



Spring Festival Sligo, 2009

10 Year Celebration

**MAY BANK HOLIDAY WEEKEND
2000-2009**

St. Columba's Church, Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo



Michael Dervan was commissioned by Sligo Arts Service to write an article marking 10 years of the Vogler Spring Festival 2000-2009. The article looks at classical music performance/promotion in Ireland, and the issues affecting Sligo and the regions, as a background to the Vogler Quartet in Sligo residency 1999-2004 and the first Vogler Spring Festival

The reporting of history usually gives an impression of clarity. Political movements, key turning points, evident tensions, imminent disasters, and revivals just around the corner can all be marshalled as evidence in a way that most people's views of the present simply cannot match. It's much easier to be wise about the great Wall Street crash of 1929 than to have a handle on the unfolding crisis that's gripping the world at the moment. It's not just that the current situation has yet to be fully quantified and that we don't know the extent of it. No one has even managed to give it a name that seems likely to stick. Even in the history books, however, not everything is clear. And, for most people, the past of classical music in Ireland is anything but.

Yes. We all know that Handel's *Messiah* was first performed in Dublin in 1742. And that Dublin was the birthplace of John Field, "the inventor of the Nocturne". Early music fans may know that the great Italian violinist and composer Francesco Geminiani worked and died in Dublin (he's buried in St Andrew's in Suffolk Street, now a tourist centre). There are bound to be some new music aficionados who know that one of the 20th century's great *enfants terribles* John Cage spent some time in Ireland in the late 1970s, collecting material for his Joyce-inspired *Roaratorio*, and traditional musicians will surely remember the traditional players who were roped into that particular project.

Dublin-born Charles Villiers Stanford and Hillsborough-man Hamilton Harty both made big impressions on the musical world of their time. Stanford, a major composer in the world of pre-Elgar Britain, became a professor of composition who trained a generation of composers in London.

And Harty, who was an accomplished accompanist and conductor as well as a composer, turned Manchester's Hallé Orchestra into an ensemble which was the envy of the rest of Britain.

Yet much of the history of Irish music, or, rather, classical music in Ireland, is a rather vague if not actually a blank area for most Irish music lovers. I remember, as a teenager, being astonished to learn that both Paganini and Liszt had performed in Ireland. The story goes that part of the floor collapsed during Paganini's performance in Limerick, and people fell through the ceiling into the room below. And no tickets were sold for Liszt's concert in Clonmel, so the great man invited some people from his hotel to his room, and gave a recital for five listeners on the very modest piano he had been supplied with there.

The great musicians of the day also performed in celebrity concerts here in the 1920s and 1930s. Horowitz (with publicity declaring him "the greatest pianist alive or dead"), Heifetz and Kreisler all appeared within 12 months of each other in the mid 1930s. The promoter was Harold Holt, who obviously saw lucrative opportunities in Dublin (and also Belfast — the renovated Ulster Hall displays the posters) the way some of his successors still do today.

Ireland, of course, has one of the world's most unlikely-seeming celebrations of opera. The Wexford Festival, founded as long ago as 1951, has carved out a reputation for paying attention to parts of the operatic repertoire that other opera centres largely ignore. In a country where, by European standards, opera itself is something of a rarity, we have a festival that specialises in operatic rarity.

Outside of Ireland's major cities, Irish opera lovers depend on touring companies, notably Opera Theatre Company, to provide locally available productions. It was not always so. As recently as the 1980s, there were small opera companies at work in Wicklow and Kilkenny, companies whose lifelines were withdrawn when the Arts Council decided to focus its support on a small number of more highly-professionalised companies. Before that, back in the 1960s, there was a time when singers from the Glyndebourne Festival came to Co. Mayo, and provided an opera festival (with piano accompaniment) in Ballinrobe, and later in Castlebar.

My perspective on all of this is, of course, coloured by the fact that I live and work in Dublin. Dublin is a capital city. It has a richer and busier musical life than anywhere else in the country. When I was a student, I had friends who took part in the Sligo Feis Ceoil. As editor of *Music Ireland* magazine in the 1980s I noticed the establishment of the Sligo New Music Competition and the Sligo International Choral Festival. But it was a full ten years after I became music critic of *The Irish Times* in 1986, before I set foot in Sligo for the purpose of reviewing a concert in the town.

It's really only in the last 15 years, then, that Sligo, which has a strong traditional music heritage, has begun to match that with activity reflecting the world-wide heritage of classical music. Sligo went about this in its own unique way. The town's first festivals were specialised events, one concentrating on early music, the other on new music. Both had a strongly alternative feel, an atmosphere generated by the rather dilapidated interior of the old Model Arts Centre. It may have been often cold and uncomfortable, but it also had a pioneering, cutting-edge feel. And barriers were genuinely

being broken. Sligo was able to boast festive celebrations of both new music and old music at a time when no similar festivals were to be found in Dublin.

These festivals couldn't have come at a better time. Talk of the Celtic Tiger was already underway. The Arts Council had set out on a course to develop the involvement of local authorities in the arts. Municipal funding, which is the main source of arts funding in Germany, was badly underdeveloped in Ireland, and in fact remains so by the standards of many other countries.

Sligo Arts Service was set up in 1997 as the arts wing of Sligo County Council and Sligo Borough Council. And with almost Hey, Presto!-ish speed, there was soon an astonishing new proposal being mooted. Sligo was going to take a giant leap into the unknown and create an ensemble in residence. And, with careful stewardship from the Music Network, ambitions were set high. The trawl for prospective ensembles was an international one, and the string quartet which took the leap into Sligo was an established group from Berlin, the Vogler Quartet.

The Vogler's 1999-2004 residency and the annual spring festival which it spawned are now such established facts of the Irish musical landscape that it's hard to remember quite how surprised everyone was by the new developments. I talked to many people about the Vogler residency at the time it was announced, and one of the most insightful comments came from Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, professor of music at the University of Limerick.

Ó Súilleabháin is not only a composer and musicologist of note, but also a man with a clear-sighted grasp of the politics of culture in modern Ireland. He straightaway commented on the significance of the project lying in the

fact that it showed local authorities in Ireland taking ownership of classical music for the first time. And he was right. Local authorities ran schools of music. But that was wholly an educational issue. The Voglers were chosen first and foremost for their skills as performers. Concert-giving, if you'll forgive the pun, was their forte. Yes, they would of course teach, too, bringing their charisma and nous to schools and communities that had never before been exposed to such high-powered musical ambassadors. But the gloss of the project was that they were performers of international renown.

The importance of the association of the Voglers with Sligo goes well beyond the most obvious achievements. The residency has been well documented, carefully measured and fully reported on. Sadly, the provision of music education in Ireland is extremely poor by the standards of our European neighbours. It's weak in terms of specialised schools. It's weak in terms of regular schools. It's weak at third level. The plan to develop a conservatory-level Irish Academy of the Performing Arts, mooted in the late 1990s, came to naught. So, in the first instance, the residency of the Vogler Quartet provided a much-needed injection of educational excitement.

But it also provided all young, prospective musicians it touched with a model. It may seem odd to say so, but John O'Connor was a first. There was no one before him for him to look to who had already done what he set out to achieve — to live in Ireland and sustain a career as a performer at home and abroad. O'Connor and others who followed him are models for the young of today. As working musicians, as artists in residence in Sligo, the Voglers presented themselves as models to those whose lives they touched.

It's often surprising, too, how lives *are* touched by special musical moments, how young people experience epiphanies, hear a performance or a work which turns their head towards a lifetime of musical engagement.

Looking back, it would be easy to imagine that an ensemble in residence for Sligo could have been chosen from the pool of musicians who engage in community music or specialise in tuition. Had that path been followed, it's doubtful that a festival like the Vogler Spring Festival would have emerged.

Performers like performing. Some of them live for their moments on the stage. Engagement with an audience can constitute the ne plus ultra of their working lives. So the development of an annual festival out of the Vogler residency shouldn't seem such a surprising outcome. The beginnings, back in 2000, were actually quite modest. The Voglers had just two guest artists, Irish pianist Hugh Tinney, and German clarinettist Ib Hausmann (who also featured as a composer). The programmes blended old and new. Along with the great masterworks of the 19th century were pieces by John Cage and Raymond Deane, and a new work by Donnacha Dennehy, with the composer on hand for a pre-concert presentation about his *Counting*, for string quartet and four loudspeakers. The performances that remain most vivid in my memory from that first festival are those of the Cage and Dennehy. Later years delivered a striking performance of Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, with Irish soprano Orla Boylan joining the Voglers, and introduced Irish audiences to the extraordinary Israeli clarinettist Sharon Kam.

I hadn't been in the festival's venue, St Columba's Church in Drumcliffe, the burial place of the poet WB Yeats, since I made a pilgrimage there on a school tour when I was in primary school. The church is small and acoustically intimate, and during the first festival, which was sponsored by the ESB, local knowledge prompted many people to bring their own cushions as protection from the then uncovered hard pews. That comfort issue has since been resolved, but the unwary visitor still needs to take precautions about the weather (which has been both glorious and awful) and may well be surprised by the raucous cawing of crows, which pervades, however faintly, everything that is heard at St Columba's.

The Vogler Spring Festival was not the first of its kind in Ireland, nor is it the biggest. But it quickly established a core formula and an audience following that have guaranteed it a secure place in the affection of Irish music lovers — 30 per cent of respondents to a 2008 audience survey had been to all eight previous festivals!. And, like the Vogler residency itself, the festival has created a model for others to follow, should they choose.

The most striking feature of that model is the ownership of the local authorities in Sligo. You'll hear much discussion about top-down and bottom-up in the creation of new arts events. The most famous bottom-up festival in Ireland is the Wexford Festival, which had a local doctor as its founding artistic director. Francis Humphrys, the director of the bottom-up West Cork Chamber Music Festival, is also a local farmer, an Englishman who moved to Ireland in the 1970s.

In Sligo, the Con Brio concert series run by Luisa McConville, and the Sligo Academy created by Niamh Crowley look like typical bottom-up creations. The Vogler Spring Festival is much more of a top-down affair, an instance of the kind of thing that some people might turn up their noses at because it's not the result of one dedicated individual's blood, sweat and tears.

That, of course, is the very feature which makes the Vogler festival particularly interesting in the context of Ireland, where public policy on music can seem like one large vacuum. It has survived a number of landmark changes — the disappearance of the ESB sponsorship, and the expiry of the actual Vogler residency. More change is now underway, as the Vogler's festival contract runs out with this year's programme.

The festival is going to change. It's changed already in a whole range of ways since the first notes were played back in 2000. It's grown from three days to four, the number of events has been increased, and non-classical performers have been embraced in late-night slots. The first festivals were actually programmed by John O'Kane, the then chief executive of Music Network, with the Vogler Quartet's second violinist, Frank Reinecke, taking responsibility from 2005. Changes of emphasis have been clear, with the absence of commissions from Irish composers being among the biggest losses. But all festivals change. If they don't, they're unlikely to survive, because the communities that support them and the world that exists around them also change.

Who knows, maybe some day a brave programmer will reach out to the music of American composer George Antheil (1900-1959), who was drawn to the attention of Yeats by fellow writer Ezra Pound (a spare-time music critic) in the 1920s. The great man commissioned incidental music from this self-confessed “bad boy of music” for his play, “Fighting the Waves,” at the Abbey Theatre in 1929. It would be good to think of something with such a direct connection to Yeats being performed so close to his resting place.

Michael Dervan © 2009

