

FREDERICK MAY

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Frederick May was born on 9 June 1911 to Frederick and Jeannie May of Marlborough Road, Dublin. His father worked at Guinness's. The family were Protestant and very pro-British when it was, to say the least, very unfashionable in Ireland to be so.

Young Fred studied at the Royal Irish Academy of Music from 1923 to 1929 where he was awarded seven scholarships including the Vandeleur Academy Scholarship for piano in 1928 and for harmony in 1929. Between 1930 and 1933 he continued his studies at the Royal College of Music in London under Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob learning theory, piano, conducting and composition.

As one might expect, his early works, and indeed some later ones, show the influences of both these composers. Vaughan Williams certainly stands behind May's Suite of Irish Airs for orchestra of 1953, a work written when he was in his forties (as if to do penance for his dislike of his native Ireland). The work is not particularly Irish in character and lacks the freshness and conviction of his mentor. May took his Bachelor of Music degree at Trinity College, Dublin in 1932 and submitted a fifteen-minute String Quartet in A minor.

His years in London were successful in that he was accepted and, to some degree, admired as a talented pianist, accompanist and all-round musician. He believed he was finding his niche in such musical circles but there occurred the first major disappointment in his life. He was tormented by his nationality and angry at not being British. To add to this disappointment he was accorded a travelling studentship to study with Alban Berg in Vienna in 1935 but, unfortunately, Berg died that year. May was, however, able to study with Egon Wellesz, a pupil of Schoenberg in Austria's capital city.

His first important composition was his Scherzo for Orchestra which dates from 1933 and was taken up in Ireland by Michael Bowles and Aloys Fleischmann, and, in England, by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Sir Adrian Boult. Whether scherzo is the correct definition for this work is debatable, but it is a competent, attractive work with a commendable strength and integrity.

Vienna in the mid-thirties must have been both an exciting and worrying time for a young Irishman. The fact that he did not study with Berg was probably just as well for he did admit some forty years later that he was not in sympathy with the music of the Second Viennese School. About serialism he said, "It certainly produced some wonderful works such as Berg's Wozzeck and so on, but if you look at the subject matter it was all of the most horrifying nature. There seemed to be no room in their work for anything joyful like the coming of spring."

May was firmly of the romantic school of music himself; his most admired composers were Beethoven, Schubert, Mahler, Delius and Sibelius.

May returned to Ireland in 1936, escaping from the threat of Hitler that was soon to engulf Europe. From 1936 to 1948, he was musical director at Dublin's Abbey Theatre. In this capacity he was the pianist in a small group of musicians, more often than not just a piano trio but sometimes extending to a total of ten players, who performed 'boiled-down' classical repertoire and other music to serve as overtures, such as those by Mozart, and to serve as interval music, which might comprise Irish airs or



courtly dances. The musical director also chose the music and sometimes a composer would write incidental music for such a production and this explains the small forces employed rather than the larger ones usually associated with such music.

May still kept very close spiritual ties with England, but departed for good to avoid conscription and thereby damaged his hitherto good reputation there. It did nothing to improve his reputation in Ireland either where, for example, his dislike of the Irish language and culture was well known.

His Symphonic Ballad was first performed by the BBC Northern Ireland Orchestra under E Godfrey Brown in 1937 and the beautiful Spring Nocturne: An Idyl for Orchestra was premiered at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin in 1938 in a performance conducted by Aloys Fleischmann. The work is intended to suggest the countryside of County Meath; it is a work full of mystery, ambiguous tonality and stirring climaxes and Vaughan Williams' *The Lark Ascending* might have inspired the lingering violin solo.

The artistic stimulation of Vienna as well as being witness to the "whole Hitler menace" (he saw for himself the passion unleashed by the Nazis) led May in 1941 to compose his most important work—settings of Ernst Toller's *Songs From Prison*. Toller was a German socialist playwright who was imprisoned for his political activities in Bavaria and eventually committed suicide in 1939. The poems tell of swallows which nested in his prison and their eventual destruction which is successfully depicted in the impressive climax of a work which exudes the influence of Mahler.

The BBC gave the premiere and a later performance in Ireland in 1946 had Brian Boydell taking the solo baritone role which is both difficult and taxing, added to which the orchestral forces at times prove excessive. However, it will be readily admitted that May has always written well for the voice and set many poets. His own ability as a pianist and accompanist (he was a particularly fine exponent of the works of Arnold Bax) are reflected in his songs which show a close affinity with those of Hugo Wolf.

A work of great beauty, the *Lyric Movement for String Orchestra* (a title borrowed from Vaughan Williams), was first given by Madeleine Mooney's Dublin String Orchestra conducted by Terry O'Connor in 1942. It is both simple yet intense, fresh but profound with memorable phrases and ideas. It is a sunny work but is never superficial or banal.

It was in London in 1958 that his *String Quartet in C minor of 1935/6* was premiered. It claims to be in three movements but in its thirty minutes duration it might just as well have thirty movements so often does the music stop and start. But it was highly original for its time, especially bearing in mind that it was the work of an Irish composer. It attracted a lot of attention and, indeed, a commercial recording. The best pages of the work reveal Bartok's influence and strength.

It was composed at the onset of the crippling disability that was to dominate the rest of his life. This was deafness accompanied by tinnitus in the form of two notes ringing constantly in his ears; his 'infernal din'. He continued to work as the director / pianist at the Abbey Theatre and as a composer. He said that he "did the best he could for as long as he could" but with "that racket torturing me all the time and my anger at not being given a fair chance; it was not always possible to work and behave in a civilised fashion".

Like all composers he wanted to be remembered for his music. "I just hope that when I and my damn personal failures are gone, there'll still be something left of use to people afterwards," he said adding, "But I don't want people's actions to my music to be coloured by my troubles. They are irrelevant to the quality of the music. If I hadn't been afflicted I'd have liked to try to bridge the national and international gap myself. Sean O'Riada did wonderful things for Irish folk music and developed himself in so doing; but there was always a dichotomy between his Irish music and the work with which he achieved international recognition. The gap is a hard one for an Irishman to bridge. In the centuries that the French and the Finns were preparing to produce composers of the stature of Debussy

and Sibelius, Ireland had no art music developments at all. We had fine national ballads, all right, but everything else was imported. I think we're still suffering the results of that.”.

How very much this statement is an attempt to ease his conscience and to justify his distaste for his own country and culture, so backward in its musical development, which May lamented held him back.

Frederick May possessed a fluent speaking voice, that of a cultivated Dublin man, and it was employed in many informative broadcasts. He was a regular author of programme notes for RTE concerts. His character combined gentleness and aggression; he could be a friendly man but, enduring the greatest tragedy that could befall any musician, he was combative. On a visit to Sweden he hit a policeman and went to prison; there was at least one similar incident in Ireland; there was also an occasion when he was frogmarched from the RTE building for yet more misbehaviour. He had become a crushed and tormented individual particularly in the last twenty years of his life. He drank heavily, so much so that the solicitor administering the rather large estate of his father doled out money to the legatee as pocket money: otherwise it would have been completely squandered on alcohol. Notwithstanding this constraint, he still drank heavily and had several nervous breakdowns. His life was marked by despair and horror. In the last twenty years of his life he was confined to general and psychiatric hospitals and spent his final few years in such an institution at Portrane, a wizened old bachelor encumbered with heavy hearing aids.

His String Quartet and the Songs from Prison - which belong to May's Dark Night of the Soul period, are grimly psychological in the manner of the Schoenbergian school so disliked by May for its outpourings of personal anguish - which may be too prolix to survive, but conversely the orchestral work Sunlight and Shadow of 1955 serene, fresh and possesses a diatonic clarity. It has some pungent harmonies and is well-shaped and compact. There are moments of Ravelian glitter as well as the influence of Delius's more robust style. This very fine piece is dedicated to the RTE Symphony Orchestra and Milan Horvat who gave the first performance at the Gaiety Theatre on 22 January 1956.

Frederick May died on Sunday 8 September 1985 and was laid to rest in Mount Jerome Cemetery. Only three people attended his funeral, one of whom was my friend, the late Irish composer, Gerard Victory.

Had May not been stricken so cruelly, he might well have become a significant international composer. While all his works clearly reveal various influences and are therefore not noted for striking originality, his best works are of a fine quality, marked by flawless craftsmanship and great appeal.

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