

## JOHN IRELAND

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John Nicholson Ireland was a fascinating composer and quite different from most. He did not compose at the piano and did not compose regularly. Britten said he did not compose at the piano, in an effort to promote himself, but he did. Ireland wrote sections of each work as sketches to ensure that they were right and then put them together. He did not revise his works unless they were major ones. Occasionally, a song could be composed in a day and, unlike some composers, he had a modesty and sincerity. He would rather extol the virtues of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Ravel and Stravinsky than his own music. He was a good teacher and believed in individuality and he regularly said that of all his pupils, Humphrey Searle was the most original and cleverest student and was Britain's greatest composer since Purcell, a phrase that has been purloined by others.



When Ireland was born in Bowden, Cheshire on 13 August 1879, the greatest living composer was Brahms and Tchaikovsky's Eugen Onegin was brand new as was Franck's Piano Quintet. As a child, Ireland was always interested in music. His sisters played the piano and John had to endure a plethora of Chopin. His mother was deeply interested in music and he began to learn the piano when he was about eight years old. His father, Alexander, was 70 when John was born.

John went to London in 1893 to study at the Royal College of Music but his first piano lessons as a child were not pleasant. These were the days of the punishment by the ruler which could often be very frightening. Discipline at RCM was also troublesome when Frederick Cliffe would tell a student to go home for a couple of hours and come back and play the piece again without mistakes. Ireland also studied with Walter Parratt.

In 1896, John became the sub organist at Holy Trinity Church, Sloane Square, London. The following year, he wrote two string quartets.

His first real awakening to music was the College performing Beethoven's Symphony no 8, a work he said was with great humour that was almost wicked.

His love of music stemmed from his parents who were literary people. Father was the editor of a Manchester paper and Mother published a book on Jane Welsh Carlyle. Many literary people and would-be literary people visited the Ireland household. John was impressed with A E Houseman who wrote brilliantly in a condensed way whereas Wordsworth or Tennyson could, at times, be long winded. He also admired Swinburne.

He studied with Stanford four years into his stay at RCM, a teacher who adored Brahms but he did not expect his students to copy the German master. Stanford could be a tough master and, in those days, the College had separate entrances for men and women. Ireland was once spied upon talking to a female student and disciplined severely so that he thought he might be sent down.

Only the best would do for Stanford and if work was not of good quality he could be cruel. He could not tolerate errors and any miscreant could be humiliated.

Ireland began to teach at RCM in 1923.

Good taste was also important in those days but, sadly, this is not respected today, wrote Ireland. Serious composers now dabble in styles of lesser purport and significance thus losing their prestige and, of course, to write or perform such lesser music is far easier than the superior stuff. Cyril Scott was one of the first to break away from established and worthy ways. Stanford said that Scott was mad and when one reads his literary works one can agree with Stanford.

Other pupils at RCM when Ireland was a student were William Hurlstone and Coleridge-Taylor who both had short lives but produced music of quality, as did Holst and Vaughan Williams.

Ireland had strong misgivings about Holbrooke who arrogantly wanted a large orchestra each time sometimes with concertinas and saxophone. His attempts to be clever was his downfall. Ireland said that it is better to deal with the means you can expect and he quoted Sibelius on this.

As with Vaughan Williams, Ireland was interested in modern music. Latterly, he found Boulez fascinating and complained that people condemn such works because they do not understand it nor want to. Only melody and conventional harmony is preferred and if that continues then music will stay in the past and just be anachronistic.

Later in life, Ireland complained that students are not trained properly in music. Everything is free and easy and when composers write like this, then the results are poor and haphazard. Students no longer put up with hard work. And that is true.

Unlike some British composers, Ireland did not give advice nor held a pompous sway over others. He never forced his ideas upon students such as Alan Bush, Benjamin Britten, who was always conceited, Humphrey Searle, Richard Arnell and E J Moeran. Ireland said that Britten was hard working and Ireland only took him on to please Frank Bridge but Britten was not a pleasant person.

Ireland is the only Britten composer I have encountered, who had some positive things to say about Elgar but, in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the music of Ireland fared very much better than Elgar. His marvellous work for chorus and orchestra, *These Things Shall Be* of 1937, is very noble and grandiose but, thankfully, does not have the nauseating pomp and tedium of Elgar.

Ireland was married, separated and divorced in quick succession. Then, when he was 47, he married a 17 year old pupil Dorothy Phillips and they were divorced in 1928.

He was then, for a short while, with Helen Perkin (1909 -1996) to whom he dedicated his Piano Concerto of 1930 and then withdrew the dedication when he fell out with her, and, finally, he had an assistant, Mrs Norah Kirkby until his death from heart failure in Washington, Sussex on 12 June 1962.

Ireland speaks for us all, although we may not wish to admit it, when he said that he often got bored with the classics. As a young man, he enthused about Brahms' Clarinet Quintet and Tchaikovsky's Symphony no 6 but pointed out that a new work would make a greater impression, such as Stravinsky's Rite of Spring.

Asked if there is such a thing as British music, he said that Elgar's music was not British in that it owes much to German music and that there were few British composers who used British folk songs.

He was not a travelling composer but went to the ISCM Festival in Geneva in 1929. Rachmaninov was there and a song by Vaughan Williams did not impress and so this composer cursed and left the auditorium. Ireland played his Sonatina which did not fare well either and he had a letter threatening

his being shot if he wrote such rubbish ever again. Rachmaninov led the critics about illustrative titles for Ireland's piano music. How could Chelsea Reach be depicted in a piano work? Debussy's Fireworks was also condemned because the music did not sound anything like fireworks. A later critic said it could just as well be called Buying Toilet Rolls in Tesco's!!

Ireland met Ravel who was also homosexual and was surprised that Ravel was not a good pianist. He also met George Gershwin who said to him, "I 'ear you 'ave written a rhapsody. So 'ave I and it is played a least ten times a day!"

Ireland loved the countryside and would walk the Sussex Downs where he latterly lived in a converted windmill from about 1953. His Legend for piano and orchestra was inspired by an old track leading to the ruins of an ancient church and, during the Middle Ages, this track was used by lepers, who were not allowed to mix with people, but wanted to worship God.

He was also fond of the Channel Islands.

As for his music, it is certainly not outstanding but it is sincere. The Piano Concerto is admittedly very weak. Some of the chamber music and songs are acceptable as is his orchestration. His only film score, The Overlanders, has much to commend it. The piano pieces with illustrative titles tend to be slight.

Works include

- Two Violin Sonatas
- Cello Sonata
- Two String Quartets
- Two Piano trios
- Trio for clarinet, cello and piano
- Much Church music

Orchestral Music

- Comedy Overture
- Concertino pastorale
- Downland Suite
- London Overture
- Mai-Dun
- Satyricon
- Piano Concerto
- The Forgotten Rite

Chorus and orchestra

- These things shall be

Piano works

- Sonata
- Sonatina
- Chelsea pieces
- Sarnia
- Prelude in E flat
- and many other pieces

Film score

- The Overlanders

In recent years much of Ireland's music has been recorded and it is good to have these works available.

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