

JOHN F. LARCHET

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John Francis Larchet shares two things in common with the distinguished composer and conductor Sir Hamilton Harty; they were students together and both came under the influence of Commendatore Michele Esposito (1855-1929), a Neapolitan who was professor of piano at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He was a violinist, pianist, conductor, composer and publisher and, for many years, the leading light in the musical life of Dublin. He founded a small symphony orchestra, the Dublin Orchestral Society, and organised chamber recitals and founded a school of piano playing at the Academy. Larchet was associated with Esposito for almost 49 years.



Larchet was born in Dublin on 13 July 1884 to John Edward Larchet (a hotelier) and Emily (née Farmer) who came from Kilkenny. His father was of Norman descent and the mother's family had connections with the name Purcell; it has been suggested there is some descent from the great English composer Henry Purcell.

There was always music in the house. Mrs Larchet was certainly musical as were her family and Mr Larchet had a good tenor voice. There were ten children born of whom John was the second. Four children went in for music; one into acting and two went into the Civil Service. But it is John, in this generation, that has probably become the best known.

He first took piano lessons from his mother and went on to learn the organ and the violin. He went to the Catholic University School and then progressed to the Royal Irish Academy of Music and Trinity College becoming a Bachelor of Music in 1915 and in 1917 a Doctor of Music. His decision to become a musician was inspired by hearing the Pilgrims Chorus from Wagner's Tannhauser when he was only seven or eight years old and for the rest of his life he was a confirmed Wagnerite! His father would have preferred him to follow him into the hotel business but both his parents accepted his choice of vocation and were encouraging.

On 27 December 1913 at the Church of Our Lady of Refuge, Rathmines, Dublin, Larchet married Madeline Moore, a very talented musician who also loved the theatre. Her greatest interest was, however, in her home and three children: Marie (born 1921) who was to become principal viola in the RTE Symphony Orchestra; Sheila (born 1923) who was to become principal harp in the same orchestra and Gerard (born 1926) who was to become a horn player as well as pursuing a career in engineering.

John F Larchet was senior vice-president and professor of harmony, counterpoint and composition at the RIAM from 1920 to 1955. He was musical director to the Irish Army in 1923; director of music at Dublin's Abbey Theatre from 1907-1934. He was the chair of music at University College, Dublin 1921 - 1958 (professor emeritus); conductor of the Dublin Amateur Orchestral Society; director of music examinations in secondary schools; vice president to Trinity College of Music, London and the first president of the Dublin Grand Opera Society. He was awarded an honorary doctorate of music from the National University of Ireland in 1953 and in 1958 was decorated with the Order of Commendatore of the Italian Republic. He had a very versatile, busy and academic life and earned lasting respect as a musician. But he was not stuffy. In his day he would play cricket and rugby and he was interested in a wide range of literature which further developed during his long association with the Abbey Theatre. It was the theatre's orchestra that performed his first major work, the First Set of Twelve Irish Airs of 1917 but the first work of his maturity is probably the song Padraic the Fiddler of 1919 for voice, piano and violin obligato which sets a poem by Pádraig Gregory. The song The Legend of Loughrea for double choir dates from 1920 and is still spoken of warmly by Irish musicians of today. In fact all his music is in very good taste. It is proficient and attractive; its simplicity is appealing. It is not original enough to be sensational; it is not simple enough as to be relegated as merely pleasant. His work is very tastefully written. Ireland is very much in his music and in a very warm and mellow way. He was sometimes referred to as a miniaturist and often said this of himself. His longest

composition is the ballet poem Bluebeard of 1932 which plays for thirty minutes. Undoubtedly, restriction of time was an important factor. He did not write a sonata, string quartet, symphony or concerto or opera although he long cherished an ambition to compose an opera based on J M Synge's Rides to the Sea, which, in fact, Vaughan Williams did between 1925 and 1932. Larchet was very Irish. He was a committed member of the Roman Catholic Church and, as already suggested, loved all the works of Irish writers and poets including Synge, Yeates, Shaw, Elizabeth Shane and Pádraig Gregory. His literary passions extended to Shakespeare and Dickens whom he considered the greatest English novelist. Indeed, he was nationalistic through and through. He regarded himself as being the nation's composer as Edvard Greig was to Norway although this was certainly not an arrogant aspiration. In fact, his was a gentle personality; he was a sensitive man with an optimistic outlook on life. He saw a future for Irish 'serious' music when few, if any, shared that view. He considered Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924), Hamilton Harty (1879-1941), Brian Boydell (1917-2000), Seoirse Bodley (1933-) and Gerrard Victory (1921-1994) to be Ireland's finest composers and he himself lived to see a birth of talented Irish musicians. John McCormack and Bernadette Greevy took up his work and the Austrian violinist Fritz Kreisler admired Larchet's music.

His only weakness, if it is one, is that he was scathing about much modern music and his outlook was rather anachronistic and this may not always have endeared him to successive generations of Irish composers. If any music culture is to survive it has to progress as well as valuing its past.

But, in his music, there is a wonderfully evocative rural Irishness conjuring up a way of life that still exists in some parts of this beautiful and extraordinary country.

Larchet died on 10 August 1967, six years after his wife, and was buried Deansgrange Cemetery, Dublin. He was a composer from whom many British composers had a profound respect and these include Vaughan Williams, Stanford, Rawsthorne and Searle.

His music deserves to be heard. It has much character and charm.

The Works of John F Larchet

ORCHESTRAL

- Twelve Irish airs set 1 for strings and piano (1917)
- Twelve Irish airs set 2 for small orchestra (1922)
- Lament for Youth (1939)
- Dirge of Ossian
- McCananty's Reel
- Carlow Tune
- Tinker's Wedding
- March quasi scherzo (1955)
- By the waters of the Moyle (1957)

CHORAL

- Sancti Venite (1954)
- Two Motets (1959)

CHORAL unaccompanied

- Legend of Lough Rea (1920)
- Luireach Phadraig (1956)
- Ave Maria Stella (1957)
- Three Motets (1961)

SOLO VOICE

- The Philosophy of Love (1908)
- In sweet humility (1910)
- Padraic the Fiddler (1919)

An Ardglass Boat Song (1920)
A Stoirin Ban (1922)
Diarmuid's Lament (1937)
The Stranger (1939)
The Thief of the World (1939)
The wee boy in bed (1943)
Wee Hughie (1947)
The Cormorant (1947)
The small black rose (1955)

INCIDENTAL MUSIC

The Pipe in the Fields
The Spell
Land of Heart's desire

BALLET

Bluebeard (1932)
A Ballet poem

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