

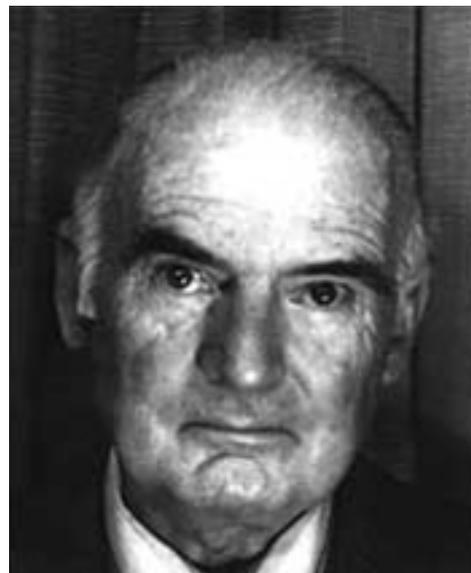
## **WALTER BECKETT**

Dr David C F Wright

WARNING Strict copyright applies to this article and all of Dr Wright's articles

Walter Koehler Beckett loved Dublin. His father, James Walter Beckett, was a cousin of the writer Samuel Beckett and was himself a TD in the first Fine Gael Government under Liam Cosgrave.

Walter was born in Dublin on 27 July 1914 and studied at the Read School of Music and at the Royal Irish Academy of Music. He was a fine pianist and received his LRAM in 1934 and his BMus in 1936, the year in which he became an Associate of the Royal College of Organists. He was the organist at Canice's Cathedral in Kilkenny and, when he was living in England, often played the organ at various venues mainly in Coventry and district.



In 1945 he composed one of his first works a Suite for orchestra lasting some 27 minutes and in three movements, Pastoral, Scherzo and Triple Fantasy. The first two movements were premiered on 27 February 1954 at the Theatre Royal Dublin by the Radio Eirean SO under Milan Horvat. The Triple Fantasy was given first at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin by the same forces. In 1947 he received his MusD from Trinity College, Dublin.

His first major vocal work was Four Higgins Songs of 1946 for tenor and small orchestra. The songs are Connemara, Spanish Man, Little Green Shoes and The Cautious Man.

Between 1946 and 1952 he was the music critic for the Irish Times.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s he studied conducting in Italy on an Italian Government scholarship. He and his wife, Hylde, loved Italy and, while there, he taught English at the Scuola Navale in Venice and wrote orchestral arrangements of Irish Airs which, since the 1940s, had become popular. He studied Liszt's time in Italy and therefore encountered the Liszt expert, Humphrey Searle and they became good friends. Beckett was also interested in Liszt's visit to Ireland during 1840-1. Searle stayed with the Becketts in Venice which city partly inspired Searle's splendid Third Symphony.

Searle brought out his book on Liszt in 1954. As a result of this, many other writers jumped on the bandwagon and brought out books on Liszt using Searle's information. Beckett was one such person.

In 1957 Beckett composed his Irish Rhapsody for orchestra which lasts about 12 minutes. It was premiered in a broadcast performance on 25 June 1956 conducted by Eimear O'Broin. This was followed by the Falaingin Dances a work of similar duration and forces first performed in the Gaiety Theatre with the RESO conducted by Lawrence Leonard. His nearest work to a concerto was the Suite of Planxties of 1960 for harp and orchestra in four movements also lasting about 12 minutes.

He also wrote a book on Ballet Music in 1958 which was published by Cassell again following Searle's example with his book, Ballet Music.

In 1970 he succeeded Dr Archie Potter as professor of harmony at the Royal Irish Academy of Music.

His most active period was at the end of his life. His song cycle Goldenhair to settings of James Joyce was for medium voice, optional viola and piano. The five songs only last seven minutes and were premiered by Alison Edge and Brian Connor in April 1982. He composed a String Quartet in 1986 which is available on Chandos (CHAN 9295) and composed his Dublin Symphony of 1991 which combines his love for Dublin, Italy and for Bach and Delius whose harmonies he found impressive.

His music is diatonic and romantic and shows influences of the composers he most admired, J S Bach, Chopin, Faure, Vaughan Williams, Richard Strauss and, of course, Delius.

He was a champion sailor winning many cups in the Dragon Class and Cruiser competitions. He was a member of the Irish Cruising Club and Howth Yacht Club. With his brother, he won a trophy for sailing around Ireland in his cruiser, Dara.

His duties restricted his time for composition. He conducted the Dublin Operatic Society and the Dublin Music Society and, while in England, conducted the Leamington Spa Bach Choral Society.

He died on Wednesday 3 April 1996 and was survived by his wife and their daughter, Lisa, and four grandchildren. He was buried in Rathnew, County Wicklow.

---

Copyright Davd C F Wright, 1996. This article or any part, however brief, of it must not be copied, used, quoted stored in any retrieval system or downloaded without the prior written consent the author.