, and therefore more controversial, view of the matter ... In fact I was interested in another kind of politics at least as much as I was in our local problems. I'm talking about the politics of new music. By the late 80s I had got to be a bit tired of what seemed like the hygienic discretion of the New Music scene. I was interested in composers like Henze who had a life outside of it. For better or worse, I feel this has been where I have spent my professional life as a composer – I mean outside rather than inside. Of course there is a political (in the broader sense) implication to that decision too. Living in Northern Ireland I found the whole New Music thing introverted and beside the point."

"In a BBC interview about my Cello Sonata I talked about the Shankill bombing and the shootings near Derry which occurred during the long gestation of that piece. Again, I think it is an oblique thing. People want to read all kinds of things into the *Lament for Limerick* used in the slow movement. But that tune does not fit into a political programme in any schematic way at all."

In his 1995 youth opera *The Fire King*, O'Connell portrayed young people living in a modern city. Yes, "it was notionally Derry, but it could have been anywhere. To the extent that John Goodby's libretto dealt with the sins of the fathers being visited on the sons, there was maybe a political dimension".

O'Connell's 1997 orchestral work *North*, another BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra, "was a distant reflection on things, because I wrote it in Dublin. Jennifer McCay, a musicologist from Derry, has made much of the fact that Seamus Heaney wrote his book [*North*, 1975] soon after moving from the North to Dublin and I was in a similar situation. Not sure if there is anything in it. People come to know you better than you do yourself."

True. It was only recently when I began to gather up the programme notes for my own works that I realised I had indeed referenced the Troubles on more occasions than I had remembered. From *The Nature of Gothic* in 1974, through *A Planxty for the Dancer* (1983), *The Journey of the Magi* (1990), *Distractions of the Mind* (1998) and *The Rising of the Moon* (2002), like O'Connell, the approach has been an oblique one, seeking a universality of response and often doing so by drawing on mythology (usually Irish), folk tales and Irish poetry, particularly that of Joseph Campbell.

Michael Alcorn has also sought parallels in Irish mythology. His *Macha's Curse*, a BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra, was premièred in May 1997. Macha is the Irish mythological figure who cast a curse on Ulster for nine times nine generations. Alcorn explains that the initial ideas for the work came at the end of 1994 "only a matter of weeks after the cease-fires had been declared in Northern Ireland and several months since our local butcher in Crossgar had been murdered; both these events had been on my mind and for the first time I felt a strong desire to comment in some way on the troubles which have blighted all our lives for so many years. *Macha's Curse* is a personal response to this. It is a work without political, programmatic or symbolic references. Instead it attempts to capture some of the complex emotions which have touched so many lives in the Province."

There are arguably fewer Troubles references in Philip Flood's music. He was also drawn to his Irish heritage from an early age and was always fascinated by folk tales. "In many ways this took precedence over writing any music that was directly inspired by the Troubles in relation to what was happening in the North from 1969 onwards. At the time it felt too close, raw and immediate and would only, in my opinion, polarise those who might hear the work."

"In hindsight I think I was writing works that related to Ireland and Ireland's history as oblique references to the current situation. So, there was an opera fragment for Opera Theatre Company which was around the Easter Rising [*Con(vict)* 12], settings of Yeats and Joyce, and a very Stravinsky-inspired Mass which also had a lot of my own Catholic faith in it."

"To be honest, the Troubles had no direct link to my music in terms of style, language, etc. However, indirectly it totally drove everything that I wrote, in that it was written, up to 1986, in the environment of the Troubles. It was through writing music that I managed to leave Belfast and so it was, in a very abstract way, a driver of my musical style. In hindsight, it was also interesting looking back to Northern Ireland from my base in London; some of my work reflected that sense of distance. There is a piece for four hands at one piano called *Across the Water* which used snippets of *She moved through the fair*; I don't think I would have written that had I stayed in Ireland."

"In some ways the Troubles had no effect on my music as I didn't specifically use them as source material. On the other hand they influenced me a huge amount in terms of looking at my overall Irish heritage and, later in my career, always wanting to preserve a sense of 'Norn Irish' identity as an artist. I still refuse to lose my accent although I have now been out of Ireland longer than in it."

Speaking to Hilary Bracefield, Flood admitted that *Rising*, his 1995 commission for the Ulster Youth Orchestra, was written after the ceasefire and so "became more optimistic than it might otherwise have been".

Flood's oblique approach doesn't necessarily conflict with David Morris's assertion that the composer's role in society is "somehow to reflect on that society: specifically the composer's interaction with his/her surroundings, be it intellectual (literature, painting, etc.), natural (Debussy!), or physical (e.g. the Troubles)". He added, "So, I cannot see a creative artist living in a troubled environment, and NOT commenting upon them!"

Responses

Comment can be every bit as meaningful even when it is oblique and understated. An indirectly Troubles-related work is Philip Hammond's ...*while the sun shines*..., a 2005 BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra. Written in memory of the Hillsborough-born conductor Hamilton Harty, Hammond draws attention to his use of "folksong and quasi folksong (i.e. Harty's own tunes) as well as orchestration to highlight the contrasting and diverse origins of the 'traditions' here and the way in which it all gets mixed up no matter how clear the divisions may seem on the surface at first ... those of us who live in Northern Ireland may recognise the aural image of the bands side by side and indeed united with the harp and fiddle – a recognition of the musical traditions we all share".

Just over ten years ago Ed Bennett, in conversation with Michael Dungan, was determinedly avoiding the past. "Because tradition has caused so much trouble in this country, I don't really want to have anything to do with it. And that has affected my music, because tradition is always used as an excuse for wrongdoing. I feel that that has affected me greatly. I don't really like delving into the past if possible."

Eibhlis Farrell was writing an orchestral work in 1978 while her father was dying. "I used to sit up late, writing in his room to keep him company, and all the time on the news there was a surfeit of violence. The work was called *Threnody* and was as much a lament on losing my father; but things like listening to bombs and bullets and screaming did very much affect my writing of it. There were so many events which upset us all, but I think a lot of my work has really been anti-troubles. I don't believe I could ever go into the gory detail that many writers and visual artists have done, and I have tried to avoid overt references to the Troubles."

"I actually think that they [the Troubles] encouraged me to write music that was deeply spiritual. I have used a lot of liturgical texts in vocal works, etc., again that sense of 'rising above' as an innate response. I was also brought up in a very nationalist community and was deeply immersed in Irish music (and plainchant!) from my earliest years and a lot of that has to have permeated my compositional process. I think my music has a strong sense of linearity as a result and I have always been conscious of that 'sense of line' coming through."

For Simon Mawhinney, all his work is a response to the Troubles. "However, no specific work sets out to make explicit reference. Rather, I have sought in my work to consider underlying sources of conflict (which I would term duality in order to apply it universally) and to come up with solutions as to how it is prevented. I have sought to inculcate my optimistic/idealistic world view throughout the structure of my work. *Hunshigo* [for violin and piano] is as good an example as any of mine in which the resulting musical language reflects my response. I really cannot envisage writing any other way to achieve this."

Greg Caffrey is just as definite. "Nothing I write is specifically motivated by my experiences [of the Troubles], however, since everything I write is some kind of reflection of who I am, the experiences are undoubtedly in there. It's impossible to point to them, should they exist, because I can't even identify them myself. I think they are there though! It's hard to make music really comment on such things. It's too abstract for that ... I can see that a suggestive title could clue an audience into some kind of troubles-related origin in the music."

Piers Hellawell underlined some of the issues with Troubles-inspired music. "I frankly deplore it when pieces give the feeling of the history being used as an up-front visiting card, an attention-grabber. But it would be absurd to extend this uncritically over all pieces, and impossible to discern between what feel like genuine expressions and

those with the feel of sensationalism. I'm thinking more of abstract works; those setting a Troubles text seem in a different category, like those setting any text ... No need to be reminded that I've written elegiac pieces myself!"

Ian Wilson reaches the heart of the matter: "Music takes inspiration from the broadest range of events and ideas, so to my mind it's not so much the root of a work's inspiration which may or may not be problematic, but rather how the music uses that inspiration. Does it slavishly try to follow a literary, time-based, non-musical narrative in order to 'interpret' its source or can it find musical inspiration in the initial idea and take flight from there?"

Taking flight

At least three of Bill Campbell's works reflect the Troubles, with and without words. "Around 1995," he writes, "there was much talk about what was being termed as the peace process. There seemed to be a lot of hysteria and I couldn't help think that the victims had been forgotten in the midst of all of this. Of course the balance eventually shifted towards victims in the course of time. At that time I was commissioned to write a Piano Trio for the Barbican Piano Trio. I decided to use this troubled thought [of the forgotten victims] as an emotional core to the piece. In the closing section I evoked some ghostly wailing in the strings (which some listeners thought were emergency sirens) over which was an elegiac chordal pattern played by the piano."

"Another piece which is more obvious is a collaborative work for music and speaker [*The Reed Bed*, 2002] using a poem by Dermot Healey written the day after the Omagh bombing, entitled *Sunday 16th August 1998*. The music I composed was in response to those words." Alec Macdonald has described that setting as "dramatic and moving".

Campbell's BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra, *Scotia*, began with thoughts "of a protestant marching band passing the Ulster Hall as the orchestra was playing a quiet piece of music; eventually ending up as a piece trying to portray our shared and mixed heritage from Ireland to Scotland and back."

"Writers and poets of the province," says Deirdre McKay, "have had a different role to play in untangling evolving events and perceptions, and in offering leadership and vision. Their medium is words: the astute dismantling of false rhetoric, the calling out of acts as 'barbaric' when so often subsumed and justified in political terms. Music, as an abstract art form, cannot deal in language and rhetoric. It is much more susceptible to emotional charge, which is also its danger. Most of 'The Troubles' pieces which I have heard in performance chose to express narratively – the music relying on sensibility and comprehension in another art form, in actuality."

For Conor Mitchell, setting the words of the Latin mass for the dead was the best narrative and the most appropriate response to one of the ongoing nightmares of the Troubles. He describes his *Requiem for the Disappeared* (2012) as a "musical reflection on the issue of the right to burial. It doesn't answer any questions, but it does ask some."

He expanded on this in an interview with Terry Blain for *Culture Northern Ireland*: "What the disappeared were deprived of was a funeral rite. The more I learnt about this period, the more I felt I wanted to write a piece of music that would embody the funeral rite for people that didn't have that. If you're a composer the only way you can speak about this kind of thing is to write a piece of music about it, without getting political. To say that this is how I feel about this situation. These are Catholic people. I'm a Catholic. I needed to say some things through music about the denial of the right to burial. On a very human level you try to imagine what it's like for someone just to vanish, disappear ..."

Mitchell's programme note mentioned some of his compositional means to that end. "We know 'rest' or a note coming to rest as a cadence ... This entire score is built around a certain note looking for its place of rest: the search for resolution. I was also taken with dissonance (harsh notes) resolving into beauty or what we call 'tonality'. This music always finds a place of repose in tonality or (can I say it?) a tune – something we composers are, falsely, trained to be wary of!"

Mitchell has also written an all too short opera, *Our Day*, with words by Mark Ravenhill, one of the New Music 20x12 commissions for the London 2012 Festival. Composer and librettist explore sectarian attitudes in 1972, the bloodiest year of the Troubles, when Mary Peters won an Olympic gold medal and the Troubles seemed to stand still for that day. "*Our Day* is really about conflict, celebration, and the cessation of violence, viewed through the lens of that special day in 1972."

Raymond Warren, Resident Composer to the Ulster Orchestra (1968-1972), chose the two prize-winners in the Orchestra's 1974 Composition Competition. They were Alan Murdoch with *Path to Peace* and Alec Macdonald with *Threnoidea, An Abercorn Memorial*. Macdonald's work followed the Abercorn Restaurant bombing in March 1972 and he recalls how the Troubles also impinged on its composition in May 1974: "I was working on it during the Workers' Strike when there was often no power. I have vivid memories of sitting at the piano/dining room table at home, working by the light of an oil lamp. In one way it made me feel closely linked with composers of the past – and helped me to appreciate why Bach, Handel, Haydn, et al, had eyesight problems in later life!"

Like Bill Campbell nearly 30 years later, Macdonald's *Threnoidea* absorbed the Troubles' own sound-world. "Although the title refers to a specific incident, the inspiration was more general: the sorrow occasioned by so much death and destruction and, more prosaically, though no less real, the constant sound of sirens. It got to the point where I seemed to be 'hearing' them even when there were none. The siren figure (oscillating thirds) forms a key part of the musical argument, while the spiritual aspect of the piece is represented by a motif from the setting of the *Stabat Mater* by Penderecki, a composer I was particularly interested in at the time (thanks to Adrian Thomas). The image of the mother weeping is, of course, an iconic one for the Troubles. Its musical interval (a rising second) and the sirens' falling thirds dominate the piece, at times seeming to merge."

Stephen Gardner's *Wanting Not Wanting*, commissioned by the BBC for a St Patrick's Day concert with the Ulster Orchestra in 1992, used a "very loosely based impression of the Irish air, *Snaidhm an Ghrá (The True Lover's Knot)*". Gardner expanded on the music's background in a revised programme note for a performance at the Sonorities Festival in 1995. There had been "two utterly senseless acts of mass murder at Teebane [January 1992] and in a bookies' on the Ormeau Road [February 1992]. These tragedies had a profound effect on the mood of the music. There is a constant struggle for light to shine through. An Ulster Processional, which provides the climax, has a beacon of light in the high trumpet solo, though it is still tinged with sorrow. The work ends reflectively. *Wanting, Not Wanting* is dedicated to those who pointlessly lost their lives during the conflict."

Gardner returned to that marching element for his 2003 RTÉ commission, *NEVER... NEVER... NEVER...*, premièred by the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra. The title, referring to Ian Paisley's 1985 speech rejecting the Anglo-Irish Agreement, had originally been *Three Screaming Paisleys*. "RTÉ advised me against this, thinking that it might be sensitive stuff. So, I changed it to the listener-friendly Never..." The music makes use of *Onward Christian Soldiers* and *The Sash* and Gardner says "there's a lot of belligerent stuff going on ... It is full of conflict, and near resolutions." John McLachlan, reviewing the first performance, commented on the "extensive break on two snare drums sounded suspiciously like Lambeg drum patterns to me. Hair-raising!" He also described the ending as "a fantastic depiction of evangelistic catharsis".

Gardner used *The Sash* again in 2008 for a BBC orchestral commission, *An Sash*, in which he noisily recalled childhood memories of Eleventh night bonfires and the Twelfth parades.

Different responses

Philip Hammond lived and worked in areas which were not directly affected by the Troubles and he had no reason or interest in delving deeply into the political issues behind the Troubles. "It was not part of my artistic awareness and I preferred to explore other life issues, or not as the case might be, in the majority of my compositions."

Brian Irvine also finds it difficult to deal with the Troubles "and to be honest there is so much material that does deal with it brilliantly, in literature, poetry, drama, etc. It is not an area that really interests me."

However, he argues that the horror of the Troubles "is something no person who has lived through this time in Northern Ireland can ignore. Like it or not, we are connected to it, affected by it. Like many, my family was knitted into the fabric of working class Belfast life ... Life was a daily bombardment of violence mixed with sharp, black wit, decency, love, generosity, banter and fear ... As a kid in this environment, brought up against the backdrop of the Troubles, I was nervous and afraid. The act of creating and shaping sound provided such a fundamental escape for me. I noticed early on that making noise with others enabled me to completely live freely in a world that was exciting, vibrant, full of optimism and joy."

"Because of the highly-charged, politically-driven agenda of Northern Ireland life, I was attracted to live more in the world of making than in any other dimension. It was all about escape, feeling free and feeling alive. Rejecting anything associated with Ireland or Northern Ireland, I was drawn to the exotic sounds of America, Russia, Underground, Experimental, Punk, Free Improvisation, etc. ... Music for me was a total rejection of every aspect of the Troubles and Northern Ireland and ultimately drove me to America and England to study. Ironically though, my attraction to the dysfunctional began to foster a very strong and real commitment to making in Northern Ireland. I really began to appreciate the creative energy and the unresolved 'want' of the people here. It began to feel so natural to be able to integrate and harness that energy and appetite into music I wanted to make."

"The Troubles fostered in me an almost overwhelming desire to make and to communicate in the abstract language of sound; provided me with a need to escape and to create an environment where I could focus thought and feeling and conduct my own experiments in exploration and aesthetic communication."

"What has interested me creatively is making work that has nothing to do with the Troubles but is created and performed by those that have been involved in these back stories. I am interested in individualism and exploring ways to integrate that individualism in an aesthetically interesting way. So I have made a lot of work for, and with, many different kinds of people who have suffered great loss, been involved in paramilitary activity, have been victims to, and instigators of, the most terrible things, prisoners, victims, descendants, observers, children, teenagers, adults, elderly, able-bodied, disabled, etc. The work is never 'about' the Troubles, but it is work that has those affected by the Troubles at its core and is a process of creating/performing something new."

"Having said that, there is one piece that I made 20 years ago entitled *Missa Terribilis* with text from Padraic Fiacc's poem of the same title, inspired by the death of a nurse in the rubble of the Enniskillen cenotaph bombing [1987], but it's not very good – too sentimental. The work is an electro-acoustic piece for piano and tape and a girl on a chair."

Peter Rosser, who only began writing after the first ceasefires, says he cannot really think of how his work as a composer has been directly affected. "Living here, you can't not be affected in some unconscious way – but that's the problem, it's unconscious, and not readily available to me."

Pre-ceasefire, "the composers' charge was to provide an alternative arena into which cultural values could be discharged and then (re-)expressed without recourse to the purely atavistic. A difficult task, indeed, at least before the beginnings of a formal political settlement. But times have changed, and slowly – at least since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 – ideas of accommodation and understanding have become dominant. Contemporary music itself, it now seems, had always been a blueprint for living with, and for, diversity."

Amongst some of the distinct and motivating musical types dominated by ideas of accommodation and understanding since 1998, Rosser lists the "junk yard, urban, mix-and-match aesthetic that provided a significant home for those who believed that humour and irony were the only ways out of the impasse, led by the ribald and infectious Brian Irvine Ensemble."

Spiritual utopianism

Another type Rosser identifies is "the kind of spiritual utopianism that promised a delivery from material grief through art, most effectively expressed by the Ulster Orchestra/BBC commissioning of composers like Ian Wilson and Deirdre Gribbin."

Her native Northern Ireland provides an occasional but recurring thread through Deirdre Gribbin's music. *Tribe*, a large ensemble work from 1997, faces up angrily to the Drumcree stand-offs and incorporates folk-like music and marching bands in Charles Ives fashion, but described by Bob Gilmore as "bleaker and more politically charged".

Unity of Being was commissioned by the Ulster Orchestra in 2001 for its 35th anniversary and also performed by the Orchestra at the opening concert of the *UK with NY* Festival in New York, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Its subtitle was *A Peace Anthem for Northern Ireland*: "the sense of unity I want to convey is that of Northern Ireland: neither Ireland nor Britain, but a place with its own distinct identity. Maybe a lot of people living there don't know how special that unified culture could be."

Gribbin's 2007 BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra was a concerto for six Lambeg drums, *Goliath*. The music treads a fine line between fear and excitement: the sound of the drums which had terrified her as a child was now a fascinating source of strong rhythmical identity. For Gribbin, the work represents a journey; a re-defining of culture and a symbol of a shared future. As she told Bob Gilmore, "I looked at it in a very distant way and thought, this is a culture that shouldn't die, because this drumming is very skilled, and these people should continue to drum ... I love the sound of it, and that's the prime force".

In Gribbin's programme note for her most recent work, *The Binding of the Years* (2012), a Piano Concerto commissioned by RTÉ, she tells of being inspired by a piece of Aztec sculpture and the powerful ritual of lighting one flame from another. Amongst other things, it reminded her "of the 'peaceful' candlelit processions in Belfast during the troubles in the 1970s when communities of women from both sides of the religious divide who called themselves 'The Peace People' took to the streets with candles in silent processions of unity."

Reconciliation, unity, respect for differing cultures? Northern Ireland's composers, like its writers and artists, have breathed that tainted air. It has surely permeated their work, sometimes consciously, perhaps more often unconsciously. Some from afar looking in, others close by, trying to look out. Some have faced up to specific aspects of the Troubles; some have done so in a much less obvious and more oblique way; others feel their most useful contribution is simply to write the best music they can. All have risen above the ingrained bloody-mindedness and there's a great sense of optimism around.

However, Greg Caffrey feels "that Northern Ireland has been in a cultural coma for reasons of the Troubles. Every artist has been affected by default due to the lack of cultural investment". That certainly wasn't the message I was hearing from so many different composers. Caffrey also asks where the peace dividends are to build a cultural awareness. "My music is mostly performed abroad, which is a bit sad."

Undoubtedly, in a post-Troubles era, the music of Northern Ireland composers needs a platform. Whether or not that music focuses specifically on the Troubles or reflects on this troubled society or something much more abstract, will anyone be listening out there?

David Byers

July 2012

Email responses

Elaine Agnew, 3 July 2012

Hilary Bracefield, 7 June 2012

Bill Campbell, 12 June 2012

Eibhlis Farrell, 25 June 2012

Philip Flood, 11 June 2012

Stephen Gardner, 12 June 2012

Philip Hammond, 6 June 2012

Piers Hellawell, 13 June 2012

Brian Irvine, 14 June 2012

Alec Macdonald, 14 June 2012

Simon Mawhinney, 14 June 2012

Deirdre McKay, 20 June 2012

Paul McKinley, 7 June 2012

David Morris, 9 June 2012

Kevin O'Connell, 6 June 2012

Peter Rosser, 11 June 2012

Adrian Thomas, 6 June 2012

Ian Wilson, 6 June 2012

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Discography

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Mawhinney, Simon, *Hunshigo, Altarus* (AIR-CD-9027)

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