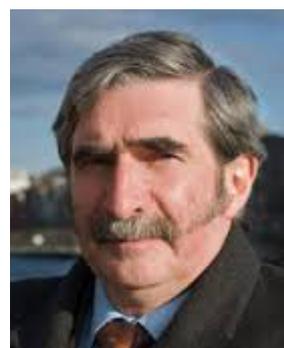


## JOHN BUCKLEY

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The music of John Buckley is sometimes tough and gritty and therefore not for the faint-hearted, shallow or uninitiated listener, although his early works are written in a less ambitious style than his later ones.

However, the rapid development of his musical thought and fertile imagination has often paused, as it were, to allow him to compose some immediately accessible pieces including Five Two-Part Songs for children of 1978, Scél lem Duib of 1981, which are settings of some anonymous texts in Old Irish, superlative transcriptions of Three Irish Folk songs of 1983 with their rich harmonies, and to undertake the stirring and resplendent arrangement of the anthem of the Irish Labour Party, Watchword of Labour the original melody being by J. J. Hughes and the words by James Connolly. It is scored for chorus and band.



Other works of Buckley which could well become widely popular are the Sonata for guitar of 1989, which is well conceived and realised, as well as being gratifyingly devoid of ‘Spanish’ clichés and sun-drenched sentimentality, thus refreshingly projecting the guitar as a robust instrument, as did Alberto Ginestera. A Thin Halo of Blue is an intriguing setting for speaker, choir, piano and orchestra of texts compiled by the composer from place names on the moon (and elsewhere) and statements made by astronauts. The music could hardly be more apt, and it is a most evocative score even to those who have not the slightest interest in space exploration. This work was the Radio Telefis Eireann entry for the Italia Prix in 1990.

But although Buckley’s strong and distinctive style may be forbidding to some, his music teems with a wealth of ideas and, as one writer has said of Taller than Roman Spears, is formidably original. However, it would be wrong to represent Buckley’s work as perplexing; Lutoslawski’s may not be any more difficult.

John was born on 19 December 1951 in Templeglantine, County Limerick, a richly rural area of Ireland, and a locality marked by a passion for traditional music. His mother, Eileen, played the traditional fiddle but along with her farmer-husband, Thomas, did not extend such interests to classical music. This wealth of traditional music lead John to take up the button accordion with Liam Moloney between the years 1960 and 1963 while he was attending Templeglantine National School which he had entered in 1957. Unlike many traditional musicians, Moloney could read music and was therefore able to teach John the appropriate skills.

In 1964, the schoolboy moved up to the Salesian College, Ballinakill, County Laoise, where he stayed until 1969. This college acquired three instruments and the three pupils most likely to use them were given a choice. John was last in line and inherited the flute.

At school, he was good at music, Latin and physics and had an interest in athletics. In 1968, he experienced his first awakening to music’s expressive power on hearing two very disparate works, Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony and Penderecki’s Threnody for Victims of Hiroshima.

The following year John went for weekly flute lessons to Doris Keogh at the Royal Irish Academy of Music while studying for two years at St Patrick’s Teaching Training College, Drumcondra, Dublin. He qualified as a National teacher in 1971 but he had already decided to be a composer. One of the professors at the College, Dr A. J. Potter asked Buckley, “Do you want to study harmony and be an academic or be a composer?” Potter was not well enough to take Buckley as a pupil, so he went to

James Wilson for composition lessons, where he both learned how to write idiomatically for instruments and voices and also acquired the ability to develop musical ideas. He was with Wilson for four years until 1975.

In his teenage years John had been influenced by Beethoven, Sibelius and contemporary music to which he had access. He had no interest in 'pop' music and his reading was mainly confined to adventure stories. In his young adult years he absorbed a very wide range of literary works, and this has extended still further throughout his life, to include Ibsen, Kafka, Golding, Borges, McGahern, Calvino, Brian Moore, Ishiguro and Nabokov. These influences encouraged his creativity in the form of an inner drive to compose, coupled with a fascination, curiosity and delight at manipulating notes and sonorities. His first year with Wilson saw his initial attempts at composition namely a movement for string quartet, a flute sonata and about ten fragments that did not proceed beyond two bars apiece. The Sonata for flute and piano was performed at the RIAI by Deirdre Brady and Mary O'Sullivan who were then students.

Buckley taught most subjects at the Holy Spirit Boys National School in Ballymun where the pupils were aged between seven and twelve. He was there until 1982.

His first acknowledged work is the Sonata for cor anglais and piano of 1973 and it was his first piece to be performed by professionals, namely Lindsay Armstrong and his wife Gillian Smith. Charles Acton of the Irish Times described it as 'a work of real charm and delight.' The premiere was at the Festival of 20th-Century Music held at Trinity College, Dublin in January 1974. It was James Wilson who suggested this piece as the repertoire for the cor anglais is very small. Coupled with good advice and Buckley's persistence in trying to interest players in his music, provided the springboard for his first performances. Six months later this sonata was broadcast by RTE.

Having discarded the flute sonata although proficient as a flautist, Buckley composed the skilfully-written Three Pieces for Solo Flute in 1973. The Evening Herald said that 'they reveal a sensitive ear and a flair for evocation.' The Brass Quintet of 1974 is, to quote Charles Acton, 'Vividly written, having a wealth of individual ideas'. The Three Pieces for Solo Cello of 1975 were described by the Irish Times as 'rewarding to hear because the pieces are music and significant'. Ian Fox of the Sunday Tribune said that they were 'pensive and tuneful' while the Evening Press reported that the work was 'a positive and continuous statement showing sensitive feeling'. The following year Buckley submitted his Wind Quintet for the Varming Prize and won. The Evening Press referred to the central movement as "haunting" and the finale as "a merry piece with shrill and giddy fanfares and a clever interpolation of 'Yankee Doodle'. The composer was to revise the work in 1985 to "improve its clarity and continuity".

On 10 July 1976, Buckley married Philomena McGinley in Dublin, a teacher who has held various appointments at primary schools, teaching all subjects. Although she has not sung professionally she was for some years in Cantairi Avondale, a choir consisting mainly of teachers. She has always been enthusiastic about her husband's music and her favourite piece is A Thin Halo of Blue which is dedicated to her. The Buckleys have three children: Deirdre born in 1978, Niamh in 1981 and Oisín in 1985.

Buckley's first orchestral work appeared in 1977. This was Taller than Roman Spears which takes its inspiration from a Celtic epoch. The title comes from poem 'The Celts' by Thomas D'Arcy McGee:

Long long ago beyond the misty space of twice a thousand years  
In Erin old there dwelt a mighty race taller than Roman spears

The work is dedicated to Colman Pearce and is really a concerto for orchestra. As the Evening Herald stated, "It explores layers of colour". The Evening Press speaks of it as "arrestive, having a ritualistic atmosphere evoked through orchestral writing immediately pungent and barbaric". It is arranged in four movements representing the four major Celtic ritual festival days. Samhain treats of communication

with the gods and the music is semi-savage and highly evocative, suggesting shafts of iridescent light. Imboilg is the pastoral festival and a more traditional sound is portrayed. The music is melodic and profound and this movement would make a good introduction to Buckley's individual style. The lovely long section for strings is genuinely impressive. Bealtaine is concerned with fertility rituals and here the composer introduces an aleatoric section in which the orchestra is sub-divided into eight numbered groups which the conductor has to rehearse separately. Indeterminacy is very suitable for the subject matter and the composer was to use the same improvisatory device in his Concerto for Chamber Orchestra and Time Piece and, to a lesser extent, in his Symphony no. 1. The last movement of Taller than Roman Spears, Lughnasadl conveys the Celtic concepts of the overseer of all such festivals and the importance of the arts and sciences. Quotations from the previous movements are included and the noble melodic lines are striking. Stravinskian brass and percussion of The Rite of Spring come to mind.

Following this splendid orchestral tour de force is a work for the piano. Oileain of 1979 is also a four-movement work which is based on Irish mythology and deals with the voyage of Maelduin who sought out the killer of his father. One newspaper reported that the music was 'vigorous but not overly descriptive'. The Evening Herald was undecided, saying "Buckley writes better for singing instruments than he does for the piano. Oileain does not emerge with the force and persuasiveness of Buckley's other music but is a violent, highly explicit work". The Sunday Tribune and Irish Times were more perceptive when they wrote respectively, "It is a very strong work with ferociously difficult passages for the performer", and, "It communicates readily without being superficial".

Having acquired the Macaulay Fellowship in 1978 following the submission of several scores for adjudication Buckley was awarded a grant of £2,500 to be used at his discretion to further his studies. He travelled to Cardiff to study with the Welsh composer, Alun Hoddinott whom he described as "a fantastic teacher and a very likeable man. He was a great encouragement and help analysing my scores and correcting them to ensure a sense of flow. We got on well and shared a mutual interest in Celtic mythology".

The following year Buckley obtained a first honours Master of Arts degree in composition from University College, Cork, having studied externally.

Many of John Buckley's works have been commissioned. Radio Telefis Eireann who were behind Pulvis et Umbra (Spring's Return) a setting for choir and piano of words by Horace. It is a vocal show-piece, at once exciting, sombre and fascinating, in which vocal techniques are always used to good purpose. The next work in his oeuvre is Five Epigrams for flute and oboe which the Evening Herald believed to have a "highly Arabian tang" and to be "abounding in thrills". Charles Acton is right when he says of this work, "It has immediate appeal... it is real music... it speaks!".

One work which had mixed reviews was Fornoacht do Chonac Thu of 1980, described as ballet music for orchestra. This was an Irish government commission for the Padraic Pearse centenary. It is music of contrast as all good music must be. It alternates anguish with calm in a clear and coherent fashion. As with all of Buckley's orchestral works, the colours and textures are expertly judged. It is robust, percussive and invigorating, with some contrastingly tasteful and more restrained passages; the prominent piano part is exhilarating. While the music may occasionally lose its way, there are some unforgettable passages, including the long, magnificent, and indeed overwhelming climax, beside which a Rossini crescendo would sound commonplace, before a restful end. It is a remarkable score.

In 1980, Buckley was introduced to film music with his incidental music for Orpen, Mirror to an Age, an RTE documentary directed by Joe Mulholland and based on the life of the artist William Orpen. It is scored for ten voices and five instruments with a text again by Horace. Five years later, Buckley was to use just four instruments for the incidental music for the film, The Woman who married Clark Gable which starred Bob Hoskins and Brenda Fricker. It is tuneful, diatonic, nostalgic and appealing

music of a rich mellowness that could not fail to please. The following year came a score for the Strongbow Film and Television Productions version of *A Summer Ghost* which just employed flute, cello, and piano. The aphoristic elements of this music recalls Buckley's perceptive comments to me about the music of Webern, "His pieces have a gem-like perfection. He manages to say in a word what it takes others a sentence. Extreme brevity can be as difficult as undue length".

In 1981, another impressive score appeared as the *Concerto for Chamber Orchestra*. The *Irish Times* called it "imaginative". The *Evening Press* said of it, "The composer has a sure grasp of orchestration and its many possibilities... it has some exciting effects... it is a rich score... while the whole work is interesting, the second movement was the most successful". The *Sunday Tribune* wrote, "The first movement is riveting... the second is peaceful and more impressive". The *Irish Independent* concurred: "It is a colourful work full of ideas" and admires the composer's "distinctive style" and remarks about the "sparks of humour that light it". The work opens with snarling brass and is angry and compelling with its collages of sound. The music is virile and develops into a more conventional expression and yet its greatest feature may be the rich sounds obtained from a small orchestra, an ability he shares with Beethoven. Buckley's work is a little too long and it falls apart somewhat in the middle. In some sequences the inherent repetitiveness leads nowhere, as in so many of Elgar's sequences; Shostakovich's, sequences conversely, were sometimes lengthy but always purposeful.

*Time Piece* for flute, clarinet, cello and piano was considered by the press to be "too detached and insulated". Such opposition did not deter John Buckley. After the submission of scores and tapes for adjudication, together with an outline of a project which was to become the *Symphony no. 1*, he was awarded an Arts Council Bursary. In order to take this up he retired from his teaching post to concentrate full-time on composition.

The Ennis Summer School of Music was the vision of John Buckley who founded it in 1983 to provide a facility for young composers in Ireland to work with established composers and benefit from their tutelage and, at the end of the two weeks, have their own works performed. For many years the School has hired professional performers from the Irish symphony orchestras including Alan Smale, John O' Kane and Richard O' Donnell and, one year, the British soprano, Jane Manning. Guest composers have come from Germany, Sweden, the United States and, from England, Paul Patterson and John Casken. Some students who have attended the School over the years have become well-known, in Ireland particularly, including Michael Alcorn who lectured at Queens University, Belfast and is a promising composer, Marion Ingoldsby who has completed an opera *Hot Food with Strangers* and Rhona Clarke who has deservedly won a name for herself.

After the first year, Buckley asked James Wilson to assist him and Alcorn has become its third administrator. The School is held at Colaiste Mhuire by courtesy of the order of nuns, and, apart from 1988, has had an Arts' Council Grant.

The Three Irish Folk songs of 1983 for chorus and piano are especially fine arrangements. *Down by the Sally Gardens* has perfectly glorious harmonies and one cannot contemplate a better transcription. Buckley exalts these tunes from the commonplace to stand alongside music of greater moment. *Kitty of Coleraine* calls for expert vocal articulation and has an infectious humour. *My Lagan Love* is also eminently singable although some may consider the piano part a little obtrusive

The *Suite for harpsichord* was commissioned by Gillian Smith with funds provided by the Arts Council. There are five movements of tough and, it must be said, repetitive music which lacks any relaxation or respite. Though indisputably clever, it also verges on the tedious. The *Sonata for unaccompanied violin* is another major work which, to quote the words of Charles Acton, is "written for the instrument not against it". It is a work devoid of any time signature and is finely conceived. *Boirèann* for flute and piano is Buckley's only excursion into serialism. The work was inspired by the composer's personal reaction to the landscape of the Burren region of County Clare. The music is intense, stark, mysterious and

powerful whereas *And Wake the Purple Year* of 1985, with its conscious references to Bartok and Debussy, is a warm-hearted work which the Cork Examiner called “probably his most traditional composition”. Pat O’Kelly wrote, “it is at once a colourful collage of irrepressible beauty, having an alluring artistry, being a decided asset to the repertoire of Irish piano music”. That could also be said of *Winter Music* of 1988, yet probably the most outstanding work of 1985 was for organ, and was based on one of the Holy Sonnets of John Donne *At the Round Earths Imagined Corners*. This work certainly deserves to be in the repertoire of all concert organists. It is as approachable as Messiaen and more rewarding. It has not only a well-argued structure, characterised by telling contrasts, but also an almost blinding scintillatio. The performance I heard was breathtaking, stirring afresh my love for the ‘King of instruments’.

The *Symphony no. 1* is dedicated to my friend the composer James Wilson and was completed in 1988. It is an uneven work, its excitements being offset by unwelcome longueurs, which in a two-movement work lasting about thirty-five minutes, requires some intellectual stamina to assimilate! However, it must again be said that here is a composer who always puts his own stamp on what he writes. He also impresses as a man of integrity with firm convictions about his own music and that of others. His opinion of Bach matches my opinion of him “He produced music in response to situations he found during his life. His music is of an intellectual quality coupled with emotional expressiveness”. Like Bach’s music, Mozart stands at the “culmination of an era. Perhaps Mozart is the most gifted composer ever bringing his genius to bear on all genres. Beethoven brought a new scope and dimension to musical art with a dramatic power and through broad architectural structures”. How aptly that remark applies to Buckley himself.

John Buckley has had the distinction of representing his country four times at the International Rostrum of Composers; in 1978 it was with the Brass Quintet in 1980 with *Fulviset Umbra* in 1984 with *Boirèann* and, in 1987, with *Wake the Purple Year* This choice is made by RTE of works they broadcast in the appropriate year. In 1991 Buckley received the Marten Toonder Award from the Arts Council, submitting for independent adjudication five scores composed in the past ten years. There was also the production of his first opera *The Words upon the Window-pane* with a libretto by Hugh Maxton from the play by W. B. Yeats. This was one of four twenty-minute operas commissioned for the same occasion and Buckley scored it for five singers and six instruments. The plot concerns a séance in which a medium is taken over in character and personality by Jonathan Swift and then by the two loves of his life, Vanessa and Stella. The opera calls for a mezzo soprano of some versatility for the main role in a work that is entertaining and gripping, and which received superb responses in Dublin (it was written for European City of Culture celebrations) Belfast, Wexford and Waterford in October 1991.

The *Concerto* for organ and orchestra dates from 1992. It was jointly commissioned by the National Concert Hall, Dublin, Radio Telefis Eireann and the Irish Arts Council for the new organ in the hall. The work is dedicated to Hugh McGinley, his father-in-law, and was premiered on 26 June 1992 with Peter Sweeney at the organ and Robert Houlihan conducting the National Symphony Orchestra. It may be the work that gives the composer most satisfaction.

Such a concerto raises problems of balance between the organ and the orchestra and often the organ seems to be just another instrument in the orchestra. There are solo passages for the organ but the orchestral writing is often technically difficult thus making this a *Concerto* for organ and orchestra.

Although the work is in one movement it is basically in three sections with two toccatas sandwiching an adagio.

The *Three Preludes* for piano date from 1996 and have titles namely *The cloths of Heaven*, *Like Ghosts from an Enchanter* *Fleeing* and *Jim Singing*.

Titles are of great significance to this composer as they are intimately connected with the understanding of his work. The titles suggest mood and atmosphere. I will quote some examples:

Rivers of Paradise was inspired by John Doone in his sermon 14 of 1624 and John Henry Newman's The Idea of the University of 1852 - 1873. But it is a translation by the composer of a 17th century Irish text

The Silver Apples of the Moon; the Golden apples of the Sun is a work commissioned in 1994 by the GPA Dublin International Piano Competition with funds from the Arts Council. It was premiered by Paulo Cremona at the National Concert Hall in May 1994 and was inspired by Yeats poem The Wandering Aengus:

And walk among long dappled grass  
And pluck till time and times are done  
The silver apples of the moon  
The golden apples of the sun.

There is a Spot Mid Barren Hills is a line from Stanzas of 1838 by Emily Bronte and was composed in 1998 for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's College. It is scored for satb.

The literary influence behind A Mirror into Light is taken from an image is the poem What We Can See of the Sky has Fallen by Lavina Greenlaw which captures the brilliance and luminosity of the poetic image. It was commissioned by Camerata Ireland with funds from the Arts Council and first performed by them in Stormont Castle in April 1999 when the conductor was Barry Douglas.

In Lines of Dazzling Light for violin, clarinet, horn, bassoon and piano was commissioned by the Ensemble Contrasts of Vienna with assistance from the Arts Council. The title is taken from a line from Sir Walter Scott. It is in eight short movements and was premiered in Vienna in February 1993.

In Winter Light for flute and guitar was inspired by the poem Omeros by Derek Walcott and is set in two movements. In Winter Light (Concerto for flute/alto flute and orchestra) of 2009 is a version of the flute and guitar piece. The two movements are Adagio and Con Moto and was premiered by William Dowdall and the RTE National Symphony Orchestra conducted by Christian Gansch.

Winter Echoes for flute is a version of the cadenza from the Flute Concerto.

Sea Echoes of 2009 for solo flute uses the recent innovation of a sliding head joint.

Campane in Arias (Bells in the Air) of 2006 was commissioned by the National Concert Hall for the 25th anniversary of its opening in 1981. It is a single movement of about seven minutes where the bells of the instruments are raised facing away from the audience. The work is a celebration of bell ringing with the tintinnabulation of glockenspiel and vibraphone.

A work of great interest is the Maynooth Te Deum which was commissioned by St Patrick's Maynooth College as part of its International celebrations of 1995. It is scored for solo soprano, contralto, tenor, bass, College choir, large chorus, male voice choir, organ and large orchestra and premiered in the National Concert Hall on 16th November 1995. There are eight sections and the composer has caught the sonorous majesty of the text.

The Quattor for four orchestras was commissioned by the Dublin Youth Orchestras with funds from the arts council. The work was completed on New Years Eve 1999 and the first performance was in the national Basketball Arena in Tallaght, Dublin on 9 April 2000.

The four orchestras are junior, intermediate, transitional and symphony orchestra. Each orchestra has a movement on its own.

The movements are:

1. Intrada for four orchestras, an energetic with fanfares and swirling strings
2. Air and Dance for junior orchestra a slow and meditative piece
3. Scherzo for transitional orchestra with syncopation and jazz-like rhythms
4. Interlude for intermediate, transitional and symphony orchestra
5. Elegia for intermediate orchestra
6. Finale for symphony orchestra, a bright and energetic movement
7. Coda for the four orchestras recalling material from the opening Intrada.

The work should not be dismissed as just educational music.

Mr Buckley continues to lecture on many music subjects at St Patrick's College, Drumcondra. He has been awarded a PhD and DMus from the National University of Ireland and is a member of Aosdana, Ireland's state-sponsored organisation for creative artists.

He is proud to be Irish and, modestly, he wants to be remembered for having made a contribution to composition in Ireland. That he has done and, more recently, his music has attracted attention throughout Europe, the USA, the Orient and Russia. Sadly, Britain shows no interest in present-day music from Ireland, a discrimination which is inequitable. Buckley is a fine composer with a remarkable and original talent and, whether one likes his music or not, one has to admit that here is a composer and a musical ability to be reckoned with. He has set standards in his native Ireland which are surely exemplary in both originality and excellence. He is also a most congenial man, modest and genuinely courteous.

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