

Darmstadt Revisited: Seóirse Bodley's *News from Donabate* (1999)

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Musical Modernism has received a lot of flak in recent years. Particularly in English-speaking countries it is almost customarily accused of being elitist and solely concerned with technical innovation, thereby deliberately shutting off referentiality, both towards other musics and towards society at large. The butt of this critique is often the so-called 'Darmstadt School' of the European post-war avant-garde, which, with its obscurantist theories and techniques, appeared like the epitome of modernism.

So wrote Björn Heile in a recent review of M.J. Grant's *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics: Compositional Theory in Post-War Europe*.¹ Having almost single-handedly introduced the more extreme forms of musical modernism to Ireland in the 1960s, Seóirse² Bodley (b. 1933) too took critical flak. It wasn't until his development of a combination of post-war modernist techniques with elements of Irish music in the 1970s (or what I have described as 'Irish music heard through Darmstadt ears',³ or what Axel Klein has called 'a creative conflict between the two traditions'⁴) that he was to achieve national recognition. It is not surprising that in the anti-modernist world of the last quarter of the twentieth century, his First String Quartet of 1968 was never again to be heard (recorded yet never released), or that his *Configurations* of 1967 had to wait thirty-five years before its second performance at the RTÉ Living Music Festival in 2002. Bodley enjoyed a *Mise Éire-ish* type of validation as an Irish composer with the relative success of *A Small White Cloud Drifts Over Ireland* in 1975, a work which vaulted his name into the national consciousness, and in many ways it remains his most famous work. It was followed by his second symphony in 1980 notably subtitled 'I have Loved the Lands of Ireland' and various prestigious commissions such as his Third Symphony (*Ceol*) composed for the opening of the National Concert Hall in 1981.⁵ But this more accessible synthesis of styles was of course not unproblematic. His very 'Irish' Fourth Symphony of 1991, for example, with its main theme in the first movement complete with obligatory flattened 7th; or the final movement with its 'Irish' inspired rondo theme and an overtly Irish air with which the flute interrupts this rondo (*Example 1*). However, this air appears to be refuted musically by the subsequent raucous *glissandi* (*Example 2*), clearly a reference to Bartók's similar dismissal of Shostakovich's bland theme from his

¹ Cambridge: CUP, 2001. Heile's review appeared in *Music and Letters*, vol. 84/1, February 2003, p. 132.

² Seóirse Bodley has used the Irish version of 'George' since the 1950s.

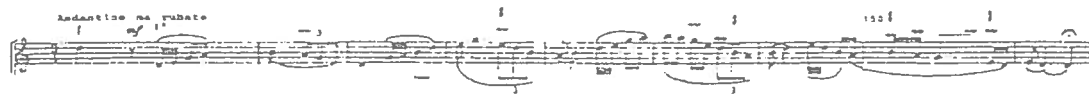
³ Gareth Cox, 'An Irishman in Darmstadt: Seóirse Bodley's String Quartet no. 1 (1968)', *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, Irish Musical Studies vii, ed. Gareth Cox & Axel Klein (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), p. 27.

⁴ Axel Klein, 'Seóirse Bodley', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2nd edition, ed. Stanley Sadie. London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 3, p. 775.

⁵ Bodley stated in interview with Charles Acton that it would be 'a nice thing [...] if we could have our national composers writing in a national idiom'. *Éire-Ireland* 5 (1970), p. 129.

Seventh Symphony, which is so mercilessly parodied in the fourth movement of his *Concerto for Orchestra*.

Example 1. Bodley, Symphony no. 4, bars 143-151 (solo flute only)



Did this therefore represent the beginning of an abashed rejection of an unconcealed Irishness? After all, it was as long ago as 1934 that Constant Lambert was lambasting similar nationalist traits in Spanish music which appeared 'at times as irritating and embarrassing' as the self-conscious racial exhibitionism of those who unconvincingly remark, 'Wouldn't I be telling you that it's Irish I am'.⁶ In Ireland audiences had

Example 2. Bodley, Symphony no. 4, bars 152-155 (brass [minus horns] & strings only)

A multi-staff musical score for brass and strings. The staves are labeled: Trum. 1 2, Trum. 3, Trum. 1 2, Bass Trum., Tuba, Timpani, Perc., Harp, Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vcl., and D.B. The score shows various dynamics (f, ff, p) and performance instructions such as 'senza sord' and 'gloss'. The music is written in a grand staff format with multiple parts.

⁶ Constant Lambert, *Music Ho* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 119.

become accustomed to a Bodleyian style which appeared to serve him well and was arguably recognisably his own. But was it enough for him? Was he now yearning for the halcyon days of Darmstadt where he spent three fruitful summers at the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* from 1963-65? His mammoth 52-minute solo piano piece, *News from Donabate* of 1999 certainly came as a surprise to many, a compositional bolt out of the blue. Did this 'departure' constitute a conscious conceptual rejection of a personal style that stretched over thirty years, or was it merely a nostalgic revisiting and reworking of past material and techniques? Having written about the apogee of his Darmstadt style as represented by the First String Quartet in the late 1960s⁷ and with the feeling that in many ways that period of his compositional style was over, it was interesting to note his return to these techniques almost thirty-five years later. Perhaps *News from Donabate* will come to be seen as constituting a stylistic watershed work just as the *Prelude Toccata and Epilogue* of 1963 and the *Narrow Road to the Deep North* of 1972 bracket an earlier ten-year Darmstadt period?

News from Donabate was first performed by Andrei Roudenko on 21 February 2001 at the Musicaitl Festival in the Aula Maxima at NUI Galway. This performance was recorded for the Contemporary Music Centre (CMC) and is currently available on a non-commercial CD. Bodley refers to the work as early as 1996 in an interview with Michael Dungan for the Contemporary Music Centre's *New Music News*, when revealing that he would 'probably continue with a solo piano work which has [...] suffered from interruptions by commissions [...]'.⁸ He confirms this gestation period in his programme note (identical on the CD and in the CMC publication). In another interview with Dungan seven years later in 2003 (also for the CMC), Bodley states that

I just felt that what I wanted to do with that would not be amenable to, for example, either using tonal expression or elements of traditional music. Neither seemed right for it, so I just simply turned around and did it differently, and in a sense rejoined some of my earlier experiences in avant-garde music. I wanted to write a work that would somehow be illuminated from inside. But in order to do the sort of work I had in mind, I wanted to avoid any kind of a) sentimentality and b) any too direct expression. So I deliberately wanted to put myself in a sort of indirect mode of expression.⁹

Bodley states that he 'gave the piece as a whole the perhaps slightly ironic title' *News from Donabate* in order to concentrate his mind.¹⁰ He recounts that every September during the mid-1960s he used to stay for a month at a house in Donabate beside the

⁷ Cox, op. cit. This article also details the various composers and lectures which Bodley heard in Darmstadt. See also Hazel Farrell's detailed work on Bodley's *Ariel Songs* of 1969 in 'Aspects of Pitch Structure and Pitch Selection in Post-War Irish Composition: An Analytical Study of Tonal and Post-Tonal Referential Collections in Selected Works by Irish Composers', unpubl. Ph.D diss., University of Limerick, 2002, pp. 36-58.

⁸ Interview with Michael Dungan, *New Music News*, September 1996, p. 11. He also reports that 'I wasn't terribly happy with what I'd written so it's undergoing some major changes at the moment. And if it ever sees the light of day it will be a large-scale work for solo piano [...] the provisional title for the work, [...] is *News from Donabate* [...] It's not actually programmatic, but perhaps it will be reflective of states of mind'.

⁹ Interview with Michael Dungan, 2003, Contemporary Music Centre, Ireland, www.cmc.ie/articles/article638.html

¹⁰ Seoirse Bodley, Sleeve Notes, *News from Donabate* (CD: CMC Archive). Identical to programme note to the CMC piano score.

sea and compose there. Donabate was a small seaside village north of Dublin with a population of about 400 (now a sprawling suburb in the commuter belt of greater Dublin). The title of the piece is of considerable interest, not least because it appears to have been something which Bodley himself agonised over, and at one stage he was going to call it *From the Other Side*.¹¹ In fact the piece was to bear the sub-title *September Music no. 2*,¹² an intriguing appellation which harks back, not unsurprisingly, to another work which took shape at the same time in the late 1960s, his first String Quartet of 1968 which was, according to Bodley, conceived as 'the first movement of September Music no. 1'.¹³ This would therefore appear to suggest that the idea for this piano piece actually post-dates the String Quartet, i.e. from the very end of the 1960s. He also states that he intended the String Quartet (the first September Music) to be 'the first of a series of projected works which somehow reflect the significance of that month for him, not only that month externally but also an attitude'.¹⁴ It is this extra-musical concept of 'attitude' to which he returns thirty-five years later. He recalls that:

During one sojourn in 1967 [I] experienced a startling and quite unexpected change of consciousness. It was as if I viewed the ordinary quotidian world from a perspective quite dissimilar to that of my usual perceptions. Everything was quite different (while on another level remaining the same). Seeing the normal world from another viewpoint, everything had a different meaning. Even ordinary human relationships were changed and priorities were altered. It was not a fleeting experience. With varying degrees of intensity it lasted some 2.5 weeks. At its height it became quite overwhelming in its immediacy. All was suffused with a radiance within itself – something that is always there but unseen. Shortly after I left Donabate the altered perception faded – in Chester, England.¹⁵

He states that he had intended for quite a few years to write a work 'arising from this experience'.¹⁶ The piece is in ten sections, each with a title:

1. Night-scene with electric light and starlight
2. Such a morning¹⁷
3. Six inches above the ground
4. The breath
5. Red flagpole in sunlight
6. A walk to the post-office
7. Through the narrow gate on a fine morning with dew
8. Twelve noon – but why bother going?
9. The wheel turns by itself
10. The Sea

¹¹ Mentioned in an e-mail correspondence with Miceal O'Siadhail, March 10 1999. Bodley also used the title 'News from Ireland' as a translation in the *Carta Irlandesa* songs of 1988.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music, Programme Booklet, 1969.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bodley, Seóirse, Sleeve Notes, op. cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ 'Such a Morning' was originally to be called 'Vormittag am Strand' after a poem by Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914).

Bodley states that these titles are not intended as illustrative but that he decided to leave them in place 'in the hope that it might help to make his thought processes a little more transparent.'¹⁸ He says that he did this before in *Meditations on Lines from Patrick Kavanagh* (1971) by using the phrases from the poem 'as a stimulus [...] taking them really as a starting point but not attempting a direct expression'.¹⁹ The piece is based on a 21-note series which repeats seven of the notes twice, and one (the D) three times:

Example 3. Bodley, *News from Donabate* – Prime Row



The most common interval classes are ic1 & ic2 whereas ic4 (the 'major third' dyad) only appears once. Bodley records that when 'using the larger tone rows beyond twelve notes, like fifteen- or sixteen-note rows [I was less] concerned with the question of tonality or atonality, but just more with using it as a sort of distancing device so that, in a way, it's like holding yourself back a bit. And somehow the expression becomes more intense.'²⁰ In the first piece, *Night Scene with electric light and starlight* (see *Example 4*) the prime form of the row can be traced through bars 1-4 and its retrograde inversion noted condensed in bars 9-10. However such formal constructions do not preclude certain programmatic elements which appear to unfold in a combination of demisemiquaver flashes of light interpolated with a romantic/sleazy night music as represented by the many 'George Shearing-esque' tetrachords, particularly in the nine-fold descending sequence in bars 14-15. Whether the extensive and exhilarating *A walk to the post-office* (a movement selected to represent Ireland at the International Society for Contemporary Music's World Music Days in Yokohama in 2001) with its repetitively hammered top A, or the more luxuriant 21-bar aphorism which follows, *Through the narrow gate on a fine morning with dew*, this significant piece clearly merits close study. More importantly however, it should surely enter the repertoire of pianists interested in turn-of-the-century Irish music (particularly as sections could be played as stand-alone pieces).

Bodley has often implied that it was the spirit of Darmstadt that inspired him more than the explicit techniques of that school. It seems to have represented a compositional paradise for him and so, by revisiting it conceptually over thirty-five years on, *News from Donabate* appears for him personally to be a Miltonic case of *Darmstadt Lost* and *Darmstadt Regained*.

¹⁸ Bodley, Sleeve Notes, op. cit.

¹⁹ Dungan, 2003, op. cit.

²⁰ Ibid.

Example 4. *News from Donabate: Night Scene with electric light and starlight* (bars 1-16)

Piano

$\text{♩} = 60$

The musical score is written for piano and consists of seven systems of two staves each. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 60$. The piece begins with a dynamic of *fp* (forzando piano) and includes a variety of dynamic markings such as *pp*, *ppp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, and *sf*. There are also accents (>) and hairpins. The score includes slurs, ties, and a 'L.H.' marking in the second system. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

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