

# MUSIC FOR BAND BY

# IRISH

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# COMPOSERS

In the build up to the 13th World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles Conference in Killarney, Ireland, July 8th to 14th 2007, we continue the series of articles relating to Ireland.

**From Percy Grainger's *Irish Tune from County Derry* to Leroy Anderson's *Irish Suite*, through the *Irish Rhapsody* by Clare Grundman to more recent works, including a vast amount of beginner and junior band music based on Irish airs, the average bandsperson must feel that they are on pretty familiar terms with Irish literature for wind band. Certainly, taking into account 150 years or more of immigration, the Irish Diaspora has spread far and wide, in the process taking their music to every corner of the earth. One only has to look at the phenomenal success of shows such as *Riverdance* and its various spin-offs to appreciate the popularity of music from Ireland outside its country of origin.**

Of course, what all the above-mentioned band works have in common is that they were not written by Irish composers. In recent years a growing body of music for winds has been created in Ireland, much of which as yet remains undiscovered by musicians outside of the country. While some of this music is based, as before, on traditional tunes or variants thereof, there is an increasing amount of music that is not, and which owes its inspiration to a much wider and varied set of influences. In this article I hope to draw attention to some of the important literature for band that has been created in Ireland, both during the course of the twentieth century and in recent years.

On gaining independence from the British Empire in 1922 the newly formed Irish Free State inherited many of its institutions directly from the departing British administration. Unfortunately while classical music was by this time undergoing a renaissance in Britain the influence of this had yet to spread to Ireland which had remained a cultural backwater of the British Empire for much of the nineteenth

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century, a period of musical moribundity in Britain that led to it sometimes being referred to as 'the land without music'. The formation of the Army School of Music in 1922 was a hugely significant point in the early history of wind band music in the country. The first director of the school was Colonel **Wilhelm Fritz Braze**, a German with an established reputation as a military band conductor and a composer for same. From this point onwards Ireland had a source of trained bandsmen who were to have a significant influence on the local civilian bands in the areas in which they were based. The nationalistic environment that existed in the early years of the state created a demand for Irish music that resulted in the officers of the newly formed army bands making many settings for band of traditional airs, songs and dances. This tradition remains, with successive directors of the Army School of Music contributing to an ever-growing canon of marches and other arrangements. Though over time some of this

music has found its way into the hands of civilian bands, the majority of it remains the preserve of the army and is rarely performed outside of military settings. One series of works that are of note from the early years of the state are the six fantasias on Irish airs composed by Fritz Braze, of which the first was published by Boosey & Hawkes subtitled 'Let Erin Remember' and as recently as 2002 was recorded by the Irish Guards Band of the British Army on a CD of the same name. An article in *Winds* described the work as being 'wonderfully gothic'; however it is now unfortunately out of print.

The influence of nationalist ideas in composition can be seen in some of the first works created for band by composers from outside of traditional band circles. Of these, one of the most endearingly popular is **Thomas Kelly's** *Wexford Rhapsody*, composed in the early 1950s for the Band of the Curragh Command of the Irish Army and premièred by that band at a concert given as part of the Wexford Opera Festival. Kelly was from Wexford and studied with the influential John Larchet, Professor of Music at University College Dublin, before spending the majority of his working career as Head of Music at Clongowes Wood College in County Kildare, the same institution at which the Irish writer James Joyce received his education. *Wexford Rhapsody* comprises three ballads that are all associated with County Wexford in southeast Ireland and, in particular, the failed uprising against British rule in that county in 1798, and finishes with a skilful setting of two quite different tunes, adapted to work in counterpoint to each other. It has been recorded on the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble CD *Where the Wind Blows*.

A number of Ireland's most significant composers in the course of the 20th century passed away without contributing works for band. The most famous, **Seán O'Riada** has one work listed on the website of the Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland. The work's title, *Ceól Mearsáile i gCóir Socraide*, translates as 'Marching Music for a Funeral', but the website has no further details on why it was written or for whom. The work is for traditional Irish warpipes - similar to the more famous Scottish bagpipes - and band, a combination that is not as unusual as it sounds, considering the tradition that Irish military bands have always had of combining with pipe bands, both for ceremonial and concert purposes. O'Riada's

teacher was **Aloys Fleischmann**, one of the most important Irish musicians of the twentieth century and a noted composer in his own right. It is unfortunate that he wrote just one short work for band, the *Four Fanfares for An Tóstal*, which was written for one of the army bands to perform at the opening of a festival celebrating Irish culture in the 1940s. Fleischmann, born in Cork of German parentage, died in 1992 without ever having written a concert work for band, despite a long-time professional relationship with members of the Band of the Southern Command of the Irish Army, based in that city. A third figure, also hugely influential during his lifetime and one of the most important Irish composers of the last century was **Brian Boydell**. He also contributed just one work for band before his death in 2000, the light work *Fred's Frolic*, written for Colonel Fred O'Callaghan and the Army No. 1 Band.

One of the best known and most performed composers of the middle part of the twentieth century was **A. J. Potter**, who was born in Belfast in 1918. Following studies at the Royal College of Music, London with Ralph Vaughan Williams, he returned to Ireland, gaining a Doctorate in Music from Trinity College Dublin in 1953. He succeeded John Larchet as Professor of Composition and Allied Studies at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in 1955. A prolific composer, he wrote numerous works for band, mostly incorporating existing traditional melodies. The best known of these is probably *Finnegan's Wake*, a humorous take on an already humorous ballad, which he also set for orchestra. Instead of a straight setting, Potter jolts the rhythm in places by adding beats and augmenting the original melodic rhythm and at one point has two muted trumpets playing the tune a semitone apart, effects that were most uncommon to Irish bands of the era, least of all when playing arrangements of Irish airs. Of the many other works that Potter wrote, the majority are unpublished and the manuscripts that exist are held by the various bands for which they were written, including the Band of An Garda Síochána (the Irish Police Band) and the Army No. 1 Band.

The composer **Gerard Victory** (1921-95) was Director of Music in RTE (Radio Telefís Éireann, the Irish state-sponsored television and radio broadcasting service) from 1967 to 1982. He writes:

'It was not until 1980 that I became interested in writing for brass and concert wind bands. My new interest was aroused by a number of factors – the European Broadcasting Union's scheme 'New Music for Bands', the infectious enthusiasm for the medium of RTE's Assistant Head of Music, Michael Casey and the encouragement I received from an enterprising young music publisher from County Down, Martyn Imrie. *Marche Bizarre* was my first work for concert wind band.'

*Marche Bizarre*, which has been recorded by the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble, is described by the composer as being a 'novelty piece with a mock serious style'. Though the work is not programmatic, he suggests that one could imagine 'a procession of wizards who are both macabre and yet slightly comic'. A more substantial work by the same composer is the *St James's Suite* for brass and reed band written in 1992. This three movement, 10-minute work was written in response to a commission from the Irish Music Rights Organisation to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Performing Right Society. A number of other works exist, including the *Mayo Rhapsody*, written for the Band of An Garda Síochána to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Irish Police Force and dedicated to the then President of Ireland, Mrs. Mary Robinson. Also of importance are the *Tableaux Sportifs*, which were written in 1988 for a commission from Radio France, and consist of eight movements over 15 minutes which were subsequently transcribed by the composer for orchestra and for chamber ensemble.

The Irish pianist **Philip Martin** has established a reputation not just as a renowned concert pianist and teacher, both in Ireland and abroad, but also as a composer. While he has a significant output as a composer of works for piano, he has also composed important works for chamber ensemble and for orchestra. In 1987 he was commissioned by the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble to compose for that group and the result was the work *Rain Dance*, described as 'A Fantasy for Wind Ensemble with Piano Solo' but in effect a concerto for piano accompanied by winds, in the tradition of the Stravinsky concerto for similar forces.

**John Buckley** was born in County Limerick in 1951 and studied composition with James Wilson, Alun Hoddinott and John Cage. He

wrote *Where the Wind Blows* for the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble in 1989, following a joint commission between that ensemble and the Arts Council of Ireland. The piece is in one movement falling into two contrasting sections. The opening section is fast and vigorous and is characterised by a strong rhythmic drive and constantly varied orchestral densities and colourings. The second section is more in the nature of a slow meditation with lyrical and flowing melodic lines being highlighted against sustained chords in brass and lower woodwind. Fanfares, recalling the opening section, usher in a calm reflective ending. *Where the Wind Blows* has been recorded by the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble and in recent years has been the test piece in the advanced category of the Norwegian National Band Championships.

While Seán O'Riada was probably the first significant Irish composer to incorporate twentieth century compositional trends into his compositions, in recent years a number of works for wind band or ensemble have been written that reflect a more general trend towards avant-garde music in Irish composition. **Raymond Deane's** *Alembic*, written in 1992 for the DIT Wind Ensemble as a result of a commission by its conductor, William Halpin, is one such work. Deane, born in 1953, graduated from University College Dublin in 1974 before going on to spend long periods abroad studying composition with, amongst others, Karlheinz Stockhausen. The composer describes the work as follows:

'An alembic is a distilling apparatus used in the alchemical process of transmuting base matter into gold. The raw material of the work is the familiar "horn-call" motif heard in the opening section, which leads to an aggressive and increasingly elaborate passacaglia (alembicated = complicated). Off-stage trumpets sustain a dignified commentary on the proceedings, and all join together for the triumphant close.'

In 2001 the Irish Youth Wind Ensemble gave the première of **Jennifer Walshe's** *Small Small Big*. While the performance of new music is nothing new to this ensemble, the logistical details of this work were a new departure. A former member of the ensemble, Walshe wrote the work under

commission from the IYWE with funding from the Arts Council of Ireland and conceived the work with the acoustical properties of the National Concert Hall in Dublin in mind. Thus the ensemble is divided into a number of sub-groups to be divided throughout the hall and the various motivic elements are designed to interact with the specific acoustical proportions of that hall. While poorly received on its première, a repeat performance in 2005 with a more mature ensemble in the same venue gained an enthusiastic review from the influential Irish critic, Michael Dervan.

Two composers who are unknown to Irish bands, despite having written for winds, are **Kevin Volans** and **Roger Doyle**. Both have been commissioned to write for the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, one of Europe's top professional wind ensembles, specialising in chamber music for wind ensemble and spanning repertoire from Mozart to the avant-garde. Volans, originally from South Africa but a naturalised Irish citizen wrote his Concerto for Piano and Wind Ensemble as part of a joint commission between the NWE and the BBC Proms in 1995. The concerto, along with a number of other works, is available on a CD released by Chandos Records. Roger Doyle specialises in electro-acoustic music and has also had a CD, entitled *Under the Green Time* and also featuring the NWE, released by Chandos. This contains a number of works incorporating electronics, various combinations of wind instruments, and the vocals of traditional Irish singer Sarah Grealish. Neither of these composers' works is likely to find its way into the standard repertoire in Ireland in the short term; a combination of unusual orchestration, difficult instrumental techniques and the use of electronics in the case of Doyle's works mean that these works will remain outside of the repertoire for Irish Bands.

Of works that go against the recent trend in Irish composition toward avant-garde music, one such piece is **Eibhlís Farrell's** *Soundshock*. This work was written in 1992 for the DIT Concert Band when Ms Farrell was a member of staff at the same institution. She writes:

'Soundshock evokes the spirit of the late 16th century polychoral antiphonal style where sonority and the exploration of instrumental colour contrasts became a

vital structural element. It highlights the unique sound of the different sections of the concert band and the use of timpani and unpitched percussion throughout forms an important structural, unifying function. The bass drum ostinato patterns are reminiscent of the force and power of the Lambeg drum, a sound very strongly etched into my early soundworld.'

*Soundshock* is one of the few works listed here that have found popularity amongst North American ensembles, and it has been recorded by the Rutgers Wind Ensemble.

**Declan Townsend's** *Dreamworld* (*Taighreamh* in Irish) was the result of a request for a piece for the Concert Band at Cork School of Music, where at the time Townsend was Head of Wind, Brass and Percussion. The origins of the work lie in an earlier composition by the composer for string quartet. The work was never performed by that ensemble, possibly because some of the individual parts, especially the percussion, exceeded the capabilities of the then young membership. The Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra premiered the work in 1998 with the composer's son Peadar conducting. It is published by Maecenas Music.

As can be seen, the majority of works discussed in this article are by composers with no specific involvement in the band world and, as a result, much of the core repertoire consists of one-off pieces written for specific purposes. One composer who has an on going record of writing successful works for band is **Vincent Kennedy**. Born in Dublin in 1962, Kennedy trained as a trumpet player before deciding to concentrate on composition. Essentially self-taught as a composer, his style, while reflecting numerous eclectic influences, remains firmly rooted in tonal harmony. Typical of his recent output is the four movement, 15-minute work *What's a Heaven For?* which was premièred by the Rathfarnham Concert Band in Dublin in May 2006. The work contains elements of minimalism and atonality within a strongly melodic framework, as well as using traditional Irish dance rhythms in the up-tempo finale. Other works by Kennedy include the prize-winning *Soliloquy and March in Memoriam Michael O'Hehir* (1997), *In a Yellow Wood* (2003) and *Serendipity* (2005).

Another whose works avoid modern avant-garde techniques in favour of more tonal values is the Cork-born composer **Patrick Zuk** (1968-); however, his works for wind ensemble remain unperformed by Irish ensembles. Robert Boudreau of the American Wind Symphony Orchestra has made a point of commissioning lesser known composers, especially those from outside of North America, to write for his ensemble. In 1992 Zuk was little known outside of Ireland yet Boudreau was willing to commission him and the result was the *Scherzo for Wind Orchestra*. Recently Zuk has also composed a Concerto for Trumpet and Wind Orchestra (2003) for the same ensemble. Both works are relatively light and tuneful, although the latter work does present some technical challenges for the trumpet soloist. The *Scherzo* has had some success but, like many of Boudreau's commissions, these works have failed to enter the standard wind band repertory, perhaps because they are only available for hire and not for sale through conventional band sources but also because the instrumentation is for orchestral winds rather than for the normal wind band/ensemble.

With the exception of his work *Omaggio*, which was composed in 1987, the majority of **Michael Ball's** compositions for wind band have been written since he moved to live in Ireland in 1992. While there is no specific Irish influence on such works as the Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Wind Band, the *Intrada*, *Chaconne and Chorale* or the *Three Processionals*, the composer has indicated that there is a work for band in progress that will more obviously reflect the influence of his years living and working in Ireland. The composer himself suggests that this could be seen as a sort of Irish equivalent to Ives's *Three Places in New England*: that is, a work influenced by the area of the Dublin coastline where he now lives.

One of the most recent figures to emerge from Ireland's burgeoning wind band scene is **Fergal Carroll**. From County Tipperary and with a background in wind band music, his first major work for winds, *Amphion*, was written while studying composition with Adam Gorb at the Royal Northern College Music in Manchester, England. This single movement work, taking its inspiration from Amphion, the mythological King of Thebes in ancient Greece, takes on a very specific tonal feel from the composer's use of

the Greek modes and displays his very distinctive ear for sonority and instrumental colour. Carroll's music has become widely performed very quickly, both in Ireland and abroad and *Amphion* has been performed both at WASBE and BASBWE conferences, to much critical acclaim. Subsequent works include the *Winter Dances*, for amateur wind orchestra and *Song of Lir*, commissioned by Tim and Hilary Reynish in memory of their son, William and premiered by the Band of HM Royal Marines at the BASBWE Conference, Manchester in 2004. His most recent works include a series of easier pieces for young bands and all his music is published by Maecenas Music. He is currently serving as an officer in the Irish Defence Forces School of Music.

Of the major composers currently active in Ireland, many have yet to write for band or wind ensemble. However, two of the senior figures in Irish composition circles, **Ian Wilson** and **John Kinsella**, have been commissioned to write works for the World Association of Symphonic Bands and Ensembles (WASBE) Conference, to be held in Killarney, in south-west Ireland in July 2007. Hopefully the presence of this conference in Ireland will act as an important catalyst to the promotion of wind band and ensemble music in the country and will encourage more composers to treat the genre as a serious medium for composition.

It is hoped that this article will give those outside of Ireland some insight into the wealth of high quality wind band music being composed in this country. It is important to note that the author has limited himself to discussing works created by those working within the Republic of Ireland (that is, excluding Northern

Ireland). Much important band activity, including a very strong brass band tradition exists in that area but for political reasons it has not had very much influence on events in the south. For further information on the works discussed, including publication details, it is advised that readers visit the Irish Contemporary Music Centre, <http://www.cmc.ie/>, which attempts to document all important compositions by both twentieth century and contemporary composers. An invaluable resource, it has available for sale most of the scores not published by commercial publishing houses, as well as a selection of recordings of Irish composers. The main source of band music not published by mainstream publishers is Fergus O'Carroll's OCMPI, specialising in music for brass and wind bands by Irish composers and responsible for the publication of a number of the significant works listed above. Visit <http://www.ocmpireland.com/> for further information.



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