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A.J. Potter (1918-1980): The career and creative achievement of an Irish composer in social and cultural context

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Chapter 4

Choral works with orchestra

4.1 Introduction

In view of Potter's early training as a chorister, it is perhaps surprising to find that choral music comprises a comparatively small proportion of his output: one might have expected him to follow up his early *Missa Brevis* with other substantial choral works of various kinds. The fact that he did not can undoubtedly be explained by the circumstances of Irish musical life at the period: in bleak contrast to Britain, not only were good choirs few and far between, but there was little evidence of interest in choral music throughout the country at large. This state of affairs is confirmed by the various contributors to Aloys Fleischmann's survey of national musical life *Music in Ireland*, which appeared in 1952. In his essay 'Choral Music in Ireland', Radio Éireann's Director of Music Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin identified as a root cause the lack of any satisfactory system of music instruction in schools and the dearth of adequately trained teachers – factors that militated in a very obvious way against the establishment of a vital choral culture. As a consequence, such choirs as existed tended to be of a rather low standard, composed of members who were generally unable to sight-read and were deficient in basic musicianship. Reading between the lines of Ó h-Annracháin's account, it seems that most of these bodies would have been put to the pins of their collective collars to tackle anything more complex than a simple folk-song arrangement. Nor were they generally minded to explore music of greater substance: Ó h-Annracháin described the members of an average Irish choir as being 'regrettably limited ... in their general outlook', and warned of the 'insurmountable difficulties' that would arise if a conductor attempted to impose music on them which was 'beyond [their] powers of appreciation.'¹ No doubt this advice was born of bitter experience.

¹ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 'Choral Singing in Ireland', in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland* (Cork, 1952), 236



Nor was the state of church music a great deal better. The Church of Ireland admittedly managed to maintain choirs and choir schools in the two Dublin cathedrals of Christ Church and St Patrick, but these were the only establishments with sufficient resources to perform daily choral services: in the smaller cathedrals elsewhere in the country services could only be rendered in full fashion on Sundays.² The development of Catholic Church music had inevitably been disrupted under colonial occupation and the Penal Laws that were in force throughout the eighteenth century. In the later nineteenth century, efforts were made to employ foreign organists and choirmasters (who mostly came from Germany and Belgium) and to introduce choral services in the cathedrals.³ This development reached a climax between 1890 and 1930, but it did not ultimately succeed in transforming circumstances as might have been hoped. Unlike the Church of Ireland, the Catholic Church did not maintain choir schools, nor did it establish a dedicated institution for the training of church musicians. In the absence of these facilities, it was impossible to sustain whatever momentum had been generated and encourage the emergence of native talent. At bottom, there appears to have been little willingness to provide the level of practical and financial support which would have been necessary to sustain a vital culture of church music, and one suspects that there was probably little desire to do so. The Catholic Church in Ireland was notorious for its lack of interest in artistic activity of any kind: as the historian Terence Brown has pointed out, this was hardly surprising in view of the fact that its priests were often the offspring of farmers or shop-keepers, and thus came from backgrounds largely devoid of culture.⁴ The unimaginative education provided in the seminaries, which was largely concerned with the inculcation of an unquestioning anti-intellectualism and exaggerated sexual prudery, would have done little to broaden their mental horizons. The consequences of this state of affairs can easily be imagined. It is

² F. C. J. Swanton, 'The Training of the Organist and Choirmaster', in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, 145-53

³ An account of these developments is provided in Mary Regina Deacy, 'Continental Organists and Catholic Church Music in Ireland 1860-1920' (MLitt thesis submitted to the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2005).

⁴ For a discussion of the low levels of general culture amongst the Irish Catholic clergy at this period, see Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London, 1987), 30-34.

notable that the Catholic clergyman who contributed the article on church music to Fleischmann's book largely passes over in silence such performing activity as actually took place at the period, concerning himself instead with outlining 'recent papal legislation on music' and discussing 'certain epochs in the history of musical composition in so far as these affected the art of church music and influenced ecclesiastical legislation'. The author makes only the briefest of references to the current unsatisfactory state of Catholic Church music, but prefers to attribute it to vaguely formulated factors such as 'the profound changes that had come over European music generally between the pre-reformation period and the end of the eighteenth century', rather than the conspicuous failure of the church hierarchy to ameliorate matters.⁵ In spite of this lack of support and the dearth of opportunities for church musicians to receive an adequate training, a few establishments managed nonetheless to maintain choirs of a good standard into the 1950s and beyond, notably the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin and the Cathedral of St Mary and St Anne in Cork. The choir at the latter, which was directed by Aloys Fleischmann's father, was especially fine and elicited enthusiastic praise from visiting foreign musicians such as Arnold Bax: it broadcast frequently on Radio Éireann and from time to time on the BBC World Service.⁶ Nonetheless, these ensembles seem to have been exceptional in every respect.

All in all, from the composer's point of view the circumstances described here could hardly be regarded as conducive to creativity. The low standard of most of the country's amateur choirs would inevitably have placed severe restrictions on the sort of music that could be written for them. There appears to have been a limited demand for simple part-songs and arrangements of Irish folk music – a repertory to which Potter contributed at least to some extent, along with other contemporary figures such as Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair. (The music published by the state publishing house An Gúm consisted largely of such simple, accessible pieces.) There

⁵ Michael Tracy, 'The Training of the Organist and Choirmaster', in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, 138-9

⁶ For an account of Aloys Fleischmann senior's work with this choir, see Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin, 2006), 4-8.

seem to have been very few opportunities to compose choral music of a more ambitious kind, however. Church choirs, by their very nature, tend to perform a rather conservative repertoire and an examination of the catalogues of Irish composers does not suggest that any of the Irish churches displayed a great deal of enterprise in commissioning new work, in contrast to some of their counterparts in Britain and on the continent. In the wake of Second Vatican Council, it is true that a number of composers, including Seóirse Bodley, Gerard Victory and Potter himself, devised settings of the Catholic liturgy, but these were generally extremely simple in nature, being little more than wholly functional *Gebrauchsmusik* designed for congregational singing and tailored to the capacities of the most mediocre of parish choirs: one doubts that they can have been rewarding to compose. As far as larger ensembles were concerned, there were a few choral societies in Dublin that gave performances of oratorios and other large-scale works with orchestral accompaniment, but it would appear they did not commission very much new music either.⁷ Their standards of performance were no doubt variable, as with all such amateur bodies, but even at their most proficient, one doubts whether they could have borne comparison with the finest British choirs of the period such as the Huddersfield Choral Society, or been capable of performing the sort of taxing modern repertoire in which a body like Charles Kennedy Scott's Oriana Madrigal Society excelled. These expectations would no doubt have been unrealistic in view of the country's stunted choral tradition, but the absence of a first-rate choral society that was willing to perform modern music on a regular basis meant that there was little incentive for composers to write large-scale works demanding the services of a sizeable choir.

Apart from a few church choirs, there was only one professional choir in the country, Cór Radio Éireann, which contained two dozen members and functioned on a part-time basis. In 1953, a few years after Potter's move to Dublin, this was disbanded and replaced with a smaller but full-time professional chamber choir, the Radio

⁷ A list of major choirs and choral societies active in the early 1950s is given in Aloys Fleischmann, *Music in Ireland*, 240-241.

Éireann Singers, which remained in existence until 1984. This ensemble performed a wide repertoire ranging from light music and arrangements of folk music to contemporary music. Its conductor, a German by the name of Hans Waldemar Rosen, was a man of considerable ability, and under his direction the choir proved itself capable of giving performances at a reasonably high standard.⁸ Nonetheless, despite Potter's close association with Radio Éireann, he appears to have had little opportunity to write anything for the Radio Éireann Singers except arrangements. Many of these must have represented the *ne plus ultra* of dreary hackwork: Potter's catalogue indicates that in addition to churning out many versions of folk songs for SATB choir and piano accompaniment, he was also required to deck out mawkish kitsch such as 'A Nation Once Again' or 'Hail, Glorious Saint Patrick' in a suitably gaudy choral and orchestral panoply. These items appear to have been broadly representative of the sort of regular musical fare that the ensemble provided. The RTÉ Singers (as the group was later renamed with the advent of television) later gave performances of a few of his original compositions including the early *Missa Brevis*, but RTÉ does not appear to have been interested in commissioning him (or anyone else, for that matter) to write choral music of a more serious nature. One of the rare opportunities to write something more worthwhile came about when composers were invited to contribute pieces to the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music established by Aloys Fleischmann in 1962 as a fixture at the annual Cork International Choral Festival, an event at which the RTÉ Singers often performed.⁹ Potter was commissioned for the Seminar in 1969, producing *Ten Epigrams by Hilaire Belloc* for the occasion.

⁸ For a discussion of the performance activity of the Radio Éireann Singers, see Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, (Dublin, 2005), 379ff. Although this choir undoubtedly made an important and valuable contribution to Irish musical life at the period, one is inclined to wonder whether Pine's high estimate of its merits (he speaks in superlative terms of the choir's 'mastery') can be sustained. The choir's recordings of Potter's choral music range from a respectable, if dull reading of *The Classiad* to a very disappointing account of his *Missa Brevis*, which is marred throughout by excessively approximate pitching and a lack of clarity.

⁹ For a brief account of the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music, see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 111-3. First-hand accounts of the seminar from former participants can be found in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Cork International Choral Festival 1954-2004: A Celebration* (Cork 2004), 268-336.

Taking all of this into account, it is consequently not surprising that Potter's output of choral music was so slender. Apart from the arrangements, there are only about a dozen works of any significance, one of which, the *Missa Brevis*, has already been discussed. The remaining pieces are mostly minor works. The so-called Arklow Mass (which appears to date from 1976) and the *Missa Iunctionis Christiani* ['Mass for Christian Unity'] (1977) both fall into the category of functional church music described earlier and are of limited interest. In addition to these, Potter wrote a few short motets and anthems at various times throughout his career, including a *Nisi Dominus* (1972), an abbreviated setting of the Stabat Mater in Irish translation, *Sheasaimh Muire Máthair Bhrónach* (1972) and a version of St Patrick's Breastplate entitled *Clamos Cervi* (1979). Apart from the Belloc settings mentioned above, the only other secular *a cappella* work of any size is a short cycle of Petrarch settings employing translations by the Irish playwright John Millington Synge, *Four Sonnets from Petrarch* (1979). None of these compositions is sufficiently important to detain us here, and the focus of the discussion that follows is on three remaining works, all of them for choir and orchestra, which represent Potter's most substantial contributions to the native choral repertory.

4.2 *The Classiad*

The first of these is a cantata of for female voices, piano and string orchestra to which Potter gave the whimsical title *The Classiad* – a portmanteau contraction of the words 'classified advertisement' that is presumably intended as an ironic echo of the title of the *Iliad*. This work lasts about twenty minutes and was completed some time in 1964. It appears to have been composed for the Irish Countrywomen's Association (an organisation founded in 1910 with the aim of providing educational opportunities and social outlets for women living in rural areas), but the surviving documentation in the Potter Archive is otherwise uninformative about its genesis. The ICA ran choirs at this period, one of which may have commissioned the work from him, but there is no record of any performance of it taking place under the

organisation's auspices. In a letter written towards the end of his life, Potter informed a correspondent that it had 'refused it as being uncomplimentary to the nation's family life' – which seems to suggest that its commissioners somehow imagined the work to be improper.¹⁰ Regrettable though this incident may have been, it was probably for the best, as the work's choral parts are quite demanding and would almost certainly have been beyond the capacities of the amateur choir concerned. In the event, it was premiered by the RTÉ Singers in a radio broadcast the following year in 1965.¹¹

The Classiad could best be described as a 'novelty work' that relies on a gimmick – in this case, the setting of deliberately banal texts based on newspaper advertisements. This was not an original idea on Potter's part: it had been anticipated by the Russian composer Aleksandr Mosolov some forty years before in his *Chetire gazetnikh ob'yavleniya* ['Four Newspaper Advertisements'] of 1926; and Darius Milhaud had experimented with something not wholly dissimilar several years previously again in his *Machines agricoles* of 1919, which sets a catalogue of agricultural machinery. Rather than employ pre-existing material, however, Potter wrote the words for the cantata himself under his habitual literary pseudonym of Lee McMaster. The work is in four movements, entitled 'Advertisement', 'Births', 'Deaths' and 'Marriages', and the text in each case makes ironical references to the standard formulae found in the classified advertisements sections of the Dublin daily newspapers. The piece gives the impression of being a wholly light-hearted divertissement, but for reasons that are rather difficult to fathom Potter was anxious to create the impression that it was fundamentally serious in import. At the suggestion of Gerard Victory (who proposed entering the score for the Prix Italia, an Italian broadcasting award¹²) he

¹⁰ AJP to Sarah Burn, 26 January 1978 ('№7: Fan mail July 1977-8 + FIN', PA). Potter told another correspondent that 'It was judged the best in a competition sponsored by a well-known woman's organisation, but the good ladies withheld the prize on the grounds at someone was taking the mickey out of someone': see AJP to Aoine Ní Dhobhailéain, 7 December 1968 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA).

¹¹ The date is uncertain: see the relevant entry in Mark Cronin, *A. J. Potter (1918-1980): An Annotated Catalogue of Works* (MA thesis, Cork Institute of Technology, 2005).

¹² See Gerard Victory to AJP, 11 February 1969 ('№3: RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA). Further correspondence about the project can be found in this folder.

subsequently attempted to turn it into a kind of radio play with music called *An Nuacht* (the Irish for 'The News', the name usually given to a television or radio news broadcast), providing it with a framing script, a copy of which survives amongst his papers. The play is prefaced by a fairly lengthy programme note in which Potter not only declares the work's underlying concept to have been inspired by the modernist aesthetic of James Joyce, but claims that in spite of its 'façade of superficially light-hearted literary punning and persiflage, the ultimately serious business of life and death is being recounted in all its essential gravity.'¹³ He further contends that the work incorporates serious commentary on contemporary Irish social issues (such as the problem of emigration and the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant communities inhabiting both parts of the island of Ireland) and that it satirises the 'clichédified [*sic.*] platitudes in which public personalities habitually discuss them.'

The response of most listeners to these pronouncements, one imagines, would be an attitude of frank scepticism: Potter's programme note attempts to burden the piece with a weight of significance that it can hardly bear. On examination, such 'social commentary' as the piece contains is found to reside in rather tiresome and decidedly 'clichédified' gags. The second movement, 'Births', for example, presents the following juxtaposition of announcements:

SMITH-hyphen-BROWNE.

To Basil and Ursula

Smith-hyphen-Browne,

At Carryboy Nursing Home,

Twin sisters for Jonathan.

O'REILLY

To Shamus O'Reilly *agus a bean*¹⁴ [*recte* 'bhean'; Irish: 'and his wife']

Of Fifty-four Ascal Rory O'More [*recte* 'Ascall' or 'Ascaill'; Irish: 'Avenue']

Triplets:

¹³ Foreword to undated script for 'An Nuacht' ('Scripts etc Oct '59-', PA).

¹⁴ Potter's spellings of the Irish words employed in the text contain glaring inaccuracies.

Three brothers for:

Patrick and Mary and Sheila and Joseph and Deirdre and Brigid and Kevin and...

For contemporary Irish audiences, the subtexts of this passage would not have been difficult to decode. Dublin Protestants have imposed double-barrel surnames and bestowed posh-sounding Christian names such as Basil or Jonathan on their children. This is a reflection of their snobbery, their social pretensions and their lingering desire to ape what they perceive as the superior refinement of British manners. Protestant women give birth in private nursing homes. Dublin Catholics, on the other hand, reside in sprawling housing estates named after nationalist heroes¹⁵ and have recourse to a few token words of Irish as a badge of their putative cultural distinctiveness. They cannot afford the luxury of a sojourn in a private nursing home. They endow their children with unmistakably Gaelic names that are faintly redolent of the bog, thatched cottages shared with farmyard animals and a monotonous diet of bacon and cabbage, all of which they have only recently left behind. Protestants are conspicuous for having small families, and we infer that they have recourse to contraception. Catholics, who tend to have monstrously large broods, obviously do not. The humour here is scarcely subtle, and the text as a whole is hardly deserving of serious consideration as social commentary.

Potter's claims about its intrinsic seriousness notwithstanding, *The Classiad* is essentially a piece of light music and, as with *Variations on a Popular Tune*, most listeners are going to find his assertions to the contrary completely implausible. His portentous programme note was no doubt written in the hope of influencing the perceptions of the Prix Italia jury and deflecting adverse criticism. If one simply disregards it and approaches the original score on its own terms, it makes a rather more favourable impression. The extent to which individual listeners will respond to its humour will depend on their capacity to derive amusement from schoolboy tags such as

¹⁵ Rory O'More (c. 1620-1655) was a scion of an aristocratic Gaelic family who gained notoriety as one of the principal organisers of the Irish Rebellion of 1641.

Poor Murphy's dead and gone,
We shall see his face no more:
For what he took for H₂O
Was H₂SO₄.

- and other venerable chestnuts of this kind. On the whole, one is inclined to think that Potter managed to give more satisfactory expression to his peculiar brand of sardonic humour in his second opera *The Wedding*. Nonetheless, in spite of a certain heavy-handedness of approach, the piece does contain some witty touches, many of them deriving from the incongruous contrasts between the banal texts and their musical settings. In 'Deaths', for example, Potter devises an elaborate canon three-in-one at the minor sixth to the text 'O Death, where is thy sting-a-ling?'; and elsewhere, platitudes about newly-born babies and newly-wed couples are given a suitably syrupy musical embodiment that exudes mordant irony. The least satisfactory movement is the finale, which is too sectional and concludes in a rather perfunctory manner. This does not represent an insurmountable problem, however, and in a spirited and committed performance the piece could make an unusual addition to a concert programme, though it is unlikely to travel well, as its humour is so dependent on local references that would mean very little to non-Irish audiences.

4.3 *Hail Mary*

Potter's next major choral composition was to be on an altogether grander scale and must surely constitute one of the oddest commissions in the entire history of Irish music. This work, *Hail Mary*, was composed for Our Lady's Choral Society, a large choir based in Dublin which had come into being in 1945 as an amalgamation of the best singers from various church choirs within the archdiocese of Dublin. It rapidly established itself as one of the most accomplished amateur choirs in the country, capable of tackling such demanding scores as *The Dream of Gerontius*. As a rule, it confined itself to performing the standard oratorio repertoire, but it commissioned a pair of substantial works from Irish composers to commemorate two important

events occurring in 1966. The first of these was the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising, which was celebrated nationally with great ceremony. The Choral Society's contribution to the festivities was the performance of a cantata specially written for the occasion by Brian Boydell, *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, the title of which refers to one of Yeats' most famous and overtly nationalistic poems. The second commission commemorated an important event in the history of the choir itself - the twenty-first anniversary of its foundation. It was evidently considered desirable to put on a concert of a more than usually resplendent nature for the occasion: the choir's director decided to programme Berlioz' *Requiem*, prefaced by a short new work by an Irish composer - which Potter was asked to provide.¹⁶

Frustratingly, most of the correspondence relating to this commission does not appear to have been preserved, so the circumstances of its genesis are once again somewhat obscure. Potter's score consists of a setting of the traditional Catholic prayer 'Ave Maria' in English translation, for similar forces to those employed in the Berlioz *Requiem*: contralto and tenor soli, SATB choir with divisions, large symphony orchestra and four offstage brass choirs. This was surely a most peculiar choice in every respect. As anyone familiar with the prayer will know, it is of a very intimate character, being a conflation of two salutations to the Virgin Mary reported in the Gospel of St Luke, one from the angel Gabriel and the other from her cousin Elizabeth, which concludes with a request for her to intercede on behalf of sinful humanity. The concept of setting it for gargantuan choral and orchestral forces, complete with additional brass, seems positively bizarre. Unfortunately we do not know whether this idea originated with Potter himself, or whether he composed the work to specifications dictated by the choir's board of management. One is inclined to think that the latter was the case, because it is difficult to imagine any composer choosing to write such a monstrosity of his own volition. If the board specifically desired Potter to employ the full complement of voices and instruments required for the Berlioz, one wonders why they did not ask him to compose a *Te Deum* or set a text such as Psalm 150 - either of these would have been suitably celebratory in tone

¹⁶ See 'Dublin Choir Anniversary Celebrations', *Irish Times*, 23 August 1966.

and afforded ample scope for the deployment of very large forces without any sense of incongruity. Potter's score is so odd that one is tempted to look for alternative explanations. The most plausible is that the concept for the work originated with no less a personage than the formidable Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, who was President of Our Lady's Choral Society at the period. McQuaid had a special personal devotion to the Virgin Mary and was an enthusiastic promoter of the Marian cult.¹⁷ He may have regarded the 'Ave Maria' as an eminently suitable choice of text for a work commemorating the foundation of a choral society that was named after the Virgin Mary. It is unthinkable that his opinion would not have been sought about the commission, particularly one for a prominent public event of this kind. A keen admirer of Edgar J. Hoover, McQuaid seems to have managed his archdiocese in a manner disconcertingly reminiscent of the American CIA chief: he kept the activities of every organisation in which he was involved under close scrutiny and generally insisted that all important decisions were referred to him personally.¹⁸ One further suggestive fact adds weight to these suppositions: the score of *Hail Mary* is dedicated to him.¹⁹

Whether or not the idea emanated from McQuaid, Potter's *Hail Mary*, like his television opera *Patrick*, is uncannily evocative of the climate of Catholic triumphalism that the archbishop had done so much to foster. It is one of Potter's most routine scores and creates the impression that he was merely going through the motions in fulfilling the commission, trying to fill the manuscript paper as best he could. Unfortunately the work's empty bombast seems perfectly of a piece with the vulgar and ostentatious public displays in which the Irish Catholic church habitually engaged at this period and which reflected its overweening pretensions to social dominance.²⁰ From the very outset, the score's gestural exaggerations border on the

¹⁷ See John Turpin, 'Visual Marianism and National Identity in Ireland: 1920-1960', in Tricia Cusack and Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch eds. *Art, Nation and Gender: Ethnic Landscapes, Myths and Mother-Figures* (Aldershot, 2003), 72.

¹⁸ See John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), 288-9

¹⁹ See Robert Johnson, 'Music for Holy Week', *Irish Press*, 2 April 1971.

²⁰ In this connection, see the account of the festivities organised for the 1961 Patrician Congress in the next chapter.

ludicrous. It opens with thunderous brass fanfares and stentorian repetitions of the word 'Hail' enunciated by the tenor soloist in laboured melismata. These are taken up by the choir and after another strenuous contribution from the tenor, still on the word 'Hail', soloist and choir proceed to a slower section that elaborates the next word, 'Mary', in antiphonal exchanges composed of flaccid sequences. Much of the remaining text is set in a gently undulating six-eight, followed by a still slower section that affords a measure of contrast in texture and mood. In an all too predictable fashion, however, the work culminates in a further aural onslaught for the closing 'Amen's'.

Amusingly, preparations for the premiere on 3 September 1966²¹ were beset by complications arising from the fact that Potter had inadvertently exceeded the size of the forces that RTÉ had put together for the Berlioz *Requiem*, having apparently been unable to obtain any definite information about the number of wind instruments that were going to be used: Berlioz specifies an ensemble of impractically large proportions which is generally scaled down for modern performances. Potter seems either to have forgotten or been unaware that Berlioz does not employ any trombones in the orchestra proper, using them only in the offstage brass choirs. He consequently wrote for a standard complement of orchestral brass, including three trombones as usual. This presented RTÉ with a problem of major dimensions, since every trombonist of any standard in Dublin had already been engaged for the concert, and the management of the RTÉSO apparently had to scour the provinces in the hope of finding three more.²² As Potter commented wryly to a correspondent:

I was very relieved to get the full score of Our Lady's [Choral Society's] *Hail Mary* finished ... of course they have had the vocal parts for some time, but I couldn't for the life of me find out just how much of Berlioz' original megalo-multi-monstrosity

²¹ To judge from the relevant entry in his annotated catalogue of Potter's works, Mark Cronin seems to have been unable to establish the date of the premiere from the documentation available to him. The date given here was found on an invitation preserved in the Potter Archives ('General correspondence from Dec '65 to Dec '66', PA), which confirms that the performance took place in the Main Hall of the Royal Dublin Society in Ballsbridge, Dublin.

²² Potter recounted this incident to Séamas de Barra in an interview of 1978 (Séamas de Barra, personal communication to author).

of an orchestra they actually did retain in the performance. In the end, I more or less went ahead on my own: with the result that poor Tibor [Paul] is complaining that he has to augment the Berlioz orchestra to play AJP. I think that this must be some kind of record – or something.²³

The question naturally arises as to what Potter may have thought of this singular commission. Although like most composers, he prudently refrained from expressing criticism of his work in public, one or two ironical references to the *Hail Mary* in his letters suggest that he did not take it terribly seriously: he described it to one friend as being 'somewhat apocalyptically scored'.²⁴ One wonders why he accepted the commission in the first place. The most likely explanation is that he felt it might have been imprudent to refuse, as opportunities to write choral and orchestral works arose so seldom, and hoped that he might subsequently be offered another opportunity to write for the choir. A letter Potter sent after the premiere to Fr Andrew Griffith, the Society's director, confirms this supposition. It hints at some initial doubts on his part about the nature of the commission, and suggests that, as he had clearly surmounted any inherent difficulties to the satisfaction of all concerned, the board should consider commissioning something more substantial from him:

I can't tell you how happy I was that everything turned out so well. You know that I had slight qualms over the approach to the problem at first, but your advice and assurances have been triumphantly vindicated. My only complaint is that the whole thing was far too short, but this can easily be put right. I also am most anxious to collaborate again – preferably in a good substantial-length work which would give the choir a whole evening's music tailored to their own merits.²⁵

Nothing came of these overtures, however, and eight years were to elapse before Potter wrote another large-scale choral work.

²³ AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Father Cathal', 23 July 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec '65 to Dec '66', PA)

²⁴ AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Cecille' [*recte* 'Cécile?'], 14 November 1973 ('No13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

²⁵ AJP to Rev Fr Andrew Griffith, 11 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec '65 to Dec '66', PA)

4.4 *Cornet of Horse*

Potter's last composition of any significance for choir and orchestra, *The Cornet of Horse*, dates from 1974. Interestingly, this work did not result from a commission, but seems to have been written at the prompting of one of Potter's acquaintances, the Dublin music critic Fanny (Frances) Feehan. In February of that year, Feehan attended an event at the Dublin branch of the Goethe Institute, at which she heard the English writer Constantine FitzGibbon read his translation of an early poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* [The Lay of Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke], which had recently been reissued by a local publisher under the title *The Cornet*.²⁶ The following day, she sent a copy of the poem to Potter, with a hastily scribbled covering letter couched in her customary breathless telegraphese:

I heard this poem read by the translator in the G Inst last night and it seemed to cry out for setting for choir + orch. + bar. solo – or as a solo instrument with narrator. Both translator and Director of Inst were excited when I mentioned sending it to you. Perhaps as there is a choir in the G Inst they might commission it from you with perhaps Arts Co. help! ... I hope you will read it and enjoy it, but I feel very strongly that you could do a wonderful job on it somehow.²⁷

This would have struck Potter as something worth pursuing: Feehan's husband, the novelist Mervyn Wall, was Secretary of the Arts Council at this period – and her meaningful exclamation mark after the reference to this body clearly seemed to hint that Wall would pull some strings on Potter's behalf in order to obtain funding to cover the costs of a commissioning fee.

²⁶ The translation appears to have been originally published by Allan Wingate of London in 1958. It was reprinted in 1973 by The Dublin Magazine Press (an imprint of Dublin Magazine – a periodical edited by the Irish artist and writer John Ryan, to whom reference is made in the next chapter).

²⁷ Fanny Feehan to AJP, 14 February 1974 ('№23: *Cornet of Horse* 1974-', PA)

Feehan's proposal would also have been attractive from another point of view, as it opened up the possibility of collaborating with a prominent British man of letters who appeared to have to have contacts in the BBC and elsewhere. Constantine FitzGibbon's work is neglected today, but he had a considerable reputation as a novelist, biographer and historian in his lifetime. His early career was quite a colourful one. Born in America in 1919, he was educated in England and won an open scholarship to read modern languages at Oxford. He never completed his degree, however, and enlisted with the British army in 1940, later transferring to the American army in 1942. He subsequently served as an intelligence officer during the Allied campaigns in France and Germany during the latter part of the war. This experience, which enabled him to observe the workings of power at first hand, led to a lasting fascination with the ways in which can exercise a corrupting influence on those who wield it. After the war, he edited a book on the German general staff, in addition to carrying out research that was used at the Nuremberg trials and which he later incorporated into a history of the German resistance to Hitler. In the decades that followed, he produced an extensive and varied literary output that included novels, translations, historical works and biographies of Norman Douglas and Dylan Thomas. After re-marrying for the fourth time in 1967, he moved to Ireland, settling in the seaside village of Killiney near Dublin. He was thus permanently resident in the country by the time Feehan brought him into contact with Potter in 1974.²⁸

On a personal level, one imagines that the two men would have had a considerable amount in common, not least their extensive periods of service in the army during the Second World War and a shared interest in politics.²⁹ The surviving

²⁸ No biography of FitzGibbon has so far been written, and the information given here is based on his autobiographical reminiscences in his book *Drink* (Dublin, 1980) and the entry by Robert Lubbock, 'FitzGibbon, (Robert Louis) Constantine Lee-Dillon (1919-1983)', rev. Clare L. Taylor, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004).

²⁹ Both men were also alcoholics. FitzGibbon's personal life was rather turbulent and he tended to drink to excess even as a young man, like Potter, becoming a chronic alcoholic by the mid-1960s. Although he remained steadily productive, in the 1970s his consumption of alcohol increased to the point where his health was endangered and he eventually felt impelled to seek professional help. He was admitted to the Dublin hospital of St John of God in 1978, where he came under the care of the same specialist who had helped Potter nine years previously, Dr J. N. P. Moore. The course of treatment was successful. Two years later,

correspondence between them certainly suggests that their relationship was a cordial one. Feehan, who seems to have revelled in her self-appointed role of *entremetteuse*, wrote to Potter shortly afterwards to tell him that FitzGibbon was 'enchanted' about her proposal that he should set the translation to music and held out the prospect that the writer might draw on various contacts to organise a performance in Germany. By this stage, she had evidently come to regard the project as something in which she had a personal stake and strongly pushed for Potter to incorporate a solo part for the Irish mezzo-soprano Bernadette Greevy, who seemed poised on the threshold of a promising international career at the time.³⁰ Fitzgibbon promptly gave his permission for Potter to proceed and arranged for an agreement to be drawn up about royalties.³¹ Feehan next set about the task of obtaining sponsorship, so that Potter could be paid the equivalent of a commissioning fee. In the middle of July, the composer received from her the following mysterious communication:

A firm (reputable) have agreed to put up £200 towards *The Cornet* – to be paid on completion of the score. I can arrange a bit of a 'do' (press etc.) when cheque is being handed over – all the usual ballyhoo. The boys will play up. The firm ... will definitely pay and are interested – genuinely – so it's now up to you. I will tell you name of firm when score is in Bernadette's hands!³²

Now that he could be confident of receiving a fee, Potter got down to work and by mid-October could report to Feehan that he was making good progress.³³ In the event, he set the poem for male-voice choir and orchestra, but acquiesced in Feehan's

he published a book on the subject of alcoholism, *Drink*, which incorporated much autobiographical material. He seems to have hoped that it would spark off an extensive campaign to eradicate alcoholism, but it did not meet with the response which he had anticipated. According to Sarah Burn, Potter did not think very highly of the book, and seems to found FitzGibbon's proselytising zeal for the cause of temperance rather off-putting (Personal communication, 3 August 2007). Unfortunately for FitzGibbon, he began to suffer from serious health problems not long after its publication and died three years later at the comparatively young age of 63.

³⁰ Postcard from Fanny Feehan to AJP, no date ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

³¹ Constantine FitzGibbon to Paul Guinness, 12 March 1974 (copy in '*Nº23: Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

³² Fanny Feehan to AJP, 18 July 1974 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

³³ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 12 October 1974 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

suggestion that he should include a prominent part for mezzo-soprano. The score was eventually completed on 4 December: Potter punctiliously recorded the time at which he drew the final double bar-line as 3.26pm.³⁴ Four minutes later, he dispatched a whimsical telegram to Feehan:

CORNET COMPLETED GRATEFUL INSTRUCTIONS NUMISMATIC OBSTETRIC
AND PROMOTIONAL. POTTER.³⁵

In spite of Feehan's willing assistance as midwife, however, a considerable length of time was to elapse before *The Cornet of Horse* (as Potter eventually called the work³⁶) was performed. It is not clear whether or not FitzGibbon explored the possibility of arranging a premiere in Germany as he had promised, but if he did, nothing came of his efforts. As usual, this meant that the only realistic hope of securing a performance lay with RTÉ and Potter duly submitted the score to Gerard Victory for his consideration in February 1975. Around this time he also approached one of the major Irish banking firms, Allied Irish Banks, to request that it underwrite some of the costs involved in performing the work. Irish banks have not been especially notable for their willingness to support artistic ventures, but rather surprisingly, Potter managed to persuade AIB to part with some money.³⁷ The details of this deal are uncertain and it has not proved possible to establish either the size of the sum involved or how it was spent, but it may well have made it a more feasible proposition for RTÉ to perform the piece. Potter's correspondence with Victory

³⁴ AJP to Constantine FitzGibbon, 7 December 1974 ('No23: *Cornet of Horse* 1974-', PA)

³⁵ Copy in 'No23: *Cornet of Horse* 1974-', PA

³⁶ Potter felt that to call the work *The Cornet*, *tout court*, might evoke misleading associations with the musical instrument of the same name, or even more unfortunately, with ice-cream. He hesitated for some time before settling on the title *The Cornet of Horse*: see AJP to Bernadette Greevy, 26 June 1975; and AJP to Maureen Reilly, 20 November 1976 (both in 'No23: *Cornet of Horse* 1974-', PA). One wonders if this choice might have been prompted by the popular novel *The Cornet of Horse: A Tale of Marlborough's Wars* (1881) by the Victorian writer G. A. Henty (1832-1902).

³⁷ This occurrence is mentioned a letter Potter wrote several years later to Ulster Bank requesting sponsorship for a production of his opera *The Wedding*: see AJP to George Platt, 28 April 1977 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA). The folder of correspondence relating to *The Cornet of Horse* also contains a letter to the public relations manager of Allied Irish Banks which makes reference to a recent meeting about sponsorship (AJP to Bob Ryan, 19 February 1975, 'No23: *Cornet of Horse* 1974-', PA).

reveals yet again how little money an Irish composer could expect to receive for writing a work of this size. The £200 that Feehan had managed to obtain on his behalf is worth roughly £1,500 or €2,200 today – hardly an adequate recompense for the composition of a large-scale work lasting about thirty-five minutes. In addition, he also had to undertake the task of preparing a vocal score. As we have seen, the music department in RTÉ did not operate a regular commissioning scheme at this period, but paid composers a fee to purchase outright any new scores that it agreed to perform. In view of the amount of time and effort that the score had cost him, Potter proposed that RTÉ pay him an additional £846.90 (approximately £4,900 or €7,200), a sum calculated on the basis of current rates recommended by the Irish musicians' union IFMAP and which seemed to him to represent a fair remuneration for his work.³⁸ Victory balked at this figure, informing Potter that RTÉ simply could not afford it 'in the present quite serious financial climate' and asked if he might be willing to accept the considerably smaller sum of £320 (£2,300/€3,400).³⁹ There is no reason to suspect that Victory was treating Potter unjustly in this matter: given RTÉ's straitened financial circumstances, the music department was undoubtedly operating on a tight budget.⁴⁰

There remained the problem of finding a suitable choir to perform the piece, the number of male voices in the RTÉ Singers being insufficient. This did not prove easy to solve. Potter approached the conductor of the Garda Choir (a male-voice choir formed from members of Irish police force), who declined to perform it on the grounds that it was too difficult.⁴¹ He subsequently managed to persuade the choir of the Goethe Institute to learn the piece in time for the studio recording, which was prepared over several days in late March 1977 under the direction of the Irish

³⁸ AJP to Gerard Victory, 4 July 1975 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

³⁹ Gerard Victory to AJP, 9 July 1975 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

⁴⁰ Potter later informed correspondents that it cost RTÉ around £10,000 (£40,000/€60,000) to make a studio recording of *The Cornet of Horse*: see AJP to William Doran, 20 August 1974 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA); and AJP to George Platt, 28 April 1977 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA). It is not clear why this was so: the choir was an amateur one, and a staff conductor was used. The orchestra members and technicians would surely have been paid in any case.

⁴¹ Maureen Reilly to AJP, 24 November 1976 ('Nº23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

conductor Pronnsias Ó Duinn. Although the choir members made a gallant attempt to get to grips with the work, they clearly found it challenging and their performance was rather tentative. An additional problem was presented by the fact that the choir was too small to balance satisfactorily with the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra, and the sound engineers had to resort to the expedient of boosting its tone by artificial means.⁴² The choice of soloist was a happier one: Bernadette Greevy having been unavailable, another Irish singer, Mary Sheridan, was engaged, who acquitted herself well in the part. This recording was first transmitted on 24 June 1977. It was subsequently rebroadcast, but a public performance never seems to have materialised.

Although Potter had been prompted to set Rilke's poem by a purely external stimulus rather than an internal one, this score seems to have taken on a special, highly personal significance for him because of its resonance with his wartime experiences.⁴³ He was by no means alone in his intense response to Rilke's *Cornet*: it made an equally powerful impression on several generations of German-speaking readers. This poem dates from a very early stage in Rilke's career: the first version was composed in 1899, when he was only twenty-three. The inspiration for the work came from Rilke's reading of a seventeenth-century German chronicle that described the career of an aristocratic youth by the name of Christoph Rilke who participated in the Austrian campaign against the Turks during the early years of Leopold I's reign and met with an early death in Hungary in 1663. Though he had no grounds for doing so, Rilke seems to have believed that this figure was one of his ancestors and that he himself was consequently of noble lineage. According to his own rather romanticised account of its genesis to his friend the Princess Marie of Thurm and Taxis, the tale so fired his imagination that he composed the poem in a single intense burst of inspiration:

⁴² See AJP to Pronnsias Ó Duinn, 23 March 1977 ('№23: *Cornet of Horse 1974-*', PA)

⁴³ Sarah Burn, personal communication to the author, 3 August 2007

Un soir, [Rilke] me parla du *Cornet* (le lai de Christophe Rilke), écrit pendant son adolescence... Il se trouvait, je ne sais trop pourquoi, dans une maison de garde forestier pour y passer la nuit, mais il ne pouvait pas dormir.

- Voyez-vous, Princesse, continuait Rainer Maria Rilke, en s'approchant avec moi de la fenêtre ouverte, voyez-vous, c'était une nuit toute pareille, une nuit de pleine lune, avec une brise assez forte qui chassait de longs nuages sombres comme d'étroits ruban noirs passant incessamment sur le disque éclairé. J'étais debout à la fenêtre, et je regardais les nuages qui paissaient, toujours très vite comme ceux-ci, et dans le rythme rapide, il me semblait les entendre murmurer des mots que je répétais comme en un rêve inconscient, ne sachant pas ce que allait devenir : « Chevaucher... chevaucher sans arrêt » et alors je me mis à écrire, toujours comme en songe, j'écrivis toute la nuit et le matin le lai de Christophe Rilke était terminé.⁴⁴

[One evening, Rilke spoke to me about his *Cornet* (the lay of Christophe Rilke), which he had written during his adolescence. He was passing the night – I don't quite know why – in a forester's house, but he could not sleep.

"You see, Your Highness", Rilke continued as we approached the open window, 'you see, it was a night just like this, a night with a full moon, and a fairly strong breeze that chased long dark clouds like slender black ribbons which passed incessantly over that illuminated disc. I was standing at the window, gazing at those clouds that scurried past, always at great speed like these ones, when I seemed to hear them murmur words that I repeated in an undertone, as if in a profound reverie, not knowing what was about to happen: 'Riding... riding without cease'; whereupon I started to write, as though in a dream throughout: I wrote all night, and by the morning the lay of Christoph Rilke was complete.]

The result was a fairly lengthy prose poem in twenty-nine sections that presented a highly atmospheric, but wholly imaginary recreation of his namesake's experiences during the campaign: the hardships and long periods of monotony compensated to some extent by the comradeship of his fellow officers; his thoughts of home, his

⁴⁴ Princesse de la Tour et Taxis, *Souvenirs sur Rainer Maria Rilke* (Paris, 1936), 211-212

elderly mother and the sweetheart he had left behind; the devastation and wanton destruction he observes as he passes through the surrounding countryside; an idyllic respite provided by the hospitality of a local aristocrat; a fleeting sexual encounter; and his death at the hands of Turkish soldiers. Rilke assigns the young man the rank of Cornet – the officer in the company who bore the colours. His function was not merely ceremonial, as it is today: in an era before sophisticated modern communications, the standard-bearer played the vital role of concentrating, forming and directing the troops during an engagement. The loss of the colours could thus prove calamitous for the course of a battle. As one seventeenth-century commentator remarked:

Bey den Soldaten ist das Cornet dasjenige Zeichen / so die Helden bey Frewd vund
Muth erhaltet / darnach sie alle sehen / und wo dieses verlohren / so ist Hertz vund
Muth vund die gantze Compagni / das gantze Regiment / das Feld verloren.⁴⁵

[For soldiers, the Cornet is that sign / by means of which heroes remain of good cheer
and keep their courage / which they all keep their eyes on / and when this sign is lost
/ then heart and courage are lost, / the entire company / the entire regiment / and the
field of battle are lost.]

A later writer declared that a Cornet 'muß eher das Leben, als sich seine Standarte nehmen lassen' ['must sooner give up his life rather than his standard']: the standard-bearer was evidently expected to demonstrate an exemplary heroism.⁴⁶

In comparison with the great poems of his maturity, Rilke's *Cornet* is undoubtedly a minor piece. Nonetheless, its poignant treatment of the theme of youthful mortality seems to have struck a widespread chord in a similar way that A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* had done for English readers. The popularity of the poem exceeded

⁴⁵ Philander von Sittewald, *Gesichte* (1650), reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke: Text-Fassungen und Dokumente* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974), 172.

⁴⁶ Hannß Friedrich von Fleming, *Der Vollkommene Teutsche Soldat* (1726), quoted in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 173.

the wildest expectations of its author and publisher: Rilke revised it twice, in 1904 and again in 1906, and a cheap Insel-Bücherei edition of this final version sold some 840,000 copies between 1912 and 1950.⁴⁷ The poet subsequently came to regard the work with a certain amount of embarrassment⁴⁸, telling a potential translator in 1922 that he did not consider it 'a very valuable specimen of my output'.⁴⁹ This attitude may well have had something to do with his dismay at attempts during the First World War to press it into service as a piece of nationalistic propaganda, which Rilke regarded as a grotesque perversion of its import.⁵⁰

The poem was widely translated in Rilke's lifetime, but he seems to have regarded these attempts as rather futile, inclining to the opinion that its 'magic' (as he described it) was impossible to reproduce in any other tongue.⁵¹ On comparing FitzGibbon's version with the original, one is inclined to concede that Rilke may have had a point. Although the language of the poem is not particularly obscure, it is highly elliptical in style, its brusque short sentences and frequent omissions of verb and pronouns lending it a terseness that is very difficult to reproduce convincingly in English. One assumes that Rilke deliberately resorted to these devices to offset any tendency towards sentimentality inherent in the subject matter. Although it is couched in *vers libre* throughout, in lines of varying length, the poem's verbal music and rhythmic organisation is of a subtlety that presents considerable difficulties to the potential translator. FitzGibbon's rendering, though serviceable, is disappointingly pedestrian.⁵²

⁴⁷ 'Rilke. Weisen von Liebe und Tod', *Der Spiegel*, 28 March 1956: reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 349.

⁴⁸ For a discussion of Rilke's later responses to the poem see Thomas Nolden, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Soldier: Rainer Maria Rilke's Cornet', *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Autumn, 1991), 443-451.

⁴⁹ See Rilke to Aurelia Gallarati Scotti, 10 August 1922: reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 154-5.

⁵⁰ See Franz Theodor Csokor, 'Der Kornett und die Feldwebel' (1951): excerpt reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 217-8.

⁵¹ See Norbert Langer, 'Rilke als Mitarbeiter der ›Deutschen Arbeit‹': reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 285.

⁵² To take a single example: its fifteenth section of *Cornet* describes an animated scene of feasting at the castle of a local nobleman, opening

Rilke was equally ambivalent about attempts to set the poem to music, feeling that his verse was musical enough in its own right and needed no other expressive adjunct.⁵³ Nonetheless, he reluctantly granted permission to the Austrian composer Casimir von Pászthory (1866-1966) to fashion a melodrama from it, and later allowed the Danish composer and student of Schoenberg Paul von Klenau (1883-1946) to make a setting.⁵⁴ Rilke's strictures did not deter subsequent composers, however: it was subsequently set again by another Schoenberg pupil, the German-Czech composer Viktor Ullmann (1898-1944) not long before his tragic death in Auschwitz in 1944; and the Swiss composer Frank Martin (1890-1974) composed a version for alto and small orchestra that was premiered a year later in 1945.

Interestingly, Martin hesitated considerably before embarking on the project, being uncertain whether the poem was really suitable for musical treatment.⁵⁵ His vacillations are not difficult to understand, for at first glance the *Cornet* strikes one as being a rather intractable text from the composer's standpoint. In the first place,

Als Mahl begann. Und ist ein Fest geworden, kaum weiß man wie. Die hohen Flammen flackten, die Stimmen schwirrten, wirre Lieder klirrten aus Glas und Glanz, und endlich aus den reifgewordenen Takten: entsprang der Tanz.

A literal translation might run:

It began as a meal. And it became a feast, one scarcely knew how. The tall flames flickered [flared], voices buzzed, confused [disordered, wild] songs jingled from glass and glamour, and at last, when the rhythm had grown ripe – the dance sprang from it.

But this rendering fails completely to capture the peculiar incantatory quality deriving from the complex interplays of alliteration and vowel rhyme in conjunctions such as *Flammen / flackten*, *Stimmen / schwirrten / wirre / klirrten* and *Glas / Glanz / Takten / Tanz*. The inherent difficulty, of course, is to find ways of reproducing these schemes satisfactorily without lapsing into a style reminiscent of a parody of a Wagnerian libretto. FitzGibbon's translation is not particularly inspired: he evades most of these problems, and allows himself considerable licence, introducing not a few distortions:

It started as a meal. And it grew into a feast, though none quite knew how. The tall flames flickered, the buzz of voices rose, a confusion of song and glass and plate, and at last, when the measure was ripe, from it all there blossomed forth: the dance.

⁵³ In a letter to Marie Taxis of 24 February 1915, he averred that the poem's 'eigener Gang ist Musik genug' (extract reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 126-7).

⁵⁴ For an account of Rilke's attitudes to musical settings of his work, see Herbert Deinert, 'Rilke und die Musik' (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1959).

⁵⁵ See Frank Martin, 'Warum ich Rilkes ›Cornet‹ vertont habe' (1944): reproduced in Walter Simon (ed.), *Die Weise*, 306-7.

there is the problem of its sheer length: words are inevitably enunciated far less rapidly when they are sung rather than spoken, especially at slower tempi, which means that any potential setting runs the risk of becoming inordinately long. Further difficulties are presented by the nature of the poem, which is cast as a loose narrative depicting twenty-seven discrete episodes. If a composer wished to follow the original order of events fairly closely, he or she would be compelled to set most of the text without cutting it, treating each scene in turn. An inherent danger in this approach is that a sequence of more or less self-contained short episodes would make for a diffuse musical structure which is merely additive in nature, rather than constituting a satisfactorily integrated design. From the point of view of a choral setting, the most serious drawback of Rilke's text is that its terse poetic prose affords very few opportunities for word repetition. This would make it difficult to achieve a satisfactory range of choral textures, particularly contrapuntal ones, which are not only necessary for the purposes of variety, but are also of long-range structural importance, as they allow the composer to build towards peaks of expressive intensity.

The Cornet of Horse is on a much higher level of achievement than the two works previously discussed, but it cannot be said that Potter succeeded in finding a wholly persuasive solution to these problems: although the score has features of indisputable merit, its effectiveness is compromised considerably by its unsatisfactory structural organisation. Unlike Martin, who sets each portion of the text as a separate song, Potter attempted to set the poem in one unbroken expanse of music. He appears to have felt that it was impractical to set it in its entirety, and his attempted solution was to cut it in length by about a third and conflate some of its sections. In principle, this approach could have worked well, particularly if he had then grouped the remaining sections into perhaps four linked movements, each of which would be unified musically by being set to a continuous span of music that proceeded in a fairly uniform tempo. Unfortunately, in spite of his reorganisation and condensation of the poem, Potter's setting is still very fragmented, falling into over two dozen very short sections. These are performed without a break, but still

strike the listener as being more or less discrete on account of their very obvious final cadence points and their abruptly contrasting tempi, with the result that the score creates an impression of short-windedness. Like his ballets, *The Cornet of Horse* also suffers from Potter's habitual failure to vary material sufficiently on subsequent restatements in order to ensure a greater variety of mood, texture and tonality. These defects could no doubt be overcome to some extent in a sympathetic performance, but the piece would require very careful handling in order to succeed.

Ex. 4.1: *The Cornet of Horse*, bars 181ff.

Tempo di valse ♩ = 48
mf

The score consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line with lyrics: "They are close to one another, These gentlemen from France and Bur -". Below it is the piano accompaniment with the instruction "[ww doubling voices]". The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "gun-dy, From the Low Countries and the valleys of Car-in-thi-a, From the Bo-he-mian Cas-tles,". The piano accompaniment includes the instruction "[vc, db + brass]". The third system shows the vocal line with lyrics: "From the Bo-he-mian Cas-tles,". The piano accompaniment includes the instruction "[tpts]" and a dynamic marking of *ff*. The score is marked with *cresc. sempre* and *cresc.* throughout.

The shortcomings of *The Cornet of Horse* are much to be regretted, because in other respects Potter's setting is imaginative. One of the score's most effective features is its intermittent recourse to a stylised late-Romantic idiom that is unmistakably evocative of *fin de siècle* Austria: the music depicting the camaraderie of the young soldiers at times recalls the suave rhythms of Viennese waltzes [Ex. 4.1], while the

expansive vocal lines for the mezzo-soprano soloist, with their yearning appoggiaturas, are plainly reminiscent of Mahler in their lyrical intensity [Ex. 4.2].

Ex. 4.2: *The Cornet of Horse*, bars 1004ff.

Moderato ♩ = 96 *mf*

The one from Lan - ge - nau is deep in the en - e - my ranks and all a - lone. —

[vlns] *pp* [ob, cl]

[archi con sord]

sf

Ter - ror has cleared a cir - cle all a - bout him

Detailed description: The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics and a piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The piano part includes markings for violins, oboe/clarinets, and strings with mutes. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, with a dynamic marking of *sf*.

These elements of the score's sound-world suggest a period some two hundred and fifty years later than the events described, but as a compositional strategy Potter's approach seems entirely justified, particularly if one considers that Rilke's contemporaries seem to have regarded his poem as having a direct relevance to their own concerns and immediate circumstances. Such musical material, which appears within quotation marks, as it were, allows Potter to conjure up the sensibility of a more innocent age, in which young men could unselfconsciously aspire to lofty ideals of chivalry and heroism, and view the life of a soldier in a highly romanticised light. As he would have been only too well aware, the realities of war and of army service bore no relation to these adolescent fantasies, and he had ample opportunity to observe at first hand the futile waste of young lives in senseless conflicts. In view

of this, it is perhaps not surprising that *The Cornet of Horse* is imbued with a depth and intensity of feeling that is otherwise rather rare in his music, which generally tends to be emotionally reticent when it is not expressing good humour and high spirits.

Ex. 4.3: *The Cornet of Horse*, conclusion

Meno mosso ♩ = 96

quasi f *cresc.*

There saw he an old wo - man's tears, tears,

[fiati] [archi] [archi] [cl, bsn] [p cresc.]

[trb, tb]

tears, tears, tears, tears,

dim.

f

tears

[timps]

ppp

This quality is particularly in evidence in the highly expressive arioso passages assigned to the mezzo-soprano, which are often deeply poignant, in spite of their extreme simplicity. Although it might be considered a somewhat surprising choice,

the use of a female voice to personate the male protagonist, somewhat after the manner of an eighteenth-century operatic trouser role, is most effective in suggesting his extreme youth and vulnerability. The vocal writing is excellently judged throughout, and the brief concluding solo, which evokes the grief of the young man's mother on learning of his death, is undoubtedly one of the single finest inspirations in Potter's entire output (its closing bars are shown in Ex. 4.3). Other episodes in the piece are characterised very imaginatively by means of vivid orchestral writing, one of the most effective being the young man's surreal encounter in the course of his travels with a girl who has been ill-treated and subsequently abandoned. Potter conjures up an atmosphere of extreme emotional disturbance through the eerie sonorities of multi-divided strings in slow-moving dense chromatic clusters, shrill woodwind ululations and rasping brass glissandi – sonorities which form an effective contrast to the more diatonic music that surrounds them. Imperfect as it is, *The Cornet of Horse* contains some of the most memorable music that Potter composed, and provides a tantalising indication of how his dramatic talents could have found expression in other large-scale choral works had suitable opportunities presented themselves.

Chapter 5

The Stage Works I: Ballets

5.1 Introduction

As we have had frequent occasion to observe in the foregoing chapters, the conditions of Irish musical life were decidedly difficult from the composer's point of view, and opportunities to have large-scale works performed were generally hard to come by until the mid-1960s. This was particularly true in the case of opera, and Potter was forced to wait for over twenty years before he was able to secure a production of his second opera *The Wedding*. It is consequently rather surprising to discover that circumstances were far more favourable to the production of a ballet, and that Potter was commissioned to write no less than four dance scores within a few years, from 1959 to 1963. A study of Potter's involvement with the ballet is consequently of considerable interest for several reasons. In the first place, it allows us to assess what opportunities were available to him, particularly those opened up by the existence of the Cork Ballet Company and a short-lived Dublin company, National Ballet (later Irish National Ballet¹) that presented three of his ballets in the early 1960s. Very little has hitherto been known about the latter company, even though it was a venture of notable significance in the history of dance in Ireland; and an important subsidiary focus of this chapter will be to provide an account of its activities based on materials that have been preserved in the Potter Archive. Secondly, writing for the ballet afforded Potter with opportunities to collaborate with three of the most famous Irish men of letters of this period – Donagh MacDonagh, Patrick Kavanagh and Micheál MacLiammóir. The creative partnerships that resulted are in themselves of considerable interest, as are the works that they engendered, all of which engage in

¹ This company, which ceased to operate in 1964 (see below), should not be confused with the professional Cork-based Irish Ballet Company founded in 1973, and which was renamed Irish National Ballet ten years later in 1983. For an account of this change of title, see Ruth Fleischmann, 'The Arts Council and Irish National Ballet', in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty: Founder of Irish National Ballet* (Cork and Colorado, 1998), 34.

one way or another with aspects of contemporary Ireland, and like Potter's operas, offer valuable insights into the nature of Irish society and culture at the period. Finally, Potter's ballet scores, though uneven in achievement, contain some of the most compelling music that he ever wrote, two of them in particular - *Gamble, No Gamble* (1961) and *Full Moon for the Bride* (completed in piano score in 1963 and orchestrated eleven years later for its premiere in 1974) – ranking amongst his finest work.

Writing for the ballet was ideally suited to Potter's creative gifts, far more so, arguably, than more abstract forms: he displays a fine natural talent for characterisation and the portrayal of dramatic situations, as well as a highly sensuous, almost visceral feel for rhythm and orchestral timbre. As he would have been the first to admit, it was precisely this quality of sensuous enjoyment, with a heady admixture of frankly erotic pleasure, which he demanded from the ballet as a spectator. In a letter to a former student, he made no secret of his views on this score:

I've considered voyeurism always to be an essential part of the drawing power of ballet (and you would know if you'd ever seen any of mine!). What about the DOMs [dirty old men?] in the stalls with their opera glasses? You may not like them, but they do buy tickets! Don't get me wrong: it's all art, of course. But you know what I mean: the *Rokeby Venus*² is more fun than the Mona Lisa... isn't it?³

² A reference to one of Velazquez' most famous paintings, *La Venus del espejo*, which depicts Venus contemplating her reflection in a mirror held up by Cupid. The painting, which hangs in the National Gallery, London, was subjected to a notorious attempt to vandalise it on 10 March 1914 by the militant suffragette Mary Richardson, who slashed the canvas with a meat cleaver. Richardson explained her actions as having been motivated by the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst the previous day: 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history.' In the light of Potter's remarks, it is somewhat ironical to note that in 1952 Richardson told an interviewer that her attack on the painting had also been prompted by her dislike of the fact that 'men visitors gaped at it all day long'. See Gridley McKim-Smith, 'The Rhetoric of Rape, the Language of Vandalism', *Woman's Art Journal*, 23/1 (Spring 2002), 29-36.

³ AJP to Maeve Foxworthy, 2 July 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA)

The flippant tone of these remarks notwithstanding, there can be no doubt that Potter was genuinely appreciative of ballet as an art form and found his involvement with it to be a deeply rewarding experience, as numerous comments scattered throughout his correspondence attest. In a characteristically extravagant pronouncement, he once declared to Irish choreographer Joan Denise Moriarty, with whom he enjoyed a professional association over more than two decades:

I've often been called by the same epithet as Mary Tudor: and like her, I'm sure they'll find a word inscribed on my heart when I die. Hers was 'Calais': mine will be 'Ballet'...⁴

5.2 Early involvement with the Cork Ballet Company

It was through this remarkable woman, and her equally remarkable collaborator, the composer Aloys Fleischmann, that Potter was presented with his first opportunity to write a dance score. By the time he settled in Ireland, this enterprising pair had already made strenuous efforts to ameliorate the cultural deprivation that was such a dispiriting feature of life in Cork, the country's second city, in the grey years after the Second World War. Fleischmann, who showed outstanding promise as a student, had been appointed Professor of Music in 1934 at the very young age of 24 and on completion of his postgraduate studies in Munich promptly threw himself with enormous energy into the arduous task of revitalising musical life in his native city. Apart from his activities as a teacher, composer and administrator, he was a talented conductor, founding the amateur Cork Symphony Orchestra in 1934 and making numerous guest appearances with the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra. In this capacity, he was an active proponent of music by Irish composers, including their work whenever possible in his programmes.⁵ His association with Joan Denise Moriarty dates from 1947, when Fleischmann undertook to place his services and

⁴ AJP to Joan Denise Moriarty, 25 March 1967 ('No1 Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

⁵ For an account of Fleischmann's career, see Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin, 2006).

that of the Cork Symphony Orchestra at her disposal to provide music for a presentation mounted by the Cork Ballet Group which she had recently founded. This event marked the beginning of an artistic partnership that was to last for almost fifty years.⁶ Emboldened by the success of this first venture, Moriarty and Fleischmann decided to present a full week of ballet the following year - something that became an annual fixture in the city's theatrical calendar thereafter. Although the entire enterprise was dependent on local talent and resources, and the standard of productions was inevitably variable, the Cork Ballet Company's record of achievement was nonetheless impressive, as were its efforts on behalf of Irish composers and others who were closely associated with Ireland. In addition to staging two ballets by Fleischmann himself, *The Golden Bell of Ko* (1947) and *An Cóitín Dearg* [The Red Petticoat] (1951), Moriarty had already adapted Elizabeth Maconchy's *Puck Fair* in 1948 and *The Children of Lir* by Redmond Friel (1907-1979) in 1950.

In September 1953, Fleischmann contacted Potter to enquire whether he might have written anything suitable for adaptation as a ballet and which could be included in a programme by Cork Ballet Company during the 1954 *Tóstal* - a festival which had been initiated by the Taoiseach Sean Lemass in an attempt to boost national morale during a period of severe economic depression and mass emigration.⁷ Potter had come to Fleischmann's attention the previous year, when he had acted as adjudicator for a composer's competition organised by An tOireachtas, an annual Gaelic culture festival similar to the Eisteddfod in Wales, which was founded by the Gaelic League in 1897.⁸ On this occasion, he had awarded Potter first prize for *Rhapsody on Corrymeela* (later renamed *Aiste ó na Gleannta* [Music from the Glens]), which, as we have seen, evidently made a considerable impression on him. Having discovered a new talent, Fleischmann, with characteristic generosity of spirit, made it his business

⁶ For an account, see Chapter 7 of de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 94ff. and Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty, passim*.

⁷ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 8 September 1953 ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA)

⁸ For a description of this festival, see Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair, 'The Cultural Value of Festival and Feis', in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland* (Cork, 1952), 215.

to be supportive, just as he had supported Frederick May, Ina Boyle and other Irish composers active at the period.⁹ Potter was deeply grateful for his interest, and the exchange of letters that ensued inaugurated a warm and enduring professional relationship between the two men. In his reply, Potter informed Fleischmann that he imagined *Corrymeela* might not be very suitable and proposed *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* instead.¹⁰ From Fleischmann's point of view, this choice would have been somewhat problematic. For one thing, the prominence given to the heavy brass in its scoring would have made it difficult to secure a satisfactory balance with a small ensemble such as the Cork Symphony Orchestra. And there was an additional problem, as he explained to Potter: in spite of Fleischmann's best efforts, the company had been severely criticised for not including a sufficiently large proportion of new Irish works in its programmes and he was anxious to ensure that whatever Irish work was included would be sufficiently long. *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, at twelve minutes, was too short. Fleischmann enquired if Potter might have written anything else, or if he would consider composing a new score for the occasion: 'Is there any hope that you would consider writing a ballet proper? If too late for this season, it would be something to look forward to for the following season.'¹¹ Potter does not appear to have pursued this opportunity at the time, and in the end Fleischmann chose a score by Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair, *Casadh an tSúgáin* [The Twisting of the Rope].¹²

Three years later, in August 1956, Fleischmann contacted Potter once more, informing him that Moriarty was considering the possibility of devising a ballet based on *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and *Rhapsody under a High Sky*.¹³ Potter was evidently keen on the idea and offered to send on scores. As Moriarty's conception of the projected ballet clarified, Fleischmann wrote to Potter to explain that the work

⁹ See de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 41-4, for an account of Fleischmann's efforts to programme works by Irish composers in his concerts with the Cork Symphony Orchestra and the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra.

¹⁰ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 11 September 1953 ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA)

¹¹ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 19 September 1953 ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA)

¹² See list of productions mounted by Cork Ballet Company in Appendix B of Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 244-247.

¹³ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 6 August 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

(in a manner somewhat akin to his ballet *An Cóitín Dearg* to a scenario by the eminent actor and writer Micheál MacLiammóir) would explore the conflicting claims of tradition of tradition and modernity experienced in modern Irish society, which Fleischmann described as 'one of the main trends of Irish life'. Its first part was to be 'a cottage *céilidhe* affair'¹⁴, followed by 'a dramatic change of sets and costumes and facial expressions into [a] slick "modern" idiom.'¹⁵ In the intervening three years Potter had been quite productive of new works, and he was now in a much better position to provide something suitable. He sent on details of his recent compositions, including *Variations on a Popular Tune*, the three orchestral fantasias on Irish folk tunes (*Fantasia Gaelach* I, II and III), the *Irish Suite*, *Nocturne in Bansha* and the various arrangements of Irish dance music that he had made for the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra, including sets of hop jigs, reels and hornpipes.¹⁶ Fleischmann requested to see some of these scores, and after some weeks of deliberation, Moriarty eventually settled on *Fantasia Gaelach III* in combination with extracts from Potter's sets of hop jigs and reels, having reluctantly rejected both *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and *Variations on a Popular Tune* in favour of Gershwin's *An American in Paris*.¹⁷ Fleischmann's explanation of her decision to Potter is rather amusing, reflecting as it does his notorious antipathy to jazz and popular music:

Miss Moriarty thinks that the idiom needed for the second half of the ballet would have to be regrettably slick and banal – we would not subject you nor any Irish composer to the indignity involved in bringing the satire home, as the needs of the ballet now suggest! Gershwin's *An American in Paris* about fills the bill and I think you were good enough to say that you would not mind being bracketed with him. At all events, such is the trend at the moment, and we would be most grateful for your views. It would, of course, have been far preferable to have worked out the

¹⁴ *Céilidhe* is an older spelling of *céilí*, employed before the spelling reforms introduced in 1948.

¹⁵ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 25 August 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

¹⁶ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 29 August 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

¹⁷ See Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 29 August, 24 September and 12 October 1956 (all in 'General 1956', PA).

ballet in collaboration with your good self, to new music, but for this now there would not be time.¹⁸

Potter was quite happy to leave Fleischmann adapt his music as he felt appropriate: he evidently had complete trust in his senior colleague's abilities and musical judgement, which, reading between the lines of his reply, he regarded as being in a different league to those of other Irish conductors:

I am perfectly happy to leave any interpolations, cuts, amendments or what-not to your own perfectly good taste. You are there on the spot so whatever you decide will be OK with me: and thank you for your trouble in any case. (I'm sure you won't, like certain conductors whom I forbear to name, change my 5/4s to 4/4s "because they're simpler": or my harmonies "because they're not suitable"!!)¹⁹

Fleischmann, for his part, appreciated Potter's professionalism and willingness to be accommodating. He offered him an honorarium of ten guineas for the use of scores, aware that it was little more than a token fee: 'I realise how inadequate this is', he wrote apologetically, 'but we are always in financial difficulties, and penury has become second nature!'²⁰ To expedite matters, he set about the task of preparing a piano reduction of Potter's orchestral scores for rehearsal purposes – a thankless chore which, in a manner wholly typical of him, he undertook himself rather than delegating it to somebody else.²¹

The ballet, which was given the ironic title *Moy Mell* – an anglicisation of the imaginary Gaelic never-land of folklore *Magh Meala*, which means 'The Vale of Honey' – was performed in a double-bill with *Giselle*. (The latter work, which had never been previously performed in Cork, was directed by the Swiss dancer and

¹⁸ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 26 September 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

¹⁹ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 17 October 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

²⁰ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 24 October 1956 ('General 1956', PA). Moriarty seems to have based a ballet on *Variations on a Popular Tune* eleven years later in 1967: see AJP to Joan Denise Moriarty, 25 March 1967 ('№1 Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA). It is not included in the list of Cork Ballet Company productions listed in Ruth Fleischmann's book, however.

²¹ See Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 18 December 1956 ('General 1956', PA).

choreographer Michel de Lutry, and featured his wife Domini Callaghan in the title role and Joan Denise Moriarty as Queen of the Wilis.) Moriarty's choreography for *Moy Mell*, in Fleischmann's description, contrasted Irish traditional dance forms 'with the new manifestations of jive and crooning to the music of George Gershwin' – a somewhat novel spectacle, one imagines, for Irish audiences. The first night was a very distinguished social occasion, and was attended by some fifty members of the Irish Association for Cultural, Economic and Social Relations, some of whom travelled from Belfast and Dublin, as well as by the Minister for Lands, Erskine Childers. The performance received very favourable reviews, and not just in the Irish press: as Fleischmann recalled many years later, with justified pride,

A. V. Coton, a well-known English ballet critic who had come to Cork for one of the performances wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* of *Giselle* that 'within its own terms it was an entirely successful production'; and of *Moy Mell* that 'Miss Moriarty was to be highly commended for daring to tackle an up-to-date subject, and doubly so for doing it neatly; and of the company as a whole that 'Cork's activities in this non-professional field of ballet are far ahead of all similar efforts anywhere in these islands. No other ballet company within my knowledge had produced a programme of such magnitude, and, within the special conditions, quality.'²²

The success of the Cork Ballet Company's ventures led Joan Denise Moriarty to mobilise her energies and bring into existence a small full-time professional company in Cork, which would give performances all through the season and tour the cities and provincial towns. With the assistance of a modest level of support from the Irish Arts Council and contributions from major companies such as The Irish Dunlop Company and The Irish Refining Company, she realised this aim in 1959 with the formation of Irish Theatre Ballet.²³ For the company's début performance in the Palace Theatre, Cork on 14 December 1959, a programme of seven short ballets was

²² Aloys Fleischmann, 'The Ballet in Cork: The Amateur and Professional Companies 1947-1985', in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 25-6.

²³ For an account of the formation of Irish Theatre Ballet, see Aloys Fleischmann, 'The Ballet in Cork: The Amateur and Professional Companies 1947-1985', in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 28-30.

devised, three of which were choreographed by Moriarty herself. The idea for one of these, *Súgrai Sráide* [Street Games], had been inspired by seeing local children at play. Interestingly, Fleischmann approached Potter once more to ask if he might have written anything that could be used as a basis for the work, but as it transpired, Potter not only had nothing suitable, but was also engaged in writing his first original ballet score for another company which had just been launched in Dublin with the dual-language name Ballet Naisiúnta/National Ballet.²⁴

5.3 Foundation of Ballet Naisiúnta/National Ballet

Our knowledge of National Ballet's functioning and performance activities is somewhat sketchy, due to what appears to be a paucity of surviving documentation. Fortunately, some of the materials preserved in the Potter Archive permit a partial reconstruction of its activities, as does information garnered from its founder members.²⁵ This company was an outgrowth of an organisation by the name of An Sgoil²⁶ Ballet Naisiúnta [Irish National Ballet School], which, according to a promotional circular dating from 1956 that survives amongst Potter's papers, described itself as 'a non-profit making organisation, the aim of which is to develop eventually into an Irish National Ballet Company of internationally acceptable standards'. It commenced operations in January 1954, with teaching taking place under the supervision of one Valentina Dutko, who is described on this document as its Artistic Director. In the summer of 1956, classes had also been given by Stanley Williams, the Senior Ballet Master of the Royal Danish Ballet. The School arranged public performances for its advanced students: its Senior Class presented two recitals in 1955 and another in September 1956.²⁷ Around this time, its staff was augmented

²⁴ See Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 8 October 1959 and AJP to Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 10 October 1959 (both in 'Careless Love Ballet / also *Caitlín Bocht* / Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

²⁵ In this connection, I would like to express my particular gratitude to Patricia Collins (formerly Patricia Ryan) for the information she provided about her work as a choreographer and her involvement with National Ballet (and subsequently Irish National Ballet in 1963-4) during an interview on 6 January 2006.

²⁶ An older spelling of *scoil*, school.

²⁷ Undated circular from An Sgoil Ballet Naisiúnta (amongst papers in 'General 1956', PA)

by a young Englishwoman, Patricia Ryan, who was one of the principal instigators of the School's next phase of development.

Ryan, who had been a child actress in London, had also studied dance and classical ballet both there and, for a short period, in South Africa. In her teens, she became a student at a private school in London run by a husband-and-wife team, Nicolai Legat and his wife Nadine Nicolaeva, two of the most distinguished teachers working in England at the time.²⁸ Nicolai Legat (1869-1937) graduated from the St Petersburg Imperial Ballet School in 1888, where he had been a favourite pupil of the great Christian Johansson. He rapidly made a reputation as a dancer of talent, and later, when his career as a dancer came to an end, he became ballet master at the Maryinsky Theatre from 1906-1914. He failed to establish himself in any of the imperial theatres when they were reorganised after the revolution of 1917, however, and after a short spell spent working for the Ballets Russes, he moved to London and opened a studio there. He was very highly regarded as a teacher and his students included such future luminaries as Frederick Ashton, Anton Dolin, Alicia Markova and Margot Fonteyn. His wife Nadine embarked on her career as a dancer comparatively late, starting as Legat's private pupil and subsequently dancing at the Bolshoi and with the Ballets Russes for brief periods. The general consensus about her dancing appears to have been that she had a somewhat lacklustre stage presence, but was highly proficient technically: in the opinion of one recent commentator, 'she seems to anticipate more than any other dancer of the era the current emphasis on hyperextended positions and aggressive technique.'²⁹ She is a rather shadowy figure in the Russian émigré dance world of the post-war period, if, by all accounts, a colourful one, conducting numerous affairs and dabbling in alternative nutrition, spiritualism and other fads. She had, nonetheless, the reputation of being a thorough and exacting instructor.

²⁸ This account of the careers of Nicolai and Nadine Legat draws on John Gregory, *The Legat Saga: Nicolai Gustavovitch Legat, 1869-1937* (London, 1993).

²⁹ Jennifer Fisher, review of *The Legat Saga: Nicolai Gustavovitch Legat, 1869-1937* by John Gregory, *Dance Research Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1. (Spring, 1996), 72

Ryan studied with Nadine Legat for five years. In her recollection, the training at the school was rigorous and highly methodical. She showed considerable promise and came to the attention of Leonide Massine, who wished her to undertake further study with him in Monte Carlo. Ryan's mother refused to permit her daughter take up this opportunity, not wishing her to live abroad without a chaperone. Another, more serious blow followed. Shortly afterwards, her mother remarried an Irishman and with the outbreak of the Second World War, insisted on moving with her family to Ireland, thinking it safer than England in wartime conditions. Nadine Legat pleaded with her to allow her daughter to remain in London, but she was unrelenting. This move interrupted Ryan's training at a critical juncture: in a cultural backwater like Dublin, such teaching as was available at the time was of a very low standard and, needless to say, there were no professional ballet companies. Marooned in Ireland, Ryan had to content herself with dancing in operatic productions put on by the Dublin Grand Opera Society and teaching ballroom dancing. In 1949 she married John Ryan (1925-1992), a painter with strong literary interests who designed sets for various theatres in Dublin. By her own account, she found her enforced separation from Legat very difficult and constantly yearned to resume her involvement with the ballet. In 1956, her former teacher came to Dublin to visit An Sgoil Ballet Naisiúnta and Ryan had an opportunity to meet her once more. On this occasion, Legat encouraged her to become a professional ballet instructor and arranged for her to obtain an advanced teaching certificate so that she would possess appropriate paper qualifications. After joining the staff of An Sgoil Ballet Naisiúnta, she produced several programmes of ballet with its students, including excerpts from *Les Sylphides*.

Encouraged by the success of these productions, Ryan conceived the ambitious scheme of starting up an amateur ballet company that would mount productions using her advanced students as the *corps de ballet* and hiring in English professional

dancers for the principal roles.³⁰ In 1959, Ballet Naisiúnta/National Ballet came into being, with Ryan as Director and Nadine Nicolaeva Legat and Leonide Massine as patrons. On its headed notepaper, the company explicitly described itself as being 'in association with National Ballet School/An Sgoil Ballet Naisiúnta'.³¹ For its first production, Ryan and her colleagues at An Sgoil Ballet Naisiúnta proposed to do a mixed programme of extracts from standard works such as *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker*, *Giselle* and Minkus' *Don Quixote*. They were not only fortunate enough to obtain funding from the Irish Arts Council³², but also managed to secure the services of the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra for the duration of the production's run.

At some point, the idea had evidently been mooted of inviting an Irish composer to write a work which could be used as the basis for a new ballet. It is not entirely clear how Potter came to be commissioned to produce a score, although it must be added that the company would not have had a particularly wide range of Irish composers to choose from at this period: of the prominent figures, Fleischmann was probably too busy to undertake such a major project, Brian Boydell appears to have displayed little interest in writing for the stage and by 1959 Frederick May had more or less stopped composing. No doubt Potter seemed a fairly obvious choice, having already gained a reputation for being reliable, versatile and efficient through his work for Radio Éireann. To judge from the fact that he was also asked around this time to contribute incidental music for a new play *The Scatterin'* by the Irish sculptor and playwright James McKenna which was staged at the 1960 Dublin Theatre Festival, it is quite possible that he had by this time become acquainted with John Ryan, Patricia Ryan's husband, and begun to move in the same circles. In 1956, Ryan had opened a pub in Dublin called 'The Bailey' which Potter could well have frequented, as it was

³⁰ See AJP to George Rizza, 10 November 1959, ('*Careless Love Ballet* / also *Caitlín Bocht* /Aug 59 – 1965', PA): 'The group is amateur, but employs professional principals and a professional orchestra will be engaged.'

³¹ See headed notepaper used by Eoin Ó Brolcháin, Manager of Ballet Naisiúnta/National Ballet, for his letter to AJP of 13 February 1960 ('*Careless Love Ballet* / also *Caitlín Bocht* /Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

³² See Eoin Ó Brolcháin to AJP, 8 July 1960 ('*Careless Love Ballet* / also *Caitlín Bocht* /Aug 59 – 1965', PA), which indicates that venture received Arts Council support.

a popular haunt of Dublin's artistic and literary set.³³ However the commission came about, it seems that National Ballet left it rather late to approach him: in one of his letters to his American acquaintance John Cavanagh, Potter describes how he had been forced to abandon his current project - an opera called *The Emigrants* which he was sketching at the time - in order to finish the new score as quickly as possible.³⁴

National Ballet approached someone equally eminent in his field to devise a scenario for the work: Donagh MacDonagh (1912-68), an Irish writer who is considered a minor figure today, but was regarded at the time as a significant poet and playwright. MacDonagh had impeccable nationalist credentials: his father, Thomas MacDonagh, had been executed by the British government on account of his prominent role in the 1916 Easter Rising. On completion of his undergraduate studies at University College, Dublin, he practised at the bar from 1935 to 1941 when he was appointed a district justice - a position he held until his death. He came to particular prominence as a broadcaster, presenting a highly popular series of programmes on folk ballads, of which he was an avid collector. He was attracted to the theatre from an early age, staging the first Irish production of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in collaboration with his brother-in-law Liam Redmond. He was a notable exponent of verse drama and ballad operas in which the action is interspersed with traditional songs. His most successful play, *Happy as Larry* (1946) was produced to considerable acclaim in London and was sufficiently highly considered to be published in a Penguin volume of verse plays that also included work by T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry and Charles Williams.³⁵ *God's Gentry* was first produced at the Belfast Arts Theatre in 1951 and another verse play *Step in the Hollow* was given in 1957 in the Gaiety Theatre Dublin, with Hilton Edwards in the leading part. What is perhaps his finest play, *Lady Spider*, a verse treatment of an Irish folk legend, appeared posthumously.³⁶ He seems to have welcomed the opportunity to

³³ For an account of The Bailey and its various habitués, see John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood* (Dublin, 1975), 29f. and *passim*.

³⁴ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 11 November 1959 ('General 8/6/58 - 30/12/59', PA)

³⁵ E. Martin Browne (ed.), *Four Modern Verse Plays*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1958).

³⁶ Detailed biographical information about MacDonagh is hard to come by. This account has drawn on an unsigned obituary in *The Times*, 2 January 1968; the entry in Robert Hogan,

become involved in the project and was evidently much impressed by Potter's abilities: he was to collaborate with him again two years later on a television opera *Patrick*, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

5.4 *Careless Love*

Potter received the scenario some time in August 1959 and promptly set to work.³⁷ There was considerable pressure on him to finish the score quickly, as National Ballet wished to present it during the first three days of Holy Week in April 1960 - hardly an ideal time, as he remarked to a friend, but the only one for which the company had been able to book a theatre in the late spring.³⁸ Much of Potter's correspondence about the financial arrangements for the commission has survived and is of considerable interest, revealing just how little money an Irish composer of the period could expect to earn, even for a substantial stage work. It seems clear that National Ballet was only in a position to offer a very modest fee: Potter requested a mere £80 for writing a half hour of music - roughly equivalent to £1,300 or €2,000 today. The company wished to retain the rights on the work for two years, during which Potter was to receive ten per cent of any monies that might accrue from the hire of the score and orchestral materials - a rather unlikely prospect. The sums of money involved were so small that Potter proposed that the company should not bother going to the additional expense of having a proper legal contract drawn up.³⁹

The commission for the new ballet, which in the event was called *Careless Love*, was to inaugurate a highly stressful phase of hectic productivity that would last for

Dictionary of Irish Literature, revised and expanded edition (Westport, Connecticut, 1996), 749-50; and Robert Hogan, *After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of Irish Drama since The Plough and the Stars*, (Minneapolis, 1967), 154-158. Somewhat surprisingly, there is no mention of MacDonagh in the recent *Cambridge Companion to Irish Literature* of 2006.

³⁷ AJP to Eoin Ó Brocháin, 11 August 1959 ('*Careless Love* Ballet / also *Caitlín Bocht* / Aug 59 - 1965', PA)

³⁸ AJP to correspondent identified only as 'John', 25 February 1960 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

³⁹ AJP to Eoin Ó Brocháin, 24 August 1959 ('*Careless Love* Ballet / also *Caitlín Bocht* / Aug 59 - 1965', PA)

several years. Indeed, Potter had only partially completed the score when he was asked to undertake another commission at very short notice, one which he obviously felt it would have been impolitic to turn down. This was occasioned by a campaign to have a dedicated concert hall built in Dublin: the city was the only European capital at the period not to possess one and its lack was felt acutely by Irish musicians and concertgoers, since it was a persistent and embarrassing reminder of the impoverished condition of national musical life. An organisation called Concert & Assembly Hall Ltd. had been set up to coordinate the efforts of various interested parties; however its proposals met with an indifferent response from the government, which presumably felt that the expense could not be justified in the prevailing straitened economic climate. In order to demonstrate to the government that there was a public demand for such a building, it was decided to hold on 15 January 1960 a gala fundraising concert given by an expanded Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra in Dublin's Theatre Royal – a large cinema with a capacity of 4,000 seats. According to Potter, this event was organised at very short notice and, as it was deemed desirable to have a new work by an Irish composer on the programme, he was asked at the eleventh hour if he could contribute something. Potter hastily extracted a suite from his ballet in progress, and after a somewhat nerve-racking delay until he had obtained permission from National Ballet to perform these extracts in advance of the work's stage premiere, re-orchestrated it at top speed for standard symphony orchestra (the original having been conceived for smaller forces).

In the event, the concert was successful and made a clear profit of £1,000. The occasion was a highly prestigious one and no doubt did much to bring Potter's name before a wider audience. The guest list included some of the most notable public figures in Ireland of the day: President Éamonn de Valera was in attendance, as was the formidable Catholic Archbishop of Dublin John Charles McQuaid, of whom more will be said in the next chapter. Potter had evidently been somewhat nervous that the notoriously prudish McQuaid, who had what amounted to a veritable monomania about sexual purity, might have been affronted by a musical work with

the title of *Careless Love*; but if the archbishop was perturbed, he appears to have refrained from animadversion on this occasion.⁴⁰ The suite was generally very well received, not only by the critics and general public, but also by some of Potter's composer colleagues. James Wilson dispatched a note the following day to offer his congratulations, telling him that he had not only found it 'attractive and admirably orchestrated', but that it had struck him as being 'one of the very few ballet scores produced anywhere in these islands that was essentially music for dancing.'⁴¹ Fleischmann, who had travelled up from Cork for the occasion, was, if anything, even more enthusiastic:

[Please] do believe me when I say that I was enthralled with your new ballet suite. I cannot remember any new work here so full of humour, wit and irony ... and generally so attractive. With its brevity and masterly scoring, it offers a rich field to the imagination of any choreographer, and I envy the National Ballet people. Though the performance of your ballet will occur just before our Festival of Cork, we shall have to come up and see it, at all costs.

From all the Corkonians present last Friday, heartiest congratulations!⁴²

Such accolades must have been deeply gratifying and boded well for the reception of the ballet itself. Potter's correspondence gives no indication of when he managed to finish *Careless Love* and no date of completion is recorded in his manuscript score. One surmises that he must have submitted it to National Ballet no later than the end of January, as Patricia Ryan would have needed sufficient time to familiarise herself with the music and work out her choreography before putting the ballet into rehearsal. Time would also have been needed for the preparation of orchestral materials. As if he had not enough to do, given his very heavy workload, Potter took

⁴⁰ For an account of the hasty production of the *Careless Love* suite, the organisation of this concert and the activities of Concert & Assembly Hall Ltd., see AJP to Salvatore Allegra, 23 January 1960; AJP to Sydney Bell, 29 January 1960; and AJP to correspondent identified only as 'John', 25 February 1960 (all in 'General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA).

⁴¹ James Wilson to AJP, undated, but possibly 16 January 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

⁴² Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 24 January 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

on the task of tracking down the scores and orchestral parts of the various extracts chosen for the rest of National Ballet's first programme. This proved a time-consuming chore: there are no definitive editions of some standard ballet scores, and, to complicate matters, choreographers of earlier periods felt no compunction about altering them, freely making cuts, transposing numbers or even interpolating material from other works to suit the choreography they had devised. Some of these versions came to enjoy currency in their own right and Potter had to go to much trouble to obtain them, since they were not generally available. Somewhat inadvisably, in view of the considerable expense involved, the company also made use of Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony*, which required Potter to enter into negotiations about royalties as it was still in copyright.⁴³

For National Ballet's début performance in the Olympia Theatre, Dublin on 11 April 1960 the programme consisted of *Giselle* and *Careless Love*. Potter's ballet was repeated the following night in a mixed programme of short works, and the closing night repeated *Giselle* with extracts from *The Nutcracker* and a new ballet based on the Prokofiev symphony. Three British guest dancers from the Royal Ballet were brought over for the occasion: Donald McAlpine and the husband and wife team of Annette Page and Ronald Hind, who went on to have very distinguished careers. The décor was designed by John Ryan and the young Irish conductor Eimear Ó Broin directed the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra. The run was judged a success and played to full houses.⁴⁴ It is doubtful how much Donagh MacDonagh knew about ballet, or for that matter, about classical music, but he declared himself delighted with the result, offering the somewhat puzzling comment that Ryan and Potter had 'produced something which I find just as stimulating as *West Side Story*'.⁴⁵ More

⁴³ The relevant correspondence is contained in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 - 1965', PA.

⁴⁴ See AJP to Eoin Ó Broilcháin, 14 April 1960 ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 - 1965', PA); and AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 19 April 1960 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA).

⁴⁵ Donagh MacDonagh to AJP, 20 April 1960 ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 - 1965', PA). This remark about *West Side Story* strongly suggests that MacDonagh may have conceived his libretto for *Patrick* with the Bernstein musical very much in mind, and that he may even have encouraged Potter to emulate certain aspects of it when devising music for Joey and the Jamaican immigrants: see the discussion in Chapter 6.

important, from Potter's point of view, was the fact that he set about trying to organise a commission for them both from the BBC. The reviews, which confined themselves to the usual trite and entirely predictable platitudes, can be safely passed over here as they scarcely allude to Potter's music; but they were in the main favourable: the only recurrent cavil concerned some poor ensemble between stage and pit. This may not have been entirely Ó Broin's fault, inexperienced as he was: as has been mentioned in an earlier chapter, the RÉ Light Orchestra was not a very proficient body and its playing could at times border on the excruciating, with slack rhythm, ragged ensemble, poor tone, appalling intonation and insensitive phrasing. To judge from the recordings of Potter's ballets in the Potter Archive, the orchestra evidently found *Careless Love* a challenging score; and Ó Broin appears to have been concerned that the Prokofiev symphony might prove altogether beyond their capacities.⁴⁶ As far as the strings of the orchestra in particular were concerned, matters would not have been helped by the fact that the section was so small in size and exposed the individual players: Potter's letters indicate that it comprised a mere three first violins, with a desk each of seconds, violas and 'cellos and a single double bass.⁴⁷

None of the critics seem to have noticed the ballet's most striking feature: the strangeness of its subject matter and plot. Unfortunately the surviving documents do not permit of an absolutely definitive account of the scenario: Ryan and Potter make some alterations in MacDonagh's original draft which appear to have considerably changed its emphasis, but the nature of these changes can only be surmised as there is no written record of them.⁴⁸ Potter's summary of the action,

⁴⁶ See Esther Ó Brolcháin to AJP, 2 November 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

⁴⁷ See AJP to Ronald Hynd, 19 March 1960 ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht /Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

⁴⁸ There are four principal sources of information: MacDonagh's original typescript of six pages (in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht /Aug 59 – 1965', PA); Potter's undated programme note for the first performance of the ballet suite (copy in the same folder); his annotations of the stage action in one of the scores preserved in PA; and, finally, an unsigned synopsis in the programme booklet for National Ballet's 1961 season (copy in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht /Aug 59 – 1965', PA). Potter refers to unspecified changes that were made to MacDonagh's original in AJP to Donagh MacDonagh, 22 April 1960 ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht /Aug 59 – 1965', PA).

which he typed out and pasted into one of the full scores in his possession, runs as follows:

Once upon a time, in a village in the far, far west of Ireland, there lived a piper who could play so wondrously that all things and people would dance to his playing – even the very cripples would bestir themselves. This piper was betrothed to Áine, the prettiest and most virtuous girl in all the village, and they were preparing to be married and (as in all the best tales) live happily ever after... when their peace was shattered by the arrival of a strange, exotic, unknown girl from the city. This strange girl danced before the piper, and, after inducing him to join her in a strange exotic measure which grew wilder and wilder until at last... as night fell, they collapsed in the darkness into each others' arms.

When dawn broke, the villagers, who had been scandalised by the 'goings-on' of the evening before, came tip-toeing round to stare in at the piper and his strange scarlet woman... And the more they looked, the angrier they became until, at last, roused up by the parents of the jilted Áine, they assembled together and declared a fiat of ostracism against the piper and his foreign love... But the 'guilty' pair tried to pretend that none of this mattered – they could go on living on their own... The stranger girl even tried to wear a peasant's shawl like Áine's to cover her gaudy city dress... To no avail, though... They tried to hold their passion to its fiery original, but the fire slowly went out at last, the stranger girl fell ill and looked ready to die.

Then the piper appealed to the villagers for help, but was rejected by each in turn... Even Áine, who might have aided, was restrained by her parents... And so, the stranger girl died... And the piper played his last sad lament at her funeral...

And Áine was left – to triumph? Or revenge? Or despair? It was all 'once upon a time'...

The synopsis of the action provided in the programme booklet for National Ballet's 1961 season (for which the ballet was revived) introduces a number of slight, but nonetheless significant modifications, including altering the name of piper's first love: in MacDonagh's original typescript, she had been called Anna, which had

evidently been changed to the unmistakably Irish-sounding Áine and then back again. I have italicised a few emendations that seem of particular interest:

The story tells of a romantic and unworldly piper in the west of Ireland, who lives only for his music and who, *from mere kindness of heart*, agrees to marry a young girl, Anna, who is in love with him. Everyone is delighted until, to their betrothal party comes a very worldly young person from the big city, and forgetting his Anna, the piper woos and marries the stranger and is boycotted by his former admirers. Sunk in poverty and gloom, the piper and his wife *are too dispirited to dance and, worn down by starvation* and, no doubt, by the rigours of city living, the young wife dies. Now the piper plays a lament of such plangent and bewitching power as to draw all the village to his door. The men lift his wife and go out in procession, led by the music; then as all the procession leaves the stage Anna *has her secret moment of triumph, knowing her rival dead and the future with her.*⁴⁹

Potter's programme note for the first performance of the ballet suite makes some of these features even more explicit: in this version, the story 'tells of a wondrously gifted piper who charms all the world with his music, is loved by his sweetheart, infatuated with a stranger and, with her, condemned and broken by those who had once danced to his playing.' The description of fourth movement of the suite is especially striking: this was given the blatantly ironic title *Dance of the Righteous* and is said to depict 'the guardians of morality' confronting and condemning the piper and his exotic love.

Whatever one is to make of this curious plot, it seems clear that MacDonagh and his collaborators intended the ballet to convey a number of subversive subtexts about contemporary Ireland. This conclusion seems inescapable, if one considers just how sensitive the subjects of sexual morality in general and of irregular sexual conduct in particular were at this period, when the Catholic Church exercised a baneful and repressive influence on every aspect of social life. In Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s,

⁴⁹ Unsigned programme note for *Careless Love* in programme for 1961 National Ballet season (copy in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

contraception was unavailable, divorce was impossible and the draconian mores of the period frowned on all forms of sexual activity except heterosexual vaginal intercourse, which could only be engaged in by married couples for the purposes of procreation. If a young woman was unfortunate enough to become pregnant out of wedlock, she was frequently left with little choice but to emigrate. For the sake of convenience, a more detailed account of these circumstances will be postponed until the discussion of Potter's television opera *Patrick* in the next chapter, as they are especially relevant in that connection – but an appreciation of this cultural context is also vitally necessary if we are to grasp the import of *Careless Love*, and indeed, of two of Potter's later ballets.

Potter's summary informs us that the action of *Careless Love* takes place in 'the far, far west of Ireland'. It is not difficult to decode what this apparently innocent description is meant to convey: in the late 1950s, the 'far, far west' of Ireland – presumably, the north-western province of Connaught – was still one of the most backward and impoverished parts of the country, with a largely rural population that was generally highly conservative and traditional in nature, its inhabitants living much as their forefathers had done for generations. In remoter areas, most notably the Aran Islands, the Irish language had somehow managed to survive and the region was consequently considered to be important for the future preservation of indigenous Gaelic culture as a whole. The central character of the piper, one surmises, is not only a representative of this traditional culture, but is also intended to be understood in a more general sense as a personification of the artist. However, I would suggest that the fairytale-like appellation, 'the far, far west' should also place us on our guard against a wholly literal interpretation, or, for that matter, one that is entirely positive: this realm is also intended to represent Irish society at its most hidebound and unenlightened, as the discussion that follows should make clear.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This touches on a number of fascinating questions about the conflicting responses to rural Ireland and its inhabitants on the part of modern Irish writers and intellectuals. Unfortunately, the complexity of the issues involved prevents me from entering into a detailed consideration of them here. It is, however, interesting to note that there has been a notable strain in Irish writing which has portrayed life in the Irish countryside and provincial towns in a highly critical light. Brinsley MacNamara's lurid *The Valley of the Squinting*

The sequence of events that the central protagonist unwittingly sets in motion seems to require interpretation on two levels, one symbolic and the other more literal. If one considers the latter level first, it is reasonable to suggest that *Careless Love* is a projection of psychological fantasies profoundly conditioned by the repressive sexual mores of Irish Catholicism, conveying the conflict between a desire to enjoy the forbidden pleasures of sexual freedom – ‘careless love’ in the sense of its being ‘carefree’, that is, free of neurotic guilt – and fear of punishment, real or imaginary, for being ‘careless’ (in the sense of ‘not caring’ or ‘heedless’) about generally accepted moral standards or conventional notions of sexual fidelity. Interestingly, the changes of emphasis in the wording of the scenario seem to reflect an anxiety on the part of Ryan and Potter to present the offending pair in as sympathetic a light as possible: the portrayal of events in MacDonagh’s original is rather more delicately balanced and ambiguous. The printed programme note for the ballet tells us that the piper offered to marry Anna ‘out of mere kindness of heart’, implying that she is fundamentally unworthy of his attention and that his subsequent abandonment of her is wholly understandable, if not actually deserved. When referring to the offending pair’s actions, Potter is careful to place the qualifying adjective ‘guilty’ within inverted commas. The villagers – who presumably can be taken to represent the most conservative aspects of Irish society as a whole – are characterised ironically as ‘the righteous’ and ‘the guardians of morality’. This point was certainly not lost on at least one audience member, Aloys Fleischmann, who singled out the *Dance of the Righteous* for special praise and expressly commented on the ironical portrayals in Potter’s score when he wrote to offer his congratulations after hearing the first performance of the *Careless Love* suite.⁵¹ In the Potter/Ryan recension of the scenario,

Windows (1918) is one of the earliest manifestations of this tendency. On a much higher level of artistic achievement, one thinks of Paul Vincent Carroll’s plays *Things That Are Caesar’s* and *Shadow and Substance* (both dating from the 1930s), Patrick Kavanagh’s long poem *The Great Hunger* or his autobiographical *Tarry Flynn* from the 1940s, and a generation later, the early novels of John McGahern. For a useful introduction, see Edward Hirsch, ‘The Imaginary Irish Peasant’, *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 5 (October 1991), 1116-1133.

⁵¹ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 24 January 1960 (‘General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61’, PA). It is worth mentioning in this context that Fleischmann was keenly alert to the potency of these symbolic

they seem to take an almost vindictive pleasure in 'condemning and breaking' the piper and his lover and even the very expression that is employed to describe their first act of retribution – the pronouncement of a 'fiat of ostracism' – would inevitably conjure up for Irish Catholics the fearful and ever-present spectre of the ritual public denunciations from which Irish Catholic clergymen, from the humblest to the most exalted, derived such a deeply gratifying sense of their power and self-importance. Tellingly, the two lovers seem unable to ignore their social isolation and the possibility that they might seek to escape does not arise: so powerful is the terror of social disapproval that the punishment of ostracism leads inexorably to death – a somewhat melodramatic dénouement that lends weight to the view that *Careless Love* is the embodiment of a typically Catholic neurotic fantasy. The implications are quite clear: society is all-powerful and dissidence is pointless, as it will ineluctably end in failure and the incurrance of a tragic burden of guilt.

A few interesting details remain to be mentioned. In Potter's full score, two curious stage directions are given for the final scene, in which Áine (or Anna) remains alone on stage after the body of her dead rival has been borne away. The first of these reads 'Áine is left behind... and tries on the dead stranger's clothes'. Interpreted in conjunction with the other summaries, which indicate that Áine has just performed a covert dance of triumph, such a symbolic gesture seems highly significant. For once thing, it suggests unequivocally that the moral disapproval expressed by this society is hypocritical and arises from envy and unconscious resentment. Once she is safely out of the public eye, Áine eagerly tries on the stranger's sexually alluring apparel and one is left in no doubt that she too would be quite happy to behave 'immorally' if a suitable opportunity presented itself. The irony is unmistakable and overwhelming. So too is the irony of the final stage direction, 'and it was all "once upon a time"' – an Aesopian stratagem that emphatically underlines the pertinence of the piece to contemporary circumstances.

representations and employed them in a comparable way in his own ballets: see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 102-104.

The tale can also be interpreted as a parable about the plight of the artist in contemporary Ireland, who was often confronted by difficult choices between the conflicting claims of tradition and innovation, as well as the troublesome question of how best to engage with Irish subject matter, if he was to engage with it at all. There was, in fact, a recurrent strain in Irish writing which portrayed Ireland as fundamentally inhospitable to artistic endeavour: one thinks of some of Yeats' bitter later poems about the philistine indifference of the wider public, or of Patrick Kavanagh's autobiographical works that portray rural Ireland as wholly devoid of cultural or intellectual life. The attitude of prominent émigrés such as Joyce, Beckett and O'Casey was notoriously ambivalent towards the country they had left behind, not least because of the repressive climate engendered by the Catholic Church and the stringent censorship laws, under which many of the finest productions of literary modernism were banned.⁵² The symbolic parallels between MacDonagh's fable and the conditions in which he and his contemporaries worked seem obvious. Read on another level, the triangular relationship between the piper and his two loves can readily be interpreted as a conflict between 'native' and 'foreign' art. The piper enjoys a harmonious relationship with the community only so long as he is faithful to a native muse and plays his native music. As soon as he abandons her for a foreign muse and plays an alien music, he is rejected by his people. The passage in MacDonagh's original scenario portraying the unexpected arrival of the stranger makes this perfectly explicit:

[Into] the room that was filled with the village people in Connemara clothes danced a new figure, a girl with paint on her red lips and paint on each of her long fingernails, a dress from the big city that looked strange amongst the scarlet petticoats, the bawneens⁵³ and the tweed trousers. Her dancing too was strange, a kind they had never seen among the bog and heather and the grey, rain-beaten rocks.

⁵² See Chapter 6, *passim*, and especially footnote 110.

⁵³ An anglicised form of the Irish *báinín*, meaning a sleeved waistcoat made of undyed flannel – a traditional garment formerly worn by farm labourers.

And now for the first time the piper opened his eyes and he took his pipes and played for her, new, wild and sensuous music, so wild and sensuous that the other dancers dropped one by one away and at last only the stranger was left to dance. And the piper, long so dreamy, so remote, so prodigally loving, threw down his pipes and danced with her, and now for the first time he was committed, so that their dance became a courtship, and in a hostile circle they danced together while Anna in a corner danced a small dance of weeping and at last crouched on the ground, her head in her lap.

Then the villagers turned from the dancers, walked away, leaving them dancing, closer and closer together.⁵⁴

The implication seems to be that the Irish, or, at any rate, those inhabitants of Ireland who mentally resided in 'the far, far west' were fundamentally intolerant of modernist artistic innovations and entirely incapable of assimilating 'foreign' art: the piper's sexual betrayal of Áine symbolises his 'whoring' after alien artistic gods.

Although MacDonagh's scenario offered plenty of scope for musical elaboration, Potter's score is very uneven and the work as a whole cannot be judged a success, though it has features of merit. The initial section is the most persuasive. The work opens with an impassioned introduction, featuring a strident trumpet fanfare that conveys a hint at impending disaster (Ex. 5.1). This is followed two themes associated with the piper, the first of them a sinuous melody in alternating bars of six-eight and four-eight (Ex. 5.2), the second an impetuous waltz (Ex. 5.3). At the entry of the villagers, a vigorous *moto perpetuo* figure makes its appearance (Ex. 5.4). The contours for all three of these ideas are derived from a motif (marked *x*) prominent in the opening fanfare, demonstrating Potter's concern to achieve motivic consistency and close thematic connections. The harmonic language of the score is somewhat more chromatic than Potter's earlier work, though it remains essentially tonal. As Ex. 5.2 shows, many of the harmonies are derived from deformations of

⁵⁴ Donagh MacDonagh, typescript of scenario for *Careless Love* ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 - 1965', PA)

Ex. 5.1: *Careless Love*, opening

Allegro ♩ = 80

[tpts] *f* *molto* *ppp* *f* *più f* *sf* *fff*

[tims] [archi trem + fiati] [+ horns, tbns]

Ex. 5.2: *Careless Love*, bars 14 ff.

Allegretto
Ob [quasi 3/4 + 2/4]

mf [archi]

simpler, essentially triadic entities, sounded over stepwise chromatic bass lines. An occasional use of chords built from superimposed fourths (see the sixth bar of Ex. 5.2), a sonority that pervades the later ballet *Full Moon for the Bride*. Interestingly, in view of the Irish subject matter, Potter made little attempt to evoke the sound world

Ex. 5.3: *Careless Love*, bars 33 ff.

Valse brillante

Ex. 5.4: *Careless Love*, bars 105ff.

Vivace ♩ = 132

of Irish folk music or employ stylisations of it in his score: perhaps he felt this might have been too obvious. The only hint of it occurs in a melody associated with the villagers (Ex. 5.4), which faintly recalls the rhythms of an Irish reel. The principal contrast to the predominantly chromatic sound-world of this nexus of ideas is provided by a modal melody associated with Áine/Anna (Ex. 5.5), which is

Ex. 5.5: *Careless Love*, bars 218ff.

Andante ♩ = 80

introduced shortly thereafter - but this is more redolent of English rather than Irish folk music. It is presumably intended to evoke a sense of simplicity and rustic innocence; but while it is one of work's more attractive musical ideas, it tends to sound somewhat incongruous in the context of the more dissonant music that surrounds it and is not successfully integrated into the musical fabric.

The remainder of the score proves something of an anti-climax after this opening. The quality of musical invention is fairly undistinguished and Potter's musical characterisation of the strange girl – which one might have imagined to provide a splendid opportunity for the employment of gorgeous orchestral sonorities – is disappointingly insipid. The latter sections of the work also suffer from some serious technical miscalculations. The first of these is a tendency towards excessive predictability and regularity of phrase structure: the villager's dance of rejection is particularly poorly judged in this regard, with its endless repetitions of a trite four-bar idea. In addition, Potter allows himself to restate too much material with insufficient variation and at exactly the same pitch, which not only becomes tiresome but produces an impression of flaccidity. Finally, the overall thrust of the score is not very well calculated. Although the scenario is designed to produce a mounting sense of tension as the plot unfolds, there is no corresponding sense of heightened complexity in the score. Quite the contrary, in fact: it becomes increasingly fragmented as it proceeds and there is little sense of forward momentum, which means that whatever dramatic tension has been engendered so far is soon dissipated. The scene that should have formed the climax of the entire work, the portrayal of the strange girl's death, falls particularly flat.

Overall, one is left with an impression of a lost opportunity, for some of the thematic material for *Careless Love* could have provided an excellent basis for a single-movement ballet score of truly symphonic design and sweep. These ideas might have been subjected to development and transformation as the work progressed, intensifying towards a catastrophic dénouement after the manner of Ravel's *La Valse* and culminating with the strange girl's death. Unfortunately Potter's music is quite

lacking in appropriate intensity and fails to convey the extreme emotions of the protagonists: it is largely pallid and there is little sense that the closing sections of the score stemmed from any vital imaginative impulse. This may well have been due to the extreme haste with which he had to complete the ballet. In spite of these shortcomings, *Careless Love* explores new territory harmonically and certainly marks a new point of departure in Potter's output in terms of its expressive world: its dark sonorities and emotionally fraught atmosphere seem far removed from those of the light orchestral works he had written since the *Concerto da chiesa*.

The ballet was mounted again during National Ballet's second season the following year in 1961, but has not been revived since. MacDonagh encouraged him to send the tape off to the BBC and to Benjamin Britten, to see if it might be possible to get it produced elsewhere.⁵⁵ Nothing seems to have come of these initiatives, however – one can only imagine what impression the poor quality of the orchestral playing on the tape must have made on its listeners, particularly Britten: one is inclined to doubt that they would have listened to the very end. Nonetheless, in the short term, there was considerable interest in the work. John Cavanagh offered to try and get the suite performed by Arthur Fiedler in Boston, at one of the Éire Society's Pops concerts.⁵⁶ Fiedler proved amenable, and gave the score with the Boston Pops Orchestra. As Cavanagh excitedly reported back:

Fiedler gave the piece plenty of rehearsal, and it had a zip and a sheen to it that you would have liked very much. I sat thru most of the preparations and both performances, and was thrilled to see the way the men of the orchestra took to it. Harry Dickson did a magnificent job at Eire Society night, and gave the piece fully as good a performance as did Arthur on Tuesday evening. The audiences liked it, and more than that I am sure your name will be carried back to all the cities from which

⁵⁵ See AJP to Charles Lefeaux (Head of Drama Department Script Unit of BBC), 13 May 1960 and AJP to Benjamin Britten, 13 May 1960 (both in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

⁵⁶ John P. Cavanagh to AJP, 10 March 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

the orchestra members [of the Boston Pops Orchestra] were recruited...⁵⁷ I am sure that anything you do in the future of a serious nature for large orchestra will be considered in these places. I urge you to do a symphony. This is easy advice to give, but you have a pithy way of stating things. It need not be a ponderous tome or of great length, for such works take an unpardonable length of time to score, but something that reflects your own humour and zest for rhythm and melody. I was impressed, and so was Fiedler, with the directness you used in this piece. It has a fine balance and thrust, and was wonderfully orchestrated. I am sorry that none of the critics reviewed it, but then they seldom if ever come to Pops anyway, though I had hoped some of them might.⁵⁸

There were also plans to film it in colour for American television, for transmission during a special St Patrick's Day edition of the popular *Dinah Shore Show*: a tantalising prospect which unfortunately does not appear to have come to fruition.⁵⁹

5.5 *Gamble, No Gamble*

When *Careless Love* was first staged, Potter can hardly have suspected that his involvement with National Ballet would continue at such a pitch of intensity. There was certainly no indication of this at the time. On the strength of the company's first successful season, Patricia Ryan began to plan for a second one the following year. Once again, she wished to commission a new work, but of a distinctly innovative kind: one that would explore the novel possibilities afforded by a fusion of music

⁵⁷ The orchestra on this occasion seems to have been an *ad hoc* group, because the Boston Symphony Orchestra (whose members, minus principals and section leaders, also constitute the Pops Orchestra) was on tour in the Far East: see John P. Cavanagh to AJP, 20 April and 13 May 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA).

⁵⁸ John P. Cavanagh to AJP, 6 June 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

⁵⁹ See AJP to Adrian Cruft, 18 July 1960; and AJP to Sydney Bell (both in 'General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA). *The Dinah Shore Show* was a US television programme broadcast twice-weekly by NBC from 1951 to 1957. Like many programmes of this era it was fifteen minutes long, being designed to round out the time slot which featured the network's regular evening news programme. It featured the American singer and actress Dinah Shore (1916-1994), who in later life had an extensive career in radio and television. For further information, see Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows* (New York, 2007).

and dance with spoken verse declaimed during the performance by an actor, which would provide both a narrative structure for the action presented on the stage by the dancers, as well as a lyrical commentary that would serve to enhance the drama's expressive immediacy. The Irish ballet commentator and radio broadcaster Norris Davidson suggested that this concept might have been prompted by a few comparatively recent ballets that had been choreographed to vocal works⁶⁰, such as Antony Tudor's *Dark Elegies*, which was created in 1937 for Ballet Rambert in London and used Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*⁶¹, or 'Annabel Lee', a ballet based on Poe's poem choreographed by George Skibine.⁶² This comparison is somewhat misleading, however, since both of these feature sung rather than spoken text. The only precursor that comes to mind is a rather obscure one, a work by the British composer Constant Lambert with the whimsical title *Mr Bear Squash-You-All-Flat* (1924) for speaker and eight players, which was written when Lambert was only seventeen years of age. This incorporates a spoken narration supposedly based on a Russian folk tale and appears to have been conceived as an accompaniment to a ballet. However, as the piece was never published and only received its premiere in 1979, some twenty-eight years after Lambert's death, it seems highly unlikely that anyone in National Ballet would have been aware of its existence.

On this occasion, Ryan's choice of librettist was a close friend of her husband's, Patrick Kavanagh (1904-1967), who is now regarded as one of the finest Irish poets writing after Yeats.⁶³ Kavanagh, who was from a very poor farming background in Monaghan, came to prominence in the mid 1930s after the publication of some finely-wrought lyric poems and an autobiographical prose work *The Green Fool*. With the

⁶⁰ A tape of a radio broadcast of *Gamble, No Gamble* survives in PA, which was apparently transmitted in early August 1961: see AJP to Norris Davidson, 2 August 1961 ('RÉ-TÉ 1/1/61', PA). It is prefaced by a spoken introduction by Davidson, in which he expresses this opinion.

⁶¹ For an account, see Jack Anderson, 'Tudor's *Dark Elegies*, by Ballet Theatre', *New York Times*, 6 June 1987.

⁶² See Anna Kisselgoff, 'Small Troupe Revives Annabel Lee From 1951', *New York Times*, 12 January 1990.

⁶³ John Ryan's memoir *Remembering How We Stood* (Dublin, 1975) contains valuable reminiscences of Kavanagh and gives an interesting account of their friendship. The standard account of his life is Antoinette Quinn's *Patrick Kavanagh: A Biography* (Dublin, 2001).

appearance of his epic *The Great Hunger* in 1942, he emerged as a figure of major significance: this anti-pastoral poem, with its bleak and unsparing depiction of the hardship of Irish rural life, embodied a powerful critique both of Éamon de Valera's wishful envisioning of Ireland as an agricultural Eden and of the contemporary literary cult of the peasant maintained by some contemporary Irish writers, particularly those dramatists associated with the Abbey Theatre. This work and much of Kavanagh's other poetry broke new ground in its powerful articulation of emotional frustration deriving from the conviction of having had a blighted youth that offered little opportunity for personal fulfilment. His engagement with this subject matter was undoubtedly prompted by first-hand experience, as his life was for the most part difficult and deeply unhappy. There seems to have been a remarkable disparity between the refinement and delicacy of sensibility revealed in his work, and the gauche, boorish persona that he presented to the outside world. Oblivious to his surroundings, he lived in perpetual squalor (John Ryan once visited his flat in Pembroke Road and on entering the bathroom found the bath piled full to the brim with empty sardine and soup tins⁶⁴) and spent much of his spare time drunk, being a regular at Ryan's pub The Bailey.

Although Patricia Ryan was prepared to allow him complete freedom to choose the subject matter for the projected ballet and devise his text accordingly, Kavanagh was unenthusiastic about the project and could only be persuaded to become involved when he learned that he would receive a fairly sizable fee of £50 or more for his contribution – an attractive prospect, given his perennially straitened financial circumstances.⁶⁵ Working with Kavanagh, however, proved to be something of an ordeal which tried Ryan's reserves of patience rather considerably. Unfortunately

⁶⁴ Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood*, 98

⁶⁵ This account of the genesis of the work is based on the transcript of the interview with Patricia Ryan of 6 January 2006 alluded to above (see footnote 26) and that given by Antoinette Quinn in *Patrick Kavanagh*, 400-402, which was also based in part on interviews with Ryan. Although Quinn's account tallies very closely with the information given to me by Ryan, it contains a number of minor inaccuracies. She refers, for example, to the ballet company that performed the work as 'Irish National Ballet' rather than 'National Ballet': this change of name was effected a year later in 1962. I have indicated one or two other discrepancies later on.

for her and for her project, at this period of his life Kavanagh was drinking extremely heavily and he proved to be an exasperatingly unreliable collaborator. As weeks passed with no sign of the libretto approaching completion, Ryan in desperation resorted to meeting him regularly in The Bailey and coaxing the text from him piecemeal, plying him with copious libations of ten year-old Jameson whiskey as he worked in her presence, scribbling fragments of verse on odd scraps of paper in no apparent order. The thankless task of assembling this jumble of disconnected jottings into a coherent libretto fell to Ryan's friend Christopher West, a British theatre director who had succeeded Peter Brook as Covent Garden's house producer and became co-director with Ryan of National Ballet that year.⁶⁶

The genesis of the text on which the ballet was based has been shrouded in a certain amount of confusion. Around the same time Kavanagh was invited to contribute a poem on a subject of his choice for a forthcoming poetry festival organised by the Poetry Book Society and it appears that the poet chose to reduce the amount of labour involved in fulfilling both commissions by preparing two different versions of what, as we shall see, was essentially the same poem. In the absence of any indication to the contrary, Kavanagh's biographer Antoinette Quinn presumed that all but a small portion of the poem intended for the ballet had been lost, as only the Introduction and the opening stanza of its main part turned up amongst Kavanagh's papers. She was consequently unable to pronounce with certainty on the extent to which it might have resembled the poem composed for the festival, which was published under the title 'The Gambler: A Ballet' and is included in the complete edition of Kavanagh's poems posthumously published by his brother.⁶⁷ Neither was Quinn in a position to establish the chronological order in which the two versions of the poem were written.

⁶⁶ He is so described in programme booklet for National Ballet's 1961 season (copy in 'Gamble', PA).

⁶⁷ *Patrick Kavanagh: The Complete Poems*, collected, arranged and edited by Peter Kavanagh (New York, 1972). In this edition, the two sections of the poem appear under the titles 'The Gambler: A Ballet with Words' and 'The Gambler: A Ballet', 306-310.

Thanks to materials which have come to light in the Potter Archive, it is now possible to resolve some of these questions. Potter, incidentally, had not been Ryan's first choice of composer – she had initially approached his younger Irish contemporary Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933), who declined to take on the task of producing a score.⁶⁸ As with *Careless Love*, she again seems to have left it quite late to approach him: there is no mention of the commission in his correspondence before early April 1961, and when one considers that the ballet received its premiere on 1 June, it is evident that Potter must have had to compose the score at breakneck speed.⁶⁹ He seems to have been presented with no less than three different versions of the script in succession, all of which are contained in his folder of correspondence about *Gamble, No Gamble*. The first (which seems to be typed on Potter's own typewriter and on large paper of a similar size to other documents in the same folder, which one conjectures may be his fair copy of a handwritten manuscript) contains stanzas that correspond very roughly with the second half of the poem as it was eventually published, though they appear in a different sequence. The second version, typed on a different brand of paper and make of typewriter (perhaps by Christopher West) reveals that the original title for the work had been *Zero: A Ballet*. Many of the stanzas in this version are the same, except that they have been transposed into a different order and some new material has been added. A third version, typed on the same machine, orders them differently yet again, and makes further alterations, the most substantial being the addition of the introductory prologue entitled 'Opening Explanation'. All of these drafts, unfortunately, are undated, but Potter's correspondence indicates that he received the third draft on 6 April 1961. The contents of Potter's folder are arranged in chronological order, and this third version was bound in next to a letter he sent to the Manager of National Ballet on that day, the last paragraph of which reads:

⁶⁸ Personal communication from Seóirse Bodley to author, 7 May 2005.

⁶⁹ That he was asked at the last minute is confirmed by a letter to his friend the British composer Adrian Cruft, 2 July 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA), the opening of which runs: 'Sorry, sorry, sorry indeed about this poor attendance to correspondence; life has been hell. RÉ commissioned me to write their first television opera to open the new service: that was back in March. Then on top of that, the National Ballet wanted me to do a sudden job on a new experimental script by Patrick Kavanagh: for production in May/June.'

I have ... today received what I hope is the final set of words: they differ materially from those which were the basis of our original plans and I am having to alter my score accordingly: time is getting too short for further rag-chewing over it, so I am going ahead at my own discretion with the revisions: I hope this is OK.⁷⁰

This version of the 'Opening Explanation' sent to Potter also differs in quite a number of details to the version that was eventually published, which Antoinette Quinn describes as being identical to the copy she found amongst Kavanagh's papers. It seems reasonable to suggest the published version constitutes a final, polished form of the version sent to Potter, as according to Quinn, Kavanagh sent 'The Gambler: A Ballet' off to the Poetry Festival committee at the beginning of May, a month after Potter's letter to Ó Broilcháin acknowledging its receipt.⁷¹

To complicate matters, the text evidently underwent yet further alterations during rehearsals. There is no copy of the final version amongst Potter's papers, nor is it included in the full score. It has proved possible to reconstruct it, however, from the recording of the work transmitted by RTÉ, a copy of which has been preserved in the Potter Archive. Fortunately this version contains no new material, consisting merely of a conflation of all three previous versions with some minor alterations and further re-ordering of the constituent stanzas of the second part of the poem, so one can be reasonably confident of how it was set down on the page. It is, of course, an open question as to how much of this text in its final form was the work of Christopher West: one can only assume that it met with Kavanagh's approval, because he is attributed with sole authorship in the programme for the first performance.

As collated by West, the poem was eminently well suited to choreographic treatment, being essentially a meditation on erotic and emotional frustration – themes familiar from Kavanagh's earlier poetry – and making considerable use of imagery derived from the dance. It is not known why Kavanagh chose to employ a

⁷⁰ AJP to Eoin Ó Broilcháin, 6 April 1961 ('Gamble', PA)

⁷¹ Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, 401.

central trope of a game of roulette, but in the event this translated effectively onto the stage. The central role in the ballet - a young man who is explicitly identified as a poet - is divided between a narrator, who speaks in the first person, and a dancer who enacts the events that are described. The hero, if such he can be called, experiences the conflicts between his own intense sexual desires and the constraints imposed by what he impatiently describes as 'timorous morality'. He appears emotionally unformed, and despite his air of adolescent bravado and affected pose of cynicism, hungers for love as well as sexual satisfaction. He embarks on a series of chance erotic adventures with a series of women, a succession of desperate emotional gambles in which he stakes his desire for fulfilment and happiness on each of them in turn. Seen through his eyes, none of these women appears wholly real: rather, each is endowed with qualities that are a compound of his own projections and sexual fantasies. One of them, the Red Dancer, is a sophisticated beauty who appears in his adolescent idealisation of her almost as a goddess; the second, the Black Dancer, is a common whore; the last, the White Dancer is supposedly a virgin whom he fantasises about deflowering violently, but as with the other women, it transpires that she is not what she seems. In each case, his initial infatuation rapidly turns to disillusionment, leaving him with feelings of humiliation, self-loathing and guilt. What he appears to have won through his gambles turns out to be worthless, although the prize on each occasion seemed to be highly desirable. His wins are in fact a succession of defeats - and his gambling has in fact been 'no gamble', in the sense that his experiences were not the result of chance, but were heavily predetermined by the structure of his own character, given his exploitative sexual rapaciousness and his persistent confusion of fantasy with reality. In the final stanzas of the poem, he appears to achieve some insight into his neurotic predicament, recognising the tawdry and narcissistic nature of his own desires and the impossibility of their realistic fulfilment. Having recognised that 'all this is false', as the first-person narrator succinctly puts it, he is freed from the cycle of meaningless suffering that his own compulsive behaviour has caused him and a state of mind, which, were he to have persisted in it, would incur endless frustration. At the end of the drama, if he emerges disillusioned, he is also saner and wiser.

The text as recited in the RÉ broadcast runs:⁷²

[*Introductory Explanation: the Poet makes his appearance*]

Here we have a work of fiction, purporting
To portray the ways of the poet-artist;
It has gone wrong in many places, missed
The secret of love – the gift
Of the poet's knowledge which⁷³ is subject to no sporting
Chance on a wheel. The idealist
Is a man sick for art's panacea, courting
Remote princesses. But the poet's snorting
Is for schoolgirls or large women full of drive.
Time and numbers are for fools. Being alive –
Surprisingly quite rare – is a constant factor,
But we must conventionalise the actor
And see the artifice and not the true.

Yet the artifice cold and implacable
Has the inhuman beauty for our enjoyment:
The dancers in their deployment
Are not noisily cacable.⁷⁴
And when we want to be withdrawn they are the answer
To many problems in a gregarious society.
Imagine yourself in a pub reading the paper:

⁷² Punctuation and spelling are given exactly as in the versions in PA from which the stanzas are taken. The stage directions given in square brackets are based on the account of the stage action given by Norris Davidson in the RÉ broadcast: Davidson spoke over the music at various points to indicate what was taking place in order to help the listeners visualise the stage picture.

⁷³ In typescript: 'that'.

⁷⁴ A coinage of Kavanagh's, presumably invented to rhyme with 'implacable'. In the published version, the word is rendered as 'cackable', which suggests that it is a formation from the verb 'cack' and should thus be understood as meaning 'capable of being voided as excrement'. The relevant lines are altered to run: 'The dancers are a variable treasure / In a world so noisily cackable'.

You see in the icy mirror the sloothing⁷⁵ dancer
Who demands not a single moiety
Of your attention as he capes his caper.

[*Poets Don't Have to Gamble*]

Here we go round the mystic wheel
Mystic wheel mystic wheel
Here we go round the mystic wheel
At eight o'clock in the evening

I have nothing to announce
On any subject, yet once
I was full of bounce

At what I can't say
At this time of day
Lackaday lackaday

The theme here invented
And by me pay-tented
Is psychology bended

About a sad hero
Who gambled on Zero
O play me the Keel Row⁷⁶

⁷⁵ In the published version: 'sleething'. Again, these verb-forms appear to be coinages. The OED gives 'slooth' as a variant spelling of 'sleuth' (which is rarely found except in the portmanteau 'sleuth-hound' - a species of bloodhound, formerly employed in Scotland for pursuing game or tracking fugitives) and defines it to mean 'persistent' or 'dogged'. This meaning does not appear to make much sense in the context, however.

⁷⁶ A folksong associated with Newcastle-upon-Tyne. A 'keel' was a small vessel capable of carrying about 20 tons of coal, and which was used for this purpose on the River Tyne since the early fourteenth century. 'Keel Row' apparently refers to an area at the end of the western Quayside. The song is mentioned by Rudyard Kipling in Chapter XXVI of his *Plain Tales from the Hills*: 'A Cavalry Band is a sacred thing. It only turns out for Commanding Officers' parades, and the Band Master is one degree more important than the Colonel. He is

Happiness can be achieved
This gambler believed
As the roulette wheel revved

And so it can
As sure as I'm a man
Remember what I said before the dance began

This humbug and fool
Tried to scoop the pool
Of the beautiful

Let him play for disaster
Faster and faster
I am his master

[The corps de ballet is discovered dancing in a formation resembling a roulette wheel. The Poet makes his appearance as his alter ego, a dancer. He gambles, and plays on red. He wins, and the Red Dancer makes her appearance. The experience disappoints him. He gambles again, this time on black. The Black Dancer appears]

He dances we suppose
With the red, the red rose
An inelegant pose

With the black the black spade
A forthcoming jade
He could do a great trade

Observe him the ass
Miss all that brass

a High Priest and the "Keel Row" is his holy song. The "Keel Row" is the Cavalry Trot; and the man who has never heard that tune rising, high and shrill, above the rattle of the Regiment going past the saluting-base, has something yet to hear and understand.'

She as rich as Croesus

But he knew that time wasn't
In one or a thousand
And he suddenly blossomed

And I myself choose
A sixteen year-old muse
I have nothing to lose

O beauty of the world
The key of the treasure
The secret of pleasure
Is what you can measure

And the white one is not
Worth a penny in the slot
She's no more than a slut

Let him play for disaster
Faster and faster
I am his master

[This second experience is as unsatisfying as the first. Finally the Poet takes a desperate gamble on the number zero. The White Dancer makes her appearance.]⁷⁷

And at the right minute
See that he will win it

⁷⁷ The layout of roulette wheels varies considerably. On European boards, the numbers are generally inlaid on panels of red and black, with zero being inlaid on a green panel. Kavanagh seems to have envisioned a wheel on which zero instead occupied a white panel – presumably because this fitted in better with his scheme of colour symbolism, white being traditionally associated with virginity and purity. If roulette players do not wish to pursue a very risky gambling strategy, they generally place money on red or black, rather than betting on a particular number: the stakes are smaller, but the chances of winning are considerably greater. The Poet's bet on zero consequently has only a slim chance of success.

And rise to the summit

And at this terrible time

She roars in my rhyme

Tear me in twain

O Brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal, brutal,

Living with timorous Morality, tentatively asking

The why of everything

Unmaiden me with ferocity

I was born to have my throat cut –

A virgin's capacity

Kill me, kill me, kill me!

I am happiness.

[The Gambler winning of Zero also ends in disillusionment – he realises that she is not what he has appeared to be and is only a common slut: he has, in fact, won nothing.]

On no ceremony stand

I am at your command

You've the whip in your hand

That croupier splendid

Who has Luck all upended

As the game is suspended

And as I the high king

Decide everything *[addresses dancers]*

You have now had your fling.

Back, die, fade

Fool unmaiden

Zero

Here

You've the tools of the trade

Do anything

Have a ging

Sing

I cannot advise

Just Close ears and eyes

On all that is lies.

For we win we win we win

The virgin

And the sin.

All this is false

Let me feel the pulse

Outside all cults

My story is success

How when nothingness

Arrives we can guess

The turn of the table

On Venus' navel

The secret of the fable

And then if we need

Cry and scream, indeed

At success – defeat

It would be interesting to know what Potter and Kavanagh made of each other, or whether they met to discuss the project at any point. There is no mention of a

meeting in Potter's letters, however, and the two men do not seem to have corresponded. Perhaps there was simply no opportunity for an encounter to take place – a possibility which seems likely in view of Potter's very tight deadline, as he must only have had a month, at most, to finish the score. Despite the arduous labour involved, he settled once again for the modest fee of £80, and entered into a similar arrangement about royalties as he had previously done in the case of *Careless Love*.⁷⁸ Having received the first instalment for the commission, however, he had to wait a considerable length of time to receive the remainder: National Ballet only paid him the balance at end of January 1962, eight months or so after the completion of the score.⁷⁹ It is hardly surprising to learn, in view of how little income Potter derived from his 'serious' work, that he took on a great deal of hackwork during 1961 and 1962 to make ends meet, including making arrangements of songs for a new musical devised by the Dublin playwright Fergus Linehan on top of his usual work for RÉ.⁸⁰

The weeks leading up to the premiere were quite fraught. In May all the cinemas and theatres in Dublin went on strike, which rendered it impossible for National Ballet to perform in the Olympia as planned. In the end, the company managed to secure the Abbey, which was dark at the time for its vacation period, but the cost of transferring the production to the new venue was apparently very high.⁸¹ For their second season, the company presented five nights of varied programmes between 30 May and 3 June. In addition to giving the premiere of *Gamble, No Gamble*, the company also revived *Careless Love*, combining these with extracts from *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Les Sylphides* and a new ballet based on Britten's *Matinées Musicales*. Once again, British dancers were imported to take the leading roles, with Ronald

⁷⁸ AJP to Eoin Ó Brolcháin. 30 April 1961 ('*Gamble*', PA)

⁷⁹ Eoin Ó Brolcháin to AJP, 29 January 1962 ('*Gamble*', PA)

⁸⁰ This musical, which was called *Glory Be!*, opened in Dublin on 6 February 1961.

⁸¹ See AJP to Adrian Cruft, 2 July 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA). Antoinette Quinn (*Patrick Kavanagh*, 402) states that the production took place in the old Queen's Theatre, which the company is said to have obtained through the good offices of the Dublin actress Ria Mooney. However Potter's letter to Cruft states unequivocally that the Abbey was used, as does his letter to Sydney Bell, 21 October 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA), both of which were written after the event. In addition, the programme booklet for the season gives the Abbey Theatre as the venue.

Hynd and Annette Page making a return appearance. *Gamble, No Gamble* was premiered on 1 June. The role of the Poet was assigned to the actor T. P. McKenna and the dancer Charles Schuller. Three members of National Ballet danced the roles of the various women, Gay Brophy (Red Dancer), Ciara O'Sullivan (Black Dancer) and Judith McGilligan (White Dancer). To Patricia Ryan's surprise, Kavanagh deigned to attend the first night, looking unusually spruce in evening dress: when she had invited him to the premiere some time before, he had brusquely refused, saying 'What would I be doin' lookin' at a lot of wimmen leppin' around the stage.'⁸² When Potter and he were summoned to take their curtain call, both of them looked alarmingly inebriated. Kavanagh proceed to deliver a long-winded impromptu speech to the audience about 'his ballet', which apparently made no reference to the contributions of either the choreographer or the composer, much to Patricia Ryan's chagrin.

The season was accounted an artistic success, but a financial disaster. The transfer from the Olympia, which had a capacity of 1,400, to the Abbey, which held only 900, had resulted in a considerable drop in takings⁸³ - with the consequence, as Potter wryly told his friend the British composer Adrian Cruft, that the company 'lost money like stink'.⁸⁴ Nonetheless, the productions received generally favourable notices, though infuriatingly for Potter, they scarcely mentioned the music. Most disappointing, a review devoted solely to *Gamble, No Gamble* and *Careless Love* appeared in the *London Times*, but hardly alluded to Potter's contributions at all. The anonymous critic wrote sympathetically about *Careless Love*, singling out Ryan's choreography for especial praise, but gave the *Gamble, No Gamble* a decidedly lukewarm notice, finding the 'harsh journalese' of Kavanagh's poetry objectionable and suggesting rather unfairly that the concept for the work was fundamentally flawed.⁸⁵ The general failure of the ballet critics to discuss Potter's score does not mean very much, however, since they seem to have generally regarded music merely

⁸² Quinn, *Patrick Kavanagh*, 402

⁸³ See AJP to Sydney Bell, 21 October 1961 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

⁸⁴ AJP to Adrian Cruft, 2 July 1961 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

⁸⁵ 'Ballet Premieres ("A Correspondent", Dublin June 7)', *The Times*, 8 June 1961.

as an adjunct to dancing and as occupying a wholly subsidiary position of importance in the production. Nonetheless, as with *Careless Love*, the failure of the critics, and the Irish critics in particular, to comment on the nature of Kavanagh's text or the stage action is surely curious. One wonders if they were at a loss to know what to make of it. Although McKenna's diction appears to have been very good, much of Kavanagh's complex and somewhat opaque poem probably eluded most listeners at a first hearing. The Irish ballet critic and radio broadcaster Norris Davidson, who prepared a spoken commentary to preface the broadcast of the work on Radio Éireann, professed bafflement, and complained to Potter that he had found it 'impossible to impose any definite meaning on it'.⁸⁶

For any spectators who did manage to grasp something of the ballet's import, its frank exploration of a young man's sexual experience and its explicit criticism of the prevailing climate of 'timorous morality' bred by Catholicism must surely have seemed heady stuff in the context of Ireland in the 1960s. As Potter jokingly told Adrian Cruft:

Candidly, I thought it was the dirtiest bit of pornography I'd seen since Port Said.⁸⁷
However, if you know your Dublin, you will know how well that sort of thing goes down and of course no-one will say anything about it if it's art.⁸⁸

Allowing for a degree of exaggeration in these remarks, it seems clear that Patricia Ryan's choreographic realisation certainly did not shrink from engagement with the highly-charged eroticism of Kavanagh's poem, with its explicit references to prostitutes, sado-masochism and sexual intercourse with an adolescent. If *Careless Love* embodied an implicit protest against Irish sexual mores, *Gamble, No Gamble* daringly condemns them as a recipe for neurosis. Potter's willing involvement with both ventures gives pause for thought, and should certainly force a reconsideration

⁸⁶ Norris Davidson to AJP, 6 September 1961 ('RE-TE 1/1/61', PA)

⁸⁷ Egyptian city located near the Suez Canal, which would have been notorious during the Second World War for its ubiquitous prostitutes and plentiful brothels.

⁸⁸ AJP to Adrian Cruft, 2 July 1961 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

of some glib assumptions made by recent commentators about Irish music of this period: these ballets are surely far removed in sensibility from the narrow Irish nationalism aiming to project a sanitised national self-image that is supposed to have dominated composers' preoccupations in Ireland during these years. It would seem that the composer not only relished the challenge presented by this experimental venture, but also his involvement in such a risqué production. There is abundant evidence to suggest that he would have been wholly in sympathy with its import: Potter had little patience with what he viewed as the cant of organised religion or with the sexual prudishness that it tended to engender. One of his unpublished short stories, 'The Thin Red Nouvelle Vague', perpetrates a blistering satire on the mixture of prurience and hypocrisy in sexual matters prevalent in what he describes as 'our own dear sanctimonium [sic.] of saints and scholars', making clear his distaste for what he regarded as widespread servile submission to the Catholic clergy.⁸⁹ Furthermore, in an interview with the Irish music critic Charles Acton in 1970, he was prepared to speak quite candidly about visiting a brothel during his period of service in the British army.⁹⁰ In view of these facts, there is every reason to suppose that he was well-attuned to the frank and earthy realism of Kavanagh's poem.⁹¹

Gamble, No Gamble is a far superior work in every respect to its predecessor and is probably one of the most interesting Irish compositions of its period. A subject of this nature clearly required a considerable stylistic departure from Potter's earlier compositional manner and he rose to the challenge with no small measure of success. This was one of the first scores in which Potter had recourse to procedures deriving loosely from serialism. As we have seen, this rather unexpected departure in his creative development seems to have been born of an anxiety that he would not be taken seriously by Irish critics unless he demonstrated an interest in modernist

⁸⁹ Copy of typescript in PA.

⁹⁰ Photocopy of Acton's transcript of interview conducted on 14 January 1970 in '№ 7B AJP', PA.

⁹¹ His pronouncements on *Patrick* should surely be read in the light of these remarks: see Chapter 6.

compositional techniques. Although he habitually referred to *Gamble, No Gamble* as being serial⁹², this description is misleading: in reality it is no more strictly serial than his *Sinfonia de Profundis* and other works in which he employed similar techniques. In the case of *Gamble, No Gamble*, while Potter derived all of the melodic material for the work quite rigorously from a twelve-note theme announced in stentorian unison at the very opening [Ex. 5.6], this 'note-row' is not used to generate the other components of the musical textures. Although the score's harmonic language is not serially derived, and still evinces a certain measure of continuity with his earlier work, it is noticeably more astringent and aggressively dissonant than anything he had written to date, with a strong tendency to chromatic saturation. Potter does not altogether exclude tonal references, however, even if these are often obscure and elusive. The harmonies, as organised on a chord-to-chord basis, still retain a vestigial sense of tonal function, being mostly complex higher chromatic discords such as ninths, elevenths and thirteenth. The result is a wholly personal amalgam that achieves an impressive degree of consistency. It was probably this type of sonority that Potter had in mind when he spoke about the possibility of writing 'serial tunes,

Ex. 5.6: *Gamble, No Gamble*, opening

Allegro $\text{♩} = 100$ [bsns, hns, tpts, tbns + archi, pizz.]

[timps]

pp, molto ——— *sf*

⁹² He did so, for example, in a letter to an English music student Deirdre MacHugh, 18 March 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA).

or counterpoint which reflects and emphasises tonality as much as we ever did.'⁹³ The expressive possibilities which this sound world opened up proved entirely apt for *Gamble, No Gamble*, lending it a rather nightmarish, expressionistic quality.

As far as its overall structure is concerned, *Gamble, No Gamble* is organised according to a quite straightforward plan. After an orchestral introduction, the opening stanzas of the poem are declaimed over a restless pizzicato bass ostinato deriving from the twelve-note theme. There follows a sequence of four linked dances: the opening Wheel Dance for the *corps de ballet*, and then solo dances for the Red, Black and White dancers in turn. The wheel dance is cast as a brilliant swirling waltz in six-four time, and features ingenious transformations of the opening twelve-note theme, three of which are shown in Ex. 5.7, 5.8 and 5.9. Ex. 5.8 employs its constituent pitches in inversion, Ex. 5.9 in retrograde. Potter has notable recourse to colourful multiple doublings of the melodic material at the fourth and fifth below, and the accompanying harmonies made extensive use of quartal and quintal formations.

The subsequent set of solo dances is deeply impressive. One of the most exacting tasks confronting the composer of a ballet score is to find effective ways of delineating character and conveying the psychological subtleties of the action in musical terms. In this regard, Potter's dramatic sense was very acute. The central character's encounters with each of the three female protagonists are portrayed in dances that are effectively contrasted in tempo, the cast of their musical material and in scoring. The music for the Red Dancer (Ex. 5.10) transforms of the theme quoted in Ex. 5.9 into a sinister slow foxtrot, punctuated by rasping trombone glissandi and strident trumpet riffs. It rises to a searing climax through obsessive repetitions of pulsating twelve-note chords (Ex. 5.11). The dance of the Black Dancer in nine-eight time, opens with a mysterious texture of low-lying harmonies in divided 'cellos and basses, shimmering, dissonant tremolandi in the upper strings and wan figurations in the celesta and harp. The melodic material here is based on motifs deriving from a

⁹³ AJP to Deirdre MacHugh, 18 March 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA).

Ex. 5.7: *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 57ff.

Valse brillante

[vlns]
f — sf

[vle, cl, pf] (sim.)

[vc, db, pizz.]

[+ fiati]
f — sf

cresc.

Ex. 5.8: *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 73ff.

[vlns]
sf cresc.

[inversion of first nine notes of 'note-row', transposed]

Ex. 5.12, *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 235ff.



retrograde inversion of the initial twelve-note theme, giving rise to phrases of plangent lyricism on solo woodwinds (Ex. 5.12). The dance of the White Dancer is based on a motif derived from the last three notes of the 'row' and is cast as a kind of surreal gavotte (Ex. 5.13). After a number of reminiscences of earlier material, it

Ex. 5.13: *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 286ff.



becomes increasingly frenetic, leading seamlessly to the impetuous, headlong music of the finale, which consists of further elaborations of the material from the introduction. These dances have a marvellous sense of continuity and sweep, forming a taut and well-integrated musical structure. The close motivic relationships between the thematic material create the impression that the score is cast as a series of developing variations, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the treatment of the twelve-note material in Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw* or the finale of Walton's *Second Symphony*, although *Gamble, No Gamble* is very different in idiom to either of these works. Equally impressive is Potter's handling of the orchestra, which is highly imaginative throughout, his strident, edgy scoring serving to heighten the general sense of acute emotional tension.

Sadly, this work has languished in more or less complete neglect since its first performance (apart from one or two broadcasts on RTÉ of the suite that Potter

subsequently extracted from it) and remains unknown. This is greatly to be regretted, as it is undoubtedly one of Potter's best compositions and represents, in the view of the present writer at least, a finer achievement than the better-known *Sinfonia de Profundis*. Unfortunately it is highly unlikely that it will be revived as a ballet in Ireland in the foreseeable future, given the fact that there is no full-time ballet company operating in the country at present, but it may have a viable future as a concert piece and would certainly be worth recording for commercial release. The recording in the Potter Archive was made by the RÉ Light Orchestra and is of very poor quality, both in the excruciating standard of the orchestral playing and from a purely technical point of view; consequently anyone wishing to study the work has to listen past the deficiencies in the performance and imagine what it might sound like in a more ideal reading. As with *Careless Love*, Potter attempted to arouse further interest in the work, and even sent a tape of it to William Glock in the BBC, with a covering letter ostentatiously drawing attention to its 'serial' construction, presumably in the hope of provoking his curiosity.⁹⁴ Once again, nothing would come of these initiatives.

5.6 Financial difficulties experienced by National Ballet

Only a few weeks after the premiere of *Gamble, No Gamble*, Potter was presented with an opportunity to collaborate on yet another ballet. This invitation came from a rather unexpected quarter – the distinguished Dublin-based actor and writer Micheál MacLiammóir. Potter's correspondence indicates that MacLiammóir first broached the subject with him in June 1961 and presented him with a copy of the scenario for the work that was to become *Full Moon for the Bride*.⁹⁵ Potter completed this work in piano score in February 1963, but it was to be over a decade before MacLiammóir succeeded in organising a production and Potter was provided with an incentive to undertake the labour of orchestrating it. Discussion of this ballet has consequently been postponed until the last section of this chapter.

⁹⁴ AJP to William Glock, 10 August 1961 ('*Gamble*', PA)

⁹⁵ See AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 30 June 1961 ('№ 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

Potter's third ballet to be staged (and fourth to be written) was once more choreographed by Patricia Ryan in what was to prove their final collaboration. Before proceeding to examine this score, *Caitlín Bhocht*, we should first consider National Ballet's fluctuating fortunes in the wake of its financially disastrous 1961 season. To judge from various materials in the Potter Archive, it would appear that the company's heavy losses precipitated a serious crisis. Unfortunately the surviving documentation is not very informative either about the precise nature of its difficulties or about whatever proposals were mooted to rescue it, except to reveal that it was reorganised and subsequently incorporated as a limited company, National Ballet Company Ltd., on 18 May 1962.⁹⁶ Copies of the company's newly-issued headed notepaper indicate that Ninette de Valois accepted an invitation to become its President, and that a number of distinguished figures, including Laurence Olivier, Ria Mooney, Micheál MacLiammóir, Lady Longford and the Marchioness of Headford became honorary patrons. A new board of directors was elected, which included Christopher West, Donagh MacDonagh and Potter himself.⁹⁷ Patricia Ryan became its Artistic Director. An article on the subject of ballet in Ireland written by Fay Weldon, which appeared in the English dance periodical *Dancing Times* in June 1964, states that at this point the company became wholly professional, the *corps de ballet* being paid as well as the imported guest stars.⁹⁸

However, in the short term at least, the company evidently did not have the means to commission new scores and Potter set about investigating the possibility of obtaining sponsorship for a work he wished to write based on a scenario devised jointly by himself and Ryan. In June 1963, he wrote to the Irish financier Sir George Mahon, one of the directors of the private Guinness and Mahon Bank and submitted a sponsorship proposal for his consideration, complete with a detailed breakdown of

⁹⁶ The relevant documentation is contained in 'National Ballet', PA, including a printed booklet 'Memorandum and Articles of Association of National Ballet Company Ltd', drawn up by the Dublin legal firm of Ryan and O'Brien.

⁹⁷ Copies of headed notepaper in 'National Ballet', PA

⁹⁸ Fay Weldon, 'Ballet in Ireland', *Dancing Times*, June 1964, 470-2.

costs for the project. He informed his correspondent that 'in 1962, the NB was reorganised and no new ballet was entertained. This year, however, it has been thought desirable to place another new work before the audience, and a project, provisionally entitled *Caitlín Bocht* [recte: '*Bhocht*'⁹⁹] is in preparation by myself and the choreographer, Miss Patricia Ryan'.¹⁰⁰ He was obviously desirous of securing a somewhat higher commissioning fee than the rather paltry sums he had received for the previous two ballets, and specified £160 for the production of full score half an hour long – roughly £2,170 or €3,200 today. There is no record of a response from Mahon, or any indication that Potter successfully managed to raise money from another source. There is a paucity of materials relating to the composition or performance of *Caitlín Bhocht* in the Potter Archive, and the details about this ballet are consequently somewhat hazy. It is not even possible to establish the precise date of completion of the score, although one surmises that Potter can have finished it no later the start of August or thereabouts, as it was premiered in the Dublin (in the Olympia Theatre) on 14 November 1963.¹⁰¹ In the meantime, however, National Ballet had undergone a further metamorphosis – one which rapidly led to its dissolution.

Although one might have imagined that the transformation of National Ballet into a professional company would have placed it on a more stable footing, this does not appear to have been the case. Almost from the very beginning, the directors seem to have experienced considerable difficulty in retaining the services of its dancers: several left to join the recently formed Telefis Éireann Dancers, while others took posts abroad. By June 1963, no dancers of any standard remained.¹⁰² At this point,

⁹⁹ Throughout Potter's correspondence, the variant spellings *Caitlín Bocht* and *Caitlín Bhocht* are found. The latter is correct: the rules of Irish grammar demand that the adjective *bocht* be lenited after the feminine noun *Caitlín*, with an 'h' being inserted after the initial consonant. Potter does not appear to have learnt Irish and his grasp of Irish spelling was very uncertain.

¹⁰⁰ AJP to Sir George Mahon, 18 June 1963, 'Odds and Ends from 1963', PA'

¹⁰¹ No programme or other materials relating to this production have come to light in the Potter Archive. The date of the premiere given here has been ascertained from a review 'Ballet about "Poor Kate"' that appeared in the *Evening Herald*, 15 November 1963. According to a letter Edmund Hayes to AJP, 18 March 1964 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA), the ballet was also given in the City Hall, Cork between 6 and 11 January 1964.

¹⁰² Weldon, 'Ballet in Ireland', 472

the company's fortunes became entwined with those of Irish Theatre Ballet, the professional company that Joan Denise Moriarty had set up in Cork in September 1959 and to which reference has been made previously. This company had a complement of twelve professional dancers, eight of whom had graduated from the Cork Ballet Company. As with National Ballet, Irish Theatre Ballet managed to secure the support and co-operation of some eminent international figures: Marie Rambert and Alicia Markova lent their names as patrons, Stanley Judson (one of the founder members of Vic-Wells Ballet, the predecessor of the Royal Ballet) became an associate director and Yannis Metsis (formerly of Athens Opera Ballet) was appointed ballet master and assistant choreographer. The company toured the country extensively, giving seasons in Cork, Dublin, Belfast, Limerick, Galway and Waterford, as well as visiting many towns and villages where no ballet had ever been staged before. Moriarty, though she was the company's director and thus deeply involved in its day-to-day operation, chose not to draw a salary and worked in a purely voluntary capacity – a decision that says much for her remarkable idealism and devotion to the cause of dance in Ireland. In spite of her self-sacrifice, it proved difficult to make ends meet. Irish Theatre Ballet derived two-thirds of its income from private sponsorship and received a very modest grant from the Irish Arts Council. After four years in existence, it too found itself in financially parlous circumstances. In late 1963, at the behest of the Arts Council, it merged with National Ballet in an attempt to stave off closure. On the face of it, this seemed a sensible solution: National Ballet had a budget, but no dancers to speak of, while Irish Theatre Ballet had dancers, but no money to pay them. The Council had indicated that while there might be some hope of providing funding for one company, there was no possibility of supporting two.¹⁰³

The amalgamation of National Ballet and Irish Theatre Ballet was to prove an unmitigated fiasco. The headed notepaper for the new company, Irish National

¹⁰³ This account is based on Aloys Fleischmann, 'The Ballet in Cork: The Amateur and Professional Companies 1947-1985', in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 25-6; and Caroline Swift's reminiscences of Joan Denise Moriarty, 'Joan Denise Moriarty as Choreographer', *ibid.*, 220-229.

Ballet, indicates that Potter served on its board, along with Aloys Fleischmann and Patricia Ryan. Joan Denise Moriarty and Ryan were appointed Joint Artistic Directors, but there appears to have been a great deal of tension between them. Ryan had very little respect for her co-director's abilities: many years later, she contended in print that Moriarty's training was greatly inferior to her own and insinuated that she was incompetent.¹⁰⁴ According to Julia Cotter, a former dancer with Irish Theatre Ballet who migrated to the new company, the final run of performances given by Irish National Ballet in Dublin in 1964 were a deeply unpleasant and humiliating ordeal for Moriarty. For that occasion, Moriarty revived a ballet *Prisoners of the Sea* (choreographed to Hamilton Harty's Piano Concerto) which she had originally produced in 1961. On arriving in Dublin with her contingent of dancers from Cork, she discovered that she had been allotted very insufficient rehearsal time in the Olympia Theatre, and appeared to get no co-operation or support from her Dublin colleagues. Reading between the lines of Cotter's account, one has the impression that a faction hostile to Moriarty within the company was trying to engineer an embarrassing fiasco: Cotter recalls that she 'sensed a boycott and that the Dublin committee was trying to oust Miss Moriarty'.¹⁰⁵

If Moriarty did, in fact, find Ryan difficult to work with, she does not appear to have been alone. A set of minutes, financial accounts and correspondence between various members of the company's board of directors which has come to light in the Potter Archive indicates that by November 1963 Irish National Ballet was already on the verge of a crisis. A letter to Potter from another director, S. Leslie Horne, who took charge of financial matters, expressed deep concern at irregularities in the

¹⁰⁴ In a letter to the Irish newspaper the *Sunday Independent*, published on 11 April 1999, Ryan declared: 'From the waist down [Moriarty] was a disaster. Because of her extremely late start she was incapable of producing a professional dancer, let alone a ballerina. I know this sounds hard but truth will out. [...] I was trained in the Cecchetti system and then under the Legat system. Nicholas Legat was the ballet master and trainer of Nijinsky. I started dancing at the age of three before moving to the classical at nine. [...] My history is impeccable.' Ruth Fleischmann's *Joan Denise Moriarty* contains abundant testimony from distinguished professional dancers and choreographers whose estimates of Moriarty's abilities are wholly at variance with Ryan's.

¹⁰⁵ Julia Cotter, reminiscences of working with Joan Denise Moriarty, in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 161-4.

company's book-keeping, one person in a position of responsibility having failed to keep any records whatsoever.¹⁰⁶ The company was saddled with former National Ballet debts of substantial proportions. One of the minutes from a board meeting of 16 November 1963 indicates that a National Ballet account, held jointly in the names of Ryan and Potter, was overdrawn to the hefty sum of £1323 9s (roughly £19,140 or €28,280 today) and that the bank wished this to be cleared as much as possible by Irish National Ballet funds. The minute in question concludes cryptically 'It was agreed that Irish National Ballet cheques should have the signatures of the manager in addition to Dr Potter and Mrs Ryan.'¹⁰⁷ According to Horne's calculations, Irish National Ballet would consequently be in debt to the tune of about £300 (approximately £4,340 or €6,400) when all the books were finally balanced. .

In addition to these financial difficulties, it appears that board members were disquieted by what they perceived as Ryan's imperious manner and her unwillingness to follow proper procedure. The minutes of the same meeting – to which, incidentally, Ryan came very late – state that she had entered into negotiations with an agent to take the company on a tour to Israel, without consulting her colleagues or seeking proper legal advice about a contract. Having heard a rumour that Ryan was intending to absent herself from the next board meeting, Horne subsequently sent her a sharply worded communication to the effect that she was not under any circumstances to commit the company to this tour by signing a contract on her own initiative, and notified her that her fellow directors would dissociate themselves from her actions if she went ahead and did so.¹⁰⁸ Finally, the minutes reveal that there was one additional matter which, in this highly-charged atmosphere, may well have engendered further resentment amongst Dublin contingent within the company: on this same occasion, the board of directors voted to transfer Irish National Ballet to Cork. No information is given about why this decision was taken, but it probably had something to do with the fact that a

¹⁰⁶ S. Leslie Horne to AJP, 18 November 1963 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of the meeting of the Board of Management of Irish National Ballet, 16 November 1963 (copy in 'Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

¹⁰⁸ S. Leslie Horne to Patricia Ryan, 8 December 1963 (copy in 'Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

substantial proportion of the company's members resided there and that the cost of maintaining the company in Cork would have been lower than in the capital.

Unfortunately Potter does not appear to have kept further records of his dealings with Irish National Ballet, so it is difficult to reconstruct what might have happened next. The auguries for the company's continued survival, in any case, were not good. According to Fay Weldon, the November 1963 programme in which *Caitlín Bhocht* was premiered was the company's first full-scale production. Both this and a subsequent production of *Coppélia* and *Caitlín Bhocht* in Cork that Christmas appear to have been considered artistic if not financial successes. Weldon states that a tour of the Middle East (presumably the one alluded to in the minutes of the board meeting cited above) had been mooted and the dancers returned to Dublin to start rehearsing for it, but it 'was deferred many times, so much so that several thousand pounds were needed to prepare and maintain the company until the tour could be undertaken' – doubtless because the company's Board of Management had reservations about its advisability, as we have seen. Weldon's account of what happened next is of considerable interest:

The [company's] financial situation was made more acute by the Irish National Ballet's government grant not being available. A £2,000 grant had been agreed, but this could not be given until the end of the financial year April 1964. Therefore the only government finance at the company's disposal was the unused 1963 grant of the old National Ballet. Because of this crisis, the number of board meetings increased vastly and, as it was impossible for her to attend all the meetings on account of her commitments in Cork, Miss Moriarty resigned as Co-Artistic Director, thereby taking what must have been a tremendously difficult and courageous decision in view of her devotion to the cause of ballet in Ireland.¹⁰⁹

The publicly stated reason for Moriarty's departure may, of course, only have been a face-saving pretext, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that she was glad to resign. In the end, the Arts Council grant never materialised, and one wonders whether the

¹⁰⁹ Weldon, 'Ballet in Ireland', 472

internal tensions within the company proved so disruptive that the Council eventually lost confidence in it. Without this indispensable financial support, it had no choice but to cease operations in early 1964. As Weldon recounts, it struggled on for a few months with its personnel on reduced salaries, but closure was inevitable. Most of its remaining dancers subsequently emigrated and found work abroad.¹¹⁰

5.7 *Caitlín Bhocht*

Caitlín Bhocht, the only ballet score that Potter would have the opportunity to write for this ill-starred company, is a rather peculiar production, to say the least. For non-Irish readers, its name probably requires a few words of explanation. The title *Caitlín Bhocht*, which translates as 'Poor Cathleen', makes ironic reference to the conventions of the Gaelic literary genre of the *aisling* ('dream' or 'vision'), which was cultivated especially by the eighteenth-century poets of Munster. Although ostensibly a love poem, the *aisling* was frequently used to convey a covert political subtext and express the hope of the disenfranchised Catholic majority for political deliverance. Such poems were highly formalised: typically, the poet would describe an encounter with a *spéirbhean* ('sky-woman') of remarkable beauty, who would identify herself as Ireland, abandoned by her legitimate spouse, and proclaim a prophecy of national renewal through the return of the Catholic Stuart kings to the English throne. Various names came into common currency for these female personifications of Ireland, including Síle Ní Ghadhra, Róisín Dubh and Gráinne Mhaol. Yet another, Caitlín Ní Uallacháin (in its anglicised form, Cathleen Ni Houlihan) was invented by the Jacobite poet Liam Dall Ó hÍfearnán in an *aisling* anticipating the arrival of the Stuart from France, thus ending Caitlín's lonely vigil awaiting the arrival of her loyal spouse. Yeats invoked this tradition in his famous play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* of 1902, its central character being an unmistakable avatar of these venerable predecessors. Although the play had an electrifying effect on Dublin audiences when first performed (so much so, in fact, that Yeats later wondered in his poem 'The Man and

¹¹⁰ See Julia Cotter's reminiscences of working with Joan Denise Moriarty, in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty*, 162.

the Echo' if it had not been directly responsible for fomenting the new spirit of revolutionary nationalism), the figure of Cathleen was later much parodied by modern Irish writers, George Moore, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett amongst them. In devising the title *Caitlín Bhocht*, Potter and Ryan appear to have conflated Yeats' title with yet another famous soubriquet for Ireland, the *Sean Bhean Bhocht* (anglicised as 'Shan Van Vocht'), or 'poor old woman', which had first been employed in an *aisling*-like poem printed in the cultural and literary journal *The Nation* in 1842.¹¹¹ For audiences at this period, the adjective *bocht* ('poor') would undoubtedly have brought to mind a satirical novel in Irish by the Dublin writer Brian O' Nolan (which he published in 1941 under one of his pseudonyms, Myles na gCopaleen) called *An Béal Bocht* ('The Poor Mouth'). This is a blistering satire on the hardships of life in the *gaelteacht*, the Irish-speaking districts in Ireland, as portrayed in a number of celebrated autobiographies by inhabitants of these regions.

O'Brien's somewhat jaundiced perspective may well have helped set the tone for the ballet, whose central protagonist is thus Ireland herself. The scenario presents a sardonic overview of Irish history since the Middle Ages as an unending series of calamities – invasions, occupations, persecutions and natural disasters amongst them – with 'poor Cathleen' having to contend with these as best she can. The following extracts from two programme notes devised by Potter give some indication of the spirit in which he and Ryan conceived the enterprise:

Poor Kathleen Ni Houlihan– the embodiment of Ireland: always 'the most distressful country'¹¹² whether she is being assaulted or betrayed by invaders or renegades –

¹¹¹ For the benefit of non-Irish speakers who may understandably be puzzled by the apparent discrepancies in spelling: *bocht* means 'poor' in Irish and this is the basic form of the word as found in a dictionary. The rules of Irish grammar dictate that its initial letter must be aspirated after the feminine noun *bean* to become *bhocht*.

¹¹² An allusion to the popular ballad 'The Wearing of the Green', which came into circulation shortly after the abortive United Irishmen rebellion of 1798. In the wake of the latter, the British government introduced various repressive measures, one of which was to outlaw the wearing of what were perceived as revolutionary insignia – such as the shamrock. The opening stanzas run:

O Paddy dear, an' did ye hear the news that's goin' round?

and always coming back for more. Never quite sure who her friends are, and never quite sure whether the enemies she so successfully assimilates are part of her past to be shunned or part of herself to be worshipped.¹¹³

And again:

The eternal symbol of Ireland ravaged in turn by Vikings, Normans, religious opponents, fortune-hunters, carpet-baggers¹¹⁴, Mrs Grundys - to say nothing of vote-hunting politicians from Coromandel¹¹⁵ to California. But perhaps the unkindest cut of all was – and still is – the damage done by her own – ‘the old sow that eats her own farrow’.¹¹⁶

The action begins by gunmen tearing away at poor Kathleen, and then in a flashback, we retrace the steps in history through Vikings, Normans, Elizabethans, Cromwellians and the perfumed exquisites of the eighteenth-century Age of

*The shamrock is forbid by law to grow on Irish ground;
St. Patrick's Day no more we'll keep, his colour can't be seen,
For there's a cruel law agin the wearin' o' the Green.*

*I met wid Napper Tandy and he took me by the hand,
And he said, "How's dear ould Ireland, and how does she stand?"
She's the most distressful country that ever yet was seen,
For they're hangin' men an' women there for the wearin' o' the Green.*

*Then since the colour we must wear is England's cruel red,
Sure Ireland's sons will ne'er forget the blood that they have shed,
You may take a shamrock from your hat and cast it on the sod,
It will take root and flourish there though underfoot it's trod.*

Napper Tandy was a Dublin shopkeeper and political activist, who on being identified by British intelligence as a revolutionary had to flee to France.

¹¹³ Undated programme note for *Caitlín Bhocht* (copy in 'Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 – 1965', PA)

¹¹⁴ American political slang: a pejorative term for immigrants from the Northern to the Southern States after the American Civil war of 1861-65, whose 'property qualification' consisted merely of the contents of the carpet-bag (i.e. a travelling bag made of carpet) that they had brought with them. It was originally used derisively to describe Northerners who went south and tried to win political influence by means of the Negro vote; according to the OED it is employed nowadays to mean someone who interferes 'with the politics of a locality with which he is thought to have no permanent or genuine connexion'.

¹¹⁵ Probably intended as a reference to the name of a town and harbour on the east coast of the north island of New Zealand.

¹¹⁶ A reference to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: in chapter 5, its hero Stephen Dedalus declares, 'Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.'

Enlightenment. Each entity has its own recurring theme... Kathleen, sad and melancholy... The brutal gunmen, Vikings, Cromwellians *et al* with their own unmistakable barbarity. But, of course, Ireland is always betrayed by her own first and so the barbarous Normans are inveigled in by Dermot MacMurragh [*recte* MacMurrough] ... and as the apotheosis of it all, we have the same thing again – only this time, the persecutors are in ‘forty shades of green’¹¹⁷, bowler hats, furled umbrellas, and tricolour ties... *Plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose...*¹¹⁸

The rather involved scenario can be summarised as follows:¹¹⁹

The stage fills with shadowy unrecognisable figures, to the accompaniment of marching music. Cathlín dances a *pas seul*; she is interrupted by the Black and Tans¹²⁰, who treat her abusively. Three girls, personifying Gaelic culture, enter and dance; they are interrupted by a horde of Vikings who bear them off. Caitlín resumes her dance. Dermot MacMurrough¹²¹ enters, and tries to seduce her. The Norman invaders make their appearance. The next tableau depicts the enactment of the Statutes of Kilkenny in 1367, which were an attempt to maintain English political and cultural influence over the Hiberno-Norman settler families (many of whom had tended to become assimilated into the local culture) by banning them from speaking the Irish language and inter-marriage with the Irish. This scene is staged as a mock-

¹¹⁷ A traditional tag used to describe the verdant Irish countryside: it became something of a catchphrase and was (and, indeed, still is) often used ironically.

¹¹⁸ Programme note attached to full score of suite from *Caitlín Bhocht* in Library of RTÉ Concert Orchestra, quoted in Mark Cronin, ‘A. J. Potter (1918-80): An Annotated Catalogue of Works’, MA Thesis, Cork School of Music/Cork Institute of Technology, July 2005, 136-7.

¹¹⁹ This summary is based in an undated sketch of the scenario in ‘Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 – 1965’, PA.

¹²⁰ Popular nickname for an armed force recruited to combat the supporters of Sinn Féin in 1921, so called because of the mixture (black and khaki) of constabulary and military uniforms worn by its members. The Black and Tans were a hated symbol of British oppression in Ireland, and became notorious for their murderous brutality and wanton acts of destruction.

¹²¹ The anglicised form of Diarmait MacMurchadha, a twelfth-century king of Leinster who is generally considered the most notorious traitor in Irish history. MacMurchadha was ousted as king at the behest of the High King of Ireland, Tairrdelbach mac Ruaidri Ua Conchobair (Turlough O’Connor) who feared – rightly – that he would become a dangerous rival. MacMurchadha sought the help of Henry II to regain his kingdom, in the hope that he could subsequently realise his ambition of becoming High King himself. Henry II had territorial ambitions of his own, however, and used this as a pretext to invade Ireland, inaugurating eight hundred years of English occupation.

trial, with Caitlín and the trio of girls as defendants. They are condemned and dragged away. The subsequent tableau depicts events after the Tudor re-conquest of Ireland, the period of the plantations when the native aristocracy were dispossessed and the land was settled with colonists loyal to the crown. A further tableau evokes the brutal Cromwellian campaigns of 1649-53. After an interlude, in which Caitlín dance alone once more, further tableaux present scenes from the period of the penal laws in the eighteenth century, the abortive 1798 uprising and the famines of the nineteenth century. Finally, in a grand apotheosis, depicting what Potter describes as 'independence (moryagh)'¹²², Irish bureaucrats in bowler hats, umbrellas and tricolours dance to the same music previously employed to depict the invaders and betrayers, finally raising Kathleen aloft in triumph on uplifted arms.

Although the ballet was very well received by the Dublin critics on the occasion of its first performance in the Olympia Theatre Dublin on 14 November 1963, one is left with the disquieting impression that the reasons for its appeal were rather questionable, as the entire concept strikes one as being in very dubious taste. To judge from the reviews, Cathleen was portrayed as deriving a masochistic satisfaction from her various misfortunes: the account of the work given by the anonymous reviewer for the *Irish Times* reads:

Caitlín Bhocht, in the Patricia Ryan/A. J. Potter version of the tribulations of Houlihan's daughter¹²³, is the young lady who couldn't fail to say "Yes".¹²⁴ The ballet opens with poor Katie¹²⁵ being oppressed and violated by Black-and-Tans. It flashes back to the decent girl getting the same treatment from Danes, Normans and English of various types through the fabled seven centuries of oppression. It ends with Poor Kathleen in the hands of the County Managers, her freedom won – but she is still used as a convenient chattel – and sad to say, the girl still appears to take pleasure in it. So she is made to appear through all the centuries of oppression and invasion.

¹²² A corruption of the Irish *mar dhea*, literally 'as though good', but generally used to mean 'fake' or 'phoney'.

¹²³ In Irish, the particle *Ní* before a surname indicates that a woman is unmarried, and that the surname which follows it is that of her father.

¹²⁴ An ironic reference to the title of a famous play by the Irish dramatist Denis Johnston (1901-1984), *The Old Lady Says 'No'!*

¹²⁵ 'Caitlín' is a diminutive.

Patricia Ryan and A. J. Potter must have been aware that they were combining to destroy a glorious myth and the Celtic Twilight at one and the same time. John Ryan obviously subscribed to the same heresy in his settings It could be that they are all absolutely right, and that Kathleen – no better than she should be, has been treated no worse than she deserves. ... [The] combined team have brought off something new and salutary in artistic commentary on Irish life, and are to be heartily congratulated for so doing.¹²⁶

This review is surely as good an indication as any of the abysmally low standard of criticism in Irish newspapers of the period, and of the extent to which its practitioners were often devoid of perceptiveness and taste. There is surely something profoundly rebarbative about a ballet, of all things, that presents episodes in Irish history such as the Cromwellian campaigns, the penal laws or the nineteenth-century potato famines in a trivialised way and plays them for cheap laughs. One is inclined to wonder if this particular reviewer might have found a balletic portrayal of the 'fabled' history of the Jews that featured scenes from the Holocaust equally diverting, and have drawn the conclusion that they 'had been treated no worse than they deserved'. Nor was this reviewer alone in this assessment of the piece – not one of the notices published betrays so much as a hint of any genuinely critical perspective on it. Both the ballet itself and the critical responses to it suggest an astonishing emotional and imaginative disconnection from the brute facts of Irish history. No doubt cultural theorists would diagnose from these circumstances a typical postcolonial syndrome readily explicable in the light of psychoanalytic theory: that of the former colonised subject, who, unable to attain to a realistic self-image and riven by self-loathing, persists in identifying with the former aggressor, the coloniser, in the conviction that he is still innately superior to him. Having unconsciously introjected the latter's attitudes of misprision, the colonial subject is led to disparage his native country for its weakness in having allowed itself to be colonised in the first place. Cathleen not only derives pleasure from her humiliation: she also secretly desires it and is convinced that she fundamentally deserves it.

¹²⁶ Unsigned review, 'Witty and Original Ballet Intelligently Interpreted', *Irish Times*, 15 November 1963

As far as Potter's music is concerned, his score for this ballet is one of his weakest in his entire output and it consequently does not merit detailed consideration here. Its thematic material is trite and uninteresting, and, to an even greater extent than *Careless Love*, it is subjected to a degree of unvaried repetition that is scarcely tolerable. The manuscript confirms one's impression that *Caitlín Bhocht* was composed at breakneck speed: Potter took every conceivable shortcut in committing it to paper, and the reader using this score to follow a recording is forced to thumb back continually to some earlier section which Potter did not trouble to write out again. Two themes are used to characterise the various invaders and betrayers who tyrannise over Caitlín, and as so many of these make an appearance in the scenario, this degree of repetitiveness was inevitable. It is not unreasonable to suggest the Potter may have had little interest in writing it, and only undertook the commission for the money: he had, after all, completed four ballet scores in as many years and may simply have found that by this point his enthusiasm had waned.

5.8 *Full Moon for the Bride*

In any case, with the collapse of Irish National Ballet, Potter no longer had the opportunity to write new scores for a professional company, even if he had wished to do so. He made occasional, desultory efforts to arouse the interest of foreign companies in the scores he had already written: in 1965 he sent off tapes of *Caitlín Bhocht*, *Gamble*, *No Gamble* and *Careless Love* to John Lanchbery, then the principal conductor of the Royal Ballet.¹²⁷ Lanchbery subsequently wrote to inform him that the eminent Scottish dancer Kenneth Macmillan, who had recently been appointed resident choreographer with the same company, had 'enjoyed hearing them enormously and I am sure would one day like to commission a score from you, but

¹²⁷ See AJP to John Lanchbery, 23 December 1965 ('Careless Love Ballet / also Caitlín Bocht / Aug 59 - 1965', PA); and 29 December 1965 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA).

the particular works you sent were unsuitable for his present purpose.¹²⁸ Nothing came either of a proposal in 1966 from the Israeli choreographer Domy Reiter-Soffer that Potter should collaborate on a ballet with him.¹²⁹

In 1967, Potter was contacted by an American dancer Daniel Nagrin, who enquired about the feasibility of organising an Irish tour. Potter's response is of considerable interest, as it indicates that he evidently considered the prospects of ballet in Ireland to be fairly dismal in the wake of his recent experiences with National Ballet and Irish National Ballet:

Dear Mr Nagrin,

... My thanks for the honour of asking me for my opinion re the possibility of a tour for you. Since you ask, here they are:

As you presumably know, I was intimately associated both as composer, director and organiser with the former National Ballet here. My experiences there led me to formulate three things which are necessary to the prosecution of successful ballet: they are –

(1) Talent (2) Appreciation (3) Money.....

Nos. 1 & 2, I have found in my own experience here to be available in very adequate quantities. No. 3 is in desperate scarcity. If I knew of any way of raising it, I would have used it long ago to keep the N[ational] B[allet] going and even seeing that my own ballets such as *Careless Love*, *Gamble*, *No Gamble*, *Caitlín Bocht* [*sic.*] etc. got a chance to repeat the very great success which they enjoyed on their first presentations. So, speaking quite candidly, I have to tell you that whilst there may be plentiful appreciation for your art here, there will be precious little money for it.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ John Lanchbery to AJP, 20 April 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA)

¹²⁹ Domy Reiter-Soffer to AJP, 5 May 1966, ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA)

¹³⁰ AJP to Daniel Nagrin, 8 October 1967 ('Nº1 Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

Somewhat surprisingly, in spite of what seems to have been an open invitation from Fleischmann to do so, Potter does not seem to have explored the possibility of writing a work for Joan Denise Moriarty's amateur Cork Ballet Company, which continued to operate all through this period and eventually gave the long-delayed premiere of *Full Moon for the Bride*.

As we have seen, this work had been completed in piano score before the composition of *Caitlín Bhocht*, so it is necessary to retrace our steps somewhat to give an account of its genesis. For this project, Potter entered into collaboration with another remarkable figure in Irish cultural life at the period, the multi-talented Micheál MacLiammóir (1899-1987). MacLiammóir, like the English composer Arnold Bax, belonged to that category of Englishman who fell under the spell of Ireland and its culture to such an extent that he felt impelled to reinvent himself as an Irishman. MacLiammóir's self-transformation was far more dramatic than Bax's had been, however. Born Alfred Wilmore in London, while he was studying art at the Slade School he encountered the work of Yeats, which made such an overwhelming impression on him that it profoundly altered the course of his life.¹³¹ He came to Ireland to work as a designer and illustrator, changed his name, claimed henceforth to be of Irish birth and performed the almost impossible feat of becoming completely fluent in Irish, his mastery of the tongue being such as to impress even native speakers. After a period of travel in France and Italy, he began to work as an actor and returned to tour Ireland in the company of his brother-in-law. In 1928 he founded the Dublin Gate Theatre with the man who was to remain his life-long partner, Hilton Edwards (1903-82). Over the coming decades, MacLiammóir would act over three hundred roles, achieving international celebrity in the 1960s with a one-man show *The Importance of Being Oscar*, an entertainment based on the life and

¹³¹ As he described in an essay of 1945, '[Faoin] am sin tharla gur léigh mé aiste le fear darbh ainm Yeats. *Ireland and the Arts* bhí mar theideal ar an aiste, agus creidim gur athraigh mé mo shaol ar fad.' ['At that time, it happened that I read an essay by a man called Yeats. *Ireland and the Arts* was the title of the essay, and I believe it changed my entire life.'] Micheál MacLiammóir, 'Falaing Arlaicín', in *Ceo Meala Lá Seaca* (Baile Átha Cliath [Dublin], 1952), 28

works of Oscar Wilde. In addition to this, he wrote copiously both in Irish and in English, and was a highly talented designer and director.¹³² A man of immense sociability and charm, he was a figure of semi-legendary status in his country of adoption by the time Potter came into contact with him, being much loved and widely admired. His proposal to collaborate on a ballet was consequently a highly flattering indication to Potter that, in Ireland at any rate, he had at last 'arrived'.

Although he had not trained as a dancer, MacLiammóir appears to have developed an intense love of ballet in his youth. He apparently had the opportunity to see productions mounted by the legendary Ballets Russes¹³³, which to judge from his later recollections, were amongst the most powerful of his early formative experiences. One of his collections of essays in Irish, *Ceo Meala Lá Seaca* (1952) contains a rhapsodic account of seeing the great Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, whose artistry and technical virtuosity seem have made an indelible impression on him:

I mo stócach bhíos nuair chonaiceas don chéad uair é i mballet *Les Sylphides*. D'éirigh an brat agus *prélude* le Chopin á sheinnm, agus ansin, os ár gcomhair amach, bhí fear óg ina sheasamh gan cor as idir beirt *bhallerine*, agus, thart timpeall ar an triúr úd, bhí scata rincoirí sciathánach mná os comhair ghairdín de chrainnte ceomhara faoi sholas gealaí. D'athraigh an *prélude* ina bhálsa gur thóg an fear óg a lámha go mall luaimneach, a shúile leathdhúnta aige agus meanga beag diamhair ar a bhéal, amhail is dá mbeadh sé ag cuimhniú ar rún éigin dá chuid féin, agus d'éirigh sé san aer ar nós éin.

Ón nóiméad sin bhí mé féin, fearacht na mílte eile, faoi dhraíocht ag an bpearsanacht ba mhó dá bhfacthas san amharclainn le linn na haoise seo, pearsanacht nár éirigh le

¹³² The standard accounts of MacLiammóir's life are Micheál Ó hAodha, *The Importance of Being Micheál* (Brandon Press, Dingle, Ireland, 1990) and Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys: A Biography of Micheál MacLiammóir and Hilton Edwards* (Dublin, 1994).

¹³³ See Micheál MacLiammóir to Joan Denise Moriarty, 27 November 1972: copy appended to MacLiammóir to AJP, 27 November 1972 ('*Full Moon for the Bride*', PA); and a passage in his autobiography *All for Hecuba* (Dublin, 1961), 2-3, in which he mentions seeing the Ballets Russes in Monte Carlo in 1927, while Diaghilev was still alive.

lucht léirmheasa ná le lucht filíochta ná le lucht péintéireachta a míniú, faoi mar nár éirigh le lucht eolaíochta míniú thabhairt ar an aicíd scrios an phearsanacht chéanna go tobann agus í i mbláth a hóige is a cumhachta. Ní féidir le dada an fear óg aisteach sin mhíniú, ná fiú cuntas cruinn thabhairt air, ach amháin, b'fhéidir, an ceol sin an t-aon ní amháin ar féidir leis é thabhairt as ais chun beatha inár gcuimhne agus é ina chló féin os comhair ár súl.¹³⁴

[I was a young man when I saw him for the first time in the ballet *Les Sylphides*. The curtain rose to a prelude by Chopin, and then, before us, a young man was standing motionless between two ballerinas, and, surrounding the three of them was a small group of winged female dancers before a garden of misty trees under the light of the moon. The prelude changed to a waltz, to which the young man slowly waved his hands, with his eyes half-closed and a mysterious faint smile on his lips, as though he were musing to himself - and he rose into the air like a bird.

From that moment, I was, like thousands of others, under the spell of the greatest personality that was ever seen in the theatre in this age – a personality that critics, poets and painters could not explain, just as scientists failed to explain the calamitous extinction of the same personality in the flower of his youth and power. Nothing could explain that strange young man, let alone give a succinct account of him, except perhaps the music that was played while he danced; and that music was the one thing that could bring him alive in our memories and seem to appear before our eyes.]

This fascination with the ballet endured throughout his career: his very last play, *Prelude in Kazbek Street*, which was staged in 1973 and represents a notable attempt to explore the subject of homosexuality, has as its central character a celebrated Irish ballet dancer.¹³⁵ A few decades previously in the early 1940s, it had prompted him to devise a ballet scenario that was subsequently employed as the basis for Aloys

¹³⁴ Micheál MacLiammóir, 'Waslaw Nijinski', in *Ceo Meala Lá Seaca* (Baile Átha Cliath [Dublin], 1952), 265. I would like to thank Séamas de Barra for his assistance in making this translation.

¹³⁵ This play is reprinted in John Barrett (ed.), *Selected Plays of Micheál MacLiammóir* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks. and Washington D.C., 1998).

Fleischmann's second ballet, *An Cóitín Dearg*, which was staged in 1951.¹³⁶ The scenario of *Full Moon for the Bride* was written eight years later in 1959.¹³⁷ Potter's correspondence reveals that he met MacLiammóir to discuss the possibility of writing a score for it in June 1961. He was clearly enthusiastic about the idea, not least because he hoped the work would stand a good chance of being produced on account of its association with the distinguished actor. At this stage, he seems to have envisaged that the ballet would be full-length and would consequently require three to six months to write. He proposed to MacLiammóir that, rather than commissioning the work from him, he should instead advance him £200 (some £3,000 or €4,500 nowadays) in instalments, which Potter would repay him out of the royalties he would receive when the work was eventually performed.¹³⁸ Further negotiations were somewhat delayed by MacLiammóir's lengthy absences on tour in South America and subsequently by a painful injury to his spine which he sustained on his return to Dublin later in the summer.¹³⁹ He eventually got in touch with Potter at the end of September. Having mulled over the project in the meantime and sought the advice of Hilton Edwards, he suggested a number of modifications to their original plan. In the first place, he asked Potter if he might be content to accept half the fee that he had originally requested, as he could not afford a larger sum. His letter continued:

One thing I beg you to reflect upon before you say either 'yes' or 'no'. *Full Moon for the Bride*, as I visualise it, should be nothing like a full evening's entertainment. It would be, ideally speaking, about the length of your ballet for MacDonagh – am I right in saying this was about twenty-five minutes to half an hour, or if you will, the length of *Firebird* or *Petrouschka*. These are all around the half hour mark, some a little more, some a little less. Among the older Russian ballets I think *Scheherazade* was one of the lengthiest and I don't think it ran to more than half an hour. This, I do

¹³⁶ See de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 100-2 for an account of the genesis of this work.

¹³⁷ Date given on MacLiammóir's typescript of *Full Moon for the Bride* (copy in 'No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA).

¹³⁸ AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 30 June 1961 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹³⁹ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 3 August 1961 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

think, Archie, may make a slight difference to you from the angle of finance and I do hope you will be able to meet me.

Apart from purely financial considerations, I realise, of course, that the ballet seems a fairly full story, but it is amazing how much more swiftly the feet tell the story than the tongue and I am sure we can tell this one in the usual time. The enormous full evening ballet I am personally never mad about – even in *Sleeping Princess* and in *Ondine* there are moments when one would love to be listening to and looking at something else, and I don't think that *Full Moon* has the sort of weight or development to continue for a couple of hours: it is essentially a swiftly moving business that happens magically between dark and dawn.

Anyway, let me know what you think as soon as you can. Be a good man and don't take a leaf out of my disgraceful book because I have to go to America at the end of next week for two months and if you could possibly get going – I mean if it works in with your schedule at all – while I am away, it would be marvellous. We might in January or February have something to tout around and make the glory and the gold.¹⁴⁰

He concluded his letter by requesting that Potter should supply him with a piano score of the work for the revised fee of £100, and if at all possible, a recording. This agreement was to be the cause of some difficulty when an opportunity to secure a production of the work eventually materialised over a decade later, but for the moment, Potter was amenable to MacLiammóir's proposal. He replied a few days later with a rather amusing letter indicating his assent:

Thank you for your letter. I have been through the script again this morning and I think I can see your point as to length. After all, one of the main advantages of *Careless Love* was the amount of 'plot' it managed to squeeze into the short half-hour and I quite agree with you about most of the full-length affairs: the only one I can really stomach is *Romeo and Juliet* – and there you have to admit that Shakespeare and

¹⁴⁰ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 30 September 1961 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

Prokofieff are a bit extra. So we may agree upon length – and consequentially upon the financial readjustment you suggest.

There remains the problem of the score to be delivered to you: suggested, a piano working score. I will do this, but would like to emphasise very strongly one proviso. The piano is the harlot amongst instruments – all things to all men, and all men are the same to her. There are four basic elements in music: pitch, time, dynamic and timbre It is impertinent of me to lecture you on this subject for I'm sure you've forgotten more about it than I shall ever learn. But I must remind you that timbre – colour if you will – matters as much as the others: a tune, a chord, a rhythm [will] be the same on a bassoon as it would on a corneopean.¹⁴¹ Some composers (like old J. S. B[ach]) don't really mind very much about it: they work in perpetual black and white and make their effects through beauty of line and form. I don't. What originality I do have is all in the combinations of colouring that I can obtain: my harmonies and rhythms are not better than any competent composer of the day and age: the melodies, perhaps a bit better, but it is the interplay of timbre that gives what originality there is. This is all lost when all are brought down to the common level of the hammer-box. I do, of course, realise that from the strictly monetary viewpoint, a piano score is the only practical possibility. So having given due and awful warning, I'll be perfectly happy to produce it – and, of course, the tape to go with it.¹⁴²

MacLiammóir promptly sent on the first instalment of £50, taking care to reassure Potter that 'I am sure I will like it as I really do love all I have heard of your work, but even if I don't like it you will get the [remaining] £50... so there!'¹⁴³

MacLiammóir evidently expected that Potter would commence work on the ballet as soon as he could – but as we have seen, this period was a particularly hectic one in which Potter had to fulfil several other large-scale commissions, including *Gamble*, *No Gamble* and the television opera *Patrick*. When he still had not heard from Potter by April of the following year, MacLiammóir sent him a delicately-worded note of enquiry. 'Have the bees brought the honey of their music to your ears yet? I am

¹⁴¹ An old name for the *cornet à piston*.

¹⁴² AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁴³ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 7 October ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

thinking, of course, of Our Ballet and beg that you won't forget about it.¹⁴⁴ Potter's reply pleaded the pressure of other pressing commitments:

Dear Micheál,

I should have written this letter yesterday, but it was Friday the thirteenth. Thank you for your own of the previous day: you are understanding and long-suffering. For this you will have your reward in heaven. Regarding the more earthly compensation, the bees have indeed been buzzing. I think that when we had our last few moments' talk amid the snows and sneers of the New Year Telefís Éireann opening, I mentioned that the television opera *Patrick* had been causing time-consuming trouble. It has indeed thus occupied the Christmas holiday periods. Those of Easter will be devoted to *Full Moon for the Bride*. It is merely a question of getting it down on paper. I say... merely.... Please Micheál, let me have these few holiday days. You won't be disappointed at the results.¹⁴⁵

In the event, however, it was to be another ten months before Potter managed to finish the score, which he dispatched to MacLiammóir on 22 February 1963.¹⁴⁶ The older man declared himself delighted, and sent Potter a teasingly flirtatious letter of thanks:

My dear Archie,

How wonderful! I am deeply and indescribably furious with myself and my ignorance of written music: to me a pattern – lovely or hideous as the case may be – of flies upon telephone wires - I long to hear it. Hilton is in London or he'd do something for me. Will you come one evening and play it to me? I am sure it is so splendid and wicked and abounding like yourself. Again my thanks: it is to me at the moment Pandora's Box, so you or a friend must open it, to loosen all the dancing feet in the world.

¹⁴⁴ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 12 April 1962 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁴⁵ AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 14 April 1962 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁴⁶ See AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 22 February 1963 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

Fraternal greetings, from your loving playmate,
Micheál MacLiammóir.¹⁴⁷

After this hectic flurry of activity, it was Potter's turn to endure a protracted wait. A run-through of the score was duly organised with the Irish concert pianist Charles Lynch, whose services were regularly in demand on such occasions because of his remarkable facility at sight-reading, which enabled him to play even the most dauntingly complex orchestral scores *à première vue*.¹⁴⁸ MacLiammóir was unable to give any thought to organising a production, however, as he had to undergo a series of operations which attempted to arrest the alarming and increasingly rapid deterioration of his sight.¹⁴⁹ Potter sent him a musical greeting as he convalesced in the Meath Hospital in Dublin, which elicited the reply:

My dear Archie,

This is belated but sincere. All my thanks for your lovely musical message to me. I got a doctor who knows music to sing it to me; it nearly killed the poor fellow but I believe he is recovering; I think he is only used to Chaminade, if you see what I mean. I am thrilled to tell you that we have now got Photostats of *Full Moon*. This is to send love to you from us both and to dream of the future. God bless you, *lieber Musikanter* [*sic.*]. There will be more gold for us all I hope in the future.

Yours ever,
Micheál¹⁵⁰

At some point, MacLiammóir contacted Leonide Massine, whom he seems to have known slightly¹⁵¹, to ask if he might be interested in taking on the new work, but the

¹⁴⁷ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 27 February 1963 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁴⁸ Letter from AJP to correspondent identified only as 'Seamus' (probably Séamus Kelly, who wrote a column for the Irish Times under the *nom de plume* 'Quidnunc'), 6 September 1963 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

¹⁴⁹ See Fitz-Simon, *The Boys*, 270.

¹⁵⁰ Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 5 September 1963 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

¹⁵¹ He may have had an opportunity to encounter Massine in London in 1939: see *All for Hecuba*, 315.

famous dancer proved evasive. When he still had heard no definite news a month or so later, Potter seems to have grown impatient and reproached his collaborator for not pursuing the matter with greater energy. MacLiammóir's mollifying response was a minor masterpiece of tone:

My dear Archie,

I loved your letter with its note of melancholy reproach so unlike yourself in your taurine brutal splendour. I hope you are as magnificent and shameless as ever. For my part, I'm sad, so far, as I have had no word from Leonide Massine but on the strength of your note I've written him a few urgent, indeed almost testy words. You see, we had sent him photostat copies of your score and my costume designs as well as my story last winter – so what the hell he is up to I can't imagine. If he doesn't answer my last letter I shall send the thing to Covent Garden and hope for the best. I believe that Frederick Ashton is a reasonable man – though perhaps reason is not all we want.

Love from us both.

As ever,

Micheál¹⁵²

These enquires bore no fruit, however, and the project seems to have been shelved for the time being. It was to be another nine years before the two men would resume their efforts to secure a production. As we have seen, Potter does not appear to have been sanguine about the prospects for dance in Ireland after the debacle with Irish National Ballet, and he may simply have given up all hope of getting the work staged. For reasons that are unclear, his interest in the project revived in 1972, however, and he suggested to MacLiammóir that he should approach Joan Denise Moriarty in Cork to ask if she would consider staging it.¹⁵³ As it happened, in

¹⁵² Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 17 October 1963 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

¹⁵³ In a letter of 12 September 1972 to his Yugoslavian acquaintance Klara Montani, Potter mentions that plans were afoot to produce *Full Moon for the Bride* in Cork ('No 13 Personal 1969-70-1-2-3', PA); see also Micheál MacLiammóir to AJP, 27 November 1962 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

November of that year, MacLiammóir had the opportunity to see Moriarty's production of *Swan Lake* with the Cork Ballet Company when it came to Dublin, and was deeply impressed by the standard of dancing. If he had wondered whether *Full Moon for the Bride* might exceed the capabilities of the company's dancers, any such doubts were evidently dispelled. He promptly sent Moriarty a warm letter of congratulation, and took the initiative of asking if she would look at his scenario:

Hilton and I both wish to send you many, many congratulations on your *Swan Lake*. It is quite wonderful what you have done, and what a triumphant week you have had in Dublin. ... And do you know, Joan, old balletomane as I am (I've watched ballet since 1911 and saw all the great Diaghilev ones), never, until your production had I seen the fourth act of *Swan Lake*. I loved it, and want to see it again. Again, Joan, all my thanks for the wonderful work you have done in this country for ballet and for Cork.

And now, as Lady Bracknell would say, to minor matters: I have a script of a ballet called *Full Moon For the Bride*, which combines two styles of dancing: Irish folk for the *corps de ballet* and second leads, and a combination of classic and folk for the *premier danseur* and the ballerina. Archie Potter has written the music for it. I don't know what it's like yet, but suspect that it is very fine indeed, though I only got a sketch, naturally enough, when he played it on the piano with no orchestration. I have made a series of designs for dresses, and can do one at any moment for a setting.... Would you be interested to see the script? Just let me know and I'll send it to you.¹⁵⁴

Moriarty's response must have pleased him immensely: she wrote back to say that the company 'was exceedingly flattered that you would think of entrusting your *Full Moon for the Bride* to us, and it would indeed be an honour to produce it.'¹⁵⁵

Now that there was the prospect of a production at last, the practical question of orchestrating the piano score inevitably raised itself, bringing a number of difficulties

¹⁵⁴ Micheál MacLiammóir to Joan Denise Moriarty, 27 November 1972: copy appended to MacLiammóir to AJP, 27 November 1972 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁵⁵ This quotation from Moriarty's letter was re-typed by MacLiammóir and appended to a letter to AJP, 7 December 1972 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA).

in its train. Potter's correspondence reveals that he was reluctant to undertake the labour of orchestrating the ballet unless he was paid an additional fee: he clearly considered that the £100 he had received from MacLiammóir had only covered the cost of producing the piano reduction. At first he skirted saying so explicitly, but tried to avoid being put in the position of being compelled to score the work. He even went so far as to make the highly surprising suggestion to MacLiammóir that it would be better to allow the production to take place with piano, in order to make it a more feasible proposition for the Cork Ballet Company with its limited resources.¹⁵⁶ This explanation strikes one as unconvincing. When one considers his reservations about MacLiammóir judging his score on the basis of a piano reduction almost a decade before, and how deeply reluctant he was to entertain the dismal prospect of his opera *The Wedding* being mounted in what he described disparagingly as 'a village hall job with piano accompaniment' six years later at a time when this solution seemed to offer the only hope of getting it produced at all¹⁵⁷, it makes no sense whatsoever. The stumbling block was clearly financial: Potter clearly had no intention of undertaking any work for which he would not be paid. It is difficult to blame him for this, as he had recently resigned his post at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and was now wholly dependent on his earnings as a freelance professional. His subsequent handling of the matter, however, was rather poorly judged and created considerable unpleasantness.

Moriarty's musical collaborator Aloys Fleischmann was clearly unwilling to countenance performing the work in this form, particularly since it was possible to call on the services of the amateur Cork Symphony Orchestra to play in the pit. He proceeded on the assumption that Potter would orchestrate the work, and wrote to him in March 1973 to ask if he could arrange a concert performance of it by the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra as soon as possible, so that Moriarty could use the recording of the broadcast to assist her in making the choreography and subsequently for

¹⁵⁶ AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 8 December 1972 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁵⁷ See the account of Potter's difficulties in securing a production of *The Wedding* in the next chapter.

rehearsal purposes.¹⁵⁸ This, incidentally, was an entirely feasible proposition, since the Director of Music in RTÉ, Gerard Victory, repeatedly showed willingness to assist his fellow composers whenever possible in matters of this kind. He was particularly well-disposed towards Fleischmann, who had been very encouraging to him in his earlier career – something that Victory never seems to have forgotten. Potter was still disinclined to co-operate, but Fleischmann pressed the matter, telling him:

An orchestral tape is absolutely necessary. Joan Denise worked the choreography of my Chinese ballet [*The Golden Bell of Ko*] from a piano version, and was thoroughly alarmed when she heard the orchestra play at the first rehearsal, since it seemed so utterly different, and she felt a great deal of the choreography quite unsuitable when the orchestral sound materialised. As a result she vowed she would never again do choreography to a piano tape. Please do consider my proposal. I am sure Gerard Victory would be willing to do a broadcast performance, and if you like we could get an assurance on this before you start. There would be no problem about using the tape, since it would be for rehearsal only. If things work out, then, we could put on the ballet with my orchestra next November.¹⁵⁹

Frustratingly, Potter dragged his heels and did nothing for several months. In April 1974 he eventually sent Fleischmann a somewhat frosty letter requesting payment of a fee of £200 (£1450/€2,100) to orchestrate the score, based on current union rates.¹⁶⁰ The contents of this letter evidently came as something of a surprise to Fleischmann, but he gave his assent to Potter's demand nonetheless. Although the fee Potter had requested was scarcely exorbitant, it represented a drain on the very meagre resources of the Cork Ballet Company that it could ill afford. The ballets that Fleischmann himself had written for the company had only cost him money: he declined to accept any commissioning fees and paid for the copying of the orchestral parts out of his own pocket. He had frequent recourse to this expedient on other occasions when the company was low on funds, and while there is no indication that

¹⁵⁸ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 21 March 1973 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁵⁹ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 26 November 1973 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶⁰ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 3 April 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

he actually did do, it would not be surprising if he also paid Potter's fee out of his own private means. Potter's unexpected request could not have come at a more inopportune time, as the company had lost money heavily on its 1973 production of the *Nutcracker* and *The Golden Bell of Ko*. As it would also have to cover the cost of preparing orchestral materials for *Full Moon for the Bride*, Fleischmann asked if Potter might consider producing these as well for the same fee, suggesting as a desperate expedient that he try to find someone to volunteer to copy the parts non-professionally, to help keep costs down. He explained to Potter that he was anxious to secure them as soon as possible, to enable him make a studio recording of the work with the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra in mid-June before it ceased to function for the summer.¹⁶¹

Potter's response to this letter was not only unhelpful, but bordered on the insulting, especially when one considers how long he had known Fleischmann and how helpful the older man had been to him in the past: he had clearly worked himself into a state of high dudgeon and imagined himself somehow slighted. He fired off a curt and distinctly icy missive which signalled his acceptance of the £200 fee for producing the orchestration, but referred Fleischmann to the General Secretary of the Irish Federation of Musicians and Allied Professions for information about the current professional rates for copying parts. In addition, he failed to give any indication whether he could complete the score for the deadline Fleischmann had proposed.¹⁶² The latter responded to the situation with his usual astuteness and tact, and somehow matters were smoothed over. Potter evidently made a start on scoring the work and sent Fleischmann a rather more conciliatory letter a few weeks later in which he offered to get the parts copied locally in Dublin – 'with as little expense as possible'.¹⁶³

No sooner had this storm abated, than another threatened. Potter now requested that a formal contract be drawn up between him and the Cork Ballet Company, and

¹⁶¹ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 9 April 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶² AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 11 April 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶³ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 5 May 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

he forwarded a copy of one that he considered appropriate.¹⁶⁴ On examination, Fleischmann discovered that it was in fact unsuitable, as it left MacLiammóir altogether out of account. He wrote to Potter to tell him so, and took the opportunity to communicate some dispiriting news about the deteriorating state of the company's finances:

I have just heard that the Arts Council has refused to give a guarantee for the joint Cork-Dublin production, and is only prepared to guarantee Cork. Is this not regrettable? Apart from anything else, it means that we shall be on the rocks, as we have found that expenditure is halved in certain departments (costumes, décor, music etc.) when we function in both houses, and doubled for one only. However, we are determined to go ahead with Cork and, shall honour our commitment to you and Micheál.¹⁶⁵

On being consulted about the terms of the contract, MacLiammóir proposed that he should receive half of the royalties, since he had not only written the scenario, but had also produced designs for the costumes and sets. He left it to Fleischmann to determine a percentage of the gross takings that he considered fair, which would then be divided equally between Potter and himself.¹⁶⁶ This was not an unreasonable proposition, particularly as the sums of money involved would have been fairly small. Nonetheless, Potter assented to it with bad grace, remarking resentfully to Fleischmann that 'as regards Micheál, well, you know how it is: he is a very big man and I am a very small one.'¹⁶⁷

Fortunately from this point onwards matters proceeded more smoothly. Potter made swift progress on the orchestration¹⁶⁸, completing by 19 May, and was able to

¹⁶⁴ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 5 May 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶⁵ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 29 May 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶⁶ Micheál MacLiammóir to Aloys Fleischmann, 16 May 1974; copy appended to MacLiammóir to AJP, 16 May 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶⁷ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 7 June 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁶⁸ He seems to have taken the opportunity to make a number of minor alterations to the score: these are mostly small, involving small changes in notation and some transpositions of

send Fleischmann a set of parts on 7 June, giving him ample time to make the recording that Moriarty needed.¹⁶⁹ The work was presented in a double bill with *Giselle* and premiered in the Cork Opera House on 4 November, subsequently transferring to the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on 12 November. Fortunately for the Dublin run, it finished the night before the sudden death of the President of Ireland Erskine Childers on 17 November, which necessitated the closure of all theatres as a mark of respect. ('Bless his heart for not doing it the weekend before!' Potter commented laconically to a correspondent.¹⁷⁰) Whatever tensions had dominated the lead-up to the premiere, 'the event', as Potter told MacLiammóir, 'justified all': 'the production was really quite something. Your story came magnificently across, and the designing and costumes for once justified the word "fantastic".'¹⁷¹ MacLiammóir attended the first night in Dublin, on which occasion Potter found him as engaging as ever, though he was struck by his physical frailty. As he described to a friend:

the poor old thing is almost blind (cataracts out and won't wear glasses on account of how they might spoil his boyish good looks – 75 last birthday, but still makes up beautifully) – but still brim-full of his usual wit: he and Hilton Edwards are really the last two people left that I can really enjoy a bout of good old sparkling repartee with: although Hilton is getting on also. He shared a box with [Dorothy] and self at the last matinee... and informed me that he has been using the music of the *Ceol Potter* record as incidental music to – *The Taming of the Shrew* of all things! Oh well – it's all money, I suppose!¹⁷²

Potter was evidently deeply impressed by the pains that Fleischmann and Joan Denise Moriarty had taken with the work, as is evident from the warmly appreciative letters he sent to thank them.¹⁷³ Fleischmann was clearly touched by

material (compare, for example, pp. 7-9 of the piano reduction with the corresponding passage in the orchestral score).

¹⁶⁹ See AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 7 June 1974 ('№ 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁷⁰ AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Maureen', 13 December 1974 ('№ 13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

¹⁷¹ AJP to Micheál MacLiammóir, 7 November 1974 ('№ 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁷² Letter to 'Maureen', 13 December 1974 ('№ 13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

¹⁷³ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann, 17 November 1974; and AJP to Joan Denise Moriarty, 17 November 1974 (both in '№ 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

Potter's acknowledgement of the hard work of the amateur orchestra and *corps de ballet*:

How kind of you to write! I am glad that you seem to be satisfied on the whole with the performances, and unlike other composers you have been most merciful and generous in your reactions to our efforts. A great many people were most enthusiastic about your ballet, and we can only hope that the performances led to further converts to contemporary music and especially to your own work.¹⁷⁴

Joan Denise Moriarty's response is worth quoting at some length, not only for the insight it offers into her personality, which seems to have been deeply modest and unassuming, but also for what it reveals of her stoical, if poignant acceptance of the fact that the sort of ballets she wished to produce, with their predominantly Irish subject matter and choreography that attempted to fuse traditional Irish dancing with classical ballet, were coming to be seen as outmoded:

Regarding my part, as always happens – when I see the work finished I feel I would like to scrap it and start again! There are so many factors to be taken into consideration: the music, costumes, décor, and the dancers whom the ballet is being based on – the human mind and body will not always carry out the movements required of it!!!! I felt I had to stay within the story content, the period it was set [*sic.*] of a hundred years ago, the style of the West, and mix a little of the folk idiom with balletic movement! Sometimes it is a happy marriage, and can be effective. Of course, these days it is rather more difficult to have such a work accepted, as this country, I fear, is going through a 'growing up' period, and on the whole is not inclined to accept 'folkish' work – rather like children growing up and not wanting to know anything of our past culture: it is looked on as old-fashion[ed] if one still loves our heritage and sees great beauty in our past. However, I feel this will change again in time: everything moves in circles!!!!

Thank you for all your kind words – and I am so pleased that *Full Moon* turned out more or less as you expected. I enjoyed working on it and found the music vigorous

¹⁷⁴ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 18 November 1974 ('№ 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

and wild like the winds of the West, and tender when within the lamp light of the Wedding night – then again all the mystery ... ending the next morning with all the boisterous good humour.¹⁷⁵

Of all the ballet scenarios for which Potter provided music, MacLiammóir's is undoubtedly the finest. The action centres around an Irish peasant wedding celebration, which is disrupted by an emissary from the *aos sí* ('fairy folk') or the *slua sí* ('fairy host') of Irish folklore. A belief in these denizens of the supernatural realm, who play a prominent part in Irish mythology, survived well into the nineteenth century alongside orthodox Christianity in rural Ireland, creating an amalgam with paganism known as 'the fairy faith' reminiscent of the *dvoyeveriye* or 'dual faith' observed by ethnographers amongst the Russian peasantry.¹⁷⁶ The *aos sí* were much feared as a potentially malign agency, capable of inflicting illness, destroying crops and other kindred evils. MacLiammóir, who would presumably have been well-versed in this traditional lore, describes another aspect of their activity in his foreword to the scenario:

The People of Faery are believed to covet newly-married brides and to lure them away to their kingdom. Sometimes these tricky creatures disguise themselves as mortal in order to gain entrance to a house which may be guarded or thrown open by certain wild flowers. The primrose, for example, keeps them away: the hawthorn invites them. May is the sacred month of Faery.¹⁷⁷

Thirteen years before in 1946, MacLiammóir had in fact based what is generally considered to be his finest play *Ill Met by Moonlight* on an ingenious treatment of this subject. This is very different in setting and mood to the ballet, however, in which it is handled in a much more home-spun manner, if with comparable finesse.

¹⁷⁵ Joan Denise Moriarty to AJP, 28 February 1974 ('No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

¹⁷⁶ One of the most interesting accounts of this phenomenon is given in Peter Alderson Smith, *W. B. Yeats and the Tribes of Danu* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks., 1987).

¹⁷⁷ Micheál MacLiammóir, typescript of scenario for *Full Moon for the Bride* (copy in 'No 22: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA)

Unfortunately MacLiammóir's beautifully written scenario is far too long to reproduce here in its entirety, but principal points of the stage action are given in the following summary:

The curtain rises on a wild landscape in a remote part of rural Ireland. The wedding party of a young couple, Pádraic and Brídín, is in progress. As the celebrations become more animated, a bang at the door is heard, which presages the arrival of six visitors in the garb of straw-boys: in rural localities, when a wedding took place, it was the custom for men from neighbouring villages to dress up in masks and straw garments and pay the newly-weds a visit; whereupon they were customarily made welcome with food and drink, and allowed the privilege of dancing with the bride. After quaffing a glass of *poitín*, the local brew of illicit whiskey, they invite Brídín to dance. After obtaining her husband's permission, she briefly does so with each of them in turn. In the midst of these proceedings, a young girl enters with a cloth bundle in her hands – she indicates that it has been given to her as a present for the bride. Brídín opens it to reveal a small branch of hawthorn in full flower. Consternation descends on the company, and an old woman is about to cast it out over the threshold when midnight strikes. On the twelfth stroke, another straw-boy appears in the doorway, who takes the hawthorn spray from her and after dancing with it briefly, obligingly throws it out of the door.

Brídín brings the new arrival a glass of *poitín*, and he insists that she joins him in a toast. They drink together and then begin to dance. Brídín is evidently fascinated by him, yet half-afraid. He grows more amorous towards her and their dance becomes wilder; presently a strange mood descends on the assembled guests and the country dance is progressively transformed into a bacchanal. Only Pádraic is unmoved by the spell, remaining sullenly in his corner: he suddenly leaps up, and interposing himself between his bride and the stranger, tears off the straw-boy's head dress and mask to reveal the unmistakable features of an immortal. The guests retreat in fear and make the sign of the cross. The other straw-boys promptly remove their garb to reveal their indubitable humanity. They attempt to banish the stranger, but he performs a dance of astonishing virtuosity, indicating his power over the house and its new mistress.

Pádraic fetches from the fire a lighted sod of turf with a pair of tongs, and performs a fiery dance of exorcism which eventually succeeds in driving the stranger away. The guests gather about the bride and bridegroom with relief, and having bid them goodnight, make their departure. Pádraic and Brídín, left alone, dance a loving *pas de deux* before retiring to their bedroom. An orchestral interlude depicts the consummation of their love. In the dead of night, the stranger returns to the house, no longer in disguise: he is accompanied by a host of his followers, clad like himself in garments of leaves. He crosses the threshold in a bound and performs a spell, directing his attention to the nuptial chamber. As last Brídín emerges at his bidding in a trance-like state: they dance together and she slowly succumbs to his entreaties. He leads her towards the open door where his people are waiting to welcome her. Dawn breaks and the first peals of the Angelus bell can be heard. At this, Brídín stirs from her trance and makes the sign of the cross. The stranger backs away in alarm. Brídín falls into a swoon. Pádraic emerges from the bedroom and confronts his rival: he dances a second dance of exorcism, from which he emerges as victor. With a gesture of despair, the stranger departs.

Brídín stirs and Pádraic helps her to rise. He is none too pleased with her: she pleads her innocence and eventually cajoles him into giving her a loving embrace. As the sun rises, the neighbours return with gifts. Amidst the general rejoicing, a group of young girls enter, bearing wild flowers which they strew around them as they dance around Pádraic and Brídín in the morning sunlight. No hawthorn, however, is visible amongst the flowers of the wedding feast.

This scenario, simple though it seems, is brilliantly conceived, and offers marvellous scope for a choreographer. For one thing, the wedding feast itself furnishes ample occasion for colourful, animated crowd scenes. The dramatic situations created by MacLiammóir require the soloists to convey a highly varied range of emotions - love, tenderness, sexual jealousy, anger, fear, exuberance - all of them eminently communicable through gesture and movement alone. There is an excellently judged distribution of solo set pieces - the stranger's virtuosic dance of power and Pádraic's dance of exorcism constituting effective high points of dramatic tension - as well as ensembles ranging from intimate *pas de deux* to the straw-boys' virile *pas de sept*.

With its Irish setting and its reliance on Irish folklore, not mention the opportunities it provided for choreography that made allusion to traditional Irish dance, this scenario could almost have been tailor-made for Joan Denise Moriarty's distinctive talents.

It also offered abundant scope to the composer, requiring him in the first place to invent a sound-world evoking the supernatural realm that intersects with the world of mundane reality – a feature that seemed to call out for piquant harmonies and colourful scoring. Apart from the opportunities it presented for a highly contrasted range of musical characterisations, the dramatic structure of the scenario would also have permitted the composition of a score with a highly integrated musical design, capable of being performed as an independent concert piece (as *Petrushka* or *Daphnis and Chloe* can be, for example). Unfortunately it cannot be said that Potter altogether realised these potentialities - although, that said, *Full Moon for the Bride* is a score of much greater appeal than *Careless Love* or *Caitlín Bhocht*, and is far more viable than either of them.¹⁷⁸

I should preface the observations about the music that follow by saying that, as no copy of the studio recording by the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra has so far come to light, I have had to form an estimate of the work from the orchestral score alone. The sound-world of *Full Moon for the Bride* has much in common with the ballets that preceded it, although it is noticeably more mellifluous, the harsh asperities characteristic of *Gamble, No Gamble* being much muted. The most notable features of its harmonic idiom are a persistent recourse to bitonality – a device that had become firmly embedded in Potter's style by this point in his career – and an employment of quartal and quintal aggregates. The resultant sonorities are at times not wholly dissimilar to those encountered in certain works by Roussel or Milhaud, but the

¹⁷⁸ It should be mentioned that after seeing the production, Hilton Edwards proposed that a number of alterations should be made to the scenario to increase its dramatic effectiveness, which would required have Potter to make some minor revisions to the score. It does not appear that Potter ever undertook them, however. See AJP to Hilton Edwards, 17 November 1974 ('No 22:: *Full Moon for the Bride*', PA).

musical fabric of *Full Moon for the Bride* is rather more rough-spun. Potter's harmonies project an atmosphere of bracing, *plein air* freshness – a quality which is particularly noticeable when they appear in conjunction with material suggesting a stylisation of Irish traditional dance music, as in the passage from the straw-boys' dance quoted in Ex. 5.14. The supernatural presences in the scenario are consistently

Ex. 5.14: *Full Moon for the Bride*, extract after rehearsal letter F

Tempo di giga ♩ = 72

The musical score for Ex. 5.14 is written for piano in 9/8 time. The tempo is marked 'Tempo di giga' with a quarter note equal to 72 beats per minute. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for the melody and a bass clef staff for the accompaniment. The melody is marked with a forte dynamic (f) and includes an 'archi' (arco) instruction. The accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line with chords.

characterised by means of a pungent sonority comprising superimposed adjacent fourths, which is shown in its basic form in Ex. 5.15. It makes its first appearance

Ex. 5.15

The musical score for Ex. 5.15 shows a chord structure in two staves. The treble clef staff has a B-flat note on the second line and a G note on the second space. The bass clef staff has a B-flat note on the second line and a G note on the second space. This creates a sonority of superimposed adjacent fourths (B-flat and G).

when the young girl enters carrying the sinister hawthorn branch and is subsequently used to generate much of the musical material associated with the stranger: Ex. 5.16 shows the opening of his solo dance expressing his dominance, in which it features pervasively.

In comparison with its predecessors, *Full Moon for the Bride* is noticeably more adventurous in its rhythmic organisation: there is a much greater use of constructions based on irregular metres and alternating time signatures. Its orchestration, though perhaps somewhat workaday in places, is nonetheless effective. The score's most serious flaws, yet again, concern a certain thinness of invention and Potter's excessive reliance on literal repetition: in a manner strikingly

Ex. 5.16: *Full Moon for the Bride*, extract starting 3 bars before rehearsal letter P

The musical score is written for piano, violin, woodwinds, and percussion. It begins with a 'Vivace' tempo marking. The piano part starts with a forte (ff) dynamic and a 'fiati' instruction. The violin part has a piano fortissimo (fff) dynamic and a 'fiati' instruction. The woodwind part includes a 'tpt con sord' instruction. The percussion part has a 'tims' instruction. The score is divided into two systems. The first system ends with a 'molto' tempo marking. The second system continues with a 'f' dynamic for the violin part. The piano part has a 'fiati' instruction and a 'tpt con sord' instruction. The woodwind part has a 'sf' dynamic. The percussion part has a 'f' dynamic.

reminiscent of Martinů, he contents himself with restating ideas at the same pitch and in the same harmonic and orchestral guise. While this tendency is by no means as pronounced as in *Careless Love* or *Caitlín Bhocht*, these exact repetitions of material tend to vitiate any sense of increasing dramatic tension, producing a static rather than a dynamic effect. The final dance is particularly disappointing in this respect: it makes rather too fragmentary an impression and falls far short of conveying an appropriate sense of dramatic resolution demanded by the scenario. In a good production, these shortcomings would probably be less apparent, but they are likely to militate against the score being performed as a concert piece. These reservations notwithstanding, Potter's music for *Full Moon for the Bride* had much to commend it: the ballet amply merits an occasional revival, as it would undoubtedly make a diverting and colourful entertainment.

Chapter 6

The Stage Works II: Operas

6.1 Introduction

The last chapter of this study is devoted to a consideration of Potter's two operas *Patrick* and *The Wedding*, which were composed in 1962 and 1979 respectively. These scores represent particularly significant contributions to the medium in an Irish context: it was unusual for Irish composers to write music for the stage during Potter's lifetime, as there was little incentive for them to do so. No opera companies existed in Ireland which ran on a full-time basis and possessed comparable resources to major houses in Britain or on the Continent. This was scarcely surprising, since, as one contributor to Aloys Fleischmann's 1952 pioneering survey *Music in Ireland* pointed out, the political history of the country and the relatively limited size of its capital meant that local conditions had militated against their formation.¹ Such companies as existed at the period operated at best on a semi-professional basis. The Dublin Grand Opera Society (founded in 1941), which was by far the most significant of them, presented two brief seasons a year in the capital. Its repertory consisted mostly of the predictable standard Italian classics such as *Tosca*, *La Bohème* and *La traviata*. In view of the cost and financial risk involved, and the fairly conservative tastes of Dublin audiences, it would have been infeasible for this body to commission and produce new works by Irish composers on a regular basis. The various amateur companies which operated in the country would scarcely have had the resources to do so, even if they had felt so inclined. In view of these circumstances, it is readily explicable that only a few of Potter's contemporaries (notably Gerard Victory and James Wilson) were prepared to expend the very considerable labour involved in composing operas, since it was very

¹ See A. E. Timlin's contribution 'Opera in Dublin' to Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, (Cork, 1952), 244. Timlin's contribution gives a brief overview of operatic activity in the Irish capital, detailing the circumstances that led to the founding of the DGOS and sketching some of the difficulties the fledgling company encountered.

difficult, if not impossible, to secure performances. Others, such as Aloys Fleischmann, Brian Boydell and Frederick May left the medium untouched.

These discouraging circumstances notwithstanding, Potter, undeterred, appears to have given serious thought to writing an opera in the late 1950s. This may have been at the prompting of his American acquaintance John P. Cavanagh, who was an enthusiastic admirer of Potter's work and had been instrumental in securing performances of it in the United States. An exchange of letters between the two men in November 1959 reveals that Cavanagh strongly encouraged him to compose a one-act work for chamber forces, holding out the possibility of getting it put on in America.² Potter subsequently informed Cavanagh that he had actually begun to compose one, without, however, providing any details of the plot or specifying the subject matter. To judge from various papers in the Potter Archive, the idea for *The Emigrants* (the opera that was eventually performed under the title *The Wedding*) had begun to take shape in his mind around this time, so it would seem probable that this is the work to which he was referring.³ For a variety of reasons, he did not make much progress, as he explained to his correspondent:

I got stalled over libretto difficulties, and then as I was sorting them out, I got a commission from a ballet group here to do a full-length score for them. [...] The opera [...] will be done when I am through with the ballet. I am toying with the idea of getting D. McD. [Donagh MacDonagh] to recast the libretto.⁴

The ballet in question was, of course, *Careless Love*. As Potter had clearly got to know MacDonagh quite well in the course of this, their first, professional collaboration, he was an obvious person to whom to turn for assistance, in view of his wide experience as a dramatist and general man of the theatre. He does not

² See John Cavanagh to AJP, 4 November 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

³ Potter sent himself a registered letter with a brief résumé of the plot of *The Emigrants* on 17 April 1968, presumably for copyright purposes (in '*The Emigrants*', PA).

⁴ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 11 November 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA). He also seems to have considered the Irish ballet critic and broadcaster Norris Davidson as a possible collaborator: see Norris Davidson to AJP, 7 May 1958 ('RÉ '55-'60', PA).

appear to have broached the subject with MacDonagh at this time, however, or if he did, there is no mention of it in his correspondence. After the success of *Careless Love*, MacDonagh displayed notable eagerness to continue his association with Potter and sent the composer two scenarios for stage works, one of which, *Down by the Liffey Side*, he considered briefly as the basis for an opera.⁵ Although this project remained unrealised, MacDonagh had the opportunity to collaborate with Potter a few years later on an opera which, as we shall see, treated a wholly different subject.

Some months later, Cavanagh wrote again urging him to write something as the prospects for getting it accepted for production in America looked promising:

I think I mentioned in a previous letter that you and others in Ireland are missing a good bet in not getting librettos from the short story tellers [*sic.*], to be made into one act operas. Keep the casts down to a minimum, and use very small orchestras. The universities here have very alive music departments, they do countless operas. It could be a source of income from performance royalties. The T.V. could use some chamber operas in the one hour time frame, such as one act things not more than 23 or 24 minutes long, and not shorter than 20 minutes, to allow for station identification and commercials, of two short acts of approximately 20-23 minutes each.⁶

Potter does not appear to have pursued this idea, perhaps due to pressure of other work, or out of reluctance to spend time writing a score for which he would not receive any commissioning fee and when the prospects of a performance seemed uncertain to boot. He did, however, set about exploring if it might be possible to get an opera put on closer to home, in Ireland. Any such venture would clearly require a major subvention of funds if it was to proceed, and the only likely source for this seemed to be private sponsorship. In October 1960, he wrote at some length to Lady

⁵ See Donagh MacDonagh to AJP, 20 April 1960 and Potter's reply of 22 April 1960, both in folder 'Careless Love / Ballet / also Caithlín Bocht / Aug 59 — 65', PA. MacDonagh's typescript of the other scenario, *Queen River*, which is based on the Gaelic myth of the water-god Nechtan and his consort Boann, can be found in the same folder. The scenario for *Down by the Liffey Side* has not come to light amongst Potter's papers and may be lost.

⁶ John Cavanagh to AJP, 10 March 1960 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

Dorothy Mayer, asking if she and her husband Sir Robert Mayer, who were well-known for their support of the arts in Britain and Ireland, might consider underwriting the cost of producing an opera by him at the next Dublin Theatre Festival.⁷ His letter is of considerable interest, as it suggests that he was beginning to feel rather frustrated at the lack of support for and interest in serious music in Ireland at the period. He points to the lack of press coverage of musical events – even very significant ones – as indicative of the marginalised place of art music in Irish cultural life, and suggests that the Irish themselves did not take the work of native composers seriously because it had not received the imprimatur of London critics, as had the work of Irish dramatists:

Now overseas approbation might not matter very much in a country that was able to take a rational view on matters artistic. In Ireland, we just can't. And the plain fact is, as I am sure you very well know, that no-one thinks a thing of you as a musician – i.e. you have no prestige – until you have got 'good notices' outside the country. It's a regrettable fact, but fact it is.

And it is not only my own prestige I am thinking of. These things have a chain reaction. If one Irish composer is a success, the chances for the next one to get his works produced are that much enhanced. There are as many ham playwrights in Ireland as anywhere else: but because we have already produced the Synges, the O'Caseys, the Johnstones [*recte* Johnstons⁸] and the Behans already, any new Irish

⁷ Robert Mayer (1879-1985) was a patron of music and a philanthropist of German origin, who became a naturalised British citizen in 1902. A man of considerable means, he retired from business in 1929 and devoted himself to supporting a remarkable range of educational and artistic ventures in the UK and Ireland, including highly successful series of orchestral concerts for children in London and other centres, which featured conductors of the calibre of Malcolm Sargent and Adrian Boult. These were in no small part responsible for the burgeoning development of musical life in Britain at the period. He was assisted in this activity by his wife Dorothy (d. 1975), who in her youth was a soprano of considerable distinction, noted for her advocacy of the work of young British composers. Amongst the various Irish enterprises to which she lent her support was the Cork International Choral Festival, leading its founder-director Aloys Fleischmann to dedicate his choral and orchestral work *Song of the Provinces* to her.

⁸ Denis Johnston (1901-1984) was an Irish dramatist, a protégé of Yeats and Shaw, whose first play, *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* (1929) helped establish the reputation of the Dublin Gate

playwright does at least start off with the potentiality of success behind him. The same is not the case in music. Just the opposite. We have ample evidence which I won't bore you with that the label 'Irish' on any piece of music, whatever its merits, is the signal for any publisher, conductor or impresario to reject it without even the formality of a hearing to see what it's really like.⁹

After this preamble, Potter finally gets to the point. He goes on to describe the warm reception accorded his incidental music for a play *The Scatterin'* by the Irish sculptor and dramatist James McKenna (1933-2000), which had been performed that year to considerable acclaim at the Dublin Theatre Festival. This success, he informs Mayer, had prompted him to see if he could get his opera in progress staged at the Festival the following year, as it would be performed in a context that would attract international attention on account of the presence of foreign critics, and thus benefit his career. He enquires if she might be prepared to assist financially, claiming that his opera stood a strong chance of being a box-office success:

It is a convenient alibi on the part of theatre and concert-hall managements both here and across the water, to give it out as an axiom that contemporary music on the programme means empty seats in the house. That may be as it may in England: here it is different. For a start off, we are so small, that if all the composer's friends and relations only turn up, that's half the battle anyway. But apart from this, Dublin audiences are not like London: they really do like to hear and sample 'some new thing'. *The Scatterin'* music was discordant à la Stravinsky and 'serial' à la Schoenberg: yet it played to full houses. I think the time is ripe for an all-out musical work on the same lines.

Potter's sales pitch rather stretches credibility here, with his decidedly over-optimistic estimate of the attractions of 'modern' music for Dublin audiences. In any case, the reception of his incidental music for a play was surely a rather dubious indication of the potential success of an opera, particularly when one considers the

Theatre. His second play, *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931) was performed internationally to great acclaim.

⁹ AJP to Dorothy Mayer, 24 October 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

play in question. *The Scatterin'*, which depicts working-class life in Dublin during the Teddy boy era, enjoyed something of a *succès de scandale* on account of its strong language and graphic characterisation.¹⁰ As Potter recounted with relish to his friend Adrian Cruft, 'it is wildly anti-clerical so of course everybody loved it here, and when there was a row in the audience over the rude things said about nuns on the first night, our fortunes were made, so to speak.'¹¹ It calls for a considerable amount of singing from the actors, featuring some ballads in rock-and-roll style, which has caused claims to be made for it as being 'the world's first rock musical'.¹² Potter was called upon to provide arrangements of traditional airs and tunes devised by McKenna himself, as well as compose some original music.¹³ His score was thus a far cry from Stravinsky and Schoenberg, or for that matter, anything even remotely resembling an opera. In any case, Dorothy Mayer did not rise to the bait. She sent Potter a polite, but brief reply, informing him that she was unable to consider the matter just then, because her husband was seriously ill.¹⁴

6.2 *Patrick*

At this juncture, matters took a rather unexpected turn. In April 1960, subsequent to the enactment of the Broadcasting Authority Act, Radio Éireann expanded its operations to introduce a television service, Telefís Éireann, which was launched on

¹⁰ See the review by 'B. Q.', 'Cynicism in Revue-Play', *Evening Herald*, 14 September 1960, which expressed disapproval of the play's 'crude and vulgar' dialogue. The play received rather mixed reviews on its transfer to London in 1962: for example, the author of the unsigned notice 'Blarney Holds Our Interest' in *The Times*, 3 April 1962, comments: 'Subjects appear like scraps of paper blown capriciously along the street and at once are lost to sight. Lots of its lyrics [tend] towards the lugubriously melodramatic. There is no story to speak of. ...' – and continues in a similar vein.

¹¹ AJP to Adrian Cruft, 22 October 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

¹² John Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood* (Dublin, 1975), 32.

¹³ See the unaccredited introduction to James McKenna, *The Scatterin'* (Goldsmith Press, Newbridge, 1977). The tunes composed by McKenna are reproduced at the end of the volume. They are set down in a manner which suggests that McKenna's grasp of staff notation was very uncertain. Potter described his contribution as consisting of 'very very far out versions of [traditional] and well-known tunes', with some original material. The music was scored for a quartet of piano accordion/piano, bass guitar/string bass, electric guitar and drums (see AJP to Billy Amstel, 5 April 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)).

¹⁴ Dorothy Mayer to AJP, 27 November 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

31 December 1961. An American, Edward J. Roth, was appointed Director-General of Radio Telefís Éireann (as the national broadcasting station was now renamed) in November 1960. Roth was keenly interested in music and had been involved in the first production of Gian Carlo Menotti's television opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which had been commissioned by NBC and first broadcast in 1951. Shortly after taking up his post, he made it known that he was interested in commissioning a television opera for the opening of the new television station. In Donagh MacDonagh's recollection of events,

Roth had the idea of doing something similar [to *Amahl and the Night Visitors*] for Telefís Éireann, so when he came to Dublin he asked everybody he met to suggest a composer and a librettist for the new opera, possibly to open the new station. He got many lists from many sources and he found that all the lists had one thing in common – the name of A. J. Potter and myself. [...] Whereupon he sent for Dr Potter and myself separately and asked if we would like to write an opera together.

My interview lasted about an hour and ranged over many subjects. At the end I agreed to write an hour-long opera, but I had no idea of a theme though I had promised to deliver a scenario a week later. Driving home one sentence emerged from the interview and it was Mr Roth saying: "Isn't it a strange thing, in this country you have the great subject of the life of St Patrick and nobody has ever written a play about it." And I had said: "I suppose we object to all those beards and sandals." But the idea had taken root and at the end of the week I submitted a scenario [...].¹⁵

MacDonagh's solution to the 'beards and sandals' dilemma proved quite a radical one. Rather than portray the saint directly, he chose to depict instead what one might describe as his imaginary twentieth-century avatar: MacDonagh's central character is a young Irishman of the same name, who goes to work as an immigrant labourer in 1950s Britain, having discovered that he has been entrusted with a special mission by God to minister to his countrymen working there. He was to be

¹⁵ *RTV Guide*, 12 March 1965

closely modelled on the St Patrick of history and legend, his experiences explicitly evoking parallels with his prototype. This transposition of the action to a contemporary setting may have been effected at Roth's suggestion. In an article about the work written shortly before its first screening, Potter makes several remarks which suggest that Roth had required MacDonagh to come up with a subject that was 'definitively Irish', but stipulated that 'the Irishness had to be of the present day, not of the eighteenth, fifteenth or any other century but the present.'¹⁶ MacDonagh's proposed scenario met with the Director-General's enthusiastic approbation, and if he is to be believed, Roth initially encouraged both composer and librettist to devise a work of decidedly epic proportions:

"You've got yourself a big ball of wax there", [Roth] said, and told me to proceed on the basis of the biggest studio, the best singers and the most elaborate sets, while Dr Potter was promised whatever size orchestra he needed.¹⁷

Roth wrote to Potter formally inviting him to accept the commission on 24 January 1961, offering a fee of £200 (about £3000 or €4500 in today's money).¹⁸ This rather modest remuneration notwithstanding, it must have seemed to Potter like an extraordinary stroke of good fortune to be presented with an opportunity to realise his operatic ambitions at last, and he no doubt saw the commission as marking a watershed in his career. An exchange of letters with Roth ensued for several weeks to finalise various details but agreement on all essential points was reached towards the end of February. With characteristic confidence in his fluency, Potter consented to deliver the completed score by the recklessly optimistic deadline of 1 July 1961, allowing himself less than six months in which to write it.¹⁹ Nor did he seem particularly daunted by the prospect of coming up with an hour's worth of music: as he breezily told his aunt shortly after signing the contract, 'apart from Menotti, I

¹⁶ *RTV Guide*, 12 March 1965

¹⁷ *RTV Guide*, 12 March 1965

¹⁸ Edward Roth to AJP, 24 January 1961 (folder 'Patrick', PA)

¹⁹ AJP to Edward Roth, 20 February 1961 (folder 'Patrick', PA)

haven't seen any operas especially written for TV: however, judging from what I've seen, you have to get pretty bad to get any worse than what the BBC puts out.'²⁰

He probably had ample cause to rue this rash commitment over the coming year as the project became mired in lengthy setbacks for which he was partially responsible, having seriously underestimated how much of his time and energies would be consumed by other professional activities from which it would prove difficult, if not impossible, to extricate himself. The initial delays, however, were caused by MacDonagh, who made very desultory progress on the libretto and only managed to finish it on 31 July.²¹ In the meantime, Potter had to be content with receiving it in dribs and drabs, a few pages at a time.²² In response to an enquiry from Roth on 21 June as to how close the score was to completion, Potter alludes to this delay in receiving the text, but breezily reassures Roth that it should not affect his progress very significantly. His letter concludes with a confident assertion that the finished score would be 'terrific'.²³ Writing to his sister Gertrude on 1 August, Potter informs her that MacDonagh had been having 'family trouble' and his daughter was 'seriously ill with something' - circumstances which presumably account, at least in part, for his dilatoriness. His bluff reassurances to Roth notwithstanding, Potter must have realised MacDonagh's tardiness would make it virtually impossible for him to meet his deadline. He cancelled his plans for a summer vacation and began to work flat out, trying to make up for lost time.²⁴ 'We won't be going away this summer: I can't', he complained to his sister Gertrude:

I think I told Maureen that they had commissioned Donagh MacDonagh and me to write a television opera for the new service. [The] libretto has fallen behind schedule: so I will just have to push hard for the rest of the summer to get my end finished in time to be cast, rehearsed and all for when the new service opens.²⁵

²⁰ AJP to 'Auntie Win', 13 April 1961 ('General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

²¹ See MacDonagh's letters of 31 July 1961 to AJP and Edward Roth (folder 'Patrick', PA)

²² See MacDonagh's letters to AJP of 6 June 1961 and 11 July 1961 (folder 'Patrick', PA)

²³ AJP to Edward Roth, 26 June 1961 (folder 'RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

²⁴ AJP to Edward Roth, 1 August 1961 (folder 'RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

²⁵ AJP to 'Des' [Gertrude Tree], 1 August 1961 (folder 'General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

Clearly, at this stage everybody involved in the project still envisaged that it would be completed in time for broadcast shortly after RTÉ commenced operations. This expectation proved unrealistic. There is little precise information in Potter's correspondence concerning the further delays which ensued on his part, but it seems as if either he or MacDonagh (or perhaps both of them – it is not clear which) was unhappy with the libretto as it stood. In the first place, it was too long and would need to be cut – something that Potter seems to have realised as soon he examined it in its entirety.²⁶ In the event, it was also reorganised somewhat. At one point in the original version, Patrick had been assigned a lengthy monologue on the seven deadly sins, which he addressed to the other central character, the Jamaican nurse Bella, during their first private meeting. This material was subsequently reworked and transposed to a later scene, in which Patrick now delivered a similar sermon before an assembled crowd – an alteration that MacDonagh (and perhaps Potter) probably deemed more dramatically effective, and had the added benefit of curtailing a scene which was in danger of becoming too static.²⁷ These alterations were presumably carried out over the course of the summer, and seem to have required Potter to make changes to the music he had already composed. When, by the start of October, the score had still not been delivered, Roth wrote to Potter, expressing his disappointment and requesting to know how matters stood.²⁸ In his reply, Potter explains that he had completed the first part of the score, but the second part, as he put it, had been 'causing some trouble':

²⁶ Writing to MacDonagh on 3 August 1961, he tells him that 'the only fly in the highly satisfactory ointment ... is one of time: duration of the work I mean. 30 pages for 55 minutes [of music] means 1 min 50 sec per page. It's going to take some fast articulation!' ('Patrick', PA)

²⁷ These deductions have been arrived at on the basis of an examination of what is presumably MacDonagh's original typescript of the libretto ('Patrick', PA), in which numerous cuts and other alterations are indicated in pen.

²⁸ Edward Roth to AJP, 4 October 1961 ('Patrick', PA)

You will remember that after its completion in August, the script was revised somewhat: this proved a bigger upset than I had bargained for, but with things as they are, a month or so should see me through.'²⁹

In the event, there was no sign of a completed score after this period of a 'month or so' had elapsed and on 24 November Roth sent Potter a curtly worded note requesting 'an up-to-date progress report' which seems to convey a sense of mounting impatience.³⁰ The composer replied by return at considerable length, clearly anxious to mollify him. He recounted how he had experienced further difficulties with the penultimate scene, which he described as the 'crux of the drama'. Having composed a version of it, he explained that he became dissatisfied and was in the process of recasting it in the interests of greater concision. In addition, he pleaded an extremely heavy workload arising from his commitments in the Royal Irish Academy of Music and was palpably reluctant to commit himself to a firm deadline for completing the score:

It would be satisfactory if at this stage, I were to give you a firm closing figure: unfortunately, as you know, I do have other commitments, some of which have been claiming more than a fair amount of my time. I have lately been engaged in putting through some wholesale and soul-searching reforms at the RIAM: as an elected representative, I have found that rather more of my time has been usurped than I had bargained for. This has run us into the season of our annual examinations in which I have to play a prominent part. So, not being quite sure of the amount of time which I have at my disposal, I do not wish to make any unfulfillable [*sic.*] promises.

You may rest assured that I am clapping on all the pressure I can ...³¹

Roth responded in a mood of greater affability early in the New Year, making a variety of sympathetic noises but insisting nonetheless on fixing a new final deadline

²⁹ AJP to Edward Roth, 5 October 1961 ('Patrick', PA)

³⁰ Edward Roth to AJP, 24 November 1961 ('Patrick', PA)

³¹ Edward AJP to Roth, 25 November 1961 ('Patrick', PA)

as a matter of urgency.³² Potter finally submitted the full orchestral score on 22 January, after what must have been several months of arduous labour.³³

After this period of hectic activity, the events of the next year were to prove a disappointing anti-climax. To judge from his correspondence, Potter had been given to understand that RTÉ wished to get it into rehearsal as soon as possible – hence the reason he was placed under such pressure to finish the score. When he had received no communication from the station for several weeks, he wrote to Roth expressing mild puzzlement and asking how the project was progressing.³⁴ A month later, he had still received no definite news, beyond a brief communication notifying him that the score was in the process of being photostatted.³⁵ Another three months elapsed before he was informed on 4 June by Gerard Victory, the Deputy Director of Music in RTÉ, that Roth had authorised money to be released to cover the cost of copying vocal scores.³⁶ Potter promptly set about preparing a reduced score for rehearsal purposes which he sent off to RTÉ on 14 July.³⁷ For much of August, he was occupied with correcting the orchestral parts, which had been extracted in the meantime.³⁸

After this slow start, it seemed as if the project was beginning to get underway in earnest. Roth was clearly intent on engaging a renowned artist for the opera's title role – a clear sign of the importance that RTÉ attached to the venture. They were initially fortunate in securing the services of one of the leading Irish singers of his generation, the Wexford-born tenor Dermot Troy (1927-62). Troy's rise to prominence on the international opera circuit had been swift and impressive. On

³² Edward Roth to AJP, 9 January 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

³³ A copy of his accompanying covering letter to Roth, sent on this date, can be found in the folder 'Patrick', PA.

³⁴ AJP to Edward Roth, 17 February 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

³⁵ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin (then Legal and Contracts Officer, RTÉ) to AJP, 20 March 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

³⁶ Gerard Victory to AJP, 4 June 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

³⁷ Copy of covering letter of 14 July 1962 to Legal and Contracts Officer, RTÉ in folder 'RE/TE 1/1/61 -', PA

³⁸ See correspondence during this month with RTÉ librarian William Kane and copyist Roger Bell in folder 'Patrick', PA

completion of his early studies in Dublin, he sang for a time with the chorus at Glyndebourne before moving on to join the Covent Garden company in 1955. His excellent tenor voice, fine acting abilities and gift for languages caused him to be cast in a number of subsidiary roles (including David in *Die Meistersinger* and Hylas in *Les Troyens*) in which he performed with memorable distinction. From this point, his reputation began to grow rapidly. After three years at Covent Garden, he was invited to sing at Mannheim and was subsequently offered a contract with the Hamburg State Opera. Just as Troy seemed poised to embark on a burgeoning international career, misfortune struck. Early in 1961, he suffered a heart attack and was forced to take a year off to recuperate. He returned to the Hamburg stage in April 1962, singing the role of Lenski in Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. On 6 September, however, only a few days after he had agreed to sing in *Patrick*, he had a second heart attack, which proved fatal.³⁹

This clearly represented a considerable set-back to the project. A letter sent a few months later to the English composer Adrian Cruft provides a glimpse of how stressful this period must have been, as Potter had significant personal difficulties to contend with on top of everything else:

It has been one hell of a year. Dorothy's father died in April in the middle of the Easter holidays. Then D. herself had to go into hospital in the summer holidays and have a selection of guts out. [...] *Patrick*, our TV opera was all going strong: preliminary rehearsals going and the thing finally casted [*sic.*] – parts all done, vocal scores etc. etc. Performance date Jan. next. Then Dermot Troy has to drop down dead! We are all set back now because they are determined to get a good name for the title role and it's an awful job to get bookings unless for way ahead. The next opportunity looks like June or July next...⁴⁰

³⁹ This account of Troy's career draws on the obituary notice in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 103, No. 1436 (Oct. 1962), 705; and the entry in Henry Boylan (ed.), *A Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Dublin, 1998).

⁴⁰ AJP to Adrian Cruft, 14 November 1962 ('General 1/1/62 – '63', PA)

As this letter indicates, a date in January 1963 had been fixed for the first broadcast of the opera. What Potter describes in his correspondence as a 'dry run' of the opera had been scheduled for September 1962, and subsequently postponed until October. It never took place, however.⁴¹ Writing in response to an enquiry from Potter regarding how matters now stood, Gerard Victory sought to reassure him that both he and Tibor Paul (the Hungarian principal conductor of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra, who, at this period, also held the post of Director of Music at RTÉ) were 'very anxious to secure a performance of *Patrick* as soon as possible.' He went on to explain:

As you are aware, however, we had a pretty firm project to perform it in next June or July, and had actually engaged Dermot Troy only a few days prior to his tragic death. This event has put us in the position of having to start almost from scratch, and it will be now necessary to think of another tenor who would be adequate for the role. I hope we will be able to stick to the original idea of a June or July performance, but I cannot give you any further details until after Mr Paul's return. [*Paul was away on the continent.*] I realise how frustrated you must be by a continual postponement of this work, but it is a project of immense financial magnitude for this organisation, and the greatest care would have to be given to casting, in all our interests.⁴²

Victory wrote to Potter again about three weeks later to notify him that RTÉ management had 'definitely decided to go ahead with the opera' in July 1963, although the 'costs and preparatory work' were proving 'very formidable'. While 'the question of soloists' had 'not been fixed absolutely definitely', Victory communicated the heartening news that Paul was trying to engage the eminent English tenor Richard Lewis for the title role, 'because he is an international name and this would enhance the possibilities of having the work placed abroad.'⁴³ Potter

⁴¹ AJP to Tibor Paul (Director of Music at RTÉ), 26 October 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

⁴² Gerard Victory to AJP, 30 October 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

⁴³ Gerard Victory to AJP, 24 November 1962 ('Patrick' PA). Richard Lewis (1914-1990) was one of the most versatile English singers of his generation, who appeared on the boards of opera houses throughout Europe and the United States. His repertoire was remarkably wide and varied, ranging from Gluck and Mozart, through the standard nineteenth-century repertoire, to works by Schoenberg (he sang in the first English staging of *Moses und Aron* in

was naturally very pleased at this prospect and wrote back to tell Victory that he thought the 'idea of Richard Lewis ... an excellent one'.⁴⁴ This plan came to nothing, however. Victory had very little to report when he got in touch again just before Christmas, except that Tibor Paul and he were now casting about for a suitable producer 'of international status in the TV opera field'. In January, he wrote to inform Potter that they were engaged in negotiations with a third tenor, Louis Browne. Browne, however, could not be available for filming in July; consequently, it was decided to postpone the production until late August.⁴⁵

A few days later, Potter wrote to Victory at considerable length to raise a number of matters which seem to have been weighing on his mind for some time. First of all, he evidently suspected that the staff of the Music Department in RTÉ – and Tibor Paul in particular - undervalued his compositions in a more serious vein and operated a tacit policy not to perform them. He pointed to the fact that the RTÉ ensembles had not given any of his serious orchestral works of late and argued that this neglect was exercising a detrimental influence on critical perceptions of his artistic merit, leading him to be pigeon-holed exclusively as an arranger and a composer of humorous light music. He also contended that in the lead-up to the premiere of a major new score such as *Patrick* it was vital that RTÉ should assist him to consolidate his professional profile by performing and broadcasting more of his serious work. The tetchy, defensive tone of his letter seems indicative of a mood of deep frustration and discouragement:

I have always made it a rule not to complain on the personal level about lack of performances of my works, or about the standards of such performances as may occasionally take place. But I am bound to take note of the fact that for over a year now, no composition of mine for the symphony orchestra has been allowed a hearing

1965) and Berg. He created several major roles in new works by English composers, including Troilus in Walton's *Troilus and Cressida* (1954), Mark in Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* (1955) and Achilles in *King Priam* (1962). See H. D. Rosenthal: 'Richard Lewis', *Opera*, vi (1955), 144–8; and A. Blyth: 'Richard Lewis 1914–1990', *Opera*, xlii (1991), 33–6.

⁴⁴ AJP to Gerard Victory, 30 November 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

⁴⁵ Gerard Victory to AJP, 29 January 1963 ('RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

and that even though Bax awarded the Carolan Prize to my piano concerto (and although RE spent a great deal of money in preparation of parts etc.) that concerto was given one single solitary performance all those ten years ago – and has been gathering dust on the library shelves ever since. [...]

I am, of course, aware that a good deal of me is heard and seen from RE/TE [Radio Éireann/Telefís Éireann] in other directions. And finance-wise, I am thoroughly appreciative of the fact that the signature tunes of *Music of the Nation* and *The Maureen Potter Show*⁴⁶ have been respectively arranged and composed by your humble servant. But, apart from the fact that few people ever know who is responsible for signature tunes in any case, I hardly feel that recognition as the participator in a red-nosed-knock-about-music-hall series constitutes quite the best publicity build-up for the music of the opera that was supposed to show the world the deeply spiritual side of the Irish people. Not that I have anything against red-nosed-knock-about-music-hall comedy: or that I don't think it an essential part of the experience necessary to express spirituality: or that I wish the signature tunes to be withdrawn (perish the thought!). [...]

I am, of course, fully aware that there may be doubts in some quarters as to the ability of Irish musicians to rise above the peasant level: I am also aware that at least one highly-placed official has gone so far as to assert in the public press that Irish audiences were apathetic to Irish music – or rather music by Irish composers [Potter, as we shall see, is alluding to comments made by Tibor Paul in the course of a recent newspaper interview].

It is also fair to say that the eminent gentleman concerned has heard ONE only of my works at the time at which he made this statement. His advice, and that of those in a similar position therefore, is not, so it seems to me, of very much moment. [...]

But I should, in conclusion, deal with one possible criticism that may be made. This is that it may in truth be the facts of the case that I am, music-wise, a peasant and

⁴⁶ Two popular radio programmes. Maureen Potter (1925-2004) was one of the most successful Irish comediennes of her generation. *Music of the Nation* featured the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra and the Radio Éireann Singers performing arrangements of Irish folk music (many of them prepared by Potter).

only fit to be allowed arrange and occasionally write some red-nosed comedy to amuse my betters: and that anything I try in the 'serious' line is tripe.

Fair enough: it may be true. I would be the last to try and assess my own work. But if it is true: and my 'serious' work is not worth playing, then... why in hell commission me to write an opera in the first place?⁴⁷

Victory wrote back a few days later to reassure Potter that the Music Department intended to 'launch the opera with all the publicity we can command.' He expressed his regret that it had not proved possible to schedule any of Potter's major orchestral scores recently, largely because most of these were concertante works and involved the additional expense of hiring a soloist. He claimed that the Music Department's restricted budget meant that it was not possible to commission new orchestral works at that time, but promised to 'look into the possibilities' of programming more of Potter's serious work during the next season.⁴⁸

The plans to perform *Patrick* in July also came to nothing and the work seemed to languish in the doldrums once more. At some point over the intervening period, Potter appears to have been given to understand – though it is not clear by whom – that the project had now been shelved indefinitely. This news must naturally have occasioned intense disappointment: not only had a performance of his first opera failed to materialise, but the venture had left Potter financially out of pocket, for he had received comparatively scant remuneration for this substantial score, let alone for his labours in preparing accompanying performance materials. Edward J. Roth having resigned as Director-General in the autumn of 1962, Potter wrote to his successor, Kevin McCourt during the summer of 1963 to see if anything could be salvaged from the situation. His letter contains an eloquent description of his various tribulations:

⁴⁷ AJP to Gerard Victory, 5 February 1963 ('RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

⁴⁸ Gerard Victory to AJP, 8 February 1963 ('RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

I should explain that [*Patrick*] ... for one reason or another having not been performed, has thereby occasioned me somewhat grievous financial harm. The fee was small in comparison with the size and length of the score, and the preparation of reduced and vocal scores etc. etc. was done at those flat union rates intended to cover simple popular music, although this, being complicated, took up a great deal of time – which is, of course, money to a free-lance like myself. My loss was therefore severe: in the neighbourhood of £1200, but I was prepared to regard it in the light of an investment which would, to some extent at least, pay off later in the shape of performing right fees and so on, or even if it didn't pay off financially, would at least have a prestige value.

Unfortunately, as I mentioned earlier, a performance never actually has materialised and, although your music department did hold out some hope a few months back, I gather that the project has now been definitely abandoned.⁴⁹

Potter asked if, in view of these circumstances, permission could be granted for him to borrow vocal scores of *Patrick* from the RTÉ library, so that he could submit the work for international competitions in the hope of recouping some of his losses by means of a prize. In his reply, McCourt informed Potter that he was 'not aware of a decision to abandon the intended production of the opera' and promised to investigate the matter further.⁵⁰

A fortnight or so later, Potter received another communication from Gerard Victory, writing at McCourt's behest, informing him that 'further close consideration' has been given to practicalities of producing the work. Reading between the lines, one wonders if the senior personnel in the Music Department had become concerned about the production costs and were trying to find a way of extricating themselves from an undertaking which they now regarded as a white elephant. Victory's letter certainly strikes one as evasive in tone, appearing to commit RTÉ to as little as possible:

⁴⁹ AJP to Kevin McCourt, 11 June 1963 ('Patrick', PA)

⁵⁰ Kevin McCourt to AJP, 12 June 1963 ('Patrick', PA)

For various reasons, a proposed presentation on television next September cannot now take place. Instead we propose to make a sound recording in September next for subsequent performance on radio. The possibility of a television performance in 1964, or, failing that, in 1965, will be carefully assessed, after the first sound broadcast, in terms of the availability of artistes and of the production resources at our disposal. [...]

He requested Potter and MacDonagh's consent to this course of action, informing him that Louis Browne and the Irish mezzo-soprano Bernadette Greevy (then a notable emerging talent) had been proposed as principals. His letter concludes:

Once again I must express regret for the many delays you have experienced but I am sure you will agree that a television production of the very important work would not be advisable should all the ideal factors of production not be obtainable.⁵¹

On receiving this communication, Potter clearly felt that more energetic intervention on his part was necessary to make sure that the project went ahead as originally planned. Interestingly, at this point in his folder of correspondence about *Patrick* is inserted a copy of the *Irish Times* interview with Tibor Paul which Potter found so deeply objectionable (Paul had made an observation about contemporary Irish composition which could be interpreted to mean that he did not think very highly of it in general), together with an undated set of notes (that probably served Potter as an *aide-mémoire* at a meeting) in which he makes some rather strongly-worded remarks about the conductor. The latter document suggests strongly that Potter suspected Paul of trying to scupper the production of the opera, thinking perhaps that he entertained a low opinion of his music and of this score in particular. Potter appears to have met with Paul (or perhaps spoken to him on the telephone) on 9 July and wrote to him later that day requesting that a conference be arranged with the Director-General, so that MacDonagh and he could avail of the opportunity to have 'a full and frank discussion' about the project. Paul responded the following day to inform him that although McCourt was unavailable, several members of senior RTÉ

⁵¹ Gerard Victory to AJP, 29 June 1963 ('Patrick', PA)

management (including Controllers of Programmes for radio and television) could meet with him on 12 July.

To judge from his notes, Potter was quite confrontational during his meeting with Paul and taxed him with deliberately ignoring his work. He appears to have taken an intense dislike to him personally, and was irritated by what he perceived as Paul's *de haut en bas* treatment of Irish composers. To judge from one of his letters, the conductor's attitudes still rankled even after an elapse of ten years:

[That] Hungarian Tibor Paul was my particular *bête noire* for quite a while... Admittedly when he could eventually be persuaded, threatened or otherwise got to the stage of demeaning himself so much as to conduct an Irish work, he really did hammer out a good job on it... But it was such a job to make him: and when he let go to shoot off his mouth in the press... [When] he gave an enquiring correspondent the reason for his not including an Irish work in [the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra's] London concert - when he gave as his reason the 'fact' that several composers (including me) had been commissioned, but had failed to turn up with their work in time... well, that did call for the lie direct...⁵² and even if I had to go and see the editor and tell him personally that it was either that or else... Well, he got it... Of all things... Me? Miss a deadline? Needless to say, none of the composers mentioned at all had actually been asked... it was just a figment of the Pavlian [*sic.*] imagination... All the same, it did give rise to a good crack that one was able to make when someone at some committee meeting once referred to just 'Paul'... It was nice to be able to ask... "Paul? Which one do you mean? The apostle? The Pontiff? Or - the liar?"⁵³

It is difficult at this remove to determine whether his suspicions of Paul were justified and whether the latter did, in reality, have a low opinion of his music.

⁵² Meaning to call someone a bare-faced liar. The expression originates in Touchstone's speech in *As You Like It*, Act V Scene 4: 'O, sir, we quarrel in print by the book, as you have books for good manners: I will name you the degrees. The first, the Retort courteous; the second, the Quip modest; the third, the Reply churlish; the fourth, the Reproof valiant; the fifth, the Countercheck quarrelsome; the sixth, the Lie with circumstance; the seventh, the Lie direct.'

⁵³ AJP to Marie Whitty, 1 June 1972 ('File 7 Fan mail '72-3', PA)

Neither is it possible to say whether Paul regarded the work of Irish composers with universal misprision. His remarks about Irish music as reported in the *Irish Times* could certainly not be construed as wholly dismissive, although one sentence in the interview (rendered here in italics) did permit of an ambiguous interpretation, assuming, of course, that the reporter quoted him accurately:

Insofar as you can gauge taste by audience reaction, what works does the public seem to enjoy most?

—I have found that people loved Beethoven, did not care very much for Tchaikovsky, but were very appreciative of Bruckner and Mahler. One thing, though, I must remark upon: *much as I admire the enthusiasm at all concerts here, I find it absent whenever Irish works are played.*

How do you explain that?

—In one sentence. No man is a prophet in his own country, especially while he is alive. I have only to look to my own country, Hungary, where Bartók was only really appreciated after his death.

What is your opinion of Irish composers? Do you think there is talent here?

—Yes, and real talent. But a composer cannot develop if his works are not played.⁵⁴

Taken in context, Paul's remark seems unobjectionable. In Potter's mind, however, it acquired a sinister resonance, and supplied further confirmation of what he had chosen to interpret as a conspiracy against him. As far as *Patrick* was concerned, Paul, according to Potter, delivered himself of the opinion during their conversation that there was 'not sufficient trained talent at present available in the country' to permit of a successful realisation of *Patrick* for television (a view apparently shared by another RTÉ apparatchik whom Potter identified only as 'Mr K' in his notes) and that he consequently deemed it preferable to perform it in a radio broadcast only. The logic of this argument is not immediately apparent: there are only two sizeable roles in *Patrick* and all the remaining parts are quite modest in their vocal and technical demands: when the opera finally came to be recorded, these proved well within the capacities of various members of the RTÉ Singers, the broadcasting

⁵⁴ 'Talking to – Tibor Paul', *Irish Times*, 20 January 1962.

station's professional chorus, who sang most of them. If suitably proficient singers could be found for a radio broadcast, it is difficult to understand why Paul imagined the same performers would not suffice for a televised version. This raises the question of whether he had some other, undeclared motive for not wishing to go ahead with a television production, and was attempting to use this putative lack of suitable performers as a pretext. It may simply be that he was unconvinced by Potter and MacDonagh's score on artistic grounds and felt that the work simply did not justify the high costs involved in screening it. If he had reservations about the quality of the opera, these may not have been unjust, since *Patrick*, as we shall see, is a very problematic and uneven score. Whatever his motivation, his arguments cut no ice with Potter, however, who - unsurprisingly - rejected them and continued to press energetically for a televised performance as originally conceived.

Unfortunately, there is no record amongst Potter's papers of what actually transpired when he and MacDonagh eventually met with representatives of RTÉ senior management on 12 July, but the set of notes to which I have previously alluded indicates the line of attack he may have pursued:

As I understand it the situation re *Patrick* is as follows:

The opera was commissioned as a television piece in 1960. Due to various factors it has not yet been produced. In the opinion of Mr Paul and Mr K there is not sufficient trained talent at present available in the country to insure [*sic.*] a successful performance. It has therefore been proposed to give a performance in sound only.

My comments on this are:

1. MacDonagh and myself were asked to produce an opera for television...not sound radio, not the stage. We produced an opera for television. Any attempt to

judge it in terms of sound radio is therefore completely unrealistic. I am not prepared to accept any evaluation based on such a sound-only production.⁵⁵

2. Neither am I prepared to accept Mr Paul's estimate of the talents available in this country. In an interview with the *Irish Times* published on 20 January 1962 Mr Paul stated that 'Much as I admire the enthusiasm at all concerts here, I find it absent whenever Irish works are played. At the time of this interview, Mr Paul had played extremely few Irish works and none at all of my own for Radio Éireann. His total experience to date in playing my own works consists of a performance of one ballet suite which he was required to do by an outside organisation. Comment is superfluous. When last Tuesday, I taxed Mr Paul with these facts and asked for an explanation of the ban on my works in the RESO [Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra] his response was to ask me to give him a list of my works and their timings. As the works concerned were and are in Mr Paul's own orchestral library and also in many cases on tape in his own archives, the fact that after over a year as music director of the Irish [national] radio he has not found it possible to acquaint himself of their existence does little to inspire confidence in his ability as a talent searcher in other directions.

3. Mr K is, I am sure, a very able man. But, again, I do not consider him to have had sufficient experience of this country to be in a position to make any realistic appraisal of the talent available. This even without making mention of the deplorable exhibitions put out in the way of television programmes by his own country.

From his notes, it appears that Potter may have proposed that he be entrusted with overseeing the production of the opera:

So far, my criticism has been somewhat negative. I will now make a positive constructive suggestion. Appoint me as manager, office boy – call it what you will – in charge of the production of *Patrick* as a television opera, [to] have the duty of collecting personal [?] selecting directors etc. etc. I will then see to the production of the work within the year. We are now at the end of the academic year and beginning

⁵⁵ In a letter of 1979, Potter told Colm Ó Briain that 'MacDonagh (who carried heavier guns than I did) was adamantly against' proposals that they should settle for a radio broadcast. AJP to Colm Ó Briain, 21 November 1979 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

the long vacation. I am due a sabbatical year anyhow and would be happy to spend it in this way.

In case any of your distinguished overseas advisers should feel sceptical about the ability of a mere native to perform such a task I would remind them that, until they actually tried it, no-one ever believed that those Egyptians could ever run the Suez Canal.⁵⁶

If Potter actually did suggest this, it strikes one as decidedly unlikely that the representatives RTÉ senior management who were present would have been prepared to countenance such a proposal. In any event, it was evidently agreed that the project would go ahead as originally planned. Anne Makower, a young producer with a strong interest in opera who had previously worked for the BBC and ITV, was put in overall charge. The casting seems to have been finalised in the spring of 1964, with the Irish tenor Edmund Fitzgibbon and Bernadette Greevy contracted to sing the leading roles of Patrick and Bella, and a music-hall artist from Guyana then resident in Ireland, Othmar Remy-Arthur, to perform the prominent subsidiary role of Joey.⁵⁷ Rehearsals got underway on 22 June 1964 and continued for a month before the work was recorded for television between 23 and 25 July.⁵⁸

When the production team finally set to work, it must have seemed at times as if Roth had committed the station to a project that was recklessly overambitious. Makower recalls *Patrick* as being a very pressured and demanding assignment, which required her to solve problems of formidable proportions. In the first place, the station's recording equipment was scarcely adequate to cope with a project of such complexity. Secondly, due to budget constraints, she was required to have

⁵⁶ Undated, untitled memorandum in folder 'Patrick', PA

⁵⁷ Edwin Fitzgibbon was one of the most prominent tenors working in Ireland during the 1960s, performing widely in oratorio and opera. Makower recalls that she was anxious to engage Remy-Arthur on account of his colourful stage personality, despite the fact that he could not read music and was not classically trained. After hearing him audition, Potter was immediately enthusiastic, declaring 'I don't care what notes he sings: that personality is worth it.' Anne Makower, personal communication to author, 27 December 2006.

⁵⁸ See revised rehearsal schedule for *Patrick* forwarded to AJP by Anne Makower with covering letter of 17 February 1964 ('Patrick', PA)

each scene filmed in one take without edits: video tape at the time was extremely expensive (costing somewhere in the region of £60 a roll) and since the splicing required for manual editing meant that segments of tape ended up being discarded, this procedure was considered a wasteful extravagance that the station simply could not afford.⁵⁹ These technical difficulties were further compounded by Makower's wish to record sound and pictures simultaneously, as she was understandably reluctant to use the system common to many television operatic productions of pre-recording the music and then having the singers mime to the soundtrack. This presented what seemed at first to be an insurmountable practical problem: Telefís Éireann's most capacious studio could barely accommodate the set and the soloists, let alone the choir and large orchestra that are demanded by the score. In the end, it was solved by placing the conductor, orchestra and choir in the Francis Xavier Hall, a city centre concert venue situated over four miles away from the television studio, and establishing reciprocal sound and vision links with the soloists there, so that all the performers involved could see and hear one another as necessary. Makower described this aspect of the production as 'one of the most complicated technical operations ever undertaken by TÉ'.⁶⁰

Taking all of this into account, it seems appropriate to describe the television realisation of *Patrick* as a particularly laudable and even courageous undertaking on the part of the fledgling Telefís Éireann, as it appears to have placed a considerable strain on the station's technical and financial resources. It had been very expensive to make: when Potter subsequently sought to elicit detailed information about the production costs from Gunnar Rugheimer, Controller of Programmes at RTÉ, the latter replied that while he was not at liberty to disclose precise figures, the sixty-minute recording of *Patrick* had cost four and a half times more to produce than a major ninety-minute television drama.⁶¹ Potter appears to have discovered subsequently that the expenditure involved had been somewhere in the region of £20,000 – approximately equivalent to £280,000 (€415,000) at current rates of

⁵⁹ Anne Makower, interview with author, 6 January 2006

⁶⁰ See article by Anne Makower in feature on *Patrick* in *RTV Guide*, 12 March 1965

⁶¹ Gunnar Rugheimer to AJP, 30 March 1965 ('RE/TE 1/1/61 - ', PA)

monetary value.⁶² The content of other correspondence in the Potter Archive indicates that RTÉ senior management regarded *Patrick* as a wholly exceptional venture which they were not inclined to repeat on account of the expense involved. In January 1966, some nine months after its first screening (which took place, appropriately, on St Patrick's Day (17 March), 1965), Potter was contacted by an amateur Dublin writer Eva Vece, who enquired if he might be interested in collaborating with her on another opera. When Potter indicated his interest, Vece sent a proposal accompanied by an outline scenario to the Director-General of RTÉ.⁶³ She received a reply from Rugheimer which, though impeccably courteous, indicated quite unambiguously that the RTÉ was disinclined to take on another project similar to *Patrick*:

Dear Miss Vece,

[...] I think I must quite frankly say that we are not really interested in commissioning another opera for television. The production problems associated with the making of an opera on television are of such magnitude that we cannot handle such a production as part of our normal schedule of operations. In fact, the only time we could consider making an opera would be during a summer period and, even then, we would be involved in a full week in studio.

In addition, we have the problem that the action and the orchestra cannot be in the same place and we have had to solve this by setting up double micro-wave links between Montrose [the Dublin suburb in which the RTÉ's main premises were located] and the Francis Xavier Hall so that the singers in Montrose could see the conductor who was at the Francis Xavier Hall and vice versa.

All of this requires a production effort which, under our circumstances, is quite disproportionate to the programme value of the 60-90 minute programme we would obtain. It does not really matter whether the opera uses a small cast or not, because

⁶² See letter of AJP to George Platt, 28 April 1977 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

⁶³ See Eva Vece to AJP, 31 January 1966, 21 February 1966 and 18 March 1966; and AJP to Vece, 3 February 1966, all in 'General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA

in any case, there are irreducible minimum production requirements for any opera regardless of size. On top of the production requirements, the costs are, as experience has shown, quite considerable.

For all of these reasons, I really feel I cannot encourage you ...⁶⁴

In view of the efforts that RTÉ expended in producing the opera, it strikes one as a pity that MacDonagh and Potter's collaboration did not result in a work of greater artistic merit, for it will be apparent even to the most sympathetic listener that *Patrick* would be impossible to revive. This is due in no small part to the poor quality of MacDonagh's libretto, which would have defeated the efforts of any composer to devise an effective musical embodiment. Nonetheless, the reasons for *Patrick's* failure as a work of art are of no small interest, paradoxical as this assertion might sound, because it is difficult to think of any other contemporary artwork that encapsulates quite so comprehensively many of the most singular features of Irish social and cultural life at this period, in particular, the extent to which these were dominated by the Catholic Church.

We have seen that the subject matter for the libretto was suggested to MacDonagh by Edward Roth during their preliminary discussions in 1960. Roth's idea of basing RTÉ's first television opera on the figure of St Patrick, Ireland's patron saint, was probably prompted by the fact that the putative 1500th anniversary of his death would fall in the following year, 1961.⁶⁵ As Roth would surely have been aware, the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, had planned to mark the event by organising a nine-day Patrician Congress to demonstrate the Irish people's 'renewed appreciation of the gift of the One True Faith' which had supposedly been kindled

⁶⁴ Gunnar Rugheimer to Eva Vece, 14 March 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA)

⁶⁵ The year of Patrick's death has been the subject of much controversy and recent scholarship has tended to favour 493 AD instead of 461 AD. For an overview of the debates on this subject, see David N. Dumville, *Saint Patrick, AD 493-1993* (Boydell Press, 1999).

by Patrick.⁶⁶ The imposing ceremonies that were planned to occur during this Congress have been described by the historian John Cooney as the 'last hurrah' of the Catholic triumphalism that was such a conspicuous feature of Irish public life between the 1930s and the 1960s.⁶⁷ In one faintly surreal event, twenty thousand people singing *Faith of Our Fathers* to the accompaniment of an accordion band turned out to greet the Papal Legate Cardinal Gregory Peter Agagianian (who had come over specially for the Congress) in the Dublin suburb of Ballyfermot; while a crowd of some ninety thousand people attended the grand climax in the programme of events, a concelebrated mass held in the Dublin sports stadium Croke Park. At this, McQuaid made a highly theatrical appearance in an open limousine, making a circuit of the grounds before joining 12,500 robed priests, soldiers and other volunteers on the pitch, where a massive altar had been erected.

The scale of these events provides some idea of the importance that was attached to the Congress on a national level. Since Telefís Éireann was scheduled to open in the same year, it is possible that Roth envisioned *Patrick* as an appropriate way for the broadcasting station to contribute to the celebrations. Roth may also have thought that this choice of subject had much to commend it given the prevailing cultural ethos in which the station was operating, dominated as it was to an overwhelming extent by the Catholic Church. The mission of a latter-day St Patrick to convert foreign unbelievers would provide a suitably elevated theme for the station's first television opera, ensuring that it could be a vehicle both for nationalist fervour and Ireland's very distinctive brand of native religiosity. Such subject matter would ensure, moreover, that the work was morally beyond reproach – an important consideration in a country where strict censorship operated until the late 1960s and Catholic vigilante groups took it upon themselves to act as guardians of public morality, lodging formal complaints about books or plays that they considered indecent. Archbishop McQuaid, whom a recent biographer characterises as having

⁶⁶ McQuaid quoted in John Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland* (Dublin, 1999), 345.

⁶⁷ For an account of the festivities held during the Patrician Congress, see Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 345-6.

been 'obsessed with the need to control all aspects of public and private life' in Ireland⁶⁸, kept the contents of radio (and later, television) programmes under close surveillance with the assistance of a network of informants.⁶⁹ He is known to have intervened personally in an attempt to have two Protestant broadcasters sacked from the station, claiming that they exerted a subversive influence.⁷⁰ In his zeal to preserve his flock from moral contamination, McQuaid was prepared to concern himself even with trivial matters, on one occasion submitting a formal complaint about a presenter who had played a Cole Porter song on the popular weekly radio programme *Hospitals' Requests*, on the grounds that he deemed its lyrics to constitute an incitement to sexual infidelity.⁷¹ Telefís Éireann commenced operations with an ostentatious show of commitment to Catholic values, screening solemn benediction of the Blessed Sacrament (presided over by McQuaid) and earnest speeches from prominent dignitaries (including President Éamonn de Valera) which emphasised the need to maintain proper moral standards on the airwaves.⁷² In a climate of this kind, the subject for a new television opera would have needed to be chosen with some circumspection, anything modernist or experimental being presumably out of the question, let alone anything even mildly risqué. But Catholic prudery, even at its most hyper-fastidious or downright neurotic, could scarcely find anything objectionable in an anodyne drama about St Patrick.

In a letter to Victory cited earlier, Potter mentions that *Patrick* 'was supposed to show the world the deeply spiritual side of the Irish people' - a remark which seems to indicate a rather grandiose conception of the project on the part of those involved with it. It is not inconceivable that this idea originated with Roth and that he encouraged both MacDonagh and Potter to set out to portray native religious piety. The 'deeply spiritual' nature of the Gael was a cherished conviction of many Irish Catholics at the period: it was widely held that Ireland had an exalted spiritual

⁶⁸ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 327

⁶⁹ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 327f.

⁷⁰ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 347-8

⁷¹ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 327-8

⁷² For an account of the ceremonies with which Telefís Éireann opened and McQuaid's participation in them, see Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 346-7.

mission, offering an inspiring example of a people adhering staunchly to the principles of their Catholic faith and thus providing a bulwark of support to the Holy See in its battles with communism, atheism, materialism and the evils of modernism - a heroic mode of national self-imagining that recalls the manner in which the more ardent of nineteenth-century Russian Slavophiles liked to envision the world-historical role of Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in helping to save mankind from similar perils. The research of the historian Dermot Keogh suggests that Pope Pius XII himself may well have encouraged Irish statesmen and churchmen to share this flattering perception of their native country, to judge from the contents of diplomatic communiqués submitted in 1950 by Joseph Walshe, the Irish ambassador to the Holy See:

Walshe was convinced – a theme he had often laboured in his earlier reports – that the Vatican and the Holy Father in particular, was conscious ‘of the immense strength of Irish Catholicism as a factor in the fight against COMMUNISM’. Pius XII had given Ireland ‘a very important role to play in his plans’. The Irish nuncio told Walshe that the pope had accepted the view that Ireland should be the ‘intellectual and moral centre’ from which should be distributed ‘to the ENGLISH-speaking world a whole literature dealing with the doctrinal and moral aspects of most human activities.’ [...] Ireland was destined to diminish politically, [...] but Ireland’s ‘power was only beginning’ as an instrument for the diffusion of the Christian faith and for the universal acceptance of Christian principles.⁷³

Pius’ commendation of Irish religiosity and his attribution of such an exalted spiritual role to the country would no doubt have been intensely gratifying to McQuaid, who once boasted to the Irish Papal Nuncio that Ireland was freer from ‘modern aberrations’ than any other European country or North America.⁷⁴

To judge from his libretto, it is clear that MacDonagh was attempting to create a modern-day hero who represents the finest flower of this ‘deep spirituality’ and is its

⁷³ Dermot Keogh, *Ireland and the Vatican: The Politics and Diplomacy of Church-State Relations 1922-1960* (Cork, 1995), 312-3.

⁷⁴ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 327

living embodiment. As has already been mentioned, having rejected the idea of a costume drama based on the life of the fifth-century saint, MacDonagh instead portrays his modern avatar, establishing an explicit connection with the historical Patrick through allusions to various episodes in his career. The latter personage was born near the west coast of Roman Britain. When he was fifteen years of age, he was captured by Irish raiders and brought to Ireland, where he worked as a swineherd for one Milchu on Slemish in Co. Antrim. Tradition relates that he had a series of dream visions, the first of which revealed to him how he might escape back to Britain. After his return, he had another dream in which he heard the voices of the Irish beseeching him to 'come and walk among us once more in Ireland'. Patrick is subsequently supposed to have trained for the priesthood and come back to Ireland to assist in the conversion of the native population to Christianity. He is accredited with a number of impressive supernatural feats, such as banishing snakes from the country and reversing an eclipse of the sun brought about by druids. If his autobiography is to be believed, he was evidently a man possessed of considerable charisma and energy, for he records having baptised thousands in the course of his travels throughout Ireland, as well as ordaining clergy and founding churches.⁷⁵

MacDonagh's hero attempts, as it were, to perform the same task in reverse some fifteen centuries later, and reintroduce the One True Faith, kept alive in Ireland since the Reformation, to modern Britain. His Patrick is also of British birth, but of Irish extraction. We learn in the course of the opera that when the Second World War broke out, his parents, fearing for his safety, sent him to Ireland where he was entrusted to the care of his grandmother. He grew up there and in time came to regard the country as his home. So assimilated, in fact, did he become that he is portrayed as more Irish than some of the Irish themselves, having acquired what Irish nationalists of a more extreme cast would have regarded as the ultimate mark of *echt-Gaelhood* by learning to speak the Irish language. On reaching adulthood, he took a job in a factory, but started to have visions in which he heard the voices of

⁷⁵ This account of the career of St Patrick draws on the entry on him in Robert Welch ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, (Oxford, 1996), 467-8.

Irish and coloured immigrants in Britain, as well as English people themselves, imploring him to return there and act as the instrument of their salvation. He is at first reluctant to do so, but comes to believe that he has been entrusted with a spiritual mission which he cannot refuse. He returns to England and awaits some further indication of its nature, working as a labourer in order to support himself.

MacDonagh thus has his hero join the ranks of the four hundred thousand or so people who emigrated from Ireland between 1951 and 1961.⁷⁶ As has been suggested earlier, he probably chose to make explicit allusion to this phenomenon, one of the most important issues confronting modern Irish society, in an attempt to satisfy Roth's stipulation that the opera should engage with contemporary realities. This issue was a very sensitive one in Ireland at the period, arousing complex and highly ambivalent responses which are worth outlining briefly in order to elucidate some aspects of the libretto which might otherwise remain obscure to a reader unfamiliar with the immediate social context.

As the historian Ultan Crowley remarks, this slow haemorrhage of emigration 'reflected the continuing failure of the [Irish] Free State either to establish domestic industries, capable of creating dynamic urban centres, or to transform the archaic economy of the poorer agricultural regions.'⁷⁷ The ineluctable consequence of this economic stagnation was widespread unemployment, leading significant proportions of the population to experience such levels of poverty and hardship that they emigrated *en masse* in quest of a better life abroad. The attitude of Irish officialdom towards these emigrants was deeply ambiguous, and as Catherine Dunne has pointed out, to leave de Valera's Ireland in search of a reasonable living elsewhere was not infrequently construed as being 'somehow an obscurely selfish act.'⁷⁸ The Taoiseach Éamon de Valera could blandly claim that it was, in fact, unnecessary for Irish citizens to emigrate, asserting rather disingenuously that

⁷⁶ See the statistics cited in Ultan Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain: A History of the Irish Navy* (Dublin, 2001), 139.

⁷⁷ Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 132

⁷⁸ Catherine Dunne, *An Unconsidered People: The Irish in London* (Dublin, 2003), 3.

'many of those who emigrate could find employment at home as good, or better, wages – and with living conditions far better – than they find in Britain.'⁷⁹ In other quarters, however, emigration was seen as an efficacious means of defusing social discontent brought about by poverty and unemployment, which, it was feared, might foment revolutionary violence and threaten to undermine faith and morals. As one commentator averred:

In order of values, it seems more important to preserve and improve the quality of Irish life, and thereby the purity of that message (Christianity) which our people have communicated to the world, than it is to reduce the number of Irish emigrants High emigration, granted a population excess, releases social tensions which would otherwise explode and makes possible a stability of manners and customs which would otherwise be the subject of radical change.⁸⁰

For many Irish immigrants in Britain, conditions of life in their country of adoption were still very harsh, particularly for the men. By far the greater majority of these had only received basic schooling and many took jobs as what used to be called 'navvies', that is, unskilled labourers in the construction industry, who often worked in dangerous conditions.⁸¹ Some eventually managed to create more comfortable lives for themselves and their families; others suffered acutely from personal isolation and a sense of deracination, and as a result frequently failed to integrate successfully into their new surroundings. Amongst the Irish community in Britain, rates of alcoholism, mental illness and homelessness were notably high.⁸² Matters were not helped by the fact that some labourers chose to remain in cramped, squalid and unsanitary lodgings run by Catholic landlords, sometimes at the urging of misguided priests who feared that exposure to Protestantism and the general atmosphere in English homes would cause immigrants to abandon their Catholic faith. In the early 1950s, F. H. Boland, then Ireland's Ambassador to the Court of St

⁷⁹ Quoted in Tim Pat Coogan, *De Valera: Long Fellow, Long Shadow* (London, 1993), 663.

⁸⁰ A. Fitzgerald, 'Reservation No. 2' from the 1954 *Report of the Commission on Emigration and Other Population Problems*, quoted in Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 135.

⁸¹ See Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 219 ff.

⁸² See Dunne, *An Unconsidered People*, 10-14.

James, sought repeatedly to draw de Valera's attention to the predicament of many Irish immigrants in Britain. He implicitly condemned the clergy's concern to keep 'the Irish together in individual houses, as opposed to taking digs in English households', citing one case in Southwark in which the local Catholic canon had been prepared to countenance 150 men residing in 'three smallish houses' because they 'were kept together in accommodation run by a man of good character.'⁸³

Such pious concern for the spiritual welfare of emigrants seems to have been widespread amongst prominent Irish clergymen at the period. In a particularly extreme manifestation of Catholic ecclesiastical zealotry, the bishops of Dromore and Achonry were moved to write to the Taoiseach Séan Lemass in 1965 urging the introduction of a ban on persons under eighteen years of age emigrating to Britain, on the grounds that they were 'entirely unprepared for live [*sic.*] in a pagan and amoral environment' and that 'emigration in their case could almost be called a proximate occasion of mortal sin'.⁸⁴ Eight years previously, Archbishop McQuaid had been instrumental in setting up the Irish Emigrants Chaplaincy Scheme (1957-82), which dispatched Catholic priests to Britain to minister to the needs of the Irish community there. 'Africa is an easy apostolate in contrast', he informed a visiting missionary bishop - a startling and highly revealing remark that it is difficult not to interpret as betraying an intense misprision of English Protestants.⁸⁵ McQuaid seems to have regarded these priests as continuing the work of the so-called 'English mission' which had commenced after the Reformation in an effort to regain adherents to the Catholic faith. Although not a priest, MacDonagh's hero is clearly envisaged in a similar mould and his depiction, I would suggest, is only fully comprehensible in the light of this social context. Certain contemporary constructs of Irish national identity, originating perhaps partly as a belated reaction to English colonial occupation, evidently necessitated an explicit devaluation of the spiritual traditions of English Protestantism in order to project a sanitised, sentimentalised

⁸³ See Coogan, *De Valera*, 664

⁸⁴ See Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 212f.; and Damian Corless, 'The secret's out... it seems we're all a little bit bonkers', *Irish Independent*, 16 December 2004

⁸⁵ Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, 320

image of Irish Catholics, who by virtue of their religion were deemed racially superior to the heretical English. While it is not difficult to understand how such attitudes could come into being, given the long history of religious persecution in Ireland, which was, moreover, largely responsible for reinforcing the climate of Catholic triumphalism after independence, this does not make them any the less questionable. MacDonagh's libretto reflects cultural shibboleths such as these in their more blatant and exaggerated forms, as we shall see when we turn to examine the text of his libretto in greater detail.

MacDonagh attempts to reinforce this impression by making the Irish immigrant community's experiences of British xenophobia an important subsidiary focus of the drama. While it is important not to exaggerate the prevalence of this phenomenon, it undoubtedly existed: in the 1950s it was not unknown for advertisements for jobs or for rented accommodation to include such gratuitously insulting stipulations as 'No Irish need apply' or 'No blacks, no dogs, no Irish' and there is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that the Irish were subject to discriminatory treatment in Britain during this period.⁸⁶ Unfortunately, MacDonagh engages with this issue only to trivialise it for the purpose of conveying a tendentious subtext. He depicts the Irish in Britain entirely as victims and as social underdogs, suffering endless trials to their Catholic faith in hostile, alien surroundings and compelled to endure ignominious ill-treatment of the kind which had previously been meted out to their fellow countrymen under colonial occupation. Interestingly, the only indigenous Britons that the Irish encounter in the course of the opera are brutish Teddy boys who attempt to subject them to a racially motivated attack. Teddy boys had, of course, gained widespread notoriety only a few years before the opera was written through their involvement in the Notting Hill race riots in August 1958. These disturbances, which lasted for five days, were instigated by 'Keep Britain White' mobs, some three to four hundred strong, which went 'nigger hunting' among the West Indian residents of Notting Hill and Notting Dale. According to contemporary police testimony, the mobs were largely constituted of Teddy boys, some of them armed

⁸⁶ See Crowley, *The Men Who Built Britain*, 132-3; Dunne, *An Unconsidered People*, 11-14.

with iron bars, weighted leather belts and butcher's knives.⁸⁷ MacDonagh allows this minority sub-culture to represent British society, or, at any rate, the British working class, in its entirety – a dramatic strategy that is as crude as it is objectionable and which, once again, serves only to accentuate the blatant tendentiousness of the libretto.

The opening scene of the opera takes place in a public square, located in what MacDonagh, with somewhat unnecessary coyness, describes in his stage directions as a 'large foreign town', but which is evidently London or some other major urban centre in England.⁸⁸ A church is situated to one side. It is not specified to which denomination it belongs, but it is, of course, a Catholic church, as is made explicit in the final scene of the television performance. A cohort of West Indian and Irish immigrant labourers is discovered on the set. One of the former, Joey, describes the unpleasant experiences of racial prejudice with which they are habitually confronted in what MacDonagh describes as 'a calypso of exile'.⁸⁹ A gang of Teddy boys enters, whose leader, Lick, makes derogatory remarks about immigrants and challenges them to a fight. One of the Irishmen, Mick, rises to the bait and a general brawl ensues. Patrick appears on the scene and interrupts them, rebuking them for fighting in front of a church. Lick and his companion Kick respond in a threatening manner, but Mick urges them to leave Patrick alone. He characterises Patrick as a holy fool, an Irish counterpart to the archetypal Russian figure of the *yurodivoy*:

Don't touch Patrick, he's a very good man;

He may be mad, but he's a very good man.

⁸⁷ For a recent account of Teddy boy involvement in the Notting Hill race riots, see Alan Travis' article 'After 44 years secret papers reveal truth about five nights of violence in Notting Hill', *The Guardian*, 24 August 2002.

⁸⁸ Quotation from MacDonagh's original typescript of libretto ('Patrick', PA). All subsequent quotations from libretto preserve the punctuation and typographical layout of the text in this source rather than the vocal score, as the transcription of the text in the latter is sometimes rather careless. Where discrepancies in wording occur, the text in the vocal score is treated as the definitive version.

⁸⁹ The opera's opening number is thus described in an undated summary of the plot (evidently prepared on MacDonagh's typewriter and hence presumably by him) in 'Patrick', PA. The plot as outlined in this differs in several respects from the final version.

He smokes no tobacco, he drinks no drink,
He fights no fights and he courts no girls,
He does his work and he says his prayers,
And he hears voices.

The Teddy boys are unimpressed by this explanation and make to beat Patrick up. Fortunately, they are distracted from their purpose by the timely entrance of a bevy of young nurses, whom all the men ogle admiringly. Several of them attempt to proposition a particularly attractive Jamaican nurse Bella, but she repulses their advances with amused disdain. Witnessing this scene, Patrick is moved to express his concern that this encounter with the girls may prove an incitement to sin. In a long soliloquy, he reveals his conviction of a having been entrusted with a divinely-appointed mission to bring salvation to godless Britain, and particularly to his fellow Irishmen living there. Peace is restored and Lick, profoundly moved by Patrick's exhortation, magnanimously invites the Irishmen, West Indians and Teddy boys to repair in amity to the local pub, where he intends to stand everybody - the 'nigs' included - a drink. Patrick hails this turn of events as 'a miracle of God', but declines Lick's offer of a double scotch as he is teetotal.

Bella, intrigued by this rather singular Irishman, invites him back to her flat for tea. In response to her request that he tell her about himself, Patrick gives an account of his early life, his upbringing in Ireland and his dawning sense of his divine mission after the death of his parents:

My parents died, and I, among the Irish,
Became a native, learned speech and ways [,]
Almost forgot the love of my own country
Till voices came at night to teach me grace.
Patrick, they said to me, come home and help us,
Patrick, they said, come preach the One in Three,
Leave shamrock-land and come where you are needed,
Patrick, we call you by the Trinity.

During this monologue, Bella experiences an increased sense of physical attraction to Patrick and attempts to seduce him. She enters into an animated exchange about the nature of love, urging him to forget his 'dull prayers' for an hour and experience it on a fleshly rather than on a spiritual level. Patrick repulses her advances with disgust and denounces her as evil, declaring that the only woman who could ever be a sufficiently worthy object of his devotion is the Virgin Mary:

My heroine is Mary, Heaven's Queen,
Lovely and chaste, imperial, serene.
With beauty such as hers to mesmerise,
How can earthly beauty tempt my eyes?

He makes a precipitate departure, leaving Bella in a state of dejection.

Patrick emerges into the street and witnesses the various groups of men we have previously encountered entertaining the young nurses in the local public house. He proceeds to harangue them with a lengthy sermon on the subject of the seven deadly sins, which meets with a somewhat less than enthusiastic reception from his audience. His admonishments are not entirely without effect, however: even if their reform is less than complete, the Teddy boys are moved to declare that Patrick has taught them the importance of tolerance and that they will henceforth abjure violence. Patrick receives this news with gratification.

Bella enters, and on witnessing this scene, allows her resentment at Patrick's repulse of her efforts at seduction to overmaster her. In a furious outburst, she denounces him as a hypocrite and informs the assembled company that he has just made improper sexual advances to her. The mood of the crowd changes abruptly and the men challenge Patrick to refute her allegations. Patrick replies that Bella has misrepresented his declaration of purely platonic, Christian love for her, but the crowd refuses to believe him and threatens him with lynching. In an impassioned monologue, Patrick appeals to Bella to tell the truth:

I preach against the seven deadly sins.
Those false gods I have put down, you must put down.
Admit your sin, tell them to set me free,
Or must you add to me a martyr's crown?

It is so long since you had a martyr.
Must I, like Beckett, call to pilgrimage
You and you and you, and your children
Because you hold me in your furious cage?

Kill me today and you will be remembered
Long as those soldiers who diced His clothes away.
Kill me today, you do my preaching for me,
Making another saint to whom to pray.

Ah, are you great enough to make a martyr?
Will you take on yourself the innocent blood?
This very spot, this rope will soon be holy,
This pavement will be blessed, since here I stood.

All that you heard is lies, and I spoke truly.
Bella, proclaim the truth. You know you must.

Unable to withstand the force of his eloquence, Bella breaks down and confesses her lie. Patrick declares that his mission in the locality is now complete and that it is time for him to continue his holy work elsewhere. He breaks into an exultant setting of the traditional Irish prayer known as St Patrick's Breastplate, in which all the members of the cast join. The opera concludes with shots of the assembled company processing into the Catholic church on the square, dipping their fingers into the holy water font in the porch and making the sign of the cross.

As will be evident from the foregoing account, *Patrick* must rank amongst one of the most bizarrely misconceived operas ever written – so misconceived, in fact, as to be irredeemably flawed. The shortcomings of MacDonagh's libretto are so glaring that it seems almost unkind to dwell on them. The plot is entirely ludicrous from start to finish. The central characters are wholly lacking in interest and psychological depth, being little more than ciphers. The religious theme of the opera is handled in the most tasteless and mawkish manner imaginable, and the final scene, with its implied mass conversion of the British heathen to the One True Faith, is not only frankly incredible, but also strikes the spectator as a particularly rebarbative piece of Catholic triumphalist propaganda. Even from a purely technical point of view, the libretto of *Patrick* has few redeeming qualities. It is composed in verse throughout, as might have been expected given MacDonagh's interest in poetic dramas. In his best-known verse play, *Happy as Larry* (1946), MacDonagh managed to negotiate the difficulties inherent in this genre with considerable success, and although his verse is notably uneven, the work has sufficient vitality to transcend these defects.⁹⁰ In *Patrick*, MacDonagh's technical shortcomings are much more apparent, perhaps as a result of extreme haste in composition. His text abounds in instances of clumsy scansion and cacophonous rhymes that not only seem downright inept, but inadvertently produce some ludicrous moments of bathos. For example, after Patrick succeeds in averting a gang fight in the second scene, Bella is made to address him as follows:

And yet you spoke, and there was peace,

And without calling the police.

Let's celebrate. You come with me

⁹⁰ In his book *After the Irish Renaissance: A Critical History of the Irish Drama since 'The Plough and the Stars'* (Minneapolis, 1967), the critic Robert Hogan comments in this connection: 'Much of the play is probably of necessity doggerel, but the doggerel is often either too irregular and rough or too flat and uninspired. ... MacDonagh allows himself a similar slackness with his rhyme. Sometimes in the same passage he will use exact rhyme in an exact pattern and then suddenly shift into irregularity for no apparent reason other than an inability to hold to his form. In the same passage, he will rhyme exactly, then give an off-rhyme or an assonance, and then drop rhyming entirely.' [p. 155] The same observations apply with even greater force to *Patrick*.

And I will make you coffee or tea.
Coffee or tea or a slice of cake,
Or bread and butter – which will you take?
And you must tell me why you're here
In a foreign land, in a land of fear.

The jingling final couplet, with its characterisation of England as a 'land of fear' – a description surely justified only in the minds of zealous Irish Catholics with a neurotic fear of Protestantism and all its works – is a good indication of the extent to which MacDonagh's critical self-awareness deserted him while working on this libretto. As if by some perverse instinct, he almost invariably lapses into hair-raising banalities at precisely those crucial moments of high tension when a more elevated style is demanded by the dramatic context. To take just one instance of many, Patrick's overblown monologue proclaiming his sense of divine mission features a jarring reference to the fact that he formerly worked in a bacon factory – which was probably intended as an allusion to the historical Patrick's work as a swineherd whilst in captivity, but is surely one that it would have been better to omit. At another juncture, during Patrick's harangue to the crowd on the sins of the flesh, MacDonagh has him refuse alcoholic drink when it is offered to him, and meekly ask instead for lemonade.

The opera's most serious weakness predictably concerns MacDonagh's conception of its eponymous hero. It is, of course, a notoriously difficult task for any dramatist to create a credible positive character of any kind, let alone one who is supposed to be the living embodiment of a lofty national spirituality and unalloyed goodness. MacDonagh's Patrick is grotesquely, even risibly, implausible: he strikes the spectator as a repellent prig. The 'virtuous' traits with which he is endowed reveal all too clearly just how shallow and impoverished the much-vaunted 'deep spirituality' of Irish Catholicism during McQuaid's era probably often was in reality. It should be noted in passing that, although MacDonagh is careful to avoid open references in his libretto to Catholicism or from explicitly identifying Patrick as a Catholic, there can be no doubt that he actually is so, and is intended to be a highly

idealised representative of this creed to which the overwhelming majority of Irish people adhered. Unfortunately MacDonagh's creation is stereotyped to the point where he is inadvertently comic, and produces an impression that quite subverts his creator's conscious intentions and the earnest import of his text. Indeed, Patrick strikes the spectator as the very epitome of the despised 'holy Joe', the sanctimonious, prudish and narrow-minded Catholic who devotes much energy to ostentatious public shows of piety and is minutely preoccupied with rosary beads, holy statues, miraculous medals, novenas and all the other trappings of what one might describe as a vulgar Catholicism, which, in Ireland at this period, bore all the hallmarks of a superstitious peasant religion. Patrick has all the right credentials: as his Irish comrades inform the Teddy boys, he 'smokes no tobacco', 'drinks no drink', 'fights no fights', 'says his prayers' and has a special devotion to the Virgin Mary. He openly aspires to sainthood or martyrdom, harbouring fantasies of exceptional sanctity like the adolescent Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By far the most significant indicator of his 'spirituality', however – according to prevailing notions of 'holiness' in Catholic Ireland of the 1950s and 1960s, at any rate – is the fact that he 'courts no girls' and energetically resists sexual temptation.

The significance of this character trait cannot be underestimated, since it reveals very clearly the extent to which the opera reflects the social ethos of its period. As is well known, the preoccupation of the Irish Catholic hierarchy with matters of sexual morality bordered on the obsessive and engendered a rather repressive climate characterised by extreme sexual puritanism.⁹¹ While commentators of an earlier generation, such as the writer Arland Ussher, were wont to appeal to various intangible factors in an attempt to explain this phenomenon, hypothesising the existence of a puritan streak in the Celtic temperament⁹², recent historians have suggested that it can more plausibly be explained as a regrettable, but wholly understandable outcome of colonial occupation, religious persecution and a

⁹¹ One of the classic accounts of this phenomenon can be found in J. H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland 1923-1979* (Dublin, 1980), 24ff. Interesting perspectives are also offered by Chrystal Hug, *The Politics of Sexual Morality in Ireland* (London, 1999).

⁹² See Arland Ussher, *The Face and Mind of Ireland* (London, 1949), 91

prevailing general mentality of deep conservatism. Lawrence J. MacCaffrey offers the following observations of the social climate that resulted:

Since the Young Ireland movement in the 1840s, cultural nationalists have criticized the Catholic influence [on] Irish nationalism, but their message unwittingly has aided the advance of clerical power. In their effort to de-Anglicize Ireland they attacked British values. They portrayed the Irish as spiritual people finding beauty in the things of nature. In contrast, Englishmen were coarse materialists. [...] Without the presence of the British and their perverse culture, Ireland would be a rural paradise. Catholic spokesmen exploited the cultural nationalist attack on British materialism, twisting the hope for a unique, intellectual, Irish Ireland into a demand for a unique, holy, Catholic Ireland. Cultural nationalists warned against the shallow, alien values of West Britonism⁹³; the priests and their friends sermonized against pornographic books, lewd movies, licentious dance halls and the evils of socialism. Irish Catholicism contained the worst of two worlds: the sexual obsessions of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and the intellectual bankruptcy and authoritarianism of Latin Catholicism.⁹⁴

Patrick's horror of unchastity, exaggerated and ludicrous though it may seem, faithfully exemplifies an attitude which the Irish Catholic hierarchy strove to inculcate in their flock. The result was a mentality that viewed natural bodily functions and sexual desire with an exaggerated revulsion.⁹⁵ When Bella tries to seduce him, Patrick dramatises the perceived threat in the most extreme terms and suggests that desperate remedies are required:

You are temptation that all saints have known.

⁹³ The epithet 'West Briton' became widely used in Ireland from the late 1880s onwards to describe Irish people who disdained the Irish language and indigenous Irish culture, and aped the fashions and manners of the coloniser. The Irish journalist D. P. Moran used the term frequently in the pages of the newspaper founded by him in 1900, *The Leader*.

⁹⁴ Lawrence J. MacCaffrey, 'Irish Nationalism and Irish Catholicism: A Study in Cultural Identity', *Church History*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec. 1973), 524-534, 533.

⁹⁵ John Cooney's biography *John Charles McQuaid*, already much cited in these pages, offers abundant evidence of this mentality, which was enthusiastically fomented by McQuaid himself.

St Anthony repulsed you with a groan,
Augustine lean as Lazarus feared your power
And whipped his rebel body for an hour.

Elsewhere, the language in which he refers to sexuality recalls the coy phraseology in which discussions of this indelicate subject were habitually couched in an Irish context. Thus, during his sermon on the seven deadly sins, Patrick declares:

Lust I must put down, that rampant god
Taut as a hunter for the chase;
Bad thoughts and desires must cease
And lust in his garden learn his place.

The phrases 'bad thoughts' and 'bad desires' were, of course, code expressions for sexual fantasies, while 'impurity' was often employed as a euphemism for the unmentionable activity of masturbation. A contemporary handbook on Catholic morality designed for laymen by the noted Irish theologian Dr. Michael O'Donnell, which went into numerous editions, provides copious examples of this tortuously periphrastic language and the prudish mentality that gave rise to it. O'Donnell devotes a fairly lengthy section to discussing the 'grievous sin' of indulging in 'immodest and unchaste thoughts' and other 'sins against holy purity'. The seriousness with which he regards these moral failings can be judged from the fact that he alludes to 'bad desires' in the same breath as murder.⁹⁶ In his concluding peroration, O'Donnell expatiates upon the mortal perils occasioned by the promptings of our wayward flesh:

[In] fighting sins of this kind one has all three of his enemies to battle against: the devil, the world and the flesh. Yet if we consider the sins of impurity, it will be seen to be a combat worth while. These sins darken the intellect, create an aversion for searching one's heart. ... They weaken the will, making people selfish, causing them to dislike any serious occupation, to forget God and to dread the future. Even from a

⁹⁶ Michael O'Donnell, *Moral Questions*, ed. Sebastian Lee (Dublin, 1945), 138.

temporal point of view they result, all too often, in abasement, degradation, dishonour; the loss of fortune and of peace of mind. Remember that in these, as in all sins, the beginnings are the most dangerous times.⁹⁷

In his classic study *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, the Irish historian J. J. Lee offers a thought-provoking analysis of this singular mindset, which he understands to form part of 'a highly selective social construction of reality' that powerfully shaped Irish men and women's perceptions of their native country into the 1960s and beyond.⁹⁸ Post-war Ireland was confronted by economic and social problems of daunting magnitude. It was poor and backward, its economy still heavily dependent on agriculture. Its infrastructures were very underdeveloped in comparison with other European countries. Poverty was widespread, and as has already been discussed, unemployment remained persistently high, causing thousands to emigrate. Given the difficult and dispiriting conditions in what Lee describes as this 'stunted society', Ireland 'had more than her fair share of individuals suffering from thwarted ambition, disappointed dreams, frustrated hopes, shattered ideals.'⁹⁹ Yet the bland official image of Ireland sanctioned by the country's political and clerical establishment excluded all reference to these uncomfortable realities, to the point where it was grotesquely at variance with them. *Patrick* uniquely embodies this construct conjured up through wishful thinking, which Lee scathingly characterises as a delusional 'authorised self-portrait', sustained though 'self-deception on a heroic scale', and worshipped 'with an idolatrous fervour'.¹⁰⁰ This Ireland of the imagination was a staunchly nationalist and Catholic Ireland, peopled by a race of exceptional piety who adhered firmly to 'traditional' values, were wholly free of the corrupting taint of modern ideas, and above all, of sex.¹⁰¹ It was, moreover, considered self-evidently superior in every

⁹⁷ O'Donnell, *Moral Questions*, 135.

⁹⁸ See J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge, 1989), 643-657.

⁹⁹ Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, 647

¹⁰⁰ Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, 651-2.

¹⁰¹ As Lee witheringly remarks, 'The preoccupation with sex, the virtual equation of immorality with sexual immorality, conveniently diverted attention from less remunerative tenets of Christian doctrine. It was as if a rigorous sexual morality was felt to compensate for a more relaxed concept of other moralities. Irish society had difficulty grasping the idea of

way to 'pagan' Britain – a conviction that is implicit in almost every line of *Patrick's* libretto. In the opera, the representatives of British culture, the Teddy boys, are ultimately tamed as they come under the sway of Patrick's 'civilising' influence: MacDonagh indulges in the delicious fantasy of allowing the erstwhile colonial victim to succeed at last in vanquishing the coloniser, not through an ignoble recourse to physical force, but solely by virtue of his greater spiritual endowment.

On the face of it, in accepting the commission for *Patrick*, MacDonagh was prepared to acquiesce in devising a dramatic work that amounted to little more than an empty piece of Catholic-nationalist propaganda glorifying 'official' Ireland. The libretto betrays not even the faintest hint of critical distance from the subject matter. One would dearly like to know how MacDonagh viewed the entire enterprise and in what frame of mind he approached his task. It is important to emphasise that nowhere in his correspondence with Potter is it suggested that any overt pressure was brought to bear on him to compose the text in the way that he did. Nor, if he harboured any feelings of dissatisfaction with the project or with his completed handiwork does he betray them. Quite the contrary would appear to be the case: his notes to Potter, brief as they are, indicate that he seems to have viewed the plot wholly in earnest. In one of these communications, for instance, he suggests how Potter might handle the scene in which Bella finally breaks down and confesses her lie, proposing that she 'should give a terrifying birth-pang scream before she proclaims the truth – something quite electrifying.'¹⁰² When the opera was finally broadcast, he wrote to congratulate Potter in effusive terms, telling him that he thought it 'tremendous, especially the music, which I would like to hear several times' and proposing a new operatic venture (which never came to fruition) on an even more improbable subject, the Norman conquest of Ireland.¹⁰³

public morality. ... The morality of violence, the morality of perjury, the morality of deceit in commercial and legal transactions, all tended to be relegated in popular consciousness to reassuringly venal status in the hierarchy of moralities.' Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985*, 644.

¹⁰² MacDonagh to AJP, 3 July 1961 ('Patrick', PA)

¹⁰³ MacDonagh to AJP, 20 August 1964 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA). MacDonagh subsequently sent Potter his own translation of the opening chapters of Giraldu Cambrensis'

The fragmentary evidence at our disposal permits of several conflicting explanations. It is possible – although one would naturally prefer to think otherwise – that MacDonagh believed wholeheartedly in *Patrick* and that it was written as an expression of a devout Catholicism. On the whole, this seems unlikely: one of his letters to Potter makes an ironical reference to ‘that gloomy Irish feast, Good Friday’ – a remark that it is difficult to square with the mentality of a pious Irish Catholic.¹⁰⁴ His libretto for *Careless Love* is not particularly suggestive of religious orthodoxy either. Moreover, it is frankly difficult to credit that he did not perceive how ludicrous the entire conception of *Patrick* was. MacDonagh was neither unintelligent nor ungifted, and had considerable experience in writing for the stage. The most charitable (and perhaps the most persuasive) explanation for his artistic aberration is that MacDonagh undertook to adopt Roth’s proposed subject, even if he found it uncongenial, because he would presumably have been reluctant to turn down such a prestigious commission. He may even have considered it professionally awkward to do so, since he was a popular and frequent broadcaster for R  and thus feared that a refusal could have unpleasant repercussions. On the other hand, he probably realised that he would have comparatively little freedom of manoeuvre in treating this subject matter. He must surely have expected that any dramatic work engaging with a religious theme – particularly one launched with as much publicity as *Patrick* – would almost certainly come under close scrutiny by Catholic officials, if not by McQuaid himself. It would have been unthinkable to portray the national saint from a critical or ironic perspective, though it could have opened up very interesting dramatic possibilities¹⁰⁵: in the social climate in which MacDonagh was writing, this would have been to commit professional suicide. Censorship was still very much in

Expugnato Hiberniae on 16 September 1964 (typescript and letter also in ‘Odds and Ends from 1963’, PA).

¹⁰⁴ Donagh MacDonagh to AJP, 20 April 1960 (‘Careless Love / Ballet / also Caithl n Bocht / Aug 59 – 65’, PA).

¹⁰⁵ One thinks, for example, of William Golding’s fascinatingly ambiguous portrayal of the character of Dean Jocelyn in his novel *The Spire*, which leaves the reader constantly unsure whether Jocelyn’s sense of divine mission is authentic or should be attributed to megalomania.

force in Ireland at the period, with Catholic vigilante groups zealously lodging formal complaints about films, plays or books considered indecent or blasphemous.

Art works with religious themes appear to have been subjected to especially close scrutiny. Three years after *Patrick* was broadcast, the bi-lingual Irish writer Criostóir O'Flynn lost his job as a primary school teacher in Dún Laoghaire (a town on the east coast about seven miles south of Dublin) because of charges of blasphemy and indecency levelled against his play *The Order of St Melchizedek*. Although this affair had far-reaching and highly unpleasant consequences for O'Flynn, as he recounts it in his autobiography, it was not without a number of grotesquely farcical aspects.¹⁰⁶ First of all, O'Flynn (who was born in 1927 and is still alive at the time of writing) is a devout Catholic, with completely orthodox beliefs and impeccably nationalist credentials to boot. His play (which also exists in an Irish version entitled *Cóta Bán Chríost*) is a wholly serious attempt to depict the difficult conflicts between the contending claims of faith and rationality that practising Christians are compelled to experience. Its ingenious plot portrays the predicament of a Catholic priest serving in a remote parish, who receives an unexpected visitor, a strange young woman, one Christmas night. She confides in him that she is pregnant, but a virgin, and has been sent to him to care for her until the birth. The priest is thus confronted with bizarrely improbably circumstances that explicitly recall the incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ and must struggle to make of them what he will.

The English version of the play was rejected by the reading panel of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin when O'Flynn submitted it for consideration, the anonymous readers' reports describing it in excoriating terms as 'disgusting', 'vulgar' and 'obscene'. When he eventually succeeded in getting it produced at the 1967 Dublin Theatre Festival, he not only received hostile letters (one of which accused him of 'insulting our clergy and our beliefs' and suggested that he was unfit to be teaching children), but the Dublin newspaper the *Evening Herald* chose to publish an anonymous missive (signed 'Outraged Dubliner') condemning the play as 'a

¹⁰⁶ The account that follows draws on Criostóir O'Flynn, *A Writer's Life* (Dublin, 2001), 4-69.

disgrace to Catholic Ireland'. Although one might imagine from these comments that the play was explicitly pornographic or otherwise offensive, it is, in fact, nothing of the kind: a contemporary reader would be entirely perplexed to understand how it could have attracted such opprobrium. Not long afterwards, O'Flynn learned that he was to be let go from his job, ostensibly because student numbers in the school where he worked were declining – a transparent pretext, which was blatantly untrue. He was in no doubt that McQuaid had probably instructed his superior to find a way of getting rid of him:

John Charles McQuaid would not view with approval the employment in any Catholic school in his diocese of a writer against whom there was a complaint of having written a blasphemous and obscene play about a priest and a woman. The letters in the public press denouncing my play as immoral must have been only a few of those sent to the papers, and there certainly would have been other such letters, signed or anonymous, sent both to the archiepiscopal residence ... and to the Superior of the school in which I was employed, the man who was now telling me regretfully that I would not be employed in three month's time.¹⁰⁷

This, incidentally, was the second time O'Flynn had lost his job because of his activities as a writer – he had been dismissed five years previously from a school in Limerick on account of controversy over one of his earlier plays. Nor were his experiences unique. The novelist John McGahern was similarly forced to quit his job as a teacher three years earlier in 1965, when controversy erupted over his novel *The Dark* - a disturbing account of growing up in rural Ireland that includes a scene portraying sexual abuse by a priest.¹⁰⁸ These episodes give some idea of the pressures to self-censorship that MacDonagh may have experienced, and if he chose to play safe with *Patrick* and avoid tampering too much with the subject matter, then he can hardly be blamed for doing so.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ O'Flynn, *A Writer's Life*, 62

¹⁰⁸ McGahern gave an account of this affair in his autobiographical *Memoir* (London, 2005), 249-52.

¹⁰⁹ Ireland was of course notorious for its draconian censorship of books and films at this period. Virtually every Irish writer of note had work banned at some time. They found

The foregoing exploration of MacDonagh's motives is, of course, highly conjectural, and in the absence of firm evidence it is not possible to decide the question one way or the other, but the most generous view would be to regard the libretto as a regrettable production written under unusual and difficult circumstances, a job of work which MacDonagh tried to execute in as professional a manner as he could. As for Potter's attitude to the project, hard evidence is similarly lacking. In his case, one can be sure that he would have regarded the subject matter as ludicrous. It is difficult to imagine that a hard-drinking, hard-swearing former Army Officer, much given to irreverence, could have empathised with the work's resolutely teetotal and neurotically chaste hero, or seen him as anything other than a milksop. Potter had little patience with the attitudes towards sexuality promulgated by the various Christian churches: this much is quite apparent from a letter Potter wrote in 1979 to the BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent Gerald Priestland about a recent programme dealing with a report on homosexuality.¹¹⁰ To judge from length of his

themselves in good company, however, as many distinguished European and American writers were also deemed unfit for the attention of the Irish reading public. The *Register of Prohibited Publications* produced by the Irish Censorship Board in 1967 runs to some 261 pages. A random selection of prohibited writers listed in its pages includes Norman Mailer, Ovid, Muriel Spark, Lawrence Durrell, Richard Burton, Brendan Behan, Edna O'Brien, Françoise Sagan, Mary McCarthy, Colette, Thomas Mann, Henry de Motherlant, Ian Fleming, H. Montgomery Hyde, D. H. Lawrence, George Andrzeyewski, Philip Roth, Barbara Cartland (!), Georges Bataille, Emile Zola, Vladimir Nabokov, Doris Lessing, Samuel Beckett, William Burroughs, Ilya Ehrenburg, Jean Genet, Dylan Thomas, John Updike, Iris Murdoch, Eça de Queiroz, Anaïs Nin, Boccaccio, Henry Miller, Alberto Moravia and Raymond Queneau. The classic account of censorship in modern Ireland is Michael Adams, *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (Dublin, 1968). The following books also offer valuable perspectives: Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History* (London, 1981); Brian Fallon, *An Age of Innocence: Irish Culture 1930-1960* (Dublin, 1998); Julia Carson, *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (London, 1990). It is important to emphasise, however, that many Irish people viewed the activities of the Censorship Board with an acute sense of indignation, and that its philistine attitudes were by no means universally shared. Gerald Whelan and Carolyn Swift's book *Spiked: Church-State Intrigue and the Rose Tattoo* (Dublin, 2002), which gives a fascinating account of a notorious *cause célèbre* in modern Irish cultural life, the prosecution of the Irish director Alan Simpson for staging Tennessee William's play *The Rose Tattoo*, suggests that it had become a source of acute embarrassment for the Irish government by the late 1950s and that high-ranking officials were anxious to curb its powers.

¹¹⁰ Potter's letter does not identify the report in question, but it was most likely *Homosexual Relationships: A Contribution to Discussion* produced in 1979 by the Board of Social Responsibility, a Church of England working party.

missive, he was obviously much exercised about the views he had heard expressed, but at first, it is not immediately clear what his purpose in writing it was. He opens obliquely, and launches into an eloquent description of various distressing experiences of his war years, such as witnessing at first hand the effects of the catastrophic 1943 Bengal famine. As this impressive litany reaches its climax, he finally gets to his point:

There is so much evil in this world: hunger, misery, frustration, hunger and suffering from the sadism of so many systems, be they black, white, brown, yellow – or any other colour of skin you care to name. Which is the reason for writing to you. Because I have no influence, but you have. You sound to me like a good man. Could you ever get it through to the leaders of – whatever religions you care to think of that... Gentlemen, you believe in the risen Christ: would you for Christ's sake shut up talking about sex and concentrate on the real evils of this world?¹¹¹

If he entertained a poor opinion of the MacDonagh's libretto on this score, however, his collaborator's dilatoriness in finishing it placed him in a very difficult position.¹¹² As his correspondence with Victory reveals, he was understandably anxious to make the most of a unique opportunity. The project had already run into delays that were not of his making. It would have been infeasible to request that MacDonagh make substantial revisions or start over from scratch: time was now of the essence and he needed to get down to work as a matter of urgency if he was to meet his deadline. He may also have been unwilling to risk offending MacDonagh or putting their working relationship under strain. It would undoubtedly have been professionally

¹¹¹ AJP to Gerald Priestland, 20 October 1979 ('Nº7 Fan Mail July 1977-8 + FIN', PA)

¹¹² A few years later, Potter gave a lengthy interview – running to some 14,000 words when transcribed – on 14 January 1970 to Charles Acton, music critic for the *Irish Times*, which, in a highly edited-down form, Acton used as the basis for two articles he published in 1970 (one in *The Harp* and the other in *Éire-Ireland*). According to the unedited transcript (a photocopy of which in the folder 'Nº7b AJP', PA, Acton having sent it Sarah Burn after AJP's death), when asked whether or not he liked MacDonagh's libretto for *Patrick*, Potter responded 'Marvellous, yes, it was just admirable to set to music.' This statement cannot be taken at face value: Potter does not appear to have taken Acton very seriously and was understandably wary of him. Under the circumstances, simple prudence would have dictated that he refrain from making adverse remarks about any of his compositions, when these could subsequently have been used against him.

damaging for Potter to withdraw from the project, since his work for Ireland's only broadcasting station represented a substantial proportion of his income. If, like MacDonagh, he refrained from voicing any doubts that he entertained, this was surely eminently sensible, given the notorious fondness for malicious, trouble-making gossip that has always been such a notable feature of artistic life in Dublin. Potter, who was quite hard-headed when it came to his career, presumably saw no reason to invite adverse criticism which might have been bad for future business. His attempt to puff the score to Roth could well have arisen from the cynical conviction that many people need to be told what to think, and if they are told often enough that something is good, they will come to believe it. As we have seen, he also prided himself on his complete professionalism and his ability to fulfil any task that was presented to him, so rather than waste further time, he may well have resigned himself and tried to make the best of a bad lot. His preoccupation with a self-imposed ideal of professionalism is certainly evident from a rather curiously worded letter he sent to MacDonagh notifying him of *Patrick's* completion:

Dear Don,

I have delivered the score of *Patrick* to our mutual friend. Sorry to have been so long with it. As you know, it has always been my pride and joy that I can turn the stuff out like a sausage machine: in this case, however, the words seemed to call for something rather better than the S. M. [sausage machine] treatment.

Yours,

Archie¹¹³

Potter's metaphor for the process of composing is, to say the least, peculiar, even if it is a manifestation of his idiosyncratic sense of humour. The only hint about what his real attitudes may have been comes from an undated plot summary he devised for inclusion in the vocal score, the telegraphic style and ambiguous tone of which suggest highly ironical detachment, especially in its concluding lines:

¹¹³ AJP to MacDonagh, 23 January 1962 ('Patrick', PA)

In general, a modern-day equivalent of the 5th - 6th century era break-up of the Roman Empire; when Patrick the saint was seized by Irish slave traders from the part-Christian de-colonialised [*sic.*] Britain and carried off to Ireland – where he went on to convert the natives to Christianity. This time, Patrick, a British blitz-baby evacuated to Ireland grows up there, but after manifest visions, returns to a colony-divested colonial-invested [*recte* infested?] Britain to reconvert them to Christianity.

Like the original missionary [*sic.*], he gets involved between warring factions; like the earlier contemporary [Saint] Kevin, he is subject to fleshly temptations which he rejects in rather more gentlemanly fashion. Comes near to martyrdom by lynching but is saved by Bella (an erstwhile f. t. [fleshly temptation – prostitute?]) who, after the initial 'hell/no fury' reaction, reforms into something more Brigidine [a coinage of Potter's, referring to St Brigid, another prominent Irish saint]. The conclusion depends on whether those responsible are optimist, pessimist or realist.¹¹⁴

As far as Potter's music for *Patrick* is concerned, even the most sympathetic listener would be forced to conclude that it is largely undistinguished and the opera is probably one of the dullest scores he ever composed. It would be unnecessarily tedious and serve no useful purpose to analyse it in detail here, and I shall confine myself to making some general observations and indicating briefly why it is so unsatisfactory from an artistic point of view.

In view of the fact that Potter was still at a comparatively early stage of his career when he wrote *Patrick*, and had only limited experience of composing large-scale works, it is naturally a question of some interest to see what approach he takes to handling an extended dramatic structure. *Patrick* is very much a traditional 'number opera', consisting of set pieces which, though organised as clearly discrete units, meld one into the next. While some limited use is made of a primitive *leitmotif* technique, with a handful of musical ideas being associated with particular characters, Potter's use of them is certainly not consistent or thoroughgoing. The score eschews any hint of avant-garde techniques or influences, and retains a large

¹¹⁴ Initialled but undated plot summary on loose page of typescript inserted in hand-copied vocal score of *Patrick*, PA.

measure of continuity with the idioms of his previous work. It is however, considerably more eclectic in style than his other compositions of the 1950s. This is largely a result of Potter's attempt to characterise the protagonists and the various ethnic groups (the Irish labourers, the Jamaicans, the Teddy Boys) by means of sharply differentiated sound worlds. Thus, Patrick's 'heroic' and 'spiritual' nature is projected through, on the one hand, material employing a severe diatonic modality (often featuring the Phrygian mode as in the earlier *Missa Brevis* and *Concerto da chiesa*), and on the other, featuring astringent bitonality [Ex. 6.1]. The latter, as we noted, was embryonically in evidence in the *Missa Brevis*, and from this point onwards becomes a persistent feature of Potter's later music. By contrast, Bella's

Ex. 6.1: *Patrick*, opening

The musical score for the opening of 'Patrick' is presented in three systems of piano music. The first system is marked **Maestoso** and begins with a **ff [tutti]** dynamic. It features a complex texture with triplets and a **sf** dynamic. The second system is marked **Allargando** and includes the instruction **pesante sf**. It continues with triplets and a **sf** dynamic. The third system is marked **Largo** and begins with a **sf** dynamic. It features a **6** (sextuplet) and concludes with a **pp cresc. molto** dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, sextuplets, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 6.2: Patrick, extract after rehearsal letter J90

PATRICK **BELLA** *pressando*

My song you know, It is of God I sing. I want a song with me as

Moderato

mf *p, cresc. molto*

Adagio **PATRICK**

he - ro - ine. My he-ro-ine is Ma - ry, Hea - ven's

sf *pp* *ppp*

Queen, Love - ly and chaste, Im - per - ial se - rene. With beau - ty such as

Rit. molto

hers to mes - mer - ize How can an earth - ly beau - ty tempt my

colla voce

The image shows a musical score for a vocal and piano piece. The score is in 4/4 time and marked "Lento". It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line includes lyrics: "eyes. You are temp-ta-tion that all saints have known. St. An-tho-ny re-pulsed you with a groan. etc." The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings "pp" and "sf", and various musical notations such as triplets and slurs.

sensual and hedonistic personality is portrayed in music employing an abundance of lush ninths and other higher discords, usually juxtaposed in highly chromatic succession. In this manner, Potter establishes a somewhat obvious tension between 'chaste' diatonicism and 'sinful' chromaticism which operates throughout the score, the strident bitonal sonorities associated with Patrick in his more fraught moments presumably being intended to symbolise the conflicts in which he becomes embroiled, and in which his diatonic 'purity' is threatened with compromise. (This procedure can be seen clearly in operation in Ex. 6.2, an extract showing one of Bella's passionate asseverations of love and Patrick's stern rejection of it.) The music allotted to the Irish navvies – unsurprisingly – employs gapped scales, stylised melodic contours and ornamentation deriving from Irish folk music (Ex. 6.3). The source for that of the Teddy boys is somewhat more elusive, but is probably intended to suggest a parody of English music-hall songs in its rollicking six-eight metre (Ex. 6.4). Finally, on most of their appearances, the Jamaicans habitually cavort (somewhat incongruously, one might have thought) to Latin-American rhythms of the kind shown in Ex. 6.5 and which are plainly reminiscent of Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, premiered only a few years before in 1957.

Ex. 6.3: *Patrick*, extract after rehearsal letter C30

Andante largamente

MICK

Don't touch Pa-trick. He's a ve-ry good man. He

maybe mad, but he's a ve-ry good man, He smokes no to-bac-co. He

drinks no drink. He fights no fights and he courts no girls, He

does his work and he says his prayers, And he hears voi-ces.

a piacere

ppp

Ex. 6.4: *Patrick*, extract after rehearsal letter A60

Allegro bruscamente ♩ = 126

LICK

Who asked you to leave your bleed-ing Isle? Who asked
 you to make your bleeding pile?
 Tak ing our digs, fill - ing with nigs e - ve-ry chip - per here.

f *p* *sf* *cresc.*

Ex. 6.5: *Patrick*, extract after rehearsal letter A10

Vivace

JOEY

When I first came to this hap - py land, ex - pect-ed the na - tives to take my hand.
 Now I am here three months or more, Ex - pect the na - tives to show me the door.

One of the most fundamental problems with Potter's score is that the abrupt juxtapositions of these heterogeneous materials result in a jarring stylistic incongruity somewhat reminiscent of another, later work of Bernstein's notable for its extreme eclecticism, the controversial *Mass* of 1971. While *Patrick* does not evince anything like the reckless *jusqu'au boutisme* of latter work in this regard, it strikes the listener nonetheless as an unpersuasive mishmash, in which the borrowings have not been satisfactorily assimilated into a distinctive and unmistakably individual mode of musical utterance. This stylistic muddle would appear to result from uncertainty on Potter's part as to what kind of work he was actually writing – a 'serious' opera, or something more akin to an operetta or even an American-style musical. Not only does the music associated with the Jamaican immigrants owe a great deal to *West Side Story*, but the entire opening choral dance scene of *Patrick* dramatising the fight between the immigrants and the Teddy boys derives in a very obvious way from the gang-warfare scenes in Bernstein's score. Much of Bella's music, on the other hand, is redolent of the operettas of Ivor Novello. On the face of it, that Potter should incorporate the idioms of contemporary popular music in a supposedly 'serious' score with a religious subject, employing them alongside a 'modern' 'classical' idiom (even if of a decidedly conservative cast) is very curious indeed. It can readily be explained, I would suggest, as an attempt on Potter's part to reconcile a number of contradictory, and ultimately, probably irreconcilable expectations of him as a composer, and professional aspirations of his own.

As was noted in the third chapter, Potter's attitude towards the various avant-garde idioms that emerged after 1945 was one of more or less complete scepticism, and he showed no inclination whatsoever to engage with them in his work. His natural creative bent clearly inclined towards tuneful, uncomplicated light music characterised by piquant harmony and colourful orchestral writing. Furthermore, he clearly had little sympathy with the mandarin conceptions of the artist prevalent since the emergence of High Modernism, which would have him pursue a marginalised existence, disdainful of popularity or acclaim, writing obscure and difficult masterpieces which only a select elite could comprehend. He was

absolutely frank in his desire for a popular success and saw nothing amiss in writing music which he hoped would have a widespread appeal. Neither did he display the slightest embarrassment in viewing his creative work as primarily a business activity from which he made money – the more of it, presumably, the better. Whatever one's personal view of Potter's attitudes may be, he is surely blameless in his absolute honesty and lack of pretence about these matters. If a suitable opportunity had presented itself, he would undoubtedly have not hesitated to compose a musical and the inclusion of material reminiscent of this genre and that of the operetta (or 'light opera') in *Patrick* was almost certainly a conscious effort to leaven the more 'serious' music and thus ensure that it would have a wider appeal. Unfortunately the numbers Potter wrote in this vein for *Patrick* are not particularly distinguished or memorable, and lack the very high degree of surface polish that is such a notable feature of successful American musicals of the period.

This concern to make his music as accessible as possible had to be balanced against another consideration, his desire to be validated in the eyes of the Irish musical establishment – and especially the Irish music critics – as a worthy composer of 'serious' music, and not just a purveyor of light music and 'red-nosed-knock-about-music-hall comedy', as he put in his letter to Gerard Victory quoted earlier. As has been previously discussed, from the 1950s onwards, Potter and several of his contemporaries such as Aloys Fleischmann became increasingly concerned lest his work be perceived as stylistically outmoded and out of touch with the wider currents of musical modernity. Like Fleischmann, Potter was reluctant to change his style and attempt to compose in idioms (thoroughgoing dodecaphony, for example) in which he fundamentally did not believe. In any case, for him to adopt such an idiom at the time would have been to alienate any potential audience and forego any hopes of having his work performed regularly. As Potter would have seen it, there was simply no market for 'advanced' music in Ireland. And as far as the style of *Patrick* was concerned, it would have been as impractical for him to adopt a serial or some such 'modern' idiom in view of the performing forces at his disposal, as it would have been inappropriate in view of the subject matter and the work's

potential audience. One can only wonder what Archbishop McQuaid might have made of a twelve-note opera on the subject of the country's national saint.

Nonetheless, it would clearly be necessary to show at least some willingness to move with the times, now that Potter had at last secured such an important and high-profile commission. The obvious solution was to ensure that the harmonic idiom of his music featured at least intermittently a sufficiently high level of dissonance to pass muster as 'modern'. Some suitably-placed passages of plangent bitonality and 'wrong note' harmonisations would serve this purpose well enough. The resultant style he described to a German musicologist (one imagines with his tongue firmly in cheek) rather grandiosely as 'neo-Romantic hyper-chromaticism'.¹¹⁵ Irish music critics, who, to judge from contemporary notices, were almost without exception persons of no particular intellectual distinction and certainly not notable for their perceptiveness or breath of erudition, appear to have had so little grasp of the complex issues surrounding contemporary music that they were generally content to judge the merits of new works by this sole token of surface dissonance alone - that is, if they did not evade the thorny question of evaluation altogether because they were insufficiently equipped technically to make a judgement with any confidence.¹¹⁶

If there was a lesson to be drawn from the critical reception of *Patrick*, it was that this strategy would work. Two days after the opera was first screened, it received a glowing review in the *Irish Times* under the headline 'New Opera is a Landmark in Irish Music' from the *doyen* of the country's music critics, Charles Acton - who, as Potter dryly commented in a letter, '[hadn't] been a particular friend of mine in the past'.¹¹⁷ In view of the highly problematic nature of both the libretto and the music, Acton's review is staggering in its sheer obtuseness. It is, in fact, an excellent

¹¹⁵ Biographical note accompanying AJP to Hans Ulrich Schumann, 23 July 1968 ('No 1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

¹¹⁶ That Potter's attitude was as pragmatic as this is indicated by numerous remarks scattered throughout his correspondence. For example, in a letter of 1974 he mentions that he was 'always interested in military band music of any sort', adding in parentheses 'although one has to do the high-brow *avant-garde* bit for prestige sake'. AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 2 September 1974 ('No 13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

¹¹⁷ AJP to Terence Lovett, 8 May 1965 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA).

illustration of just how intellectually insubstantial most Irish music criticism at the period was and is consequently worth quoting at some length:

[It] is an act of courage and national maturity to offer for such a prestigious venture the idea of the national apostle as a modern Irishman with a vocation to pacify racial fights between Irish and West Indian labouring men in the English Midlands (Smethwick?)¹¹⁸ One does not, of course, know how much Dr Potter had Donagh MacDonagh change the libretto to suit him; how much the final text is one, how much the other. But the result is a cohesive piece where words and music are inseparable and completely integrated. ...

[It] seemed to me that there was not enough distinction made between Irish and Coloured as separate sides in the opening, where it might have been a personal row, not a group row. Norman Maen's opening choreography, too, was too clearly post-West Side Story. This is forgivable because much of the first quarter of an hour of Dr Potter's music had a kinship with that of an American musical. But, emphatically, there are no echoes of Bernstein in the music: nor any of Menotti or Stravinsky, who seem to creep into so many English-language modern operas.

After the first quarter of an hour the music seems to gain individuality and grow in stature in its own right. There are up to a dozen numbers that could easily become

¹¹⁸ This was a highly topical reference. Smethwick, a town in the West Midlands of England near Birmingham, had seen an influx of immigrants from the Commonwealth in the years of rapid industrial growth following World War II. It rapidly became a byword for the most unpleasant manifestations of British racism. In the 1964 British general election the Conservative candidate Peter Griffiths won a seat in the constituency, having run a campaign which was highly critical of the incumbent Labour government's policy on the immigration issue. It was rumoured that his supporters had covertly employed the slogan 'If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour'. The following year, white residents gained the support of the Tory-run local council in a bid to bar blacks from moving into a particular street in the town, having secured an agreement that the council would buy any houses which came up for sale and sell them only to white families. This turn of events prompted the American black activist Malcolm X. to visit Smethwick on 12 February 1965 with the intention of engaging Griffiths in a public debate. Griffiths declined to participate. This incident is generally viewed as a milestone in the growing politicisation of British blacks and as helping to foment black militancy. An account of Malcolm X's involvement in this episode is given in Arun Kundnani's article, 'Black British history: Remembering Malcolm's visit to Smethwick', <http://www.irr.org.uk/2005/february/ak000010.html> (website of the Institute of Race Relations, accessed 17 July 2007).

popular outside the opera; they have tunes and individualities that linger in the memory even after a first hearing; especially as they are so apt for the words, and are highly evocative and emotive. In fact this is the first unhumorous composition of Dr Potter's that I admire wholeheartedly, and feel worthy of the largest possible audience. [...]

I know that I am easily moved, and often enough by the sentimental and the obvious. Perhaps that was why I was in tears by the end. Perhaps not. Either way, this is a major contribution to our culture. It must be repeated several times at least. It must be staged here and elsewhere. It is a real credit to T.E. [Telefís Éireann] and to Dr Potter.¹¹⁹

Acton had clearly been won over, and other reviewers expressed themselves in equally enthusiastic, if not quite so embarrassingly effusive terms.¹²⁰

These accolades notwithstanding, *Patrick* did not succeed in establishing itself in the repertoire. It was never staged either in Ireland or elsewhere and RTÉ only broadcast it once more in 1971.¹²¹ On that occasion, having had the opportunity to reconsider the work after a lapse of six years, Potter was inclined to think that it already seemed rather dated. Writing after the event to Joan Trimble's daughter Joanna, he cautiously expressed the opinion that the music 'survived the time elapse quite well, but there appeared to be doubts about the other angles.' He continued, 'I always did think that Verdi and that lot were much better advised to stick to historical plots: try to be topical, and it gets to be like last week's newspapers...'¹²² The reasons for *Patrick's* failure to attract wider attention, however, lie deeper than

¹¹⁹ 'New Opera is a Landmark in Irish Music', Charles Acton, *Irish Times*, 19 March 1965

¹²⁰ Another Dublin critic, Robert Johnson, wrote a highly favourable notice in the *Irish Press* which appeared on 18 March 1965 under the caption 'Television Opera Was Glittering'.

¹²¹ During an interview of 1978 with Séamas de Barra, Potter informed him that RTÉ was reluctant to screen the work again for financial reasons, on account of the nature of the contracts it had entered into with the performers. Rather than buying their services outright, the station had guaranteed them further payments every time the work was broadcast. I have, however, been unable to obtain independent verification of this assertion, although there is no reason to think that Potter's information was inaccurate. (Séamas de Barra, private communication).

¹²² AJP to Joanna Gant, 29 September 1971 ('No 13: Personal 1969-70-1-2-3', PA)

its faded topicality and must ultimately be attributed to the work's dramatic invariability and the undistinguished nature of Potter's music. In his quest for the elusive stylistic formula that would enable his music to remain accessible to a wide audience, while at the same time establishing his credentials as a *bona fide* modernist with the Irish critics, Potter lost himself artistically, at least for a time.

Apart from the stylistic inconsistency already discussed, Potter's score suffers from other technical shortcomings that vitiate its effectiveness still further. One of the most serious is its lack of textural inventiveness. Potter has too ready a recourse, on the one hand, to obvious formulae such as 'oom-pah' accompaniments or other tired figurations, and on the other, to static chordal writing - textures that become monotonous over the lengthy span of the work, even if they are orchestrated effectively. Neither is the score's 'neo-Romantic hyper-chromatic' harmonic language very interesting. In practice, much of the score's surface dissonance is generated through bitonal superpositions of remotely related triads - a process that seems to be applied in a rather mechanical way and which produces predictably crude results. The random dissonances produced in this manner do not seem to arise from any expressive necessity. For the most part, they sound gratingly ugly and their effect quickly palls, producing an impression of flaccidity rather than intensity. (Ex. 6.6 shows a typical passage of this kind.) There is only one scene in the entire work for which Potter seems to find a means of deploying these resources in a more personal way - Bella's brief aria 'Now sorrow has my heart' which she sings after Patrick has rejected her. In spite of its extreme simplicity and understatement, the music here is genuinely affecting and gives a tantalising glimpse of what Potter might have been capable had his imagination been fully engaged. It was to be over a decade before he finally had the opportunity to compose another opera, this time on a subject far better suited to his creative gifts.

Ex. 6.6: *Patrick*, extract after rehearsal letter L60

Con fuoco
PATRICK

An - ger di - vi - ding race_____ from race,____

An - ger that mur - ders, Maims and spoils

must be put down and_____ in dis - grace.

The score consists of three systems. Each system has a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano part is written in treble and bass clefs. Time signature changes are indicated by '4:3', '8:6', and '7:6'. The first system has a 4:3 time signature. The second system has an 8:6 time signature. The third system has a 4:3 time signature. The piano part features complex chordal textures and rhythmic patterns. The vocal line is in a single melodic line with lyrics underneath. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

6.3 *The Wedding*

Although the commission for *Patrick* forced Potter to suspend work on *The Emigrants* for the time being, this opera seems to have remained very much at the forefront of his mind and he was much exercised by the question of how best to raise money to get it put on. Having allowed a decent interval of time to elapse since his initial approach to Dorothy Mayer, he wrote to her again in April 1961, describing how he had interrupted work on it to compose the television opera and expressing his intention to resume once the latter project was complete. From his letter, it would appear that his conception of the work had since clarified considerably:

The opera which I intend to write now (after the television one is completed) will be a full-length one: not, of course, full-length in the *Rheingold* or any five-act sense, but of a length to fill one of our shorter-winded evenings in these less durable days. Its title, by the way, is *The Emigrants* and it has nothing whatsoever to do with famines and coffin ships.

I am writing it in what I think is a new way: the music first and the words only produced when they are really required: there is a good deal of mime when mime seems to be more expressive than words: the chorus sings no words at all – no understandable words, that is. If all this sounds odd, I can assure you that it is only an objective realisation of what has been my own practical experience of stage music.¹²³

Potter presents himself as possessing considerable experience of the theatre and a sound understanding of its business side, presumably in an effort to impress on Mayer that she was dealing with someone who had a firm grasp of practical matters and thereby encourage her to part with her money. His recent involvement with various productions had even emboldened him to think that he might oversee the production of the opera himself:

¹²³ AJP to Dorothy Mayer, 3 April 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

I might also mention that since writing to you previously I have been involved as arranger and orchestrator with the production of the musical play *Glory Be!*¹²⁴ which was successful here in Dublin and is now going on to London. On [sic.] the light of my experience there, I intend to take over the management of *The Emigrants* myself, and run the opera for a limited season here. I know of course that this would be disastrous financially in London, but Dublin is a different place and I think the experiment should be worth while making.¹²⁵

Mayer was not open to being persuaded, however. One wonders if she might have been suspicious of Potter's involvement with popular entertainments such as musicals and if this influenced her decision. She was also under no illusions about the difficulty and cost of mounting operas:

I think you are very brave to start off on a full-length opera; so many English composers have found this to be a frustrating amusement. But I am not quite clear as to whether you have a definite engagement to produce it when finished – in this case you are protected against disappointment. It is not part of my policy here to subsidise either artists or composers; I am concerned to produce a music-loving public which will allow both to function, a hard enough job, but one which holds out some definite promise of success at the present time.¹²⁶

These matters seem to have rested for several years, and Potter evidently decided to abandon the project, at least for the time being. Yet his desire to write the opera evidently persisted. Two years after the screening of *Patrick*, he wrote to the *rúnaí* (or Secretary) of the Irish Arts Council, Mervyn Wall,¹²⁷ to enquire whether the Council might consider funding a production of *The Emigrants* mounted under his personal supervision, claiming that this was the most efficacious way to avoid the

¹²⁴ By the Dublin playwright Fergus Linehan.

¹²⁵ AJP to Dorothy Mayer, 3 April 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

¹²⁶ Dorothy Mayer to AJP, 12 April 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

¹²⁷ 'Mervyn Wall' was the *nom de plume* of the Irish writer Eugene Welply (1908-1997), who published novels, short stories and plays of considerable distinction. His novel *The Unfortunate Fursey*, a comic portrayal of monastic life in medieval Ireland, enjoyed a notable popular success. He was married to the Dublin music critic Fanny (Frances) Feehan.

sort of wastefulness that habitually took place in his experience. (Reading between the lines, he evidently considered that resources had been foolishly mismanaged in some of the productions in which he had been involved.) He described the work he had in mind as a comic opera of modest proportions, which ideally would be scored for a slightly reduced standard orchestra, although he mentions that he has also considered other possibilities for the composition of the forces in the pit, such as two pianos, or a positively outlandish ensemble which could almost have been devised by Percy Grainger in one of his more imaginatively exuberant moments, comprising 'a brass band combined with an orchestra of small harps.' The total cost of putting the opera on for a week he estimated would be in the region of £8,200 (roughly £103,000 or €153,000 in today's money), and included a rough outline of his costings to demonstrate how he had come up with this figure. He concluded by making two alternative proposals: that the Council would advance the entire sum and 'have a lien¹²⁸ on all proceeds of the venture within, say, a period of three years, or *pro rata* to the portion of the total sum advanced'; or that the Council put up a portion of the necessary money and permit Potter to raise the remainder by obtaining private sponsorship.¹²⁹

Potter's correspondence with Wall provides graphic confirmation of just how great the difficulties confronting an Irish composer wishing to write an opera actually were, and how little state funding appears to have been available for projects of this ambitious nature at the period. Wall took the trouble to reply at some length, informing Potter that he would place his application before the Council at their next meeting, but held out very little hope of it being awarded any money. The sum Potter was requesting, he explained, would have constituted more than a quarter of the Council's entire annual budget, and it could only be funded by diverting money from established ventures, with predictably detrimental consequences. Nor was this all: the Council was subject to a Standing Order promulgated on 14 June 1955 and

¹²⁸ A legal term, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'a right to retain possession of property (whether land, goods, or money) until a debt due in respect of it to the person detaining it is satisfied.'

¹²⁹ AJP to Mervyn Wall, 25 March 1967 ('No1 – Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

personally approved by the then Taoiseach, John A. Costello, which ran: "The Secretary [of the Arts Council] was instructed to inform all individual applicants for financial assistance that the Council would not entertain such applications in future". In effect, this meant that composers (or writers or visual artists) were ineligible to apply for funding as private individuals. While this obstacle could in theory be overcome, were an opera company or operatic society to apply for money to produce the work, Wall clearly did not envisage that such an application stood much chance of success.¹³⁰ The outcome was as Wall had predicted: he wrote again a few days later to notify Potter that the Council members had considered the matter, and while 'they had received your idea for a new opera very sympathetically ... they had not the necessary funds to give the assistance required.'¹³¹ Potter found himself confronted with an impasse for a second time, and was forced to put the work on the back burner once more.

In 1969, Potter resumed his efforts to raise money for a production. Having been informed — inaccurately, as it turned out — that the Arts Council had undergone restructuring in the meantime, he wrote to Wall again to ask if the Council would be prepared to reconsider their previous decision:

I will not weary you with another five pages of proposals.... I still maintain my faith in the thing and am more than ever convinced of the audience-drawing capacity of music in contemporary idiom [*sic.*]. We all know (only too well) about the fiscal Cassandras who keep on about 'modern' works automatically emptying the house. But the reactions ... to my own *Sinfonia de Profundis* have surely nailed this for the lie it has actually been for the last decade.¹³²

Wall's response was no more encouraging than before. He explained that the restructuring to which Potter referred had not yet taken place, continuing:

¹³⁰ Mervyn Wall to AJP, 29 March 1967 ('Nº1 – Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

¹³¹ Mervyn Wall to AJP, 10 April 1967 ('Nº1 – Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

¹³² AJP to Mervyn Wall, 12 April 1969 ('Nº14: Odd Jobs 1969 – 70 – 71', PA)

I can, if you wish, renew your application to the present Council.... I cannot anticipate decisions of the Council, but I do know that our financial position is such that we cannot meet our existing commitments. The financial position is a great deal worse than it was two years ago. If you asked for as little as £100, I think it would have to be refused.¹³³

In desperation, Potter even seems to have considered having the libretto of the opera translated into Irish under the title *Na Eisimircí* [recte 'Eisimircigh'], in the hope that the Irish recording company Gael Linn (which mostly issued recordings of folk music) might sponsor the project.¹³⁴ Needless to say, nothing came of this proposal.

Another eight years elapsed before Potter steeled himself to try again. In April 1977, he addressed himself to the Manager of Business Development Division in the head office of the Ulster Bank in Belfast. To judge from the contents of this missive, Potter seems to have entertained a strong hope that Irish National Opera, a small company that had come into existence over a decade before, might be interested in performing his opera; but since this group operated on a shoe-string budget, the difficult problem of funding consequently had to be faced again.¹³⁵ However, there had been encouraging signs that Irish banks might be prepared to offer sponsorship for classical music: Allied Irish Banks had recently contributed funds to assist with the production of a recording of his choral work *Cornet of Horse*. This happy occurrence had no doubt encouraged Potter to try his luck with the Ulster bank, and enquire if

¹³³ Mervyn Wall to AJP, 15 April 1969 ('№14: Odd Jobs 1969 – 70 – 71', PA)

¹³⁴ See AJP to Dónal Ó Móráin, 14 April 1969 ('№14: Odd Jobs 1969 – 70 – 71', PA)

¹³⁵ Irish National Opera was founded in 1964 by Tony Ó Dálaigh and the singers Gerald Duffy and Edwin FitzGibbon. It was modelled closely on the British company Opera for All and mostly put on small-scale productions with piano accompaniment, thus keeping running costs to a minimum. The company made its début with a production of *The Marriage of Figaro* in Athlone in 1965 and over the next twenty years performed a considerable variety of standard repertoire including *Don Giovanni*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Don Pasquale*, *The Bartered Bride*, *Falstaff* and *La Traviata*. It showed notable enterprise in mounting the opera *Twelfth Night* by the Irish composer James Wilson (1922-2005) during the Wexford Festival in 1969 and in Dublin the following year. INO finally ceased operations in June 1985 when the Irish Arts Council introduced a new policy of funding exclusively operatic productions with orchestra only. I am grateful to Tony Ó Dálaigh for imparting this information in a personal communication of 12 January 2006.

they could see their way to underwriting the production in whole or in part, or perhaps commissioning *The Emigrants* from him.¹³⁶ The bank official's reply was not wholly discouraging, informing Potter that while the bank had 'not previously provided support for an individual so that he or she can devote themselves to a special project', it operated a small fund used for 'worthwhile causes which are neither charitable nor of a publicity nature but which are deemed worthy of bank support.'¹³⁷

At his request, Potter wrote back to furnish him with further details of the project. It emerges that, at this stage, he envisaged a production by the Irish National Opera in conjunction with the Irish Chamber Orchestra, which would take place in Wexford at the same time as the town's annual opera festival - although plans were as yet uncertain. RTÉ was apparently prepared to help with the preparation of orchestral material, make rehearsal space available and release any orchestral players or singers who might be required.¹³⁸ He refrained from asking for a precise sum, saying merely that any contribution would be gratefully accepted: in his previous letter, he indicated that the cost of putting on *Patrick* had come to about £20,000 and hoped that the bank might be tempted to offer substantial sponsorship in view of the publicity that would accrue from involvement in such a high-profile event.

The official's reply, when it eventually came a month later, consisted of a polite expression of regret that the bank had declined to sponsor the production: 'I quite accept that in cultural circles much comment will ensue on the merits of your production', he wrote, 'but whilst we would value the indirect publicity I feel I could not justify the costs involved.'¹³⁹ Potter was not prepared to throw in the towel just yet: he proposed the ingenuous expedient of incorporating references to the bank into the libretto - which, incidentally, he seems to have decided by this time that he

¹³⁶ AJP to George Platt, 28 April 1977 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹³⁷ George Platt to AJP, 11 May 1977 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹³⁸ AJP to George Platt, 2 June 1977 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹³⁹ George Platt to AJP, 6 July 1977 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

was going to write himself - thereby affording it advertising of a particularly novel, indeed spectacular kind:

[In] your letter of 6th July, you were kind enough to be enthusiastic about the artistic discussions which the project might give rise to: but I was worried that you envisaged only 'indirect' publicity. This would not be my idea of business. The plot [of the opera] in question involves money as one of its two main ingredients (the other is love, of course): and money means banks – and the local bank manager has naturally to appear. The Ulster Bank will not be 'indirectly' referred to: it will be plugged from bottom F to C *in alt* with full orchestral backing. Puccini and Offenbach could do it: why not I?

I realise, of course, that neither highbrow name-branding nor direct contacts with composers has been envisaged in past, and that to engage in them now would be a departure from the normal previous practice. But, Mr Platt... are the bank's accounts not now largely handled by computers? If no-one had ever departed from 'the normal previous practice', they would still be keeping them with quill pens, wouldn't they?¹⁴⁰

One can only speculate as to what the recipient - presumably a suitably sober representative of this august bastion of Ulster commerce - might have made of this decidedly unusual letter: in any case, it elicited an impeccably courteous, but nonetheless categorical refusal to consider the matter any further.¹⁴¹

As at a similar juncture in his first operatic venture, however, an unexpected stroke of good fortune supervened. In November 1978, Potter was awarded a bursary of £2,000 from the Arts Council which not only enabled him to devote the time to finishing the work, but also greatly strengthened its chances of being staged. As he explained to Eoin McKiernan, to whom he dashed off a letter after hearing the news, this award had been made on the basis of competitive application:

¹⁴⁰ AJP to George Platt, 23 July 1977 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁴¹ George Platt to AJP, 5 August 1977 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

[Earlier] this year, the Arts Council offered a bursary of £2,000 to Irish composers to help them complete any 'major' work they happened to have on hand in comparative peace – or at least, free from other commitments for the time being. The offer was open to all composers irrespective of race, colour, creed, race, sex, standing or age: and the method of entry (and presumably selection) was for each entrant to submit any six works written during the past ten years – scores, tapes plus the necessary documentation and so on. The thing was thus a test of – not just a one-off chancy competition – but, in effect, of your life's work.

As far as I know, every composer in the Irish books went in (though non-winners are naturally having their anonymity respected) but you know how it is in Ireland: candidly, I was dubious about it – especially as the adjudication was to be done overseas where I don't always find that many congenially-minded spirits: but, not wanting to get the unenviable reputation of considering myself already too great for such things like a certain ex-colleague who under the 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum'¹⁴² clause must remain anonymous too, I did enter [...]. My intention, if successful, was given as – stop all the lesser stuff such as band, school, incidentals and so on, and concentrate on getting the second opera finished.

Anyway, they did not split it as rather expected: they awarded the lot to me – in a letter which I have just received. ... I am naturally very delighted, as it is not really the money itself (which although it looks big, is actually a very small amount in present-day terms: just about the equivalent of one of the scholarships which helped me get through school when I was 14)... What does really warm the cockles is that this has obviously been the Grand National All-Irish one – like the big one top of the lot... And don't think that a veteran punter like me doesn't know just how much luck there is in being a Grand National winner!

The only trouble is... that now, I have to set to and get the blessed opera written!¹⁴³

¹⁴² 'Let nothing be said of the dead but what is good' – a Latin motto from Diogenes Laertius' *The Lives and Opinions of the Eminent Philosophers*, where it is attributed to Chilon.

¹⁴³ AJP to Eoin McKiernan, 15 November 1978 ('No25 Symy. in Memo E. de V. 1976-7-4-, PA). See also the article 'Painter and composer honoured at Dublin celebration', *Irish Independent*, 18 November 1978.

At this stage, as there was still no definite prospect of a production, Potter decided to have one last try at extracting money from a bank: this time it was the turn of the Public Relations Manager of Allied Irish Banks to find himself in receipt of one of the composer's inimitable missives:

Dear Mr Ryan,

Further to our telephone conversation this afternoon, I enclose that part of the publicity release covering the Arts Council bursary of which we were speaking: it will, I take it, give the necessary background. The particular point at present issue is the opera mentioned and the use to which I suggested that Allied Irish Banks Ltd. might care to put it.

Viz., the plot involves a bank manager and his bank: their involvement is subsidiary, but necessary to the mechanics of the plot, and the resultant image comes out as neither goody nor baddy, but purely neutral. The banking profile is, however, kept high, and the Finale of Act I (the half-way mark, since in accordance with modern time-scales there are only two acts) consists of a chorus in praise of money in general and banking in particular. This obviously creates the opportunity to associate the thing with the name of any particular bank, and (since I am writing the libretto myself under my usual literary pen-name) this is where Allied Irish Banks Ltd. also comes in, if they so desire.

That is the picture and the proposition: in amplification, and for the benefit of any to whom you might care to pass it on, I will just reiterate my lack (from long experience) of confidence in the viability – for either party – of the type of commercial patronage of which I, among other 'artists' have benefited to a miniscule extent in the past. It has been miniscule because the 'fine arts', at least, have been categorised as 'good causes' rather than hard-nosed commercial propositions: ha'pence for deserving beggars rather than contracts to profitable image-builders of the kind which enabled the Medici, the Borgias and their like to pass into history as the safe-keepers of civilisation rather than the racketeering extortionate thugs which they otherwise were. Good luck to them.

Not to suggest, of course, that Allied Irish Banks Ltd. either rackets, extorts, or practices thuggee¹⁴⁴; and in fairness, I should admit that owing to family connections which disappeared on the death of my wife some months ago, I did put a similar proposition to one of your esteemed competitor-colleagues. Their elicited reply was, that since no-one in banking had ever done anything like that before, they could not 'see their way' to doing it now. To my enquiry as to why, in that case, they were adopting computers and not still sticking to quill pens and ledgers, silence.

Regarding the question of what I as composer/author expect to make out of it all, that (and this is the main burthen of my proposition) is a matter which should be thrashed out with your colleagues in the advertising department in the normal ways of things. In the present monetary state of the world, it would be pointless to name any figures at the moment – or, indeed, even say what class of currency the thing is to be paid in: that £2,000 bursary, for instance, which may look so impressive to the older age groups, is worth – in real terms – just about 6¾% of what, at the age of 14, I got for writing one song, one organ piece, playing rather badly and singing rather well.¹⁴⁵

This communication received a rather po-faced response which suggests that its recipient was nonplussed both by its contents and its flamboyant manner of expression: the manager in question wrote back to inform Potter that his colleagues were unenthusiastic, commenting that 'the idea is certainly novel, but I fear that it might take some time before bankers would accept the idea of favourably projecting their image and that of their 'trade' through such an aesthetic form as music.'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ 'Thuggee' was the name given to a network of Indian secret fraternities that made a speciality of murdering and robbing travellers. It came into existence possibly as early as the thirteenth century and lasted until the nineteenth, when it was ultimately suppressed by the British rulers of India after a determined campaign. The word comes from the Hindi *thag*, meaning 'thief', which in turn derives from the Sanskrit *sthaga* or 'scoundrel'. A member of a Thuggee group was referred to as a Thug, a word that passed into common usage after the publication in England of a novel by the Anglo-Indian administrator and writer Philip Meadows Taylor entitled *Confessions of a Thug* in 1839. For an account of the phenomenon of thuggee, see Mike Dash, *Thug: The True Story of India's Murderous Cult* (London, 2005)

¹⁴⁵ AJP to Robert Ryan, 27 November 1978 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁴⁶ Robert Ryan to AJP, 30 November 1978 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

After this attempt, Potter seems to have decided to concentrate on completing the score rather than dissipate his energies in a quixotic and probably futile campaign of subjecting bemused bank staff to protracted epistolatory bombardment in the hope of encouraging them to prise open their institutional coffers. One is inclined to doubt, in any case, that his efforts would have met with much success: as the experiences of his contemporaries seem to confirm, Allied Irish Banks' subvention of the recording of *Cornet of Horse* was a rather exceptional occurrence. Irish banks, businesses and industries, if they provided sponsorship at all, tended to fund sporting activities and events possessing a wide popular appeal from which they were assured to receive a considerable publicity by virtue of association; quite simply, there was no tradition of sponsoring the fine arts to speak of in Ireland, as existed in Britain or on the continent. The arts were thus more than usually dependent on state funding to survive, and there were few, if any, alternatives if Arts Council funding was not forthcoming.¹⁴⁷

The Arts Council bursary may have been modest (being roughly equivalent to £8,000 or €12,000 today), but it relieved Potter, at least for a time, of the necessity to take on the sort of routine arranging jobs that represented his bread-and-butter work and thus expedited his progress on the project. He managed to complete the full score within ten months, and delivered it to the Arts Council on 24 September 1979.¹⁴⁸ The Director of the Council, Colm Ó Briain, seems to have taken a personal interest in seeing Potter's opera onto the boards, and gave an undertaking that he would make every effort to secure a production of it.¹⁴⁹ Potter seems to have known from the outset that there was little likelihood that RTÉ would agree to organise a television

¹⁴⁷ Compare, for example, the difficulties that confronted the Irish National Ballet only a few years later when it was instructed by the Arts Council in 1985 to make good the shortfall occasioned through a cut in its budget by obtaining sponsorship from the private sector: see Ruth Fleischmann, 'The Arts Council and Irish National Ballet' in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty: Founder of Irish National Ballet* (Cork and Colorado, 1998), 34-56. As Fleischmann remarks that this was scarcely 'a realistic possibility with the country in recession, having a weak indigenous manufacturing base ... and no tradition of sponsorship from industry for any of the arts.' (*ibid.*, 39)

¹⁴⁸ AJP to Colm Ó Briain, 24 September 1979 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁴⁹ Colm Ó Briain to AJP, 10 October 1979 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

production: he confided in his friend Heather Hewson that this seemed 'a very long shot' in view of the difficulties with *Patrick*.¹⁵⁰ The only alternative was to try and interest one of the few established opera companies in the country. From Potter's correspondence, it would appear that Ó Briain organised a meeting with representatives from the Wexford Festival and the Dublin Grand Opera Society, as well as what Potter described cryptically as 'a contingent of our Northern brethren' – presumably from the Northern Ireland Opera Trust or Havelock Nelson's Studio Opera Group, the two professional companies operating north of the border at this period – in an attempt to explore what might be possible.

The alternatives scarcely seemed worth while contemplating. On 21 November Potter sent Ó Briain a rather anxious letter, asking to be let know what had transpired at this meeting. He clearly feared that if they were forced to fall back on approaching RTE, the station would try and fob him off by offering a radio broadcast only, as they had initially tried to do with *Patrick* sixteen years before. In this case, much of the work's comic effect would be irremediably spoiled, as this relied to such an extent on staging, and in particular the employment of mime. Neither did Potter relish the prospect of a much-scaled down production that dispensed with the orchestra:

The other thing to be avoided is to have a sort of [Irish National Opera] village hall job with piano accompaniment. I know Ronnie McSweeney [Veronica McSweeney, an Irish concert pianist who was a mainstay of INO] does a marvellous job on the classics – but then we have already heard the orchestration, and so can let our imaginations remember what the real sounds were like – prompted by Ronnie's marvellous evocation. But in the case of *The Emigrants*, where the orchestral sounds have not yet been heard, it would kill the thing stone dead. Better not perform it at all than do it that way.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ AJP to Heather Hewson, 20 November 1979 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁵¹ AJP to Colm Ó Briain, 21 November 1979 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

Writing to another close friend Dinah Thompson a few days later, Potter told her that matters were still very uncertain: Gerard Victory in RTÉ was 'being a trifle gloomy (as usual!)' when the subject of the opera was raised and he was still waiting on news from Ó Briain. There appeared to be only 'a slight chance' of getting the opera put on independently if neither RTÉ nor the various opera companies were interested.¹⁵² In the event, nothing came of the meeting that Ó Briain had organised and RTÉ was clearly reluctant to get involved.

Potter had to contend with what must have been an anxious wait of four months before Ó Briain managed to find a way out of this dispiriting predicament. In March 1980, Potter was contacted by Patrick Ryan, the Productions Director of the Irish National Opera, who informed him that INO wished to explore the feasibility of putting on the work if he were willing to grant permission. He gave Potter to understand that the production would have Arts Council support – clearly Ó Briain had been engaged in a considerable amount of manoeuvring behind the scenes – and told him that the company's directors were currently studying the score in order to assess the demands it would make on their resources.¹⁵³ Clearly INO were intent on producing the work if at all possible, even though it was to be May before Potter received written confirmation that their production would definitely go ahead.¹⁵⁴ In the meantime, Patrick Ryan urged him to consider changing the work's title, contending that *The Emigrants* would elicit misleading expectations from Irish audiences, evoking associations with the catastrophic potato famines of the preceding century and their tragic consequences:

With the greatest of respect, and an apology for any unintentional offence, we feel that the present day title has unattractive overtones of famine, misery, coffin ships, exile... the various folk images with which people in this part of the world associate the concept 'emigrants'. We feel that this will make sponsorship, advertising and general marketing of the work difficult both short and long term. Another aspect of

¹⁵² AJP to Dinah Thompson (*née* Molloy), 23 November 1979 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁵³ Patrick Ryan to AJP, 18 March 1980 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁵⁴ See Monica Crowley to AJP, 26 May 1980 ('Nº 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

the title which bothers us is that it has little to do with the perceived action of the opera, and is in effect misleading.¹⁵⁵

Ryan helpfully attaches to his letter a list of over four dozen alternative titles, the very first of which, *The Wedding*, was adopted in the event. Much to Potter's relief, one imagines, he also received confirmation that the work would be performed with the RTÉ Concert Orchestra (as the station's light orchestra had been renamed), which would necessitate a very slight reduction in the forces that he had originally envisaged: the omission of a bass trombone and tuba.¹⁵⁶ Potter readily gave his consent to this alteration, which required him to do little more than cue the missing instruments in to other parts. To speed matters up, he suggested that his fiancée Sarah Burn prepare the orchestral parts under his personal supervision.¹⁵⁷

Reading through the remaining contents of the file in which Potter kept correspondence relating to the work is a rather poignant experience. The next few weeks were a period of hectic activity, as Potter prepared the vocal score of *The Wedding* in between bouts of working on *Salala's Castle*, a piece for wind band which had, somewhat improbably, been commissioned as a gift for the Sultan of Oman by one of his friends to mark the tenth anniversary of the country's accession to independence. He managed to finish it on 18 June¹⁵⁸ and seems to have spent whatever free time he could spare from composing *Salala's Castle* checking the orchestral score and parts for misprints, filling pages of foolscap with lists of errata in his characteristically neat hand. Sadly, his sudden death on 5 July meant that he was deprived of the satisfaction of seeing this creative project realised on stage at last, almost twenty-five years after he had first conceived it.

¹⁵⁵ Patrick Ryan to AJP, 16 May 1980 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁵⁶ See Monica Crowley to AJP, 26 May 1980 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA). The forces thus comprised double woodwind, a pair each of horns, trumpets and trombones, harpsichord (doubling piano), one percussionist and a small string body (6.6.2.2.1).

¹⁵⁷ AJP to Monica Crowley, 9 June 1980 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁵⁸ See AJP to Patrick Ryan, 18 June 1980 ('№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

Fortunately, the staging of *The Wedding* went ahead as planned the following year, and the opera was put on for six nights between 8 and 13 June 1981 in the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, Sarah Burn having overseen the preparation of the remaining orchestral material. The principal roles were played by Eileen Donlon (Sadie), Mary O'Sullivan (Rosie), Frank Dunne (George), Frank O'Brien (Jonjo), Peter McBrien (McQuaid) and William Young (McTeevan), and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra was conducted by Pronnsias Ó Duinn. To judge from the recording of the live radio broadcast, the performance was very creditable, conveying the comic verve of Potter's score with considerable success, some technical imperfections notwithstanding. The opera was apparently well received by audiences, but despite its composer's optimistic hopes of a box office profit, it made a deficit. Sarah Burn, in recognition of the company's enterprise in consenting to produce the work at all, offered to waive all but a small portion of the grand rights to which she was entitled – an offer which the board of Irish National Opera gratefully accepted in a somewhat modified form.¹⁵⁹

According to the composer, the plot of *The Wedding* was inspired by what was supposedly a true tale of events that had taken place in Manorhamilton (a small town in the border country of Leitrim, situated about 17 miles from Sligo) about a hundred years previously, and which had been told to him by his father-in-law.¹⁶⁰ Although one should refrain from reading too much into the fact, it is nonetheless worthy of note that Potter does not seem to have approached Donagh MacDonagh for help with the libretto as he had originally intended, and in the event, decided to write it himself. It is possible that Potter was motivated by purely financial considerations in this decision, since it meant he would not have to share royalties or grand rights with a collaborator. It is equally possible, however, that he would have attempted it in any case, given the obvious enjoyment that he derived from writing poems and short stories from time to time. Although the literary merits of his imaginative writings are slight, they demonstrate considerable verbal fluency and a

¹⁵⁹ See Sarah Burn to Tony Ó Dálaigh, 27 May 1981, and Tony Ó Dálaigh to Sarah Burn, 29 June 1981 ('No 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA)

¹⁶⁰ AJP to 'Ethel' (unidentified correspondent), 18 March 1980 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

talent for vivid description. These skills undoubtedly stood him in good stead when it came to writing the libretto for *The Wedding*. It is adroitly fashioned and entirely fit for purpose: the dramatic situations are created with economical precision and the characterisation is inventive and deft. On the whole, it seems fair to say that Potter carried off the task with a certain amount of aplomb, the results being far more persuasive than MacDonagh's libretto for *Patrick*. In addition, Potter's text is also mercifully free from the self-conscious and pretentious 'literariness' that had marred the libretto of the earlier work.

The following summary of the plot should allow the reader to form an impression of the work's plot and highly individual atmosphere:

Act I

The action opens in a county town in the border county of Leitrim, some time in the later nineteenth century. Sadie McQuaid, a local beauty, and Jonjo¹⁶¹ Ryan, a wealthy local farmer, have just got married and the curtain rises on their wedding breakfast in the local hotel. After the opening mimed scenes – portraying the obligatory group photograph and a somewhat unnecessarily protracted grace pronounced by the officiating cleric – the guests are at last free to fall ravenously on the food that has been provided and give vent to a pent-up torrent of inane chatter. McQuaid, the father of the bride and Master of Ceremonies, rises to his feet to deliver his obligatory speech, which is once again partially mimed, and evidently replete with the usual platitudes about losing a daughter but gaining a son. In his reply, Jonjo announces to everyone's surprise that he has sold his farm, having wearied of farming and its attendant hardships, and is planning to live on the proceeds of the sale in Dublin (his farm has realised the handsome sum of seven hundred golden sovereigns). His bride interjects, expressing scornful disdain of the lot of a farmer's wife and anticipatory relish at the thought of the glamorous lifestyle that she imagines to lie in wait for her in the capital. The best man George rises to his feet in his turn, and delivers a sententious homily (cast in the form of a mock Irish ballad) about the necessity of buying one's own house in Dublin rather than renting accommodation. McQuaid calls for a song from the bridesmaid

¹⁶¹ A portmanteau contraction of the Christian names 'John Joseph', typically employed as a nickname.

Rosie, who obliges with a maudlin number about her unenviable lot as the seemingly eternal bridesmaid. Jonjo embarks on a gruff exposition of his utterly unsentimental philosophy of life, forthrightly affirming the paramount importance of money in human affairs. McTeevan, the manager of the local branch of Allied Ulster Banks, enquires what Jonjo has done with his seven hundred gold sovereigns, and on being told that they are 'in a safe place', subjects him to a pompous lecture on the advisability of entrusting his money to the bank's safe-keeping, eloquently extolling the care that would be taken of it. This subject is taken up enthusiastically by the assembled guests in a rambunctious choral fugue that brings the act to a rousing close.

Act II

The plot thickens. George, the best man, and Sadie, the bride, meet furtively outside the hotel. They have obviously been conducting a clandestine affair: they embrace and exchange passionate declarations of love. They discuss the plan they have hatched to abscond to Derry later that night and from there catch the liner to New York, having first relieved Jonjo of the seven hundred golden sovereigns which he has apparently been foolish enough to stash under the mattress in his hotel bedroom. They are to be assisted in this exploit by the bridesmaid Rosie, Sadie's best friend, who has her own reasons for wanting to escape with them to America: her mother is exerting pressure on her to marry the bank manager McTeevan. They are suddenly interrupted by the gentleman in question, who has emerged outside in quest of Rosie. McTeevan goes off to continue his search and they resume their love duet, only to be interrupted a second time by an inebriated group of guests. Sadie and George go back inside with them, leaving Rosie to be discovered onstage alone. Rosie reveals in a soliloquy that she is somewhat apprehensive about the success of their plan. Her musings are interrupted by McTeevan, who after much hesitant beating about the bush, asks her to marry him. She demurely gives her consent. McTeevan impulsively wishes to announce his engagement there and then to the assembled wedding party, but Rosie asks him to wait until she manages to organise Sadie and Jonjo's departure on their honeymoon: she explains that an unexpected difficulty has arisen, as some practical jokers have taken the couple's hired carriage. In a sudden access of generosity staged to impress his putative fiancée, McTeevan hands her ten sovereigns and instructs her to tell his coachman to give his own dogcart to Jonjo and then run into town to hire a coach-and-pair to transport the pair of them home. She departs, leaving him to rhapsodise over his forthcoming nuptials. He in his

turn is interrupted by another contingent of guests, now more intoxicated than ever, accompanied by Jonjo, who, having sobered up somewhat, has begun to get anxious about the whereabouts of his bride. The bride's father McQuaid pushes his way forward to make a dramatic announcement: he has just learned from McTeevan's coachman (whom he encountered in a drunken state on his return from his errand) that Sadie, George and Rosie have absconded in McTeevan's dog-cart, which was last seen hurtling hell-for-leather down a road out of town. Jonjo rushes off to check if his money is still in his room, and returns to communicate the news that it has been stolen. He suspects that the trio are on their way to Derry to catch the transatlantic liner: the entire party decides to set off in hot pursuit.

Act III

The fugitives are shown during a brief halt on their journey. George and Rosie are tired, but in good spirits, though Sadie is in a somewhat petulant humour. They sing a trio about the new life on which they are about to embark. The audience is allowed to form the impression that there is more to the friendly rapport between Rosie and George than meets the eye. They depart, and the scene cuts to the contingent of wedding guests that is hard on their heels. After a short orchestral interlude, the curtain rises on the foyer of The Transatlantic Hotel in Derry. The fugitives enter. It is the middle of the night. Sadie is still in a peevish temper, and, protesting exhaustion, promptly retires to have a rest before embarking on the boat. Once the coast is clear, Rosie and George sing a passionate duet: it transpires that, unbeknownst to Sadie, George has been carrying on an affair with her best friend. After exchanging some sentimental reminiscences of their first meetings, they reveal the elaborate double-cross that they plan to perpetrate on Sadie. Under the pretext of allowing her some additional time to rest, they have promised (with an ostentatious show of feigned consideration) to look after the transfer of their luggage aboard the ship (the seven hundred sovereigns included) while she sleeps. They have also deliberately misled her about the time of the liner's departure, giving her to understand that it is sailing at 8.30am when it is actually due to leave at 4.30. They reluctantly cut short their canoodling and make haste to get on the boat, which promptly sets sail. When Sadie comes downstairs shortly afterwards, she discovers to her horror what has happened and bursts into a fierce commination of her treacherous associates. She has scarcely had a chance to recover from the shock when her pursuers burst into the hotel foyer, hotly demanding an explanation for her disappearance. Thinking quickly on her feet, Sadie assumes the role of the wounded innocent: she claims

that having accidentally discovered Rosie and George's diabolical plot to steal Jonjo's money and make for America, she made a pretence of wanting to become their accomplice, thinking that this was the best way to keeping them under surveillance. Jonjo obviously has his doubts about the plausibility of this far-fetched tale, but the bride's father takes matters resolutely in hand: he rejoins the couple, urging Jonjo to forgive, forget, and resign himself to the pleasures of country life once more, and Sadie to accept the happy lot of being a farmer's wife. The wedding party expresses its wholehearted approval of this solution and herds the joyful couple away to resume their interrupted nuptials, leaving McTeevan alone onstage. After bidding a brief, but forlorn farewell to his hopes of marriage, he consoles himself with the thought that Jonjo will be forced to take out a loan at an extortionate rate of interest with the Allied Ulster Banks to set himself up in farming once more. As the curtain is about to fall, he pronounces what could be taken as the opera's moral: 'Money is the only thing you can depend on in the whole wide world!'

Out of his father-in-law's anecdote, Potter fashioned a black comedy of greed, duplicity and cold-blooded betrayal which is almost reminiscent of Maupassant in its unsparing portrayal of the more unattractive sides of human nature. Although Potter localises the action in Ireland, he is clearly concerned that the work's import will be perceived to transcend the particulars of its time and place; and it is worth noting, in view of the opera's Irish setting, that in his introductory notes to the score Potter takes especial care to emphasise that the small-town Irish community portrayed could be either Catholic or Protestant, its religious affiliation being wholly irrelevant. The universality of the work's theme is evident, and the oppressive small-town life that it caricatures is no different in essence from small-town life anywhere else. That said, it will be apparent to any reader familiar even to a modest degree with the productions of modern Irish literature that *The Wedding* is indebted both in manner and substance to an indigenous tradition of drama and prose writing that Declan Kiberd has characterised as 'anti-pastoral' – that is, which take a somewhat jaundiced view of Irish country life and, by implication, are critical of attempts on the part of Irish intellectuals and ideologues to idealise it.¹⁶² The Irish

¹⁶² See, in particular, the essay 'The Fall of the Stage Irishman' in Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World* (Cambridge, 2005), 21-41.

setting is consequently not entirely incidental, and to some extent at least, Potter undoubtedly intended his opera to serve as a vehicle for some mordant social commentary on contemporary Ireland. If the hero of *Patrick* crosses the Irish Sea to purvey a superior brand of Irish spirituality to the heathen Britons, *The Wedding* presents a discomfiting view of what this spirituality might actually consist, if shorn of pious fictions: cupidity, money-grubbing, cynicism, coarseness, ingrained hypocrisy, narrow-minded philistinism, ruthless self-centredness, unimaginative adherence to convention, a concern with outward respectability that masks an unwholesome sexual prurience — constituting, in sum, a mentality for which there is no single word in English, but which is perhaps more satisfactorily encapsulated by the scornful Russian epithet *meshchanstvo*. Whether intentionally or not, *The Wedding* presents the obverse of the 'official Ireland' limned in *Patrick*, subjecting it to exuberant deconstruction.

As far as specific literary influences are concerned, the libretto of *The Wedding* probably owes something to the kitchen comedies which had inspired *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* forty years previously. Some of these plays explored a vein of darker humour, with the stock rural characters being portrayed from a rather more unflattering perspective - a good example being *Professor Tim* by the Ulster playwright George Shiels (1886-1949), whose plays were for many years amongst the mainstays of the Abbey Theatre's repertoire.¹⁶³ Its plot portrays the adventures of a wealthy Irishman returning home from America whose relatives attempt to exploit him, but find themselves outsmarted. However, the resemblance of Potter's opera to these comedies only extends so far: plays of this kind generally ended with a neat resolution of the preceding conflicts and an obligatory happy ending; whereas the conclusion of *The Wedding* is distinctly unsettling, with the villains of the piece getting off scot-free. Potter's sheer nihilism would have been unthinkable within their dramatic conventions. It is also possible that Potter's conception may have been influenced at some level by another strand of Irish writing that portrayed small

¹⁶³ For a useful survey of the Abbey Theatre's repertory up to the mid-1960s, see Catherine Rynne's article 'The Playwrights' in Sean McCann (ed.), *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (London, 1967), 69-100.

town and country life from a very sombre perspective, emphasising its claustrophobia and oppressiveness, and which has been discussed in connection with the ballet *Careless Love*; but the atmosphere and style of *The Wedding* are at a very distant remove from literature of this kind.

A more likely source of inspiration would have been a carnivalesque strain in modern Irish literature which employs parody, grotesque distortion, exaggeration and deliberate banality (and often vulgarity) in a calculatedly provocative way, deliberately transgressing against middle-class notions of 'good taste' and thereby calling into question conventional attitudes and prevailing norms of socially acceptable behaviour.¹⁶⁴ In an Irish context, for reasons that are immediately obvious, adoption of this strategy was often tantamount to an act of private rebellion against aspects of the established social order. Examples come readily to mind: one thinks of celebrated passages in Joyce and O'Casey (the *Nighttown* scene in *Ulysses*¹⁶⁵ or St Patrick's uproariously comic harangue in the latter's *Autobiographies*), or certain works by Flann O'Brien and Brendan Behan. That Potter was familiar with representative works from this tradition, there can be no doubt. In a very minor way, he even contributed to it: an inveterate lover of puns and word-play all his life, he would occasionally send intimate correspondents letters couched in the style of literary parodies that were generally highly irreverent and frankly bawdy. One of the most extravagant of these, which was sent to his sister, replicates a mock-Joycean 'stream of konshushness', and is replete with arcane allusions, elaborate puns, distorted quotations and eccentric phonetic orthography à la *Finnegan's Wake*.¹⁶⁶ Many of the techniques employed by these Irish writers now strike us as post-modern *avant la lettre*, not least their recourse to parody, pastiche and ironised

¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of the carnivalesque tradition in Irish literature, see Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford, 1962), especially chapters 2 and 3; and Terry Eagleton's essay 'Cork and the Carnavalesque' in his *Crazy Jane and the Bishop and Other Essays on Irish Culture* (Cork, 1998), 158-211.

¹⁶⁵ For a discussion of Joyce's work from a Bakhtinian perspective that explores its carnivalesque qualities, see R. B. Kershner, *Joyce, Bakhtin and Popular Literature: Chronicles of Disorder* (London, 1989).

¹⁶⁶ See AJP to 'Dessie', undated but probably written in early February 1978 ('Personal 1978-80, PA).

quotation: to use a term from the jargon of contemporary literary criticism, they exhibit the quality of 'intertextuality'.

Potter's opera certainly partakes of their brand of anarchic, irreverent humour, inhabiting a world that is never far removed from farce or even music hall and vaudeville. (In this respect, it displays a kinship to plays by Brendan Behan such as *The Hostage* or the posthumously completed *Richard's Cork Leg*, in which the action includes incongruously farcical elements and is periodically interrupted by songs and dances.¹⁶⁷) It also displays post-modern characteristics aplenty, even though it seems unlikely that Potter would have used this term in referring to his work, or for that matter, that he had ever encountered it. The *dramatis personae* seem almost to constitute caricatures of caricatures of stock types: Jonjo, the gross, stage-Irish country farmer, Sadie, the local beauty with delusions of grandeur, George, the young man on the make, and so on. Their conversation consists almost entirely of conventional platitudes – to the point where Potter can occasionally allow them to mime to the parodistic instrumental 'declamation' of a solo double bass or trombone, in full confidence that the audience will have previously encountered such stock responses so frequently in other contexts that it can safely be left to imagine them. The townspeople are portrayed as empty-headed boobies utterly devoid of individuality - so empty-headed, in fact, that Potter often does not even bother to assign them intelligible text to sing, leaving them to discourse in torrents of nonsense syllables such as 'yak, yak, yak', 'rub-a-dub-a-dub' and 'rhubarb, rhubarb' [Ex. 6.7]. By these and other means, Potter deliberately exaggerates the opera's qualities of

¹⁶⁷ It is perhaps worth noting that Potter knew Behan socially and that the two men appear to have been occasional drinking companions. Behan, like Potter, was an extremely heavy drinker and died prematurely of alcoholism in 1964 at the age of 41. According to Sarah Burn, Potter told her that the pair of them had once gone on a drinking spree in Greystones and had become so drunk and disorderly that they were detained by the local police. Potter's wife was summoned to take charge of him, while Behan was forced to spend the night in a cell in the local police station until he sobered up. (Sarah Burn, personal communication, 30 July 2007.)

Ex. 6.7, *The Wedding*, Act I, bar 69 ff.

Vivace $\text{♩} = 120$

Chorus *f* Yak yak yak yak yak yak yak yak, Ya - ket - ty ya - ack. *sf*

Vivace $\text{♩} = 120$ *f* Rhu - barb, rhu - barb, *sf*

sf Ru - ba - du - ba dub, ru - ba - du - ba - dub, ru - ba - du - ba -
 rhu - barb, rhu - barb, rhu - ba - ba rhu - u

sf dub - du - ba - du - ah *sf*

Maw ma may mee my mo, may ma may my mo - oh *sf*

'theatricality' and 'staginess', underlining its artificiality and self-consciously calling attention to its *facture*. The characters are permitted to step forward and address the audience in the finest tradition of acting in the 'grand manner': both Rosie and McTeevan are assigned prominent soliloquies and George is specifically instructed in the stage directions to step forward and sing his Act II aria to the audience, even though it is ostensibly a declaration of love to Sadie who is onstage at the time. The chorus is similarly free to address the principals in a manner reminiscent of the most wooden of nineteenth-century operas. When Jonjo discovers Sadie's flight, for

example, the following exchange occurs, which would scarcely be out of place in a pantomime:

CHORUS: [*savouring the scandal delightedly*] Oh Jonjo! Tell us: what's happened?
JONJO: The sovereigns is all gone!
McTEEVAN: What did I tell you? ...
CHORUS: Oh! Sadie has run off with George, but where have they gone?
 And Rosie, she has run off as well, but where are they going to?
JONJO: I know where they're going to!
McTEEVAN: Where are they going to?
JONJO: They're going off to DERRY.¹⁶⁸

Even more ludicrously, at the opening of Act II, Sadie and George laboriously summarise the details of their scheme entirely for the audience's benefit, so that it can follow the convoluted plot. The scene is calculatedly absurd in its effect, since this information is perfectly well known to both of them - which Potter surely intends as a parodic reference to the creaking, implausible plots typical of Victorian melodrama:

GEORGE: Now Sadie, let's get this straight...
SADIE: Uh-huh?
GEORGE: Your mother ballyragged¹⁶⁹ you into agreeing to marry Jonjo -
SADIE: That's right!
GEORGE: And his money
SADIE: That's right!
GEORGE: But you didn't want Jonjo, you wanted me!
SADIE: That's right!
GEORGE: But I'd got no money -
SADIE: That's right!

¹⁶⁸ All quotations from the libretto are given as rendered in Potter's typescript of it, since there are slight discrepancies (mostly in minor matters of punctuation and capitalisation) between this and the text as given in the full and vocal scores. Copies of the typescript were included in the folder '№ 26: "The Emigrants" 1977-8-9-80', PA.

¹⁶⁹ A dialect word of unknown etymology meaning to scold, harass or badger.

GEORGE: So you went on thru' with the wedding, but all the time preparing to skedaddle with me before Jonjo got his hands on you –

SADIE: That's right!

GEORGE: But tho' you didn't want Jonjo himself, you still wanted his money?

SADIE: That's right!

GEORGE: So, you went thru' with the ceremony, primed Rosie, got Jonjo drunk, and while Rosie knucked¹⁷⁰ the money from under his mattress, you were changing into your going-away clothes... to go away, but not with Jonjo to Bray for a fortnight! But for evermore with your own George to the New World: where we'll find happiness together for ever and ever: far away from the same sad, cramped, crimped, sour, stale faces...

SADIE: That's right!

As will already be evident from these quotations, much of the humour of the libretto is verbal, and derives from guying modes of speech characteristic of other theatrical and literary contexts. But there is humour of a more earthy kind too: like the work of Joyce, O'Casey or Behan, Potter's libretto is spiced with a fair deal of racy language and bawdiness. George refers scathingly to McTeevan during a passage of recitative as 'the old bastard'; while Jonjo has recourse to a variety of choice epithets to revile Sadie in her absence, calling her a 'pig', a 'whoor' [a dialect form of 'whore'] and a 'slut' – hardly the usual sort of decorous operatic parlance. By means of much unsubtle innuendo, the libretto suggests that the members of this community are victims of sexual repression and frustration on a grand scale. The wedding guests display a stubborn preoccupation with the bride's maidenhead, and some of them go so far as to hide the newly-weds' carriage in an attempt to prevent them leaving, hoping that they will be forced to stay at the hotel where the curious (whom Rosie characterises as 'dirty-minded pigs') can conveniently eavesdrop on Sadie's defloration.

The music of *The Wedding* is as richly allusive as its libretto. As in *Patrick*, Potter employs a variety of musical styles to characterise the different stage personages; but

¹⁷⁰ British slang for 'to steal'.

whereas in the earlier opera this practice had resulted in incongruity, here it is used with conspicuous success. The reason for this is because all of these stylistic references are thoroughly ironised, and in the process come to bear the imprint of Potter's musical personality at its most quirky and individual. Allusions are made to the gestural language of a wide breadth of idioms, past and present: from earlier music, we find ponderous pseudo-Handelian contrapuntal writing (Ex. 6.8 shows the opening of the concluding Act I choral fugue in praise of banking¹⁷¹), evocations of eighteenth-century *opera seria* and *opera buffa* complete with *secco* recitatives (a deliberately incongruous anachronism, given the opera's late nineteenth-century setting), and the blatantly hackneyed diminished sevenths and serried string *tremolandi* of early Romantic operas (a recurrent formula of this kind is shown in Ex. 6.9); from more modern styles, we encounter shades of the music hall and the sentimental operetta, as in the final 'reconciliation' scene, with its chorus in waltz-time and descant for the solo soprano (Ex. 6.10). Potter even pokes sly fun at Irish traditional music: the score abounds in rather demented-sounding jigs and reels whose melodies career recklessly through a torturously chromatic course to the accompaniment of utterly freakish harmonisations; and George's aria on the evils of rented accommodation in Act I is an obvious parody of the genus of slow popular ballad known in Ireland as the 'come-all-ye', supplied by Potter here with tastelessly extravagant ornamentation.¹⁷² When McTeevan overhears Rosie singing what strikes

¹⁷¹ It is worth mentioning in passing that this idea functions as a kind of motto theme throughout the opera. It is first heard in the work's opening bars, establishing money as the dominant force in this social world from the outset.

¹⁷² The Oxford English Dictionary dates earliest recorded use of this descriptive term to 1898. These songs were so named because they generally began with an invocation to the assembled company urging them to listen: the first three words of the opening line of George's aria, 'Come all ye gallant Irish men' thus employs their conventional opening formula. A minor point of detail: Potter adapted this piece from a song he had composed fifteen years before, a spoof ballad written to commiserate with a friend who had been forced to leave his rented accommodation when a new hotel was erected in the vicinity: see AJP to Liam [O'Regan], 17 April 1963 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA). Potter kept a copy of the musical manuscript that was enclosed with this letter.

Ex. 6.8: *The Wedding*, Act I, bars 491 ff.

Allegro maestoso $\text{♩} = 120$

Choir *f. risoluto*

Al-ried Ul - ster Banks is the best bank in the coun-t(e)r-y, with a ca-pi-tal of fif-ty two mil-lion

[lower strings]

Al-ried Ul - ster Banks is the best bank in the coun - t(e)r

pounds. So put your mo-ney on de - po-sit at five per cent per an-num with com -

[vle + ob] *f*

[8ves sempre]

y with a ca-pi-tal of fif - ty two mil - lion pounds.

plete se cu - ri - ty and to - tal con-fi-den ti - al - i - ty.

ALTOS

Al-ried Ul - ster Banks is the best bank in the coun - t(e)r-y.

So put your mo-ney on de - po-sit at five per cent per an-num with com - plete se

They will al - so un - der - take pro - bate and lc - gal du ties and ad-vice on

[vlms2 + ww 8va]

Ex. 6.9: *The Wedding*, Act I, bars 230 ff.

Quasi recit.

SADIE *f*

For a far-mer's wife is an un-paid skiv-vy.

p. cresc. *sf*

[archi trem. + hpd]

Ex. 6.10: *The Wedding*, Act III, bars 497 bis ff.

Maestoso, ben ritmico

SADIE *ff*

Home at last with my Jon - - jo!

Sa - die you'll come back to Lei - trim, Come back to the coun - try life And be

ff [tutti]

Ah!

hap - py for e - ver as Jon - jo's bride and a far - mer's wife.

him as being 'a lovely tune', he asks her: 'Tell me, is it one of our glorious folksongs? / The product of our National Musical Heritage?' One wonders what the ironic capitalisation might indicate about Potter's real attitude towards the unrewarding hackwork of arranging Irish folk music that he undertook out of necessity earlier in his career.

When the opera was premiered in 1981, this aspect of the score was the subject of some not wholly favourable comment. In the course of a reasonably favourable review for the Irish periodical *Soundpost*, the critic Bernard Harris nonetheless delivered himself of the opinion that 'what appeared to be lacking ... was an underlying unity of musical language that would have given an integrity [*sic.*] to the work as a whole.'¹⁷³ In the context of the stylistic experimentation characteristic of post-modern art, particularly its promiscuous appropriation of styles and techniques from different periods and its implicit negation of distinctions between 'high' and 'popular' art, the very feature of the score that disquieted Harris has since become a commonplace. It is not difficult to draw parallels between Potter's procedure here and the so-called 'polystylism' of a composer such as Alfred Schnittke, different though the two composers are in almost every other respect. As a composer who was attracted all his life to light music and was impatient with musical snobbery, Potter could only have been sympathetic to Schnittke's lack of inhibition in mingling 'serious' and 'popular styles', and welcomed the new expressive possibilities that this opened up. As Schnittke pointed out in a seminal essay on the subject, 'Polistilisticheskiye tendentsii sovremennoy muziki' ['Polystylistic tendencies in modern music'],

[In spite] of all the complications and possible dangers of polystylism, its merits are now manifest: it expands the range of expressive means, makes possible the integration of 'low' and 'high' styles, of the 'banal' and 'recherché' (or: 'refined') – in

¹⁷³ Bernard Harris, 'The Wedding at the Abbey', *Soundpost*, 3, August/September 1981, 19-20.

other words, it creates a wider musical world and a general democratisation of style

...¹⁷⁴

Schnittke often employs this technique to induce a disturbing sense of estrangement from the familiar, and conjure up a weirdly surreal atmosphere. Potter's fundamental intention in employing polystylism in *The Wedding*, I would suggest, is not wholly dissimilar, even if Potter's music is leavened to a much greater extent by humour and has nothing of Schnittke's unremitting bleakness. If *Patrick* attempts to persuade us that the Irish are inherently noble and 'spiritual', then Potter's distortions of Irish folk music in *The Wedding* can be perhaps be understood as a mordant comment on how little relation this construct often bore to reality. Furthermore, the threadbare conventionality of the various musical allusions underscores the essential banality of the characters and the pettiness of their natures. The music that Potter assigns to them is wholly of a piece with the clichés and platitudes that they utter. Their stock responses to situations are so predetermined and lacking in individuality that the same music can be used to characterise dramatic contexts that are otherwise wholly different: George declares his love to Rosie in exactly the same music as he previously declared his love to Sadie; while Sadie excoriates Rosie to the very music in which Jonjo has already excoriated her.

The sense of the characters' banality is reinforced by a number of clever touches, the first of which concerns techniques of word-setting and the nature of the vocal writing. As had already been noted, Potter employs *secco* recitative accompanied by a harpsichord (but with the bass line assigned to a lumbering double-bass instead of a 'cello), deriving many amusing effects from the rapid patter characteristic of it, suggesting conversational exchanges that are wholly mechanical. The 'lovers' are assigned vocal writing of an expansive lyricism, with soaring top notes to intensify

¹⁷⁴ 'Но при всех сложностях и возможных опасностях полистилистики уже сейчас очевидны ее достоинства: расширение круга выразительных средств, возможность интеграции «низкого» и «высокого» стиля, «банального» и «изысканного» - то есть более широкий музыкальный мир и общая демократизация стиля...' Alfred Schnittke, 'Polistilisticheskiye tendentsii sovremennoy muziki', in A. V. Ivashkin (ed.), *Besedy s Al'fredom Shnitke* (Moscow, 1994), 144. Translation mine.

the impression of hollow emotionality. Potter also makes considerable use of deliberately awkward word-setting, forcing words to fit melodic lines that are obviously unsuitable. An excellent example of this occurs when Sadie is compelled to invent an explanation for her flight to Derry: she sings her version of events to a melody associated throughout the opera with Rosie, the implausibility of her tale being underlined by her halting delivery and glaring misaccentuation of the text. (This melody, incidentally, is a quotation of the tune associated with the hapless Áine in *Careless Love*, which Rosie mentions having seen in Dublin – a mischievous allusion presumably to Mozart's self-quotation in *Don Giovanni*).

The characterisation also depends to a considerable extent on Potter varied deployment of harmonic resources. Broadly speaking, during the more 'emotive' passages, such as the love duets and the final 'reconciliation' scene, the harmonic language tends to be fairly uncomplicated, if not quite diatonic, though tending towards a certain soupiness suggestive of insincerity and sentimentality. Elsewhere, Potter employs techniques familiar from his earlier works such as lumpy 'wrong-note' harmonisations and grating bitonality. The somewhat crude use of the latter procedure, which in *Patrick* had been such a notable shortcoming, creates a sound-world that is perfectly appropriate for *The Wedding*, contributing to one's perception of the characters as being dehumanised automata. Potter reinforces this on occasion by having deliberate recourse to unrelieved stretches of mechanical sequential writing: a typical example occurs at the opening of Act II, as Sadie and George discuss the theft of Jonjo's money. The pitches of the vocal lines here suggest a fairly unambiguous G major (with one or two modal inflections), but their contours seem wholly disconnected from the desiccated harpsichord accompaniment, which mechanically grinds out a relentless succession of sequences, mostly based on dissonant aggregates derived from augmented triads and half-diminished seventh chords which meander up and down in block motion, creating an impression of deliberate arbitrariness [Ex. 6.11]. By similar means, Potter imparts an unnervingly manic quality to the material modelled on Irish folk dance tunes, his harmonies and

orchestral textures evoking the vamping accompaniments and suspect harmonisations of a faintly demented *ceili* band [Ex. 6.12].

Ex. 6.11: *The Wedding*, Act II, bars 52ff.

♩. = 96

SADIE

GEORGE
quasi sotto voce

Sure I did! Wou - ldn't ye know?

Did ye get the mo- ney? Where had he hid it?

[hpd + solo db, pizz]

Aye, the auld ce - jil!

Don't tell me! Not the mat- tress!

Ex. 6.12: *The Wedding*, Act III, bars 232 ff.

Presto

ob.

mf

[archi pizz., fiati]

ob. cl. ob.

In view of the relentlessly ironical perspectives that are established on the protagonists, the question naturally arises as to how seriously Potter wished the piece to be taken – whether he simply saw it as an entertainment, or whether he intended it to convey a more serious subtext. If its portrayal of Irish society, or at any rate, an aspect of it, is to be taken at face value, then the work's implied judgement would appear to be overwhelmingly negative. The opera is quite devoid of sympathetic characters. Their protestations of affection or consideration for one another are feigned; their real emotions are entirely negative and destructive. They lie to one another, cheat one another and exploit one another. In this nightmarish universe of fraud and duplicity, no-one can be trusted and nothing is reliable – except money. One's fellow human beings are base and, for the most part, stupid. Ireland is a cheerless place populated by bogtrotters and gobshites, a country in which it is impossible to achieve personal fulfilment and from which any sensible person would want to escape. The tone of *The Wedding* is so finely and ambiguously balanced that it is impossible to say for certain how one should interpret it – a fact that endows it with something of the strangeness and elusive fascination that is characteristic of all truly interesting works of art. Whether one chooses to regard it simply as a farce in which the moral nihilism of the characters is ultimately subverted and rendered harmless by being exaggerated to the point of absurdity, or whether it should be read as a summation of Potter's private views on Ireland and perhaps also on his fellow human beings must remain an open question.

Whatever one is to make of it, *The Wedding* must undoubtedly be considered one of Potter's finest achievements and perhaps represents the single most accomplished score he ever composed. The quality of musical invention remains at an impressively high level throughout, with many witty and imaginative details. While there are perhaps one or two places in which the work would benefit from small cuts (George's ballad in Act I being a case in point), the opera is otherwise excellently paced. In marked contrast to *Patrick*, the balance of tempi is consistently well-judged and Potter displays considerable skill in ensuring effective textural contrast, his orchestral writing being much more resourceful than in the earlier score. The opera

is eminently stage-worthy: it would be very suitable for inclusion in a double-bill and, as operas go, its demands in terms of singers and orchestral forces are quite modest. Sad to relate, however, it has only been given once since its premiere, by the student opera group of the Dublin College of Music in February 1984, on which occasion it was directed by Louis Lenton and conducted by Colman Pearce. Its continuing neglect by Irish opera companies probably says as much about the lack of enterprise they demonstrate with regard to the work of native composers as it is an eloquent testimony to the failure of Irish music critics to create a context in which Potter's achievement could be meaningfully understood and come to wider attention outside the country.

It is dispiriting to realise how little critical attention the premiere of a large-scale work by a prominent Irish composer generally received – even if the work in question was a new opera, which was an event of exceptional rarity in an Irish context. Apart from Bernard Harris' review referred to earlier, the only other of any substance to appear was that by Charles Acton in the *Irish Times*. This notice attains to a degree of fatuity exceptional even by Acton's standards, and would be hardly worth quoting were it not for the fact that it demonstrates once again the hopeless inadequacy and intellectual poverty of most Irish music criticism in its response to the work of Irish composers:

Last night was an extremely important occasion for the Irish lyric theatre. The Irish National Opera presented at the Abbey Theatre the first performance of the late A. J. Potter's posthumous opera *The Wedding*. ...

Dr Potter did me the honour of lending me the libretto of his latter opera. Frankly, it appalled me, because it had an amount of crude vulgarity that might fit in with city people, but which was totally at variance with the speech of farming people in any part of Ireland. Perhaps if I had been able to hear all the words, I might remain of the same mind. I am not sure that my inability to hear the text from the singers was the total asset I feel it to have been.

While the plot is based on a real incident in Dr Potter's family history, it is essentially the sort of thing upon which the 'Abbey kitchen comedies' seem to have been based in such number between the wars. On the other hand, the programme book, in spite of a fine essay on the composer, on Irish opera in this century, on the INO, did not provide the story of the opera, as is customary for routine Italian works. In spite of that, and in spite of mostly poor diction, the music and the production carried one along, knowing what was happening and why...

As the opera came across last night, it was a first-rate musical experience, and in a true operatic mould. It is not, perhaps, an international opera any more than an Abbey kitchen comedy is international theatre, but it is a wholly valid Irish stage work, as an 18th-century Neapolitan intermezzo is a locally valid piece – and two centuries later is an international entertainment. An opera lives or sinks by its music and by the music's relevance to the text and the situation. By this criterion, *The Wedding* should live, since it has an almost Puccinian interconnection between the text and the music. Each enhanced the other and I felt, all along, the totally dramatic reality of the music. Whether it becomes an international opera or not, it is a very real Irish opera...

I wish I had the space of a Newman or a Shaw. Suffice it that, thanks to all those whom I have named and all those I have not named, we heard last night – and can hear all this week – a true Irish *Volksoper* which should be a lasting Irish piece in its own right and a pioneering work of Irish theatre.¹⁷⁵

One can only smile wryly at Acton's self-flattering invocation of the names of Newman and Shaw, and at his fond notion that he could have filled the august pages of the *Irish Times* with an abundance of penetrating commentary had its editors only been sufficiently enlightened to allocate him the necessary space. His access of old-maidish prudery at Potter's libretto evokes shades of the scandal over *The Playboy of the Western World* several decades before, when Synge's portrayal of rural life was considered a slur on the mores of Irish country people. The remainder of Acton's review is notable only for its dull imperceptiveness and incoherence.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Action, 'A. J. Potter's posthumous opera premiere', *Irish Times*, 9 June 1981.



After complaining at some length about the difficulty he experienced in making out the text on account of the cast's poor diction, he nonetheless proceeds, without any apparent sense of incongruity, to commend the 'Puccinian interconnection' between precisely this inaudible text and the music. Technical discussion or precise observations of any kind are conspicuously absent, most of the review consisting of nebulous generalities and unsupported assertions. His attempted comparisons with Puccini – of all composers – and the genre of *Volksopern* (he presumably means Romantic operas in the mould of *A Life for the Tsar* or *The Bartered Bride*) are not only unilluminating, but are entirely beside the point. Having delivered himself of these feeble platitudes, all Acton can think of to do is to ride one of his favourite hobby-horses and engage in fruitless speculations about whether Potter's opera is 'international' or not, without ever stopping to ask himself what this empty phrase might actually mean. One hopes that a younger generation of Irish musicians and commentators on music will arrive at a more nuanced appraisal of *The Wedding's* very real musical and dramatic merits.

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