

RHONA CLARKE

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Rhona Clarke is an Irish composer of great potential.

She is one of seven children born into the Dublin home, 35 Charlemont Road, Clontarf, to customs officer Patrick and his wife Theodora, née Flaganan. Rhona's birth occurred on 21 January 1958 at the now-demolished Evelyn Nursing Home in Eccles Street. Her father played the violin and her mother the piano and violin, the latter for the Westport Musical Society. Rhona, despite having no musical forbears of note, showed early, almost precocious ability; apparently, at the age of two she could sing perfectly in tune, entertaining neighbours and friends. She began piano lessons in 1964 with one Nancy Buckley and, when this teacher died, Rhona went to a Mrs Kelly to continue learning the piano. At the age of eighteen she continued such studies at the College of Music, Chatham Row, Dublin with Miss Elisabeth Costello who counted Michael O'Rourke among her many gifted pupils.



Rhona's schools were Scoil Mhure National School, Marlborough Street from 1962 to 1970 and, thereafter, Maryfield College of the Cross and Passion Convent until 1975. Music was not taught at school and Rhona's academic strengths were languages (she did, at one time consider a language degree or, failing that, a career in horticulture). Fortunately, as I believe, time will show, she made the correct choice and the first step of her career could probably be traced back to when she was fourteen and joined the Lindsay Singers in 1972, a female voice choir under the conductorship of Ethna Barror, where Rhona sang mezzo-soprano. Already in her formative years, she had valued much music including the Beethoven symphonies particularly numbers 5, 7 and 9, as well as some of the piano sonatas. Chopin had also won her over, notably the first and third Ballades, the Nocturnes and the popular third study from Opus 10. Her awakening to present-day music was as a result of being a member of the Lindsay Singers and performing such pieces as Prayer Before Birth by Elisabeth Maconchy which she hated at first. Hearing many choirs at festivals such as those at Cork and Llangollen impressed her deeply and provided invaluable grounding in choral writing which was later to be successfully reflected in her own works for this medium.

Clearly Rhona matured early musically; as a teenager in the 1970s she was not drawn to the pop music, fashions and trends of those days. It was evident that serious music was to be an essential part of her life. Her mother, having been widowed in 1974, would, no doubt, have preferred her daughter to pursue a more lucrative career but mother's voice was a lonely one. In fact, Rhona has always been decisive, ambitious and possessed of insatiable curiosity.

She entered University College, Dublin in 1975 and became a member of its choir. She remembers singing Haydn Masses, Christmas Carols and works by Seoirse Bodley. In 1976 her friend, Joe Ryan, who was the conductor of the Gaudite Chamber Choir invited her to join. They sang mainly sixteenth-century material although they ranged from Gregorian Chant to Bruckner Motets. She was with this choir for about four years. At University, she obtained her Diploma in Music Teaching and in that same year, 1978, won the Viennese Solo Award with a silver medal and a scholarship which was for a year's free tuition at the College of Music, This award was for the playing of a Beethoven sonata.

In 1980 she graduated from UCD with a Bachelor of Music degree. She was twenty two. She became

music teacher and choir mistress at St Dominic's Convent, Cabra for just over a year when she secured a similar post, this time at St Paul's Secondary School in the Greenhills district of Dublin where she had sole responsibility for teaching music throughout the school, comprising twelve to eighteen-year olds, and conducting its various choirs.

Rhona Clarke entered the composition competition for the Feis Ceoil Award in 1982 with her Six Short Piano Pieces for children. It won the first prize in the Feils Ceoil Composers' Competiton. There were eight other entrants and she did not expect to win, but win she did and for a composer to win a prize for their very first work is some achievement. This encouragement led her to undertake cello lessons with Margaret Fitzgerald between the years 1983 and 1985. Rhona Clarke was trying to stimulate pupils at school to take up the cello as there was one available at the school. Financial restrictions may be the reason why no-one took her advice; so she studied the instrument herself,

At the beginning of this two-year period of study she composed her hauntingly beautiful lullaby Suantraí Ghrainne for female voices commissioned by the Lindsay Singers and first performed by them under Ethna Barror at the Cork International Choral Festival in 1984. It is a setting of a poem by MarieMac an tSaoí and the music, which has a conscious modal Irishness, deservedly won the Sean O'Riada Memorial Trophy. It was very well received; indeed it not only ranks as the composer's first public success but it has an enduring quality. She told me that it was written "almost entirely intuitively". Its telling simplicity of expression is appealing; it is tenderly evocative; touching, but not sentimental; unashamedly tonal and possessing that rich nostalgic Celtic quality that communicates immediately. The piece, albeit short, is well-conceived having a very human and gently emotive quality recalling a remark the composer made to the present writer when she said of the music of Mozart, "What impresses me most is how little he used to such great effect and intensity". One could say that of Suantraí Ghrainne.

Up to 1985, Clarke had worked in isolation; then she attended the Ennis Summer School where she heard music by Berio, Lutoslawski and other continental composers which generated an enthusiastic response in her. This annual school had as its directors the late James Wilson and John Buckley. Wilson was born in London in 1922 but lived in Dublin for the last forty years and became an Irish citizen. His opus numbers exceed 120 and include symphonic works, concertante and choral works as well as many song-cycles. He also wrote for the theatre and his opera Grinning at the Devil which deals with the life of Karen Blixen received twenty sold-out performances in Copenhagen in 1989. In 1990, he said of Rhona Clarke that "she is one of the most interesting and original composers working in Ireland. All her work shows integrity, individuality and a capacity for hard work".

John Buckley was born in Templeglantine, County Limerick in 1951 and studied the flute with Doris Keogh and composition with James Wilson and Alun Hoddinott. He received the Varming Prize and a Macaulay Fellowship in 1978 and has represented Ireland at the International Rostrum of Composers on four occasions. His impressive Symphony No 1 was first performed by the RTE Symphony Orchestra under Albert Rosen in June 1988. Buckley says of Rhona Clarke, "I am struck by the originality of her imagination; she has a great attention to detail and increasing technical assurance. She is an extremely dedicated and serious composer; this, allied to her fertile imagination and technical facility will, no doubt, bring her into greater prominence in years to come".

The first year at the Ennis Summer School saw the completion of Rhona Clarke's Trio for clarinet, cello and piano which she has subsequently withdrawn it being "too experimental" and her "not liking it that much". This tells us a great deal about the composer who is concerned about the integrity and quality of her music.

Ash Wednesday, to words by T S Eliot, scored for voice and piano, dates from 1985. Due to copyright reasons and the inability to secure performing rights the work has yet to be heard. The following year a short work for solo flute, Yellow and Blue appeared; a work in which the composer shows excellent



judgement. As with *Suantraí Ghrainne*, it benefits from its brevity which enhances the work. The piece is not laborious; it does not employ shrillness or disturbing effects; it states its material with the minimum of fuss and, therefore, the greatest result. It was first performed in April 1987 at the Douglas Hyde Gallery of Trinity College, Dublin by Caran O'Connell. *Sisyphus* for flute, clarinet and string trio, a work which the composer believes may have done the most to establish her, appeared in 1986. The work is named after the character who, according to Greek legend, was punished by Zeus who condemned him to push a boulder up a cliff eternally, each time it reached the top it would roll back again. The motif of the last movement suggests this.

Sisyphus won the Varming prize which is awarded every four years to a composer under thirty years of age. Varming is a Dutch businessman and one of the founders of an engineering concern whose presence in Ireland is with the firm Mulcahy and Reilly. The piece is the composer's usual economic style, contains some brief aleatoric moments but it does not hinder its neat formal structure and deft instrumentation. Of the three movements the first is the most convincing; the middle movement maintains the same basic pace whereas a contrast would perhaps have been structurally more satisfying; the finale moves with more urgency and has a hint of wry mischievous behaviour if that is how the edict of Zeus could be conceived. There is a tautness in the music; a freshness particularly in the opening pages with its judicious blend of woodwind and strings. It is an accomplished work, despite its being reserved in content, receiving its first performance by Concorde in March 1987 at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin.

Another work for solo voice, this time accompanied by a solo flute, entitled *Surprise* was completed in July 1986. It is a setting of a poem by Anna de Noailles; musically it is well-conceived and benefits from a good sense of contrast. Its first performance by Virginia Kerr and Deirdre Brady was a RTE broadcast.

Exactly a year later *Purple Dust* for flute, violin and piano was finished. The use of the flute again shows Clarke's affinity with this instrument. It has been said that of all instruments the flute is most akin to the human voice and consequently, the most personal of instruments and it always seems to have happy associations with female performers. The instrument has been given both a spiritual connotation needing breath to give it life, The cello has also the reputation of being a "human" and personal instrument no doubt due to its being held closest to the body. One can only conjecture what Rhona Clarke would make of these opinions! Her thinking in relation to instruments is always in relation to timbral possibilities and practical considerations.

Purple Dust, named after a title of a play by Sean O'Casey, won the New Music for Sligo Award from six finalists in a concert at St. Mary's Cathedral, Sligo in October 1987. It may, in many ways, be very similar to *Sisyphus* of two years earlier, but the latter work has a greater variety of writing for the piano some of which is inside the instrument producing some telling effects. There is no doubt that it was a worthy winner although one wonders whether it needs a greater contrast in material and rhythm.

Liadain for voice and Irish harp was commissioned by Aylish Kerrigan and first performed by her and Anne-Marie O'Farrell in Dublin in April 1990 in a performance which, in my view, did not fully realise the composer's intentions. *Liadain* was a Munster poetess who loved Cuirithir, himself a poet, and the poem is concerned with God-fearing guilt and torments of aborted love. The piece is beautifully Celtic but its appeal may be restricted. The writing for the harp is superlative.

Psalm 148 has not been performed. The BBC singers performed *Gloria II* renamed *Gloria Deo* The

work is anchored in the tonality of D and is for unaccompanied chorus with optional piano or organ. Its directness of expression, buoyant rhythms and mature restraint reveal the composer's discerning mind. Although Rhona Clarke claims not to be religious, her Roman Catholic upbringing surely lies behind this work which demonstrates a successful union of words and music something some experienced composers are not always able to realise.



Dunsandle for piano trio dates from 1989. While it is impressive it breaks no new ground aurally or stylistically. Perhaps the composer is confident with this tried manner of composition but originality, is, of necessity, a progressive attribute. Expert craftsmanship is not always enough. Dunsandle is an estate outside Athenry in County Galway now in ruins. A friend of the composer has a house nearby and the work was inspired by a visit there.

The Tallaght Choral Society, with funds from the arts council of Ireland, commissioned what was to be Rhona Clarke's other setting of the Gloria in 1988, a work in which she uses the orchestra for the first time. Its premiere was at the National Concert Hall in Dublin in April 1989. It is both her most adventurous and probably her best work to date. Juxtaposed with the Gloria is a translation of a meditative poem by Teresa de Avila sung by a solo soprano with some soaring and spine-tingling effects. There is use of modal styles referring, consciously or otherwise, to religious music of the past and reflecting the composer's interest in Renaissance music engendered by her days in the Gaudete Chamber Choir. The piece employs some lovely rhythms; has moments while the orchestration is beautifully balanced and at moments, is unforgettable. The choral writing is flawless.

The Gloria I of 1989 it was first heard at a 'workshop' at the Cork International Choral Festival with the BBC Singers. It hovers between the tonalities of G and D. It is, I think, reminiscent of the slow movement of Bartok's second piano concerto via the Kyrie in Britten's War Requiem. As with the psalm setting, the off-beat rhythms give this 'second' Gloria a vital character; as in Suantraí Ghraíne the closeness of the harmonies give the work a warm sound and a marvellous unity. There is also that magical Clarke ingredient of humanity. In fact, the composer perhaps even reveals more of herself, to a discerning ear at least, than she would wish to. Such a perception would conclude that she is usually of a calm and patient disposition, optimistic and friendly, though capable of occasional outbursts of anger. She can be outgoing or dreamy. This explains one of her favourite pastimes which is walking by the sea. Her closeness to natural elements is part of her temperament. She also enjoys gardening which provides a welcome contrast for her active mind, insatiable curiosity and ambitious drive. She will always want to go forward although she will wisely take one step at a time. For further relaxation, when time permits, she enjoys reading such authors as Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, the poetry of Brendan Kennelly, Herman Hesse and Collette, among others. She derives pleasure from the acting of Daniel Day Lewis, Liv Ullman, Dustin Hoffman and Glenda Jackson.

Since a visit to New York in 1987, Clarke has developed an interest in modern art which she believes assists her to compose and to value form, texture, colour and subject matter. She is certainly a woman of our time. Although she has not experienced discrimination against her because of her sex, she remains grateful to the pioneers of the Women's Liberation Movement for a freedom which is now taken for granted. Rhona Clarke's opinions are both precise and concise and always delivered with courtesy. She strongly believes in the right of every individual to live as they please provided that no-one is harmed in the process; she abhors the consequences of harmful actions, particularly crimes against the defenceless.

She and her music have travelled widely in France, Spain, Italy, USA, England and Wales and Bulgaria for skiing!

Musically, she values Bach and Mozart; recognises the highly individual greatness of Beethoven; acknowledges Brahms' emotional quality; regards Wagner as the composer who made the greatest strides in harmonic language although she is troubled at his unbearable personality; she also admires the personal harmonic idiom of Debussy; responds to Fauré particularly the Piano Quartets: she applauds the great energy in Bartok; finds some difficulty coping with the strict serial works of Schonberg admires the tautness of Webern's style but does not derive any pleasure from listening to the work of this consummate composer. She prefers Berio, Lutoslawski and George Crumb. Of British music she is indifferent to Elgar; finds Britten's choral music appealing whereas Tippett has yet to be discovered; her first encounter with the music of Humphrey Searle led her spontaneously to use the superlative "greatness". Among Irish composers she enjoys the great energy of John Buckley; the solemnity and depth of Raymond Deane and the clarity of Brian Boydell. Indeed her musical taste is wide.

She believes that if Mozart were alive today he would explore the electronic medium although Rhona Clarke prefers this form when combined with acoustic elements or used for film and dance.

The year 1989 saw the production of two further works. The Two Songs for voice, violin and percussion to words by the Irish poet Louise Hermana and the Triptych for choir, saxophone, piano and string quartet commissioned by the Clare County Council to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the town of Ennis where the Summer School has been held since 1982. The meaning of Ennis is river meadow and these words are constantly repeated in the second movement, alternating between English and Irish. The finale wonderfully captures the mood of a country dance.

She attended a weekend course in computer music technology at Queen's University, Belfast in 1989 and the following year embarked on a two-year Masters course in composition. She lived in Belfast when British soldiers were on the streets with guns. She graduated with a PhD in music.

She has also been the public relations officer for the Association of Irish composers.

Her String Quartet dates from 1990 and is entitled Magnificat because fragments of a Magnificat chant are used throughout the piece. It has three main contrasting sections, the first and second of which alternate several times. The first section is based on major and minor scales and uses two as thematic material namely two fragments of plainchant, a Magnificat and a Salve Regina. The Magnificat theme is stated in full at the end by the cello.

In 1990, she lived in Switzerland for a while and Messiaen visited Dublin for a performance of his Turangalila Symphony. Rhona is impressed with his Quartet for the end of time. She studied in Germany during 1991.

A Great Rooted Tree is an orchestral work. The title is from the words of Vita Sackville-West:

There is nothing more lovely in life
Than the union of two people whose
Love for one another has grown through the years
From a small acorn of passion to a great rooted tree.

While at Queens, Belfast, Rhona had the composer Michael Alcorn as her supervisor. When he was away Professor Adrian Thomas undertook this role. Following a viva voce at the end of June. Rhona's examiners, Nicola Lefanu, Eibhlis Farrell and Michael Alcorn recommended her work for a PhD and she graduated that December. Her interest in music for tape developed. Such compositions are the same in intent as writing for acoustic instruments or synthesised sounds she claims although the process can be different. Composing a piece for tape gives the composer total control. City with No Name is for tape and Pied Piper written two years later in 1994 is for flute and tape.

The work that probably gives her the most satisfaction is Gleann Dá Loch for piano of 1995. The timbre and resonances of the piano are exploited mainly by contrasting registers and textures... from stark unison octaves at the extremes of the instrument to monodic lines, played mostly in the middle register, to chordal sequences.

Rhona's music has sensual and spiritual qualities. It has come in for criticism as being somewhat inactive but it has not prevented her from being established in Ireland as a leading composer. Most of her works are precise and succinct.

In 2010, her work Veni Creator was premiered by the Sydney Philharmonia Symphony Chorus on their tour of London.

I cannot comment on her electro-acoustic works as I do not know enough about this genre. Her video work Relic is of art work by Marie Hanlon, a very prolific and well known Irish artist and a very close friend of Clarke,

Rhona is a lecturer in music at St Patrick's College Drumcondra, Dublin 9, a twenty minute walk from Dublin city centre. In 2005, she was elected to Aosdana the state sponsored academy of creative artists.

The composer John Veale, a personal friend of mine, listened to some of Rhona's music which I sent to him and on 8 August 1990 he wrote to me:

“What I like most is her quite evidently genuine creative urge and manifest sincerity; there is obviously not a single bar which she did not feel. I am also much impressed by her striking technical dexterity and polish... in both her handling of voices and instruments and (e.g.) her un-academic deployment of often quite academic means to truly expressive ends. I always see this as a mark of confidence.

Although I haven't a clue what the words mean In Suantraí Ghraíne, I feel it is evocative and most expressive. I also like its rather austere simplicity. The Sisyphus Variations are admiration for their neat formal structure and deft instrumentation. There is a wry and mischievous humour in the third variation.

The Gloria is magnificent, very fine choral writing and the soaring soprano solo is real spine-chilling stuff!”.

I wish to comment further on some works but not in chronological order.

Street Dancer of 2010, is a major work. The narrator is preferably a male actor whose entries are prompted by the conductor; the choir have to sing without vibrato and each voice enters by turn starting with a whisper then getting louder and gradually having a given-note pitch; the playing of the percussion is clearly outlined.

The text is by the poet Gabriel Rosenstock

There was a boy who danced on the street
Danced with his arms
Danced with his feet
He danced all day from sun's first light
Danced with the stars in purple light,
Nothing to lose he cried
Nothing at all save the soles on my shoes

I am pleased to note that her Piano Trio no 2 of 2001 is dedicated to my friend, the late Jim Wilson.

A Song for St Cecilia's Day is a comparatively early piece dating from 1991 and is dedicated to Sean Creamer and has a directness and profound simplicity. It is through-composed and impressive and should be regularly in the repertoire of choirs.

Reflection on the Sixth Station of the Cross (2001) is scored for soprano saxophone and guitar and is precisely noted throughout. The sixth station is Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. The choice of instruments may be thought strange yet the effect conveys the emotion and turmoil of this sad scene.

One can only admire Clarke's clever solo instrumental works. For the flautist William Dowdall she wrote Four Pieces in 2006 revising them in 2009. The pieces are Begin, As kingfishers catch fire (inspired by the Gerard Manly Hopkins poem), Elegy and Take Time Out, all very well written and displaying the many qualities of the flute.

Rhona has collaborated with the artist Marie Hanlon on her splendid string quartet Pas de Quatre with Hanlon's visual projection and with the work, Relic based on the landscape of the Burren area in the west of Ireland.

Whether sound and vision go together satisfactorily is a matter of personal choice. It raises the old chestnut about ballet being two art forms brought together as one.

Clarke has come a long way from her first gorgeous piece to using two media. To maintain originally experimental music has to be considered. Like most people, I can and do respond to her works that are thorough-composed rather than the music of chance.

Rhona Clarke is a delightful person. She is completely natural and wholly free of guile or bellicosity. She is determined but not ruthless; she is already strikingly mature and above all has a monastic dedication to her art. With these attributes she can only succeed and hers is a career that I shall watch with interest and great expectancy.

I hope Rhona will not be regarded as a miniaturist because of the brevity of so many of her works. I would wish her to concentrate on her earlier style of composition with conventional notation but retaining her originality, I accept that every composer must develop and not stagnate with a style that remains the same throughout their life.

I am not convinced that multi-media compositions work or will survive. If I am going to listen to music I do not want to be distracted by projected images. Music can and must stand on its own.

Rhona is an independent and will go her own way. it raises the question as to why a composer composes. I would think one's creativity is communication with people and, surely, that includes the public being able to appreciate what is written and the more that do so the greatest reward for the artiste.

List of works:

1982

Six short piano pieces

1983

Suantraí Ghráinne, ssa

1984

Trio for clarinet violin and piano withdrawn

1985

Sisyphus, fl, cl, vn, va, vc

Ash Wednesday v pf

1986

Surprise, fl
Yellow and Blue, fl,

1987

Purple Dust, fl, vn. pf

1988

Dunsandle, piano trio
Gloria Deo sop, satb, orch
Gloria I, satb
Liadáin mezzo, Irish harp
Psalm 148 , satb, organ or piano
also for satb and orch

1989

Two songs for voice and perc
Magnificat, string quartet.

1990

Cantate Domino , satb, rev. 2007
Triptych satb. sax, pf, string quartet

1990 -1

A Great Rooted Tree for orch

1991

Whaling Afloat and Ashore, electro-acoustic and mixed media
A Song for St Cecilia's Day 1687. satb,
The Mouse's Petition, sop, hn 2 perc

1992

City with No Name, pre-recorded tape
Nightsong, ob, cl, hn, tpt, vn, db

1993

Pied Piper, flute with live electronics and pre-recorded tape

1994

Sound Works Suite No. 1 for Young Players, for 3 to 5 instrument (variable)

1994

Rorate Caeli, ssa
also for satb, 1995
Gleann Dá Loch, pf,

1995 rev. 1996

Inside Out, 3 gui,
Sound Works Suite No. 2 for Young Players

1997

The Waterford Suite: Jealous Pursuit, va, pf
The Waterford Suite: Prelude and Labyrinth
The Waterford Suite: Resolution and Carousel, vc, pf
The Waterford Suite: Then / Now, 2 pf
Everything Passes for small orchestra

1998

Five Songs, sop, pf
Géibheann, ssa.
There are also musicians, ssa,

1999

Monsieur Marceau. mar, hpd, gui
Five Short Piano Solos
Missa, ssa, pf
Missa, ssa, small orch

1999 For Ide rev 2002 fkute or recorder
Jagged Edge, vn, vc

2000
In Umbra, vc
Jubilate Domino, ssa, org
Sympathy. med.v., fl, perc, Irish harp,
Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn, ssa
Piano Trio No. 2

2001 rev. 2007
Fanfare brass or ww ensemble

2001
Reflection on the Sixth Station of the Cross, ssax. gui.
Undercurrent, piano trio,
Béal Dearg, pf
Piano Trio No. 3

2002
Drift - Knot, gui
Mo Pháistín Fionn, ssa
Hidden, cl, bcl, gui, 2 perc

2003
Where the clouds go, orch

2005
Tread Softly, pf
Eight Improvisations, treble instrument ad lib

2006
Four Pieces for Solo Flute
From an upper window, pf
Do not stand by my grave and weep, satb
Two Marian Anthems, satb

2007
Cnámh, mssa

2008
Síofra Sí, ssa
The Kiss, satb
Pas de Quatre, string quartet

2010
Street Dancer, narrator, satb, pf, 2 perc
Veni Creator for mixed choir
Prelude for organ

2011
Relic, video, electro-acoustic and mixed media
Con coro for violin, cello and tape

2012
As if nothing had happened cello and tape
Piano trio no 3

2013
Shift choral/ ensemble
Lines and Spaces video

2014
The Small Hours accodion and video
Make we merry for mixed choir1

2015
Smiling like that mezzo/electronics

2016

A different game for piano trio

Twist for piano

(4780)

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