

SEÁN Ó'RIADA

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When Seán Ó' Riada died from cirrhosis of the liver on 3 October 1971, Ireland's public grief reached proportions unprecedented for a non-political figure. People from every walk of life attended the funeral and internment in St. Gobinat's cemetery. Tributes flooded in from everywhere and for a long while after his death. This seems extravagant for a mere composer whose output was too slight to justify such a reaction.

In simple terms, he portrayed in his music a vision of Ireland and of an Irish mode of life in line with the country's oldest and finest traditions, striking a vibrant chord not only in the Irish but also in the wider cosmopolitan world.

He was a brilliant lecturer and music maker and became very popular, indeed glamorous, as a TV personality. He very successfully amalgamated traditional and liturgical music, elevating traditional music above snobbery and prejudice and winning acknowledgement of significance not only culturally but also musically. What British composers did to bring the English musical heritage to stand alongside 'serious' music Ó' Riada did for its Irish counterpart, winning approbation for thus restoring pride to Irish culture and, with his own band, securing for it a much wider audience and subsequent acclaim. In this he anticipated and prefigured such internationally recognised groups as, for example, The Chieftains. He was the only Irish composer to be a household name to his own people during his lifetime.

He was born John Reidy in the city of Cork on 1 August 1931. Seán Ó' Riada is the anglicised version of John Reidy. He was educated in County Limerick and by the Christian Brothers in Adare eventually entering University College, Cork studying the classics and later, in 1948, music under Aloys Fleischmann. He then went to Paris and came under the influence of both Florent Schmitt and Olivier Messiaen. He also played some of his own piano pieces on Paris radio in 1954. Here he encountered serialism and responded to it immediately; the consequence of this revelation was his *Nomos no 1: Ferrarie dux Hercules* of 1957 for string orchestra. Hercules, Duke of Ferrara was the patron of Josquin des Prés; *nomos* is taken from the Greek signifying a 'composition strictly following the laws of classical aesthetics'. The method of composition need neither concern nor deter; the piece, which is a set of variations, is both powerful and beautiful, evincing an original and individual mind.

Returning to Ireland as a free-lance and living in Dublin, he became musical director at the Abbey Theatre. It was, however, his West Cork background that fostered his fascination for traditional music, and he set various traditional songs for voice and piano. This nationalistic ideal enabled him to compose the score for George Morrison's film *Mise Eire* in 1959 which, among other things, magnificently employs the tune *Dark Rosaleen*. It is impossible to imagine a more effective and evocative score, although many will sneer at the suggestion that mere film music could be a masterpiece. There are other accomplished film scores, including *Saoirse* and *An Tine Bheo*.

He married Ruth in 1959 and they honeymooned on the Dingle peninsula. There were six children born in quick succession. Ruth was to survive her husband by five years before dying of cancer. Having an inadequate income and no real success with his 'classical' pieces Ó' Riada formed his own band, *Ceoltóin Cualam*, which spearheaded the Irish traditional music revival, using the appropriate instruments – tin whistles and simple flutes, uilleann pipes, accordion, fiddle, bodhrán (the primitive goat-skin drum of County Kerry) and harpsichord representing the old wire-strunged nail-plucked harp. His band was a phenomenal success and, as an individual, he also rose to great personal heights. In 1964, he was appointed Cork Corporation Lecturer



in Irish Music at University College, Cork and added to his reputation of being a gregarious person with friends in all sections of Irish society.

In 1963 he completed his *Nomos no 2* for baritone, choir and large orchestra based on pessimistic texts from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. The work lasts about fifty minutes and employs serial ideas but, as before, retains a tonal basis. There are references to plainchant and other classical and pre-classical techniques. The final climax comes with quotations from the Saint Anthony Chorale and symphonies of Mozart and Beethoven, all interrupted with extreme discord. *Nomos no 2* was first performed by Herbert Moulton, the RTE singers and Choral Society and orchestra under Tibor Paul on 11 June 1965.

Nomos no 3 survives in an incomplete manuscript. *Nomos no 4* was written earlier, in 1958, and is, in effect, a piano concerto of sorts in which, curiously, the piano has a subdued role perhaps not unlike Falla's *Nights in the Gardens of Spain*. *Nomos no 4* was premièred on 20 February 1959 by Charles Lynch under the composer's baton. There is no record of *Nomos no 5* but *Nomos no 6* is an orchestral work dating from 1966 and first performed the following year at the Belfast Festival. It has a dissonant opening, ornamental theme on strings, jazz riffs and a throwaway ending. It was to be his last completed orchestral work, while his first was the Overture *Olynthiac* of 1955 which is as exciting as *The Bartered Bride* overture by Sinetena.

Another fine, but completely different work, inspired by a river in West Cork, is *The Banks of the Sullan*, a pastoral elegy for orchestra. It dates from 1956 and is an evocative work of great beauty. There is *Seoladh na nGamhna*, a festival overture dating from 1959 and dedicated to the Cork Symphony Orchestra. The following year the *Tryptych* for Orchestra was completed as a tribute to three French impressionists – Renoir, Morisot and Manet. Also that year, a three act opera *Spailpin a Ruin* was performed in Dublin's Dame Hall. Another opera, *A Fable from Herodotus*, was not completed. There are songs, such as the *Three Poems of Thomas Kinsella* of 1954 and the *Four Holderlin Songs* of 1956, but they are not very individual. Radio Eireann commissioned, as an entry for the Italia Prix, a large choral work, *The Lords and the Bards*, to a text by Robert Farren in 1959 and, on a smaller and more intimate scale, there are some original liturgical works deliberately written in the Irish traditional music style. The *Cuil Audha Mass* of 1968 was written for the people of Coolea in West Cork and it broke new ground for the words are in Irish following Vatican II's relaxation of its policies. The accompaniment is of the most simple basic chords. In one passage in this work a rhythm reminiscent of a dance metre is used typifying the overall accessibility of the music and the language, which thus encouraged people to go to Mass for Ó' Riada's music. There is also another Mass written for the Benedictine Abbey at Glenstal. Both these works were recorded surreptitiously and pirate photocopies were circulated extensively. Ó' Riada said, "I would like to hear a man coming out of Mass whistling 'Our Father' or to hear a man making hay whistling 'Our Father'." He had a vision of producing an endless stream of Masses which would be used all over Ireland. He saw this as the best means of involving people in his music and, of course, in himself, and thereby reaching the people that his band may not have touched. He longed for recognition and prominence and his peculiar behaviour was to this end. He passed himself off as an exotic, modelling himself on Stravinsky in his Paris years; he had a bizarre appearance in the way he dressed and pursued other indulgencies and irresponsible activities. There is a story of his hiring a gold Cadillac in which to take some of his lady friends around; he drank heavily and indiscreetly for it was poitín he drank, the Irish 'moonshine'. He was eccentric in the extreme, driving about in an old and somewhat dangerous Mercedes and, indeed, some months before he died, he was involved in a collision with a lorry which could have been fatal. He always did what he wanted to do whether in music, sailing on the Kenmare river or being involved in social activities. He was a proud man and a law unto himself.

Curiously, one of his last works was a *Requiem Mass* dating from 1970 and scored for soloists, chorus and organ. It was commissioned by RTE and broadcast for the first time on the death of Eamon de Valera. It makes use of some melodic writing in the Irish style and the *Pater Noster* is taken from the *Cuil Aodha Mass*. The work's association with de Valera (one of the founders of the Fianna Fail party and its first president, he was later prime minister of Ireland for three terms) elevated Ó' Riada to a parity with the head of the country. Charles Haughey, the prime minister of Ireland when Ó' Riada died, attended the composer's funeral, the

two of them having worked together to obtain tax concessions for artistes. By these connections with the heads of his beloved Ireland, he did what Elgar did by toadying to royalty, which, as much as anything, made his name.

But it is the music we must consider.. Paradoxically, it is flawed but rather special. His film score *Mise Eire* (I am Ireland) brought him an acclaim that no other Irish composer has received in Ireland. Indeed he was Ireland - for a while. He was honoured by thousands in his death but, memories being short, he is now viewed as an enfant terrible, a sacred cow or a white elephant?

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