

A belated arrival: Gerald Barry and the creation of an Irish musical avant-garde

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Abstract

The standard narrative of the musical avant-garde in Europe is well known; a movement centered on primarily German cities such as Darmstadt and Donaueschingen which grew musically out of the inheritance of Anton Webern and politically out of the destruction of the Second World War encompassing new ideas from the United States about musical organisation and material. However, in Ireland the situation was radically different and it could be argued that for many years the avant-garde completely bypassed Irish composers. This was partly due to the political and cultural ideology dominant at the time: for a relatively new state establishment of a clear national identity was a priority and this resulted in a culturally insular approach.

With the exception of Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933) who visited Darmstadt in the 1960s and briefly experimented with total serialism before returning to tonality to compose in a folk idiom, no other composer in Ireland before the 1970s engaged with any of the dominant avant-garde movements. The first catalyst for change was the hosting by Dublin of an international festival of contemporary music every two years, exposing young composers to the latest developments around the world and this spurred a number of them to travel abroad to continue their study. Foremost among these was Gerald Barry (b. 1952) who spent time studying with Peter Schat in Amsterdam before moving to Cologne where he studied first with Karlheinz Stockhausen and then Mauricio Kagel.

This paper outlines the cultural background against which Barry studied in Ireland and offers reasons for Ireland's particular trajectory. It also examines Barry's own approach as cultural 'outsider' to dominant avant-garde ideologies and how this affected his compositional strategies. Finally it outlines the importance his music has had in creating a pathway for the next generation of modernist and postmodern composers in Ireland.

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Mark Fitzgerald completed his PhD on rhythmic structuring in the late works of Alban Berg at Trinity College Dublin in 2004. He was a postdoctoral fellow in the National University of Ireland Maynooth from 2004-2008. He currently lectures in the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama (Dublin). Mark is Executive Editor of the forthcoming *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (2011) for which he is also writing the articles on Gerald Barry, the String Quartet, Raymond Deane and Modernism. Other publications forthcoming in 2009-2010 include a study of Irish composer James Wilson for a series of books on Irish composers published by Field Day and a volume on Music and Identity in Ireland co-edited with Dr John O'Flynn (St Patrick's College, Dublin) and Professor Barra Boydell (National University of Ireland, Maynooth). He has also been commissioned to write an analytical study of Gerald Barry's music for the twelfth volume of Irish Musical Studies (Four Courts Press).