



ART:2016

A NATION'S VOICE

A Nation's Voice – A Response by Roisín Higgins

Rain and wind greeted audience members as they made their way to the courtyard of Collins Barracks for the Easter Sunday centenary concert, *A Nation's Voice*. The central feature of the programme was the premiere of *One Hundred Years a Nation* with words by Paul Muldoon and music by Shaun Davey. The concert brought together 31 choirs with over 1,000 singers and was attended by President Michael D. Higgins. The grey sky mirrored the stone surroundings and a banner at the entrance of the barracks proclaimed 'History: You Can't Get Closer than This'.

It was a fitting location for a commemorative concert. Collins Barracks itself reflects complex layers of Irish history. Settled by Danish migrants in the eleventh century, the land by the river Liffey was gifted to the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Ormond, in 1665. It was sold to Queen Anne in 1703 for the purpose of building a barracks and became an important base from which to suppress uprisings. Wolfe Tone was imprisoned and court martialed there and, during the Easter Rising, it was the billet for soldiers who challenged rebel combatants. The renaming of the barracks for Michael Collins, the first Commander-in-Chief of the Irish Free State Army, further signals its embedded history, marking Ireland's struggle for independence and the civil war.

Commemorations, like buildings, contain memories of different and intermingling versions of the past. They are multi-layered processes enabling communities to make sense of the present through engagement with history. The act of commemoration is political, social and emotional. It often takes a ritualistic form, sustaining the idea that the integrity of the original event is being recaptured in the annual observance. However, each act of commemoration also reshapes and re-imagines that which is being remembered and this creative tension is a vital element in linking past and present.

The Easter Rising operates within Irish history at the levels of both the real and the imaginary. Michael Collins famously described it as having ‘the air of a Greek tragedy’. It would subsequently be characterised as ‘street theatre’ and a ‘unique example of insurrectionary abstract art’, indicating that interpretation and representation are a crucial part of the Rising’s importance. Ninety years after the event, historian of the Rising, Charles Townshend wrote that it ‘shifted the horizons of possibility, both at the subliminal and practical level...the symbolic effect of the rebellion by the middle of Easter week was to burst the limits of what could be imagined’. This statement provides some understanding of the emotional and political significance of the Rising for Irish people. It is a radical moment shot through with possibility; the imaginative leap before reality sets in.

As Helena Moloney, member of the Citizen Army and Cumann na mBan, said ‘Everyone was exalted and caught in the sweep of a great movement. We saw a vision of Ireland, free, pure, happy. We did not realise this vision. But we saw it.’ It is the promise of the Easter Rising that is so compelling; the elusive, hoped-for possibility of something better.

Commemorating the Rising

The Easter Rising itself was a commemorative act. The Proclamation framed the event with references to previous rebellions in Irish history and also echoed the Proclamations of the United Irishmen and Fenians. The leaders of the Rising clearly understood the importance of culture in the formation of national identity and in the transmission of political messages; for many there was a deep engagement with language, literature, the visual arts and music. It is not surprising therefore, that the search for meaning through the Easter Rising often takes an artistic form.

Easter 1916 has not had a straightforward commemorative history. The families of the executed leaders embodied the nation’s sacrifice and toured nationally and internationally advocating on behalf of the new Republic. None of the Easter widows supported the Treaty and they acted as an uneasy reminder of what had been lost, and stridently articulated their views on what had been compromised. Each official commemoration of the Easter Rising has been accompanied by opposing unofficial rituals so that the memory of the Rising was never settled. The proximity of the fiftieth anniversary in 1966 to the outbreak of the northern Troubles led many to believe that anniversaries of the Rising were potentially explosive events. Official

commemorations became muted affairs and, by the seventy-fifth anniversary in 1991, the state's observance was brief and with little ceremony.

Artists across the country, however, asserted their own sense of connection to Easter week and, in Dublin in 1991, a group of writers and musicians ran a day-long artistic event which was attended by 'six double-decker busloads of pilgrims'. Called *The Flaming Door*, the programme included a group of poets who maintained a continuous recital which 'celebrated not only 1916 but also the oral tradition of poet as entertainer, prophet and commentator'. In attendance was the Labour Party politician Michael D. Higgins who said that he was pleased the public had rejected the 'ashamed, forgetful and subservient' attitude the government had adopted regarding the commemoration. These echoes were heard twenty-five years later when Higgins attended as President supported by Muldoon as poet, entertainer, prophet and commentator.

The Music of Commemoration

The ballad has long been an important vehicle for the creation of a sense of nationhood. *A Nation's Voice* recalls and adapts the legacy of the Young Irelanders who published 800 ballads in their newspaper, the *Nation*, a selection of which were published as *The Spirit of the Nation* in May 1843. At sixpence, the aim of the volume was to circulate among the population, 'selections from the national ballads, political songs, squibs and epigrams published in the paper'. Within two months of publication it was claimed that one hundred copies a day were being sold. The success led to the publication of two new editions and a companion, *The Voice of the Nation: A Handbook of Nationality*, in 1844. The latter contained articles that had appeared in the *Nation* and claimed that Nationality had never had an organ until the *Nation* was published: 'Other political writers advocated it, wished it, helped it, but we devoted ourselves to it...' The title of the centenary concert is a reminder that historically music has been used to propagandise and persuade and that these elements are present in commemorations.

However, as a commemorative vehicle, music also has the potential to explore complex ideas and emotions. For the fiftieth-anniversary of the Easter Rising, Brian Boydell was commissioned by Radio Éireann to compose a cantata. He said that this commission was 'a tremendous sign of the coming maturity in the country that an Anglo-Irishman should be invited to do this, rather than someone who was known to be, shall we say, an ardent Gael. Secondly, I

happen to have been president of the Irish Pacifist Movement.’ Radio Éireann specified that the music should contain settings of 1916 poems and Boydell worked with Tomás O Suilleabhain on constructing a text. Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’ punctuates (or is punctuated by) seven others in the composition, including ‘Renunciation’ by Patrick Pearse, ‘In Memoriam’ by Thomas MacDonagh and ‘Sixteen Dead Men’ by Dora Sigerson. The final poem is Tom Kettle’s ‘Reason in Rhyme’. The cantata, *A Terrible Beauty is Born*, was performed at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on 11 April 1966.

While disagreeing with the violence of the Easter Rising, Boydell came to view the commission as an opportunity to contemplate the fundamental ideals of those who had taken part, ‘because there is no doubt that those ideals were sincere – bound up, I think, in the ideal of freedom of the individual, which is tremendously important’. As its title suggests, the composition opened and closed with words from Yeats’s ‘Easter 1916’. The last line of the poem, which had given Boydell his title, recommended itself because it was shot through with innuendo. The composer did not see the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising simply as an occasion to ‘wave flags and say hurrah about everything without thinking about certain question marks which are left in the air ... in some ways the whole work aims at a question mark’. For Boydell, the ambiguity was a necessary tempering of complacent celebration because ‘there are still many things left to be done – in fact the really important things are left to be done’.

There is perhaps an assumption that any piece commissioned for an official commemoration necessarily serves the authority of the state. However, art cannot be so easily conscripted for a single message; its meaning is not fixed and, in fact, often it exposes the contradictions inherent in the official commemoration.

A Nation’s Voice

The premiere of *One Hundred Years a Nation* on that rainy Sunday in Collins Barracks, was set within a broader programme of music. Tickets were free, available by lottery and the programme was broadcast live on television. The concert was presented by the Arts Council and RTÉ, in association with the National Museum of Ireland, the Association of Irish Choirs, and Music Generation.

The title of the concert, *A Nation's Voice* suggests the complexity of the commemorative process. A sense of nationhood is much older than one hundred years and statehood (which excludes part of the nation) is younger. Nations do not have a single voice and commemorations often ascribe unity and seamlessness to history and culture while, in fact, demonstrating their fragmented and contradictory nature. In Irish the name of the concert, *Glór an Phobail*, denotes community rather than nation but, in employing the definitive, suggests that it is 'The Community's Voice' (and is only an 'i' away from 'The Community's Glory'; 'Glóir na Phobail'). In the poem 'Traditions' Seamus Heaney invokes both Shakespeare and Joyce with Mac Morris's question, 'What ish my nation?' to which the reply comes, "'Ireland,'" said Bloom, / "I was born here. Ireland." A sense of nationhood is both very simple and deeply complex. Fittingly, therefore, the programme of *A Nation's Voice* elicited emotions that soared and collided: joy; nostalgia; pride; fury; longing and belonging.

The Concert Programme

The concert opened with perhaps the most famous piece of music to be premiered in Dublin. George Frideric Handel arrived in the city in 1741 suffering a run of bad fortune. The following year, with the aid of three local charities, *Messiah* was performed in the New Musick Hall in Fishamble Street. *A Nation's Voice* opened with the 'Hallelujah Chorus'; brimming with hope and ambition; the collected voices searching heavenwards.

Then followed the Orchestral Suite from *Mise Éire*. Seán Ó Riada's score for the 1959 film propelled him towards celebrity status and both the film and its music were a landmark moment in Irish cinema. *Mise Éire*, directed by George Morrison and produced by Gael Linn, brought together footage of the revolutionary period which Morrison had gathered from across Europe. He preserved and edited the material into what was the first feature-length Irish language film. The title, *Mise Éire*, is a reference to Patrick Pearse's poem of that name, and the 'Orchestral Suite' includes the familiar strains of *Róisín Dubh* and *Boolavogue* (with its references to the 1798 rebellion), given new life by the originality of Ó Riada's scoring. Morrison and Ó Riada had taken pieces of the past and re-made them into something new. Morrison had organised fragments of memory into a cohesive narrative for which Ó Riada provided emotional interpretation. So well-known is Ó Riada's score to an Irish audience that, for many people, it provides immediate access to a range of feelings about identity, history,

childhood and home. The rain in Collins Barracks was fitful by this part of the concert, but fittingly, the sound of seagulls evoked images of the seashore, a trope in the original film.

The audience was then taken westwards with excerpts from Bill Whelan's *Connemara Suite*, 'The Currach' and 'The Island Terns from Inishlacken'. The two movements are from a concerto for violins, one in a classical style played during the concert by Helena Wood, and one in the traditional style played by Zoë Conway. For many cultural revivalists, including Yeats and Pearse, the West represented an unspoiled Ireland in which resistance to the modernising drive of Anglicisation could be found. Connemara conjures up real and idealised visions of Ireland and the piece, accompanied by a playful call-and-response hard shoe dance by Colin Dunne, with the orchestra enriched the visual and rhythmic experience of the pieces. The combination of Whelan and Dunne also invited thoughts of *Riverdance*, a joyful explosion of Irish culture in Europe which then travelled across the world. It was a reminder, too, of the ways in which traditional cultural practices can be remade, energised and monetised, and of a central negotiation in modern commemorative practices between the desire to remember and the impulse to commodify.

One Hundred Years a Nation

It was within this rich and thought-provoking context that *One Hundred Years a Nation* received its world premiere. As the librettist, Muldoon aimed to give an account of the several thousand years before the Easter Rising, layered with literary and historical allusions, and challenging in what it chooses not to forget. The musical landscape for Muldoon's words was composed by Davey in three main parts. The first is led by a narrator (Muldoon) accompanied by an adult choir. Davey said he thought of this as 'a terrain in which the choir were the inhabitants, the narrator the traveller. Everywhere the narrator goes he finds the choir, ready to support, to amplify, to echo'.

The whole piece rebounds with commemorative echoes. As it opens the audience hears the lyrical and familiar words of *Danny Boy* and then journeys through a mythical, historical and literary landscape:

from glen to glen a great stag roars
and rattles its horned head
a yellow bittern booms once more
by turf bank and stream bed
for once again Finn and his men
are following from glen to glen
the doe with one white ear
and setting their sights on the sun

W.B. Yeats, writing about the downfall of Parnell, was obsessed with Goethe's description of the Irish being like a pack of hounds, always 'dragging down some noble stag' and this image recurs throughout Muldoon's poem. The yellow bittern refers to the classic poem in Irish by the seventeenth-century poet Cathal Búí Mac Giolla Ghunna. It has been translated into English by, among others, James Stephens, Thomas MacDonagh and Seamus Heaney. The poem throughout evokes the memory of Heaney as well as Yeats, and is an act of personal as well as public commemoration.

Muldoon's verses are replete with references to battles and religion, 'our footing had grown much less sure/as Glenmama and Glenmalure/led to our vale of tears'; to *Amhran na bhFainn* 'through danger's gap' the bhearna bhaoil; the 'grass stained lips' of famine victims; and to the northern Troubles:

flute bands and bandoilers
the slogan heard above the slew
bloody assassination
the red hand's lámh dhearg abú
the bomb's abominations
some didn't live to see it through

The central section of the poem opens with the adult chorus singing ‘we turned our backs...’, introducing a section on the Celtic Tiger in which expert blows are landed through wordplay and allusion; operating its own call-and-response with the opening sections:

now Finn MacCool gave way to cool
our very monks lived by the rule
of gombeen financiers
for a great stag may be dragged down
by flimflam and stagflation

The piece expresses a sense of public anger over what has been squandered; the failures of the nation laid bare. Davey explained, ‘As the description of the troubled century unfolds the choir becomes an army, marching in step with the narrator. For the “Celtic Tiger” the music takes off in a jazzy gallop, which transforms into a restless dark score as the text describes corruption and greed of the recent past.’

Out of this darkness comes a choir of children singing of the birds, trees, sky and sea. Muldoon said he did not want to present a version of the future which was ‘bogusly upbeat’, and yet in children there is always hope and rebirth. Their collective voices sing ‘we are ready to make our mark/on an Ireland yet to be’. The narrator too provides a manifesto rooted in the landscape, the turf bank and the sea, ‘let’s renew rather than ransack/ our corner of the planet’. The children chorus, ‘from a ruined nest/ the starling builds afresh/ the hawthorn, the oak, the ash,/ will flourish again’.

Muldoon (in the programme notes) expresses his own ambivalence about nationhood, claiming that the idea of singularity is neither philosophically sound nor practicable. *One Hundred Years A Nation* is a bird’s nest of images and references and, in it, Ireland too is as much ‘ruined nest’ as nation, which the children sing ‘will flourish again’. The contradictions inherent in the text float in the air with the final section as adults and children sing the repeated line ‘one hundred years’ ending in ellipses ‘one hundred years...’

The centenary of an iconic event is overlain with meaning and expectation. In Ireland the Easter Rising encapsulates a powerful tension between hope and despair. It has become such an

emblematic event that its most effective commemorative representations (like the statues of Cúchulainn and the Children of Lir) do not make any direct reference to Easter week. In *One Hundred Years A Nation* the Easter Rising is both absent and omnipresent; polarities of the same whole. In Collins Barracks on Easter Sunday 2016 over one thousand voices were raised in unison, the multiple voices of a complicated nation in one moment singing together.