

Music Preferred

Essays in Musicology, Cultural History
and Analysis in Honour of Harry White

Edited by Lorraine Byrne Bodley



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Layout and Cover: Nikola Stevanović
Printed and bound in the EU

Cover image:
Harry White at the International Conference, Schubert and Concepts of Late Style,
Maynooth University, 22 October 2011

This publication was funded by:



Lorraine Byrne Bodley (ed.): *Music Preferred:
Essays in Musicology, Cultural History and Analysis in Honour of Harry White*
Vienna: HOLLITZER Verlag, 2018

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a division of Hollitzer Baustoffwerke Graz GmbH, Wien

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ISBN pdf: 978-3-99012-402-4
ISBN epub: 978-3-99012-403-1

“NO, SIR; THE IRISH ARE NOT MUSICAL”:
SOME HISTORIC (?) DEBATES
ON IRISH MUSICALITY

AXEL KLEIN

“Are the Irish musical?” asks the writer of a letter to the editor of the *Musical Opinion* in October 1903. And as may be expected he provides the answer right away: “No, Sir; the Irish are not musical. They may have a sentimental conservative affection for their own melodies and songs, but in the broader sense of the word they lack both taste and appreciation in music.”¹

The letter writer identifies himself as ‘an exile’ who claims “knowledge if not [...] authority” in this question, derived from “many years’ residence in the country”. His supporting arguments are that there is no permanent orchestra in Dublin, that choral societies only exist because of “the personal influence of a few local enthusiasts”, that the undeniable success of the Feis Ceoil merely stems from its competitive character, and that an opera company performing Wagner in Ireland could only make up for their losses in one season by performing Balfe and Wallace in the next – concluding: “but that is a very different thing to allow that the Irish as a nation are musical”.

The popular notion of the Irish as a musical nation is, of course, not crushed and destroyed by a single letter to an English music journal, not in 1903 and not today. In fact, one might find a very similar understanding of the musicality of the Irish until the present day. No twenty-first-century tourist to Dublin would doubt that the Irish are musical, and as a proof s/he would point to the pub sessions in Temple Bar or the buskers on Grafton Street.

The issue at stake here is that, sadly, the majority of the Irish today would even agree to that understanding. Irish traditional music is often perceived as a marketing argument, from Bord Fáilte to Aer Lingus, whereas it would be hard to find the National Concert Hall represented in the inflight magazine of an airline. A historian or sociologist of music would have interpreted the 1903 statement as a specimen of colonial arrogance, denying the Irish the ability to be musical because they don’t understand the value of ‘classical’ music. Fast forward a hundred years, and the Irish succumbed to their inability. Or so it seems.

I should like to thank Dr Adrian Scahill for his close reading and his valuable suggestions relating, in particular, to the role of traditional music in the debate presented in this article.

1 Letter signed by “An Exile: and dated “September 8, 1903”, published in the *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review* 27:313 (October 1903), p. 44.

Musicality as such is a term and a concept that is not bound to any particular genre of music, be it the ‘classical’, the traditional, the popular, or any other. However, this seems to be a rather modern, and perhaps enlightened, understanding. Unfortunately, enlightenment was never a strong point of the ruling classes, and so we find ‘musicality’ as one of many distinguishing aspects between the Gael and the Gall in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. It mostly takes a form like that so succinctly summarized in that brief letter to the editor in 1903: an English (or Protestant Anglo-Irish) writer would dismiss the Irish for their poor musical understanding and appreciation, and an Irish (nationalist, Roman Catholic or otherwise more sympathetic) writer would praise Irish music in enthusiastic terms, but on looking closer at his subject s/he is writing about traditional music only, about “their own melodies and songs”, as the 1903 ‘Exile’ put it. This dichotomy in Irish music inevitably means that art music is part of an Anglo-Irish ‘elitist’ culture and traditional music is often regarded as the true Irish music – a dichotomy that shaped the perception of musical history in Ireland until the present day.

That these views are so forceful and enduring has, in fact, its roots in decades of musical partisanship. The object of this article is to document the more candid occurrences on the basis of an analysis of articles and published correspondence in late 19th and early 20th century periodicals.

“AN IRISHMAN IS A PERFECT MUSICAL INSTRUMENT”
– THE MID-1870S

The equation of the term ‘Irish music’ with the traditional music of Ireland, still so prevalent in twenty-first-century Ireland, is part of this unfortunate debate – unfortunate, because it still hampers the perception of those kinds of music in this country that are not traditional and yet Irish. Interestingly, this understanding comes from various sides of the discussion. While a quote such as the following may remind us today of the many national-minded outpourings of the veteran W. H. Grattan Flood (1857–1928), it was in fact written by an English music historian some thirty years before Flood’s influential *History of Irish Music* (1905):

Ireland from a remote period has been celebrated for its cultivation of music, and admitted as one of the parent countries of that art.

Thus wrote Edward Francis Rimbault (1816–1876) in an 1875 article for *The Leisure Hour*; a self-proclaimed “journal of instruction and recreation”.² Less rem-

2 Edward F. Rimbault: “The By-Paths of Musical History”; part VII, “The National Melodies of Ireland”, in: *The Leisure Hour*, no. 1240 (2 Oct. 1875), pp. 636–639, here p. 636.

iniscient of Flood, however, is the ensuing sentence that clarifies what Rimbault's generous concession was all about:

Most of its national airs are so old that their authors and the eras in which they composed them are unknown.

A neutral musicologist, unfamiliar with the situation in Ireland, may wonder what the second sentence has to do with the first. But Rimbault then continues in the course of his article to provide evidence to his introductory paragraph merely by highlighting the merits of Edward Bunting, Thomas Moore and George Petrie, without giving any thought whatsoever to serious composers.

A passionate 1876 letter by 'A Musical Fenian', to the editor *The Musical World*³ does not do much to balance the situation in favour of art music, although he was incited by "two insinuations, born and bred of Saxon hatred [...] against Dublin citizens, the first being, 'that they are not musical,' and the second, 'that they get their music at the expense of Belfast.'" Focusing on the first 'insinuation' (the source of which the writer does not reveal), one of his counter arguments is:

An Irishman is, in fact, a perfect musical instrument which never wants winding-up, and never gets out of order, but so happily contrived by nature as to send unceasingly forth unfailing song; [...]

We can imagine, without quoting every single idea of the letter-writer, that he, too, is not talking about art music. Well-meaning though he may have been, he is not far from doing his country a disservice when he, for instance, explains any potential wrong notes in the singing of an uneducated Irish singer with the 'imagination' that the listener applies to turn it into perfect harmony:

One of the glorious gifts bestowed on an Irishman is imagination, a charm that turns the dullest dross into purest gold and earth into a heaven. Therefore, when he listens in his home of an evening to a sister, wife, or an equally beloved one, singing the lays of his native land, his imagination supplies the hiatus any defect may make.

And he does not leave his argument in the private home but then goes on to apply it to church choirs as well. If that was true, it would be nothing but self-deception – and, consequentially, rather in support of the insinuation that the 'Musical Fenian' is attempting to refute. And one tends to almost pity the writer when he exclaims:

No, sir, no! deny an Irishman truth; deny his patriotism, sincerity, or generosity; but deny not his musical attributes!

3 "A Musical Fenian": "Music in Ireland", in: *The Musical World*, 9 December 1876, p. 823.

“RIDICULOUSLY EXAGGERATED STATEMENTS”
– THE MID-1880S

Ten years on, a debate in the *Musical Times* took on a much more factual and objective form, even though it started out initially with a rather polemic article entitled “Musical Talent in Ireland”, signed C. L. Graves.⁴ The writer is Charles Larcom Graves (1856–1944), younger brother of the poet and friend of Charles V. Stanford, Alfred Perceval Graves.⁵ In his introduction, Graves concedes that the “claims of the Irish to a higher rank among the musical races of the world than their neighbours on this side of St. George’s Channel are just as frequently advanced by the latter as by themselves”, acknowledging that the reputation of the Irish as a musical nation is equally prevalent in England as it is in Ireland. The occasion of his article in October 1886 was a report about a recent public lecture in Ireland:

I have before me, as I write, the report of a “Lecture on Irish Music,” recently delivered near Dublin, in which the following passages occur, “Ireland was not unjustly called the ‘land of song.’ She alone of all the nations has a musical instrument as her national emblem, while the flags of other nations were emblazoned with ravenous beasts and birds of prey.”⁶

Graves does not leave it at the criticism of this statement (inferring that then the intelligence of the Scotch could be disparaged by their “small cottony donkey thistle”), but turns to a number of rather polemic recourses to ancient Irish music – claiming that remnants of this music could still be heard in “performances of peasants in the outlying districts” – or of contemporary fiddlers. Graves somewhat unfairly intermingles the aesthetics of Irish traditional music with that of art music when he writes “[...] I have never yet known an Irish rustic fiddler who produced a tolerable tone, or possessed any knowledge of, or instinct for, harmony”⁷, regrets that the “peasant instrumentalist” is restricted to dance music, dismisses local Irish brass bands for their “quite phenomenal badness”, and concurs that if a peasant is asked to sing in Irish, “you cannot pronounce the result attractive”, before he concludes:

4 C. L. Graves: “Musical Talent in Ireland”, in: *The Musical Times* 27:524 (Oct. 1886), pp. 579–582.

5 Charles Larcom Graves was born in Dublin and died in Carlisle (England). It is not fully apparent from the article whether he was still living in Ireland at the time of writing in late 1886. He was a very active writer and critic on a wide range of topics, many relating to Ireland and to music, but rarely in their combination as here. Once in England, he became assistant editor of *The Spectator* and a member of the staff of *Punch*, a journal notoriously critical of Ireland. He also was the author of the first biographical monograph about Hubert Parry (1926).

6 Graves (1886), p. 580.

7 Both last quotes: Graves (1886), p. 580.

On these grounds, therefore, it is slightly presumptuous to claim for the Irish a superior ‘musical sensibility’ [...].⁸

and, after alleging a lack of part-singing in the Irish rural countryside, as opposed to the Welsh:

[...] in neither of these respects can the Irish of the present day maintain their right to the title of the ‘Land of Song.’⁹

In contrast to the authors of the 1870s, Graves then turns his attention to Irish composers, acknowledging that Ireland in comparison to Britain “contributes perhaps a larger share than her numbers would warrant us to expect”, giving brief attention to Balfe, Lover, Moore, Sullivan and Stanford.¹⁰ Balfe he dismisses for his “imperfect orchestration” and “common-place melody”, Lover for his “infantile accompaniments and conventional melody”, and to Moore he denies “the title of a national poet”. Sullivan and Stanford he does admire for “the achievements of which Irishmen are capable in the field of composition”, but not without pointing out “how the careers of both these distinguished musicians illustrate the dependence of Irish genius on foreign surroundings”. Furthermore, these would be but individual talents in contrast to any “high average excellence”. And the reason for this he sees in the lack of a concert hall, of a good orchestra and of a “first-rate Irish chorus”, in “the notorious cliquishness of Dublin musical society”, and in the poor state of musical education in Ireland, consequentially calling for “a really efficient Musical Academy in Dublin” that could “take practical steps towards confirming and justifying their often-heard claims to be considered a musical people”.¹¹

Graves’ article thus appears as a mixture of downright polemic negation of what he regards as unfounded claims of musicality among the Irish and a justified, albeit not complete, description of the contemporary Irish situation in music. He unfairly compares pears with apples in his juxtaposition of traditional musicians and classically educated ones, and is highly selective in his choice of composers to underscore his arguments. Yet, leaving polemics and a somewhat racist undertone aside, there remains a core of ideas that do sound troublesome.

Thankfully, the inevitable reaction from the Irish side does not attempt to turn straw into gold as in the mid-1870s. The responses include a long letter by an

8 This and the three preceding brief quotes: Graves (1886), p. 581.

9 Graves (1886), p. 582.

10 Graves (1886), p. 582. Michael William Balfe (1808–1870), composer of about 30 operas mainly in English and French; Samuel Lover (1797–1868), composer, writer, painter, wrote six operettas and many humorous songs on Irish subjects; Thomas Moore (1779–1852), poet and occasional composer, in music mainly known for his volumes of *Irish Melodies*; Arthur Sullivan (1842–1900), third-generation English composer of partial Irish extraction; Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), prolific Irish-born, English-resident composer – by 1886 still in his early career.

11 All quotes, Graves (1886), p. 582.

anonymous ‘Hibernicus’, a clarification from Charles Larcom Graves, and a letter by Joseph Robinson.¹² ‘Hibernicus’ is unidentified, but describes himself as one who is “old enough to recollect Dublin for many years”. He begins by declaring his position:

There has been some discussion from time to time upon the question whether or not Dublin may be termed, either in the past or present, a musical city. That is a matter which, of course, is open to much difference of opinion, but, for my part, I am inclined to hold the affirmative of the question.¹³

In his very considerate response, ‘Hibernicus’ agrees that the lack of an adequate concert hall and a permanent orchestra “have long been two great musical needs”. But he points to the recently opened Leinster Hall¹⁴ as the institution fulfilling the first of these needs and expresses the hope that the orchestra will soon follow, but that the Dublin Orchestral Society so far has not “been much of a success”. He does not agree to the alleged lack of a good choral society, pointing to the Dublin Musical Society, the University Choral Society and a number of smaller institutions. He also draws the attention to the series of chamber music recitals at the Royal Dublin Society which Michele Esposito had recently commenced.

He then makes an important remark:

With much of Mr. Graves’s observations I concur, and I think they show a practical acquaintance with the country not possessed by most critics upon Ireland; but I must say I think they are written in anything but a friendly spirit. I do not see why, because one Irishman chooses to make ridiculously exaggerated statements respecting music in Ireland, it is necessary for another to undertake the task of her disparagement in this regard.¹⁵

He also regards it as “not fair to compare the artistic progress of music in this poor and distracted land with its progress in wealthy, comfortable England”.

In a remarkably enlightened view on Graves’ criticism of Irish composers, ‘Hibernicus’ rightly argues that Balfe, Lover and Moore should be seen in the context of their time, considering that the “same charge might be made against

12 Under the headlines of “Music in Dublin” and “Musical Talent in Ireland”, in: *The Musical Times* 27 (Nov. 1886), pp. 676–678.

13 ‘Hibernicus’ (1886), p. 676.

14 The Leinster Hall in Hawkins Street was opened in November 1886 and seated more than 2,000 people. It was temporarily closed in 1895 and reopened as the third Theatre Royal in late 1897 (demolished in 1934); see Philip B. Ryan: *The Lost Theatres of Dublin*. Westbury, Wiltshire: The Badger Press, 1998, pp. 19–37. NB: Ryan speaks of the ‘second’ Theatre Royal, but he disregards the 17th-century one in Smock Alley.

15 ‘Hibernicus’ (1886), p. 677.

most his [i.e. Lover's] English contemporaries". He should also have mentioned Wallace and Rooke¹⁶ in his list of composers. Finally, however, he agrees with Graves that musical talent in Ireland is rather coincidental and not the result of a generally high musical standard:

That Ireland is more likely to achieve musical distinction by individual eminence than high average excellence I admit; and also that her failure in the latter arises from want of that co-operation which is a necessity of all harmony, not only musical, but social.¹⁷

Graves, in his response, then defends some of his statements by explaining that due to temporary absence he had not seen final proofs of his article and that his corrections had not arrived at the editorial office in time. He apologizes for having disregarded the Dublin Musical Society, after several reactions to that effect from "impartial witnesses of unimpeachable authority in such matters". He also admits "to my shame" never to have heard of the composer Rooke, but had purposely omitted Wallace because "the most recent authorities" had described him as Scottish,¹⁸ conceding:

With a great deal of what 'Hibernicus' has to say about music in Dublin, and in particular as to the high level of amateur talent in that city, I am entirely in accord.¹⁹

Much ado about nothing, one is inclined to say, as not much remains of his arguments – except the printed word.

Joseph Robinson's letter appears in the same issue of the *Musical Times* as Graves' response. Unsurprisingly, he "would ask Mr. Graves if he has ever heard of the Dublin Musical Society" but he is also doubting the writer's competence:

I have not the pleasure of Mr. Graves's acquaintance – indeed, I may say, without meaning to give offence, that I have never even heard of that gentleman, nor do I know what his opportunities have been of forming an opinion of the subject of which he treats.

To the list of Irish composers, Robinson thinks that Graves had "made more than one strange omission", and in particular points to his contemporary, Robert Prescott Stewart (1825–1894). However, like 'Hibernicus', Robinson agrees with

16 (William) Vincent Wallace (1812–1865), Waterford-born Irish composer of several English operas and virtuoso piano music; William Michael Rooke (1794–1847), Dublin-born composer of several operas and other vocal music.

17 This and the preceding quote, 'Hibernicus' (1886), p. 677.

18 He probably refers to James D. Brown's *Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. Paisley & London: Alexander Gardner, 1886, p. 606.

19 C. L. Graves, response to letter by 'Hibernicus', in: *The Musical Times* 27 (Nov. 1886), p. 677.

a number of fundamental criticisms made by Graves with regard to the general musical culture and the state of musical education:

The chief causes which, in my opinion, combine to make it so difficult to maintain a good orchestra in this country are, the indifferent musical education, the poverty of the country, and the utter indifference shown by the aristocracy and wealthy mercantile class of this city in the advancement of musical art in Ireland.

Mere patriotism would not remove these obstacles. That a “really efficient Academy of Music” was badly needed is a matter to which he expressly agrees, reporting his own experiences:

Since the Dublin Musical Society was founded I have refused admission to several hundreds of applicants, including a large number of the pupils of the Royal Irish Academy of Music, owing to their inability to read music at sight with anything like correctness.

Thus, this part of the debate ended on a conciliatory note, one that did not ignore the challenges of the time, but that also gives a fair measure of hope for developments in the right direction. One also gets a first impression of a potential range of neglected Irish composers, that – even though it took another 80 years to become considerably better understood²⁰ – is still far from being a self-evident part of musical culture in Ireland today.

“THE DISCUSSION MUST NOW CLOSE” – THE MID-1890S

With the debate of the mid-1890s we are in the middle of the increasing calls for Home Rule, the recent establishment of the Gaelic League (1893) and the imminent founding of the Feis Ceoil (1896) and its first festival (1897). This debate is an extended and at times fierce one. It takes place in the pages of the weekly journal *Musical News*, beginning with a letter to the editor in the issue of 25 May 1895 and lasting until 28 September, covering eleven letters in eight journal issues.²¹ Notwithstanding that the letter writers and readers could not be aware that we today would perceive their exchange as the third in a series of 19th-century debates, what is surprising is that the same arguments and misunderstandings continue to prevail. In fact, one cannot but get the impression that the more is at stake (here: the prospects of Home Rule), the less reasonable the debate becomes.

20 I am referring to the path-breaking study by Ita Beausang, née Hogan, *Anglo-Irish Music, 1780–1830*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1966.

21 *Musical News*, vol. 8, issues of 25 May, 8 June, 22 June, 27 July, 17 August, 31 August, 21 September, and 28 September 1895.

It is impossible (and perhaps unnecessary) to outline all of the arguments in this exchange. It involves anonymous writers, hiding their identities behind suggestive names like ‘Anglicanus’, ‘Hibernus’, and ‘One of the Fianna’, besides writers and composers Annie W. Patterson (1868–1934) and James C. Culwick (1845–1907).

The starting point was ‘Anglicanus’ complaint that the announcement of the Feis Ceoil in a previous issue of the journal contained the statement “that the old Irish music is ‘acknowledged to excel in potency and beauty the national music of any other country with which we are acquainted’”.²² With such a formulation, of course, the Feis organizers had handed the conflict on a plate. Not only does the phrase ‘with which we are acquainted’ invite an arrogant reaction, but the nationalist feelings expressed in such hyperbole must inevitably provoke criticism. The statement is typical for the nationalist writing on music in these years, in Ireland bearing the trademark of Annie Patterson, W. H. Grattan Flood, Edward Martyn, and others. ‘Anglicanus’ jumped at it immediately, of course, sardonically remarking that “the acquaintance of these patriots with music, outside the Emerald Isle, must be very small indeed”.²³ He also extended this opinion to traditional music as, in his view, the collections of Bunting, Petrie, and Joyce would not support the argument either.

Annie Patterson responded by claiming the Feis Ceoil Committee (in effect, she herself) had merely reiterated, “in a very quiet way, the strongly expressed opinion of Cambrensis”.²⁴ The arguments that ran hither and thither in the ensuing exchange are, in the main, not convincing. Either the source of a claim is hidden in some ancient manuscript with unclear meaning or they come across as unfounded postulations – indeed on both sides.

Inevitably, the discussion turned at some point to the question of musicality, with one of Patterson’s arguments running that “harp playing was practised as an advanced art among our people, not only at a time when England and Germany were plunged in barbarism, but also centuries before the Christian era”.²⁵ There evolves a heated and increasingly personal debate, and although ‘Anglicanus’ deals out no less than Patterson & Co., he once remarks “Why cannot the question of the value of Irish music be dealt with on impersonal grounds?”²⁶

22 ‘Anglicanus’: “On Irish Music”, in: *Musical News*, 25 May 1895, p. 493.

23 *Ibidem*, p. 494.

24 Annie W. Patterson: “On Irish Music”, in: *Musical News*, 8 June 1895, p. 541. Giraldus Cambrensis, or Gerald of Wales (c.1146–c.1223), in his *Topographia hibernica*, had written in very positive terms about the skill and artistry of medieval Irish musicians; for further references see Máire Mac Aongusa: “Gerald of Wales”, in: *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, ed. Harry White and Barra Boydell. Dublin: UCD Press, 2013, p. 428.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 541.

26 ‘Anglicanus’: “Irish Music”, in: *Musical News*, 21 June 1895, p. 589.

‘Hibernus’ takes the discussion away from ancient sources and futile mutual degradations to the music of the people:

A word or two might fittingly be inserted here on the present relative position of music in Ireland and England *among the musically uneducated people*, leaving entirely out of account professional and cultured amateur musicians and musical antiquaries.²⁷

‘Anglicanus’ had previously quoted the authority of Robert Prescott Stewart’s critical remarks in *Grove’s Dictionary* on the low quality of temperance bands “and that the people generally are not favourably disposed towards choral classes or associations”, Belfast being the only exception, – to which ‘Hibernus’ responds that “anyone knowing anything about Ireland will at once understand that the true cause for the people’s apathy [...] is to be sought in the peculiar religious and political circumstances of the country”.²⁸

The English-born, Irish-resident conductor and composer James C. Culwick calls the whole discussion “pointless” on account of the fact that both England and Ireland have long histories of ‘national song’ and that the English one was merely currently covered by “the thin dust of undisturbed libraries”.²⁹ The main difference between the countries’ national music was their “gender”:

English music is in the main manly and strong, Irish song is tender, pathetic, and on occasion whimsical. [...] if music can be of two genders, here we may find perfect types, and as it is never otherwise than unseemly, and altogether useless to contend about the supremacy of the one sex over the other, so is this present controversy pointless, unless it serve to bring out these facts, that there is room, nay, a necessity, for the music of both sorts, that the one is the complement of the other, and that music could not fulfil itself if either were discarded.

Thus, Culwick provides a solution to the conflict by likening England and Ireland to an old married couple, with the Irish musical character being female.³⁰ Needless to say, even such a well-meant compromise, even if it, too, rings of colonial arrogance today, did not end the debate. It had to be called off by the editor

27 ‘Hibernus’: “‘Anglicanus’ and Irish Music”, in: *Musical News*, 31 August 1895, p. 177.

28 Ibidem.

29 James C. Culwick: “National Music”, in: *Musical News*, 21 September 1895, p. 237.

30 Leith Davis has analysed this analogy and its colonial background in greater depth in her study *Music, Postcolonialism, and Gender. The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724–1874*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006, although her study is also another example for the unquestioned equation of the term ‘Irish music’ with Irish traditional music which I criticise here. I am indebted to Dr Adrian Scahill for pointing out this reference to me.

of the *Musical News* after four months, giving the last word to ‘Anglicanus’ and adding “The discussion must now close.”³¹

“IRELAND IS THE HOME OF THE ABNORMAL”
– BEFORE INDEPENDENCE

Returning to the 1903 debate quoted at the outset of this contribution (“No, Sir; the Irish are not musical”), this, too, sparked a controversy. Here, contrary to other pseudonyms like ‘Hibernicus’ or ‘Anglicanus’, it is not too difficult to identify the ‘Exile’ who so explicitly expressed his views on the musicality of the Irish, as he expressed them again elsewhere in almost the same words at around the same time. He must have been John Pentland Mahaffy (1839–1919), long-time Professor of Ancient History, Precentor of the Chapel and (from 1914) Provost of Trinity College Dublin.³² It should perhaps be kept in mind that he is the same Mahaffy who is documented as having said about a famous, originally Roman Catholic, Irish writer: “James Joyce is a living argument in defence of my contention that it was a mistake to establish a separate university for the aborigines of this island – for the corner boys who spit into the Liffey.”³³

Born in Vevey, Switzerland, to Irish parents and studying at Trinity College, it speaks volumes that Mahaffy styles himself anonymously as ‘An Exile’ in Ireland. He repeated the very same arguments as in the 1903 letter to the *Musical Opinion* in a 1905 speech at a Feis Ceoil meeting, which prompted a reply from the Irish tenor Barton McGuckin (1852–1913), who wrote:

That Professor Mahaffy is a man of rare general knowledge, of literary distinction, and a musical amateur of credit, is well known. For this reason it is that I cannot allow his statement that the ‘Irish nation is not a musical nation,’ as well as some subsidiary remarks on the subject of Irish musical societies to pass unchallenged.³⁴

To the claim that Irish audiences preferring Balfe over Wagner was “an example of the debased musical taste of the people of Dublin” he responded:

31 “Irish National Music”, in: *Musical News*, 28 September 1895, p. 258.

32 For more details on Mahaffy, see W. B. Stanford & R. B. McDowell: *Mahaffy. A Biography of an Anglo-Irishman*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971, and Lisa Parker: *Robert Prescott Stewart (1825–1894). A Victorian Musician in Dublin*. PhD diss., Maynooth University, 2009, p. 360 (fn.) and elsewhere.

33 Gerald Griffin: *The Wild Geese*. London: Jarrolds, 1938, p. 24; as quoted in Richard Ellmann: *James Joyce*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 58.

34 “Music in Ireland. Dr. Mahaffy’s Speech. Reply by Mr. McGuckin”, in: *The Irish Independent*, 17 Oct. 1905, p. 5. The following quotes from McGuckin are from the same source.

Strange as the coincidence may seem, I can assure Professor Mahaffy that the same may be said of London and all the principal cities of England and Scotland – such certainly has been my experience when with the Carl Rosa Opera Company.

The reason was not the lack of musicality among the people but rather that Balfe, Wallace (and Verdi, for that matter) “appeal to the popular ear”, pointing to education as the real factor leading to the ability of appreciating works like the operas of Wagner:

The same in France, Italy, and Germany – one opera strikes the popular ear more than another, and, therefore, becomes a favourite with the less musically educated classes, which at the same time possess strong, if ill-defined, musical sympathies.

The issue of education remains part of the debate. In another public lecture, now before the National Literary Society on St Stephen’s Green, Dublin, on 25 March 1907, the violinist Arthur Darley (1873–1929) – one of the rare musicians of the time who effortlessly moved between traditional music and art music – remarked that “melody exists in the minds of the peasant musicians, but it fails to live for want of the means to give it light”.³⁵ On the other hand, traditional music could be a resource to make Ireland musical: “[...] to make a musical Ireland they must take the ideas of the so-called traditional musicians and unite them to modern technical methods.” This was, in fact, at the very heart of the Feis Ceoil organizers and the many composers of the late 19th and early 20th century in Ireland who believed that a national ‘School of Irish Music’ should be based on traditional music. It is the very idea of nationalism and cultural identity in western art music of this period.

The early years of the Feis Ceoil regularly turned attention to the good and the bad in Irish music. In the view of some, the only good was its existence, the bad being the low turn-out and the scant public interest. Combining it with a general critique of musicality in Ireland, A. MacRompian³⁶ complained on the occasion of the twelfth festival in 1908 that

[...] the Association has kept to its purpose, with a praiseworthy tenacity, restricted only by the measure of support received from the country. We are a musical people, it is undeniable, in the sense that we love music, but we have only to look at the example set by some other countries to realize how little we do for it.³⁷

35 “Some Aspects of Irish Music”, unsigned article in *The Irish Independent*, 26 March 1907, p. 3.

36 Not identified, but he describes himself as one of the members of the original Feis Ceoil Committee.

37 A. MacRompian: “Are we musical? Work of the Feis Ceoil”, in: *The Irish Independent*, 18 May 1908, p. 4.

In the course of the second decade of the twentieth century, the public debate about the role of music in Irish life appears to have intensified. Newspapers abound with reports about public addresses to various societies, and there is an increased sense of urgency and impatience. In October 1911, the Reverend Thomas O’Kelly (1879–1924), librettist to Irish operas by Robert O’Dwyer and Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, reported in the *Irish Independent* about a speech made by Heinrich Beyerunge at the annual meeting of the Feis Ceoil Association. He wrote that Beyerunge (1862–1923), the German-born professor of church chant and organ at Maynooth and an avid music critic, believed “that musical art in Ireland is not upon the level which [...] befits a nation that has done so much for music in the past”.³⁸ Apart from the low standard of church music, he complained about the quality of concert music and their poor public attention, the lack of an Irish opera company, etc. He also criticized “the presence in Ireland of so many foreign musicians, including Father Beyerunge himself. This he justly regarded as abnormal.” O’Kelly continues:

But, then, Ireland is the home of the abnormal. In this country there is hardly anything normal except abnormality. Something stranger than any of the things Father Beyerunge pointed out is the fact that several musicians among us of foreign origin display greater sympathy with and appreciation of Irish music and a greater anxiety for the development of Irish music on native lines than, generally speaking, musicians of native origin.

Here, O’Kelly clearly points to composers like Michele Esposito and Carl Hardebeck who produced some of the most outstanding works in an Irish cultural context of the time. In Ireland, he identified “a contrast between the sympathetic interest of foreigners in the peculiarly native element in Irish music, and the apathy and, sometimes, even active hostility of Irish-born musicians to those who plead for the recognition of this native element.”

“AT PRESENT IT IS HOPELESS” – THE FREE STATE

After the Easter Rising, World War I with its fall of European monarchies, and the Irish Civil War, the world had changed. Hopes that the independent Irish Free State would raise the level of musical appreciation and give an impetus to creative Irish art music were quickly muted. In September 1923, the Cork musician Donnchadh Ua Briain (a.k.a. Denis Breen), announcing a visit of the world-famous Irish tenor John McCormack (1884–1945) to Irish schools, warned that “he will

³⁸ Thomas O’Kelly: “Music in Ireland. A New Society”, in: *The Irish Independent*, 25 October 1911, p. 4. The following quotes from O’Kelly are from the same source.



Figure 1: The British view of the Irish has always included perceptions of music – not to either side’s benefit. Illustration from *Punch*, 29 November 1922; author’s collection

not find things as rosy as he imagines. Music under the old regime was in a pretty parlous condition. At present it is hopeless. [...] Ireland is probably the most backward country in Europe musically.”³⁹

The ageing tenor Joseph O’Mara (1864–1927) demanded in a speech to the 1925 Father Mathew Feis that the Free State should “make music a necessary part of their educational system”, to which a correspondent to the *Irish Independent* comments “he ought to have added an appeal to them to cut out their high taxation of musical instruments”.⁴⁰

In 1929, the composer and conductor Hamilton Harty (1879–1941) complained, after having seen the Dublin Corporation publication *A Book of Dublin*:⁴¹

To a musician at least it seems a strange oversight that no mention of the art of music has been made in what purports to be an official record of the activities of Dublin, both artistic and commercial.⁴²

39 D. Ua Braoin: “Music in the Schools”, in: *The Irish Independent*, 22 September 1923, p. 8.

40 “Music in the Saorstát”, letter by R. S. Gray to the editor of *The Irish Independent*, 17 April 1925, p. 8.

41 *A Book of Dublin. Official Handbook*. Dublin: The Corporation of Dublin, 1929.

42 Hamilton Harty, letter to the editor of *The Irish Independent*, 24 July 1929, p. 8.

Unfortunately, the editors of the 1932 *Saorstát Éireann Official Handbook* did not read Harty's letter (or did not care). The same neglect of Irish art music is continued here in much the same way.⁴³

CONCLUSION: ARE THE IRISH MUSICAL?

Is it an exaggeration to say that, with their continued negligence of musical education and the heritage of art music, the Irish Free State and its succeeding independent state were guilty of the poor appreciation of 'classical' music in Ireland and therefore for a view of musicality that is still dominated by traditional music? Some would argue that the same is true for traditional music. Certainly, any political responsibility reflects the wider social understanding of music in Ireland (as being predominantly 'traditional') on the one side and the difficult association of art music with British colonialism which is peculiar to Ireland. Art music has never, in any country, been 'the music of the people', but – at least for an outsider – it is deplorable to see how little progress in the understanding of art music in Ireland has been achieved since independence. The development of thought in terms of what constitutes 'Irish music' is painfully slow.

So, are the Irish musical? It is, of course, the wrong question. No nation as such is musical or unmusical. From his colonial perspective, the 1903 letter writer to the *Musical Opinion* was right. But the arrogance of power that always characterizes colonialism implied that he (and other writers) disregarded different types of musicality than he allowed for with his 19th-century British background. But for the multi-racial, multi-cultural, and enlightened 'new Ireland' of the 21st century, we need a third way to interpret musicality in Ireland, namely not just in the black-and-white categories of English and Irish, of traditional and classical music, but for the many musicians 'in the middle', those who neither partake in the 'either/or' but who practice the 'as well as' and who give less regard to the distinction at all. In these musicians, who effortlessly move between the lines of styles and genres, who play traditional music now and classical music next, who prove that musicality is not limited to any genre, and of whom Ireland has very many, lies hope.

43 *Saorstát Éireann Official Handbook*. Dublin: Talbot Press, 1932. See this author's remarks in Michael Dervan (ed.): *The Invisible Art. A Century of Music in Ireland 1916–2016*. Dublin: New Island, 2016, pp. 55–57.

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