

Lecture given by :

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International Symposium

"When I grow up, I want to be a musician"

Presented by Young European Strings.



on Friday 12 January 2001 at 3.15pm
John Field Room,
National Concert Hall, Dublin.

I'd like to thank Maria Kelemen for inviting me to speak here today.

I must admit, however, I have a strange feeling that I'm an interloper. I'm not a professional in the area of education, and haven't been for 20-odd years now. Much of what I'm about to say, I've said before. My excuse for this is that, as a late stand-in, my options weren't great. But maybe repetition isn't such a bad thing. It seems to be one of the conditions of music in Ireland that many of the things worth saying haven't changed greatly over the years.

I don't know how many people in this room today have been to a conference or symposium on music education in Ireland before. I've only been to a handful. And yet that handful seems to be too much. Why? The reason is very simple. The issues seem to be as predictable as the nature of climate change is not. And the sense of progress is shaky and slight.

It was to this very building in 1994 that I came to report on a conference on Music in the Classroom. There was a genuine, warm sense of camaraderie at the event. But it was, it seemed to me, the camaraderie of those whose team had tried and lost rather than of those whose route was going to be a confident striding onward and upward.

The message then could hardly have been clearer. Music education in Ireland, everyone seemed to feel, was in a sorry state. The facts, then as now, speak for themselves. Classroom music is by no means guaranteed. Some of the individuals expected to teach it in our Primary Schools are themselves musically illiterate. The provision of music education at secondary level is altogether patchier, so it's hardly surprising that as few as 2 per cent of Leaving Certificate students sit a music exam.

At no stage in the Irish education system does a pupil have a right of access to instrumental tuition. A young person who wants to learn the piano or the guitar, or even study singing needs parents who are able and willing to pay for it, and who are fortunate enough to live within reach of a suitable teacher. This is really a case, as one wag put it to me, of class in the music room rather than music in the classroom. Ireland's public provision of music schools is among the worst in Europe. There is still no national conservatory for the training of professional musicians, and the welcome plans to provide one seem to have become temporarily derailed.

Back in 1994, I was able to gauge the official approach to collective music-making with instruments by looking at the size of grant offered by the Department of Education towards the establishment of an orchestra. It was then £225. So, for instance, if a one-hundred-member school band or orchestra managed to claim this level of support on an annual basis, it would take rather more than a century to acquire its instruments. Yesterday's Irish Times carried a report of a £6.1 million "arts and music grant for the state's 3,200 primary schools". This is "to purchase equipment and materials as well as starting activities to enable children to participate in visual arts, music, drama, dance and literature". At under £2,000 per school, or £13 per pupil, and split across a range of disciplines, I leave you all to wonder about how much of this is likely to filter meaningfully into children's musical lives.

The importance of the arts in general, and music in particular, in the development of the individual cannot be underestimated. Indeed, apart from the intrinsic value of the study of music in and of itself, the research suggests that the benefits that accrue from music education include increased confidence, greater clarity of thought and team-building skills among others.

Bands, orchestras and choirs, of course, do exist. And good work in the area of music is being done at all levels of the Irish education system. But it's hard to avoid the conclusion that it takes place in spite of rather than because of the stance of the Department of Education. I've noticed for a number of years now, that music educationalists sound a lot more positive about the Department than they used to. This, I'm sure, is a credit to the enterprise and understanding of key individuals working within that department. Yet, I can't dispel the memory of hearing details of the exciting new curriculum that was being introduced into Secondary Schools.

It was an excitement that didn't last. I learned soon enough that the freedom to be examined, for instance, in jazz performance or composition, hasn't brought with it a guaranteed access to the necessary tuition or other indeed the other resources that might be necessary.

This brings me around to one of the core issues affecting music in Ireland today: policy and its implementation, or non-implementation. In the 1970s, when the Arts Council first took the form which we recognise today, it had a declared policy of recognising the primacy of the individual creative artist. The core thrust of this policy is now enshrined in Aosdána, an institution which not only honours artists over the age of 30, but provides a structure through which needy artists can be guaranteed a basic income.

During the 1980s, the council pursued a policy of "professionalisation". In music, this had far-reaching consequences. In 1981, the council made grants to eight companies presenting opera, many of them regional, most of them with a high level of amateur involvement. By 1989 the number had dropped to just three, the Dublin Grand Opera Society, Opera Theatre Company and the Wexford Festival, all of them highly professionalised.

However, the arts, let alone music and opera in particular, aren't really the places you'll find the power of publicly-declared policies most clearly at work in Ireland. Think of the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy, with its remarkable range of impact -- on food prices and farmers' incomes here in Europe and, more chillingly, on prospects for farmers and food supplies in the third world. Think of all of the other policy-driven EU funding projects which have so radically changed the face of Ireland in recent years.

Policy is a powerful tool. So powerful, in fact, that you would almost expect a marginal activity such as, for want of a better description, non-commercial music, to have seen this as an area of vital concern. Yet, in the music world, policies are rarely openly declared. And, quite frankly, they're not always easy to spot. The first task for an outside observer is to try and distinguish between policy and practice. I can think of an amusing instance from my own life, about 20 years ago when I was living in a bedsit in Ballsbridge. At the time, my main activity was writing for *In Dublin* magazine. By comparison with working for *The Irish Times*, it wasn't a heavy commitment.

The deadlines were fortnightly, and reasonably loose. The magazine's office had a certain buzz about it. People mixed freely and you could learn a lot just by being there when things were happening -- stories being discussed, page make-up going on, proofs being checked. My musical post used to be delivered there, too, so it was a place I dropped in on quite a lot.

One day as I was setting out from home, on my bike, a local youngster -- aged five or six, I think -- stopped me to ask me where I was going. I was taken aback and said something like "Out". He didn't give up. Was I going to work, he wanted to know. I didn't know what to say, so I tried to find out what was behind his questions. It turned out that he had noticed that most days I left the house sometime between 12 and 12.30, and he was wondering where on earth I might be going at this hour. From my point of view, the timing was just coincidence. I would get up, do some reading, listen to some music, wait for the postman. And then, at some stage, I would go out. I hadn't spotted the predictable outcome of this pattern. In short, it was a matter of practice.

There was certainly no policy involved.

Planning for the introduction and implementation of the revised curriculum is well underway and, through the Primary Curriculum Implementation Group, involves a partnership approach that mirrors the NCCA developmental phase. Implementation will be on a phased basis to facilitate an ordered programme of in-career development in the various curricular areas, including music. It is anticipated that support for the formal implementation of the arts education curriculum, including music, will begin in the second year of a three to four year support programme.

For a number of years now, I've been trying to work out by observation what the Arts Council's music policy actually is. Questions to the relevant officer -- then Dermot McLaughlin rather than Maura Eaton, as now -- drew blanks. Read the annual report, and you'll know, he said. I concluded that the council actually doesn't have a well-defined policy. At a consultative session held in advance of the current Arts Plan, I discovered that my perception of this policy vacuum was widely shared in the musical community. And I was shocked to hear the council's director, Patricia Quinn, declare that we shouldn't be expecting the declaration of a policy in a hurry, either.

If you were to ask me about the music policies of RTÉ, the Department of Education, the National Concert Hall, I would find myself in a similar position. I'd be able to tell you what they do, to give you a description of their activity from which, if you wanted, you could deduce a policy. RTÉ, to its credit, has declared that it will publish its policy in the area of music. But the wait is proving a long one, and the publication of the policy is well on the way to being two years late.

There are, of course, music organisations in Ireland with clearly defined policies, not least the Music Network, with its ground-breaking information gathering initiatives, both local and national, and its success in seeding the provision of a string quartet in residence for Sligo. The Minister for Arts & Heritage, Síle De Valera, was on hand last year, to launch Music Network's Policy 2000 document. If you want to know what Music Network is about, you know exactly where to go: to the policy document.

When it comes to imitation, the models we choose in Ireland are often borrowed from Britain. But, in music as in the other arts, the models available further afield are a lot more interesting. This is especially true today, given the precarious situation of government arts funding and music education in Britain.

Don't get me wrong. Things are still actually better there than here. Scotland, Wales and, in particular, Northern Ireland provide the sort of access to music in schools that we don't even dream of, yet. Scotland and Wales are orchestrally far better provided for than we are. There are full-scale, year-round opera companies in Cardiff and Glasgow. And, in Britain, local government has a far bigger involvement in arts provision than it does in Ireland. This is even true in Northern Ireland, where Belfast City Council is a major supporter of the Ulster Orchestra and is the main funder of the Waterfront Hall.

But stranger, more wonderful things are to be found in more distant lands. Iceland, with a population somewhat smaller than that of County Cork (without the city), has between 70 and 80 publicly-funded music schools. Norway, population 4.2 million, provides interesting contrasts -- and some similarities -- with Ireland. Oslo was for a long time the only European capital apart from Dublin without a concert hall. Oslo got one in the late 1970s just a few years before Dublin. Both capitals are still without an opera house. And Norway's national music academy was only recently provided with a proper home.

So how is it that Norway now has around 350 publicly supported music schools? Well . . . in the 1950s, the provision of music education was made a matter of national policy. Interestingly, the figure quoted in "Deaf Ears?", the 1985 report on music education prepared for the Arts Council by Donald Herron, was 193. Norway has recently tightened up its music education policy to ensure access in areas which have hitherto been badly provided for. National policy in Norway has also secured the funding status of a number of professional symphony orchestras, two of which have visited Ireland in recent years, the Oslo Philharmonic, and the Stavanger Symphony Orchestra.

Stavanger, with a population of 100,000, has not only a symphony orchestra, but a concert hall, a music academy and a music school. I went to visit the city in connection with the orchestra's visit to Ireland a few years ago. It was fascinating to see how clearly-defined policies enriched the life of the local community. Most striking of all was the fact that the first campaign by the newly appointed director of the concert hall -- which is actually a converted exhibition hall -- was to lobby the local politicians to declare a policy objective of building a better one, with improved acoustics, proper backstage facilities and up-to-date creature comforts for concert goers.

I've long felt that a similar move should be a major policy objective for the board of the National Concert Hall in Dublin. The venue is poorly equipped, is far from acoustically fine, and is inadequate to the needs of a European capital city. The hall, its board and executive may well soon pay the price for their shortsightedness. If a national conference centre emerges with anything approaching a viable acoustic, the box-office advantages of its greater seating capacity could well make it the venue of choice for commercially sponsored international symphony orchestras wanting to come to Dublin.

You don't have to look far in Europe to see the wide-ranging impact well-thought-out policies can have on musical life and artistic life in general. Hungary is often singled out for a music-education system devised

under Communist rule by the composer, Zoltán Kodály. The Nordic countries and the Netherlands have support systems for creative artists which free them from nine-to-five jobs without entering into Aosdána-like life-long mechanisms. Denmark's Esbjerg Ensemble is a state-supported chamber ensemble, flexible enough to cover a broad range of contemporary music as well as the bulk of the larger and smaller traditional repertoire.

It is, I think, in places like the Nordic countries, with low populations and large tracts of sparsely-populated land, that provide the most interesting models for policy development in Ireland. Stavanger is an eight-hour drive from Oslo in the summer. In the winter, it takes much longer, if and when the mountains are passable. Business people fly. But the capital is very remote for the average inhabitant of the city. And Bergen and Trondheim, homes of Norway's other major orchestras, are equally remote. The establishment of the Irish Chamber Orchestra in Limerick has shown here in Ireland, how a regional centre can successfully become the home of a major national musical asset.

Returning to the Netherlands for a moment. When I interviewed the Dutch composer Louis Andriessen in Amsterdam some years ago, he told me the city now has 21 specialised contemporary music ensembles. Andriessen with Peter Schat and other angry young composers, created a riot in the late 1960s with a concert-disrupting campaign to have Bruno Maderna appointed conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra?

Maderna, himself a composer, would have given contemporary music a proper profile in the orchestra's work, they felt. Andriessen has in recent years turned down a number of approaches to write for the Concertgebouw. He's just not interested any more in going through the agony of explaining the aesthetic of his performing ideals to symphony orchestra players. There are just so many specialists out there who do it better without prompting. If there are any composers present, they will tell you what an extraordinary luxury it must be to be able to turn your back on an orchestra such as the Concertgebouw.

There have been important shifts within musical life in Ireland in recent years. Think of developments like the proposed academy for the performing arts, the launch of Lyric FM, the re-structuring that's under way in RTÉ's music division, the concert hall that's being built in the University Arts Centre at Dublin City University, the NCH's own much-resisted plans for a second performing space.

These are all things well worth making noise about. But the music world is also strangely quiet. There's more publicity and letter-to-the-editor writing about the chairman/director rift at the Irish Museum of Modern Art than anything in the music world. The problems at IMMA are essentially about the future of one man, however heavily he may have influenced the shape of the museum he runs. Neither the academy of the performing arts, nor the apparent derailing of the project by the Royal Irish Academy of Music, have stirred anything like the same passions in public. And I doubt if I would be alone in regarding the future of professional music training in Ireland to be a matter of more fundamental concern to the nation than the fate of Declan McGonagle, however remarkable a man he may be.

But for whatever reason, a lack of interest, a climate of fear, a loss of faith in our ability to change things, the classical music world has been publicly almost as quiet as the proverbial mouse. A bit of Dutch-style political agitation. A bit of pressure for clear-headed, published music policies by all the major players. These would go a long way towards setting us out on the road to a musically better world. Let's hope that, some day, when an Irish child says, "When I grow up I want to be a musician", their chances of doing so will be good, unhindered by details of social or geographic position, or by the peculiar workings of the Department of Education itself.