Seóirse Bodley –An Appreciation

For the composer's first anniversary, 17 November 2024

I have been an admirer of the music of Seóirse Bodley (1933–2023) since the early 1970s, when I first came to know his compositions, and I have followed the trajectory of his aesthetic and creative imagination with the greatest of interest since that time. Seóirse Bodley made an outstanding and sustained contribution to the musical and broader cultural landscape in Ireland for almost seventy years. His contribution is threefold: firstly, there is his large and distinctive body of original compositions, secondly, his commitment to teaching, performing and conducting, and thirdly, his devotion to developing a firmer and more secure infrastructure for music in Ireland: what might be referred to as his musical engagement and advocacy.

From 1959 until his retirement in 1998, Seóirse lectured at the music department of University College Dublin, instructing and inspiring numerous students, many of whom have gone on to make their own distinctive contribution to musical life in Ireland and beyond. His commitment to the development of music in Ireland is aptly demonstrated by his close involvement with and committee membership of organizations and festivals including the Music Association of Ireland, the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music (which he chaired for many years), and the Association of Irish Composers. He was a founding member of Aosdána and served with distinction on its organizing committee, the *Toscaireacht*. He was elected *Saoi* in November 2008, the highest honour bestowed by Aosdána and available to only seven people across all disciplines at any one time. To place this honour in context it might be worth mentioning that former *saoithe* include Samuel Beckett, Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel and Louis Le Brocquy.

It is, of course, for his outstanding body of original compositions that Seóirse will be best remembered. In his book *Séoirse Bodley,* Gareth Cox lists *Ring Out Ye Crystal Spheres* (for an octet of male voices) and *O Mistress Mine* (for baritone and piano), both of which were composed in 1950, as the composer's earliest completed works. His final major composition was the deeply-felt and moving *Songs from the Reservoir* premiered at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in 2018. Put another way, this indicates that Bodley was a forceful and continuous presence in the landscape of new Irish music for almost seventy years. The difficulty in attempting to place his body of work in context is that Bodley's own works very often created the context of new developments in Irish composition.

With its use of 12 tone technique allied to finely wrought and clearly etched gestures and innovative timbral combinations, his *Chamber Symphony No 1* of 1964 certainly indicated a new direction in Irish composition, placing modernist approaches and style to the fore. It has always been and remains a favourite work of mine and it bears comparison with the best of European compositions at that time or since.

Bodley's orchestral piece *Configurations* completed in 1966 advanced the case for modernity and the *avant-garde* even further and elicited the comment from the *Irish*

Times critic Charles Acton that it was 'probably the most avant-garde music ever presented live in Dublin'. Hearing it live some years ago in Dublin, it still sounded startlingly fresh, novel, revolutionary, vibrant and utterly modern.

It is no exaggeration to say that those of us who were privileged to be in the St Francis Xavier Hall on the fifth of January 1976 to witness the premiere of *A Small White Cloud Drifts Over Ireland* were left overwhelmed by the boldness of Bodley's concept and invention. With its juxtaposition and fusion of elements of Irish traditional music and the *avant-garde,* the work offered a new vantage point from which to view and imagine the relationship of identity and change, of heritage and evolution, of tradition and modernity.

A further memorable concert given by John O'Conor in St Canice's Cathedral in Kilkenny in August 1977, which I also attended, featured the first performance of the solo piano version of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* and *Aislingí*, both of which confirmed the intriguing development of Bodley's musical and imaginative inner landscape.

There are few Irish composers if any, who have engaged with poetry through the medium of the song cycle to the extent that Bodley did. Once again, I count myself fortunate to have experienced the first performances of a series of moving and memorable song cycles including, amongst many others, *A Girl* (1978), with text by Brendan Kennelly, *The Naked Flame* (1987) and *Earlsfort Suite* (2000), both to poems by Mícheál Ó Siadhail, and *Songs from the Reservoir* (2018), once again with texts by Brendan Kennelly and premiered in the Royal Irish Academy of Music. This late work displays Bodley's undiminished musical imagination and his constantly evolving musical expression in a work of great subtlety and emotional impact.

Of the myriad details that strike me about Bodley's song cycles, I will refer to just three. Firstly, there is his ability to penetrate to the very core of the poetic text. Secondly, they are true song cycles rather than just a collection of songs – a crucial distinction. Bodley's song cycles are placed in a narrative and dramatic tradition and take the listener on a voyage of discovery and invention. Thirdly, the relationship of the piano to the voice is at the core of his song cycles. The pianist is an equal partner, amplifying, echoing and providing independent commentary on the text, while at the same time fully supporting the vocal line.

While it is beyond my scope or intention to discuss the vast range of Bodley's entire compositional output here, I do want to refer to the highly significant contribution he has made to that most iconic and demanding of musical genres, the symphony. Apart from two chamber symphonies, there are five numbered symphonies for large orchestra. These works are marked by boldness of invention, vibrancy of orchestration and a strong sense of narrative trajectory. They evoke grandeur, energy, reflection, elegy, elegance and beauty of orchestral sonority. All are available in recordings which richly merit and repay attention.

2023 marked Bodley's ninetieth birthday. Amongst the many celebratory events on this auspicious occasion were the performance of his song cycle *The Hiding Places of Love* in the Hugh Lane Gallery in April and performances of a number of his pieces in October, when he was awarded an honorary DLitt by the National University of Ireland. His farewell to musical composition was a small and quite beautiful choral piece *Love After Chagall* (14 August 2018) on a text by Eva Bourke. This piece was composed as a wedding anniversary gift for his wife, the musicologist Lorraine Byrne Bodley.

Seóirse Bodley's impact on the musical landscape in Ireland was exceptional; although his music was made in Ireland and embedded in the Irish landscape, culture and psyche, it enjoys an international, even global reach, having been performed and broadcast throughout Europe, North America and even as far away as Australia and China. Bodley created an exceptional body of distinctively original, artistically challenging, and superbly conceived compositions. His engagement with and commitment to teaching, music advocacy and of course composition enhanced and enriched the status of music in Ireland, and brought international recognition and honour to both Seóirse and the country as a whole.

John Buckley