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## Composing Irishness: Remembrances of the Irish Past Through the Prism of the Present in Music by Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970) and Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974)

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# **Composing Irishness: Remembrances of the Irish Past Through the Prism of the Present in Music by Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970) and Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974)**

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Thesis submitted for the award of M.Phil.

to the Technological University Dublin College of Arts and Tourism

Supervisor:

Dr Mark Fitzgerald

Technological University Dublin Conservatoire

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## ABSTRACT

Although modern remembrances in the fields of literature, theatre, poetry, and the visual arts have received considerable scholarly attention in Ireland since the publication of *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* in 2001, similar activities in an Irish art music context remain unexplored. This thesis addresses this lacuna in examining how the contemporary Irish composers Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970) and Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974) have remembered, reimagined, and reinvented the past to communicate their positions on Irish history and modern Irish society, as well as to respond to recent historical and curatorial practices.

Through a series of five works written between 2003 and 2019, Dennehy has critiqued the ideologies underlying imperialism, racism, and colonialism in Irish history, and challenged the recent period of revisionism in Irish historicization. His anti-colonial project combats historical amnesia, advocating for consciousness of the past to address current problems. In January 2015, Walshe, in collaboration with a handful of Irish artists, musicians, and composers, published *Aisteach*, a fictional history of an Irish avant-garde. This alternative tradition consists of an ‘archive’ of Irish avant-gardists who allegedly created art and music in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Including many female and LGBTQ figures, *Aisteach* builds a more diverse and inclusive history of Irish art and music, which in turn casts a new light both on the real historical past and the present musical and political scenes. Through a detailed examination of Dennehy and Walshe’s compositions, this study aims to illustrate how they evoke alternative memories that fill gaps in Irish history and work through their cultural inheritance to reshape and, in some cases, reaffirm conceptions of national identity.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of M.Phil. is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others, save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work. This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for graduate study by research of the Technological University Dublin and has not been submitted in whole or in part for another award in any other third level institution. The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the TUD's guidelines for ethics in research. TUD has permission to keep, lend or copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis be duly acknowledged.

Signature  \_\_\_\_\_

Date 26.3.20

Timothy Diovanni

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## INTRODUCTION: REMEMBRANCES OF THE IRISH PAST IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In comparison to literature and theatre, classical music in Ireland has historically held a much less prominent position in academia and the broader cultural sphere. The main reason for classical music's lack of a national profile was the late development of the infrastructures needed to support it. Since the 1960s, however, the field has undergone substantial changes, including the foundation of performance and composition programmes at several universities, the introduction of contemporary music festivals as well as ensembles specialising in contemporary music, and the expansion of the Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) National Symphony Orchestra to a full-sized orchestra.

It is in this growing environment that composers Donnacha Dennehy (b. 1970) and Jennifer Walshe (b. 1974) have emerged. Dennehy completed a bachelor's degree in composition at Trinity College Dublin, before moving to America to undertake doctoral studies at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Following this period in America, Dennehy wrote in a post-minimalist style heavily influenced by Steve Reich and Louis Andriessen until about 2005, when he began adapting techniques loosely derived from Gerard Grisey, James Tenney, and Claude Vivier into his musical language. In 2007, his music underwent another change when he started to assimilate sean-nós songs into his work.<sup>1</sup>

Walshe, conversely, practices in a realm loosely affiliated with experimental music and is unsurprisingly influenced by John Cage, Meredith Monk, La Monte Young, and Robert Ashley, among others. After undergraduate studies at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD), she completed her doctorate in America at Northwestern

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<sup>1</sup> Sean-nós literally means 'old style,' yet refers to unaccompanied vocal music in the Irish language.



University, where she drew especial inspiration from her primary teacher, Amnon Wolman (b. 1955), and developed her ability to improvise with her voice, which has become central to her practice. Much of her catalogue pulls on various artistic threads, including literature, film, and visual art, and incorporates elements of the contemporary world, such as the internet and everyday sounds.

Despite their highly contrasting outputs, Dennehy and Walshe share an interest in engaging with Irish identity and heritage, and approach history in similar ways. They have remembered, reimagined, and reinvented the past to communicate their positions on Irish history and contemporary Irish society, as well as respond to recent historical and curatorial practices. Through a series of five works written between 2003 and 2019, Dennehy has critiqued the ideologies underlying imperialism, racism, and colonialism in Irish history, and challenged the recent period of revisionism in Irish historicization. His anti-colonial project combats historical amnesia, advocating for consciousness of the past to address current problems. In January 2015, Walshe, in collaboration with a handful of Irish artists, musicians, and composers, published *Aisteach*, a fictional history of an Irish avant-garde. This alternative tradition consists of an ‘archive’ of Irish avant-gardists who allegedly created art and music in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Including many female and LGBTQ figures, *Aisteach* (‘strange’ in Irish) creates a more diverse and inclusive history of Irish art and music, which in turn casts a new light both on the real historical past and the present political and musical scenes. Through a detailed examination of Dennehy and Walshe’s compositions, this study aims to illustrate how they evoke alternative memories that fill gaps in Irish history and work through their cultural inheritance to reshape and, in some cases, reaffirm conceptions of national identity.

## D) The Trajectory of Art Music Composition in Ireland (1945–2000s)

Whereas composers active in Ireland in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as Frederick May (1911–1985) and Ina Boyle (1889–1967) worked within an established Anglo-Irish tradition, composers in the second half of the century increasingly looked toward mainland Europe for inspiration and influence.<sup>2</sup> From 1955–57, Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933) studied in Stuttgart under Johann Nepomuk David (1895–1977), and in 1963, 1964, and 1965 he attended the *Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik* in Darmstadt, where he was exposed to integral serialism, aleatoricism, and electronic music.<sup>3</sup> Demonstrating the effects of this environment, Bodley’s style underwent an abrupt change in 1963, as evident by *Chamber Symphony no. 1* for flute, bassoon, harp, vibraphone and strings (1964), *Never to have lived is best* (1965), a song cycle for soprano and orchestra, and *Configurations* (1967) for spatially configured orchestra, although he would ultimately reject modernism in the 1970s in his exploration of the potentials of Irish traditional music in a classical idiom. Representative works from this period include his 1972 composition *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (originally for two pianos and later for solo piano) and his 1975 orchestral work *A Small Cloud Drifts Over Ireland*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the composers working in the Anglo-Irish tradition in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, see Mark Fitzgerald, ‘A belated arrival: the delayed acceptance of musical modernity in Irish composition,’ *Irish Studies Review* 26/3 (May 2018): 347–360; Edmund Hunt “‘A National School of Music Such as the World has Never Seen’: Re-appropriating the Early Twentieth Century into a Chronology of Irish Composition,’ in *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, Mark Fitzgerald and John O’Flynn (eds.), (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 53–67; and Gareth Cox, ‘The Development of Twentieth-Century Irish Art-Music,’ in Hermann Danuser and Tobias Pleblich (eds.), *Musik als Text: Bericht Über den Internationalen Kongress der Gesellschaft für Musikforschung, Freiburg im Breisgau, 1993* (2 vols, London, c. 1998), Vol. 2, 560–62.

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Cox, ‘An Irishman in Darmstadt: Seóirse Bodley’s String Quartet no. 1 (1968),’ in *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds.), (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 95; Cox, *Seóirse Bodley* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2010), 20–21; Axel Klein, ‘Irish Composers and Foreign Education: A Study of Influences,’ in *Irish Musical Studies 4: The Maynooth International Musicological Conference 1995, Selected Proceedings*, Patrick F. Devine and Harry White (eds.), (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995), 278.

<sup>4</sup> Cox, *Seóirse Bodley*, 72–81; Mark Fitzgerald, ‘Growth and Consolidation,’ in *The Invisible Art: A Century of Music in Ireland 1916–2016*, Michael Dervan (ed.), (Dublin: New Island, 2016), 137–8.

While some composers developing in Ireland during the 1960s, such as Eric Sweeney (b. 1948), sensed a pressure to engage with serialist techniques, which would allow them to clear a ‘bar of legitimacy,’ as Gareth Cox has argued in his study of serialism in Ireland, Raymond Deane (b. 1953) described himself as ‘passionately devoted’ to this tradition from an early age.<sup>5</sup> In 1969, the sixteen-year-old Deane attended the summer courses in Darmstadt, where he encountered Luciano Berio’s *Sequenza VII* (1969) and Terry Riley’s *In C* (1964). These works influenced his earliest compositions from the 1970s, including a set of piano pieces called *Orphica* (1969–1970, rev. 1981, 1996), which draws influence from Berio’s work in its dramatic and expressive approach to structure.<sup>6</sup> Gerald Barry (b. 1952) first studied with Boulez pupil Peter Schaaf in Amsterdam before moving to Cologne to study with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Mauricio Kagel.<sup>7</sup> One can trace Kagel’s influence on Barry in the absurdist elements found in the musical theatre piece *Things That Gain by Being Painted* (1977) as well as the opera *The Intelligence Park* (1981–88).

Although Barry and Deane felt the need to study abroad, largely because of the stultifying atmosphere that existed in the music department of University College Dublin, which they both attended, developments in Ireland’s musical infrastructures beginning around 1970 provided more opportunities to composers in the nation.<sup>8</sup> A biannual

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<sup>5</sup> Gareth Cox, ‘The bar of legitimacy? Serialism in Ireland,’ in *Irish Musical Studies 11: Irish Musical Analysis*, Gareth Cox and Julian Horton (eds.), (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014), 197, 199–200; Michael Dungan, ‘A Very Ad Hoc Person,’ *New Music News*, May 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Deane, ‘RTÉ’s First Festival of Living Music,’ in *The Journal of Music in Ireland* 2/6 (2002), 30; Adrian Smith, ‘The Preservation of Subjectivity through Form: The Radical Restructuring of Disintegrated Material in the Music of Gerald Barry, Kevin Volans and Raymond Deane’ (Ph.D. diss., DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, 2014), 213–14.

<sup>7</sup> See Adrian Smith’s PhD dissertation for an analysis of how these studies abroad affected the compositional development of Barry and Deane. See also Christopher Fox, ‘Where the river bends: the Cologne School in retrospect,’ *The Musical Times* 148/1901 (2007): 17–42 (29 and 37–39), in which the author discusses the effects of this environment on Barry and examines derivational strategies evident in works such as ‘\_\_\_\_\_’ (1979, revised 1987) from his years in Cologne.

<sup>8</sup> Barry paints a bleak scene of the state in music education at UCD in the late 1960s and 1970s, when he completed his bachelor’s and master’s degrees there. ‘I found studying there an extremely arid experience. The place was dead. There was no sense of music being a living thing. It was a real grind. The quickest way to make

contemporary music festival lasting from 1969 until 1986, the Dublin Festival of Twentieth-Century Music featured composers including Peter Maxwell Davies, Witold Lutosławski, Elliott Carter, Stockhausen and Kagel, and exposed musicians and composers to ideas and works from abroad. The inaugural festival included an afternoon concert highlighting electronic music by Stockhausen, Berio, and others. Up to this point, the capabilities of new technologies had not been explored by Irish composers. In 1970, though, Roger Doyle's (b. 1949) tape pieces *Obstinato* (1970) and *Why is Kilkenny so Good?* (1970, rev 1974), marked the first real engagement with these resources. The festival's Young Composers' Concert gave developing Irish composers the chance to have their music played in an international context. Encouraged by the results of this venture, Deane, Barry, Brian Beckett (b.1950), Derek Ball (b. 1949), and John Gibson (1951–2016) established the Association of Young Irish Composers in 1972 with the aim of promoting their music and creating additional performance opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

The 1970s witnessed an increase in performances of Irish contemporary music, especially from the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra, which featured works from senior composers such as Gerard Victory (1921–1995), who served as the Director of Music at RTÉ from 1967–1982, and John Kinsella (b. 1932), who was a senior assistant and Head of Music following Victory's retirement, as well as music by less experienced composers, including Deane and Ball.<sup>10</sup> Paradoxically, the underdevelopment of the scene gave greater opportunities to those composers able to write with any degree of proficiency.<sup>11</sup> The

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someone hate music was to send them to such a place. There was no passion about the place.' See Kevin Myers, 'From Stockhausen to the Petshop Boys,' *Irish Times*, 29 February 1992. Deane, who completed a BMus degree at the same university, described his experience at UCD as 'four wasted years.' Smith, *Preservation of Subjectivity*, 212.

<sup>9</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Growth and Consolidation,' 132–3.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 499–501.

<sup>11</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Growth and Consolidation,' 125.

foundation of the Concorde Ensemble in 1976 by Jane O’Leary (b. 1946), an American composer who studied with Milton Babbitt at Princeton University before emigrating to western Ireland, offered composers a specialist group for which they could write music. The National Concert Hall, inaugurated in 1981, provided Ireland with a central performance venue for classical music that, at a later stage, contributed to the development of composition through the Composers’ Choice series, which began in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> With the opening of the Contemporary Music Centre in Dublin in 1985, Ireland gained a central repository for new music composed in the nation and an institution with official status that has disseminated works by composers based in Ireland through concerts, recordings, and diplomatic events abroad.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the advances made, Irish composers have largely felt liberated from any sense of a compositional school. This belief has been advanced by composers as varied as Frank Corcoran (b. 1944),<sup>14</sup> O’Leary,<sup>15</sup> and Dennehy, who believes, ‘There’s this peripheral approach that you take being Irish, almost like a sort of guerrilla warfare. [...] I would have hated to have been born in a town, let’s say, close to Darmstadt in Germany and feeling I had to deal with its musical legacy.’<sup>16</sup> Because of this perceived absence of a foundational musical inheritance, a ‘stylistic contrapuntality of Irish music and music in Ireland’ has

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<sup>12</sup> Dwyer, *Different Voices*, 60.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 59; Fitzgerald, ‘Growth and Consolidation,’ 145–6.

<sup>14</sup> ‘I and other Irish composers have sought in vain for the giants on whose shoulders we should stand. There has been no Irish school.’ Frank Corcoran, “‘I’m a Composer” – “You’re a What?,”” *The Crane Bag* 6/1 (Special Issue: James Joyce and the Arts in Ireland) (1982): 52–4 (53).

<sup>15</sup> ‘People in America would ask me what Irish music was like, and I would say that I couldn’t describe it, that it’s up to the individual—there’s no school of Irish composition.’ Benjamin Dwyer, *Different Voices: Irish Music and Music in Ireland* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2014), 122.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Gilmore, ‘Donnacha Dennehy: composition as vandalism,’ in *The Journal of Music in Ireland* 5/6 (November–December 2005): 29–33.

emerged, as ‘most composers have had to find their own path,’ argues musicologist Benjamin Dwyer.<sup>17</sup>

After the emergence of a musical avant-garde in Ireland in the 1970s, the largest shift in Irish composition occurred in the 1990s, when the focal point of the discipline gradually moved from one centred on Europe to one that embraced American experimental and minimalist music through the foundation of the Music and Media Technologies Master’s Degree programme at Trinity College Dublin and the establishment of the Crash Ensemble in 1997, both under the directorship of Donnacha Dennehy, who had recently undertaken doctoral studies in Illinois. Dennehy’s position at TCD, along with performances by Crash, which featured music from American composers, especially Michael Gordon and David Lang, founding members of Bang on a Can (a contemporary music group based in New York) whose music synthesised elements of pop, rock, and grunge genres and employed repeating rhythms and tonal harmonies, influenced a generation of young composers in Ireland who began to look toward America for inspiration.<sup>18</sup> In effect, the Crash concerts introduced contemporary American music to Ireland, as it held a limited presence in the nation before; the Concorde Ensemble, the Mostly Modern series (which was later called Music21), run by Ben Dwyer and guitarist Brian Farrell, as well as the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and RTÉ Concert Orchestra were oriented more toward disciplines influenced by Europe. From an economic standpoint, this shift can be seen as a reflection of the Celtic Tiger, a period of rapid economic growth in Ireland in the 1990s and 2000s during

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<sup>17</sup> Dwyer, *Different Voices*, 78–9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–71. In 2003, Crash hosted a festival that brought over musicians and composers associated with Bang on a Can. Around the same time, Dennehy’s music began to incorporate more elements of American minimalism, as demonstrated by *Streetwalker* (2003), which he wrote for Bang on a Can.

which corporations from the United States established bases in the nation, strengthening ties between America and Ireland.

## II) Musical Interpretations of History in Modern Ireland: Aims and Methodology

During the Celtic Tiger, the most rapidly changing time in Irish history since independence, Ireland became increasingly pluralistic and experienced considerable social shifts.<sup>19</sup> Globalisation and modernisation in this period contributed to a ‘memory boom’ in Irish culture, which scholars have connected to a societal need for a sense of continuity and groundedness to balance against recent changes and upheavals. This proliferation coincided with a sharpened interest in history developing internationally during the 1990s, when cultural attention shifted from the future to the past. Ralph Samuel argues in *Theatres of Memory* that history as a mass activity ‘has possibly never had more followers than it does today, when the spectacle of the past excites the kind of attention which earlier epochs attached to the new.’<sup>20</sup> Ernst van Alphen interprets this growth in memory practices not as a celebration of memory, but rather as a symptom of a memory crisis precipitated in part by the overwhelming presence of media culture, which ‘threatens to destroy historical memory and the mnemonic image.’<sup>21</sup> Such a memory culture has been characterised by a desire to remember ‘not only times of glory or martyrdom but also less assimilable past[s] of violence and trauma, persecution and guilt,’ writes Silke Arnold-de Simine.<sup>22</sup> This transformation has manifested itself in the arts, which have dealt with issues surrounding war, trauma,

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<sup>19</sup> Brian Girvin, ‘Ireland Transformed?’ in *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume IV 1880 to the Present*, Thomas Bartlett (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 429.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), 25.

<sup>21</sup> Ernst Van Alphen, ‘The Politics of Exclusion, or, Reanimating the Archive,’ *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 2015(49–50): 118–137 (133).

<sup>22</sup> Silke Arnold-de Simine, *Mediating memory in the museum: trauma, empathy, nostalgia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 36.

persecution, sexual abuse, migration, the Holocaust and other genocides, and have questioned processes of memory and historicization, particularly in using archival documents and techniques.

Anniversaries of significant historical events have fueled Ireland's engagement with the violent and traumatic aspects of its history. Over the last twenty-five years, the nation has commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1845–1852 famine, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1798 Irish Rebellion, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising in the form of artistic works and programmes, public events, and academic literature. Illustrating the contentiousness of these significant historical moments, recent commemorations have provoked substantial controversy. In October 2015, the Abbey Theatre announced its upcoming season, called *Waking the Nation*, which would mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Easter Rising. This programme included plays by nine men, but only one (which was a monologue for children) by a woman. Furthermore, there were 18 male writers and directors on the programme and just two women. In response, *Waking the Feminists* was founded to advocate for gender balance in Irish theatre, ultimately leading to the ratification of an individual gender equality policy document by 10 theatre organisations in Ireland that serves as 'a joint promise to address and rebalance the gender equality deficiencies within Irish theatre.'<sup>23</sup> Several months later, a similar chain of events unfolded in classical music. After the programme for *Composing the Island* (a 100-year retrospective of Irish art music from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries) was released in June 2016, a movement led by several Irish female composers, notably Siobhán Cleary and Jane Deasy, critiqued the festival's lack of gender balance. Out of the 158 compositions in the programme, 135 were by men and 23 by women.

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<sup>23</sup> *Gender Equality in Practice in Irish Theatre* (<https://www.theatreforum.ie/forum-notice/gender-equality-in-practice-in-irish-theatre/>, 27 January 2020).



The distribution was about the same for living composers, with 74 by men and 17 by women. This backlash culminated in the formation of *Sounding the Feminists*, which secured a five-year partnership running from 2018–2022 with the National Concert Hall. Backed by €100,000 in funds, this joint venture has resulted in several initiatives, including a Female Commissioning Scheme that selected Walshe to write a new work and a Female Composer Series featuring compositions from the Baroque to the present.<sup>24</sup>

These reactions are indicative of a wider trend in Irish memory culture, namely a determination to approach the nation's collective history in new and different ways. Irish artists, writers, musicians, historians, journalists, and commemorators have increasingly welcomed, accepted, investigated, recovered, explored, and shared alternative, lesser-known, and little-heard stories and voices from the national past. Other examples include *The Long Gaze Back* (2015), an anthology of women's writing in Ireland edited by Irish author Sinéad Gleeson; *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing IV & V: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (2003), which was itself a direct response to the exclusion of female writers in the first three volumes of the anthology; and the National Gallery of Ireland's curation of *[In]Visible: Irish Women Artists from the Archives* (2019). The writer and critic Emilie Pine explains:

[T]he consequence of this revisiting of the past is that it creates new narratives—alternative and more complex narratives—taking account of memories that were for too long 'forgotten,' or sidelined, by Irish history and culture. These new narratives expand the traditionally narrow definition of Irish historical identity through the framework of remembrance and trauma.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> See Mark Fitzgerald, 'Composing Equality,' *Enclave Review* 16 (2018): 13–15; Adrian Smith, 'How Sounding the Feminists Put Music and Gender in the Spotlight' (<https://journalofmusic.com/focus/how-sounding-feminists-put-music-and-gender-spotlight>, 27 January 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

*Aisteach* addresses such repressed memories by inventing female and LGBTQ figures, thus resituating their importance in the nation's artistic and musical history. 'My feeling is that today we have the opportunity to actually examine parts of history that have often been misinterpreted. Or to shine a light on events where people have been misrepresented, offering a revised and perhaps truer image of the past,' Walshe says.<sup>26</sup>

This reinvestigation of the past in Dennehy and Walshe's work involves engaging with historical gaps to productive ends. Dennehy addresses absences caused by the failures of colonialism in Ireland, reclaiming and in some cases resurrecting narratives about Irish people from the past. In his docu-cantata *The Hunger* (2012–16, revised 2019), he fills in gaps caused by the famine of 1845–1852 by inventing a nameless Irish man and adapting *Annals of the Famine in Ireland in 1847, 1848, and 1849* (1851), by Asenath Nicholson, who aided people in Ireland during the famine. Such imaginative work centred on the historical experiences of Irish people opposes the influence of revisionism in Irish history. *Aisteach* creators, on the other hand, respond to lacunae in Irish compositional history precipitated by conditions in the country that prevented the development of a national avant-garde tradition by creating their artistic ancestors. Furthermore, in reimagining absences in Irish compositional history, *Aisteach* rejects the belief that 'a broken tradition is a liability' and the assumption that 'an unbroken tradition is a precondition of a healthy musical culture,'<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Dag Rosenqvist, 'Interview with Jennifer Walshe on art, the voice and fictional history' (<https://gas-festival.com/jennifer-walshe-on-art-the-voice-and-fictional-history/>, 27 January 2020).

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Deane, 'Exploding the Continuum: The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition,' *The Republic: A Journal of Contemporary and Historical Debate*, 'Culture in the Republic: Part 2,' 4/4 (Dublin: The Ireland Institute, 2005): 100–115 (106).

thereby corresponding with Raymond Deane's argument that a 'great gap' can be 'productive rather than obstructive.'<sup>28</sup>

How Walshe and Dennehy have filled in historical gaps has not been determined by the past, rather the reverse. As Ian McBride argues, '[W]hat we choose to choose to remember is dictated by our contemporary concerns.'<sup>29</sup> Memory does not function as a stable tradition; instead, it is 'progressively altered from generation to generation.'<sup>30</sup> This theory harkens back to ideas that French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs proposed in the 1920s. Halbwachs believed people remember through 'social frameworks of memory' that situate them as part of groups.<sup>31</sup> '[T]he past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present,' he writes.<sup>32</sup> Historian Guy Beiner has reframed this idea, 'Memory does not merely preserve fragmented recollections of the past but first and foremost reconstructs them.'<sup>33</sup> Memory therefore is selective, driven by one's own desires, predilections, historical knowledge, culture, and nation, in short, all factors comprising one's identity.

This thesis divides into four main parts: an introduction, two chapters, and a conclusion. The two chapters focus on Dennehy and Walshe, respectively, and follow a similar layout. Both start with an overview of their careers and an outline of their stylistic developments. Each chapter then provides an overview of the creation of their historical projects. After this section, the thesis analyses how their music participates in a dialogue with the past and present by examining their compositional decisions and the historical

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<sup>28</sup> Deane supports his argument by referencing Benjamin Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies, who treated the renaissance and middle ages as a 'progressive impetus,' thus negotiating a similar 'great gap' in British compositional history. *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> Ian McBride, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5–6.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, x.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis A. Coser (ed., trans.), *On collective memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> Guy Beiner, 'Commemorative Heritage and the Dialectics of Memory,' in *Ireland's Heritages: Critical Perspectives on Memory and Identity*, Mark McCarthy (ed.), (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 58.

implications of their work. These inquiries aim to determine the consequences of their remembrances, particularly whether these compositions serve to exacerbate the historical problems that they address or reconcile the past with the present, rendering history in a way that is simultaneously interrogative and forward-looking. The conclusion explores the relationship between historicization, memory, and the formation of national identity, seeking to determine how Dennehy and Walshe's compositions reshape, or reaffirm, notions of Irishness.

### III) Research Context

Contemporary classical music in Ireland written after 1900 remains a relatively unexamined subject area. The first full-length work devoted solely to the topic was Axel Klein's *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert*, which, after a short overview, provides entries on representative compositions and biographical notes on select composers.<sup>34</sup> Harry White in *The Keeper's Recital*, a cultural history of music in Ireland from 1770–1970, ends with Seán Ó Riada (1931–1971), whose importance the author problematically exaggerates.<sup>35</sup> White takes his conclusions from that study as a starting point for a chapter in a subsequent text (*The Progress of Music in Ireland*) that deals with works written after the death of Ó Riada, although he avoids detailed discussion of the music.<sup>36</sup> The proliferation of composers after 1970 and their plurality of styles is left unexamined by White. *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Gareth Cox and Axel Klein, addresses a narrow range of composers from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including May, Bodley, and Ian Wilson (b. 1964).<sup>37</sup> There have also been several single volumes on composers who were active throughout the second-half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Axel Klein, *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Harry White, *The Progress of Music in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds.), *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003).

century, including Bodley, Deane, John Buckley, (b. 1951) and James Wilson (1922–2005).<sup>38</sup>

Since this first group of musicological studies, recent scholarship has established a more complete context for music in Ireland in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Benjamin Dwyer's *Different Voices* provides an overview of developments in the field in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, confronting the ways in which the cultural and political contexts influence the construction of the current Irish musical scene. The second part of the book contains interviews with 12 living composers who were born in Ireland or work in the country today.<sup>39</sup> Mark Fitzgerald's study of Irish musical modernism reconfigures the significance of Ó Riada in the trajectory of Irish classical music and reassesses the perceived modernity of composers such as May, Brian Boydell (1917–2000), and Aloys Fleischmann (1910–1992), arguing that a musical avant-garde only emerged in the 1970s with works by Bodley, Barry, and Deane.<sup>40</sup> Along with John O'Flynn, the same musicologist edited *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, which provides hermeneutical frameworks for the analysis of contemporary Irish music.<sup>41</sup> *The Invisible Art: A Century of Music in Ireland 1916–2016*, which was commissioned by RTÉ to coincide with *Composing the Island*, a festival that offered a one-hundred-year retrospective of classical music in the nation, contains a number of germane historical overviews, particularly the one by musicologist Liam Cagney, who maps the growth of the contemporary music scene in Ireland from 2001–2016, assessing works by Dennehy and Walshe.<sup>42</sup> Also in this book is a chapter by Walshe

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<sup>38</sup> Patrick Zuk, *Raymond Deane* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006); Mark Fitzgerald, *The Life and Music of James Wilson* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015); Cox, *Seóirse Bodley*; Dwyer, *Constellations*.

<sup>39</sup> Dwyer, *Different Voices*.

<sup>40</sup> Fitzgerald, 'A belated arrival.'

<sup>41</sup> Fitzgerald and O'Flynn (eds.), *Music and Identity*.

<sup>42</sup> Liam Cagney, 'Metamorphoses in a New Millennium,' in *The Invisible Art*, Dervan (ed.), 217–238.

called ‘Notes on Being an Irish Composer, 2016,’ in which she discusses her development as a composer growing up in Ireland and provides insights into the objectives of *Aisteach*.<sup>43</sup>

A taxonomy of resources directly relevant for the study of music by Dennehy and Walshe would divide into two categories: contextual and analytical. Biographical information on both composers can be gleaned from the profiles written by Bob Gilmore for the *Journal of Music in Ireland* in 2005 and 2007 and the entries in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*.<sup>44</sup> Additional biographical information about Dennehy can be found in Pamela Burnard’s monograph *Musical Creativities in Practice*.<sup>45</sup> *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* includes an interview with Walshe that explores features of her work up until 2008 and questions posed by them.<sup>46</sup> Liner notes from CDs, programme notes from performances, and articles from media outlets (many of which include quotes from interviews with the composers) provide additional contextual information and insights into their work.<sup>47</sup>

Walshe has received considerable academic attention, particularly in Germany. Analyses of her music have largely focused on its theatrical and performative elements,<sup>48</sup> the

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<sup>43</sup> Jennifer Walshe, ‘Notes on Being an Irish Composer, 2016,’ in *The Invisible Art*, Dervan (ed.), 239–244.

<sup>44</sup> Gilmore, ‘Donnacha Dennehy’; Gilmore, ‘don’t do PERMISSION ISN’T: the music of Jennifer Walshe,’ in *The Journal of Music in Ireland* 7/4 (July–August 2007): 20–24; Sarah O’Halloran, ‘Dennehy, Donnacha,’ in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, vol. 1, Harry White and Barra Boydell (eds.), (Dublin: University College Dublin, 2013), 293–94; O’Halloran, ‘Walshe, Jennifer,’ in *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, vol. 2, White and Boydell (eds.), 1041–42.

<sup>45</sup> Pamela Burnard, *Musical Creativities in Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2012).

<sup>46</sup> James Saunders (ed.), ‘Jennifer Walshe,’ in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 343–352.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Gilmore, ‘Donnacha Dennehy: Orchestral Works,’ sleeve notes for compact disc RTÉ Lyric FM CD145, 2014; Drew Daniel, ‘ALL THE MANY PEOPLS,’ sleeve notes for solo album Migro Records MIG008, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Schwartz, Laura, ‘Repair and Self-Formation through Verbal Notation: Analyzing Self in Works by Jennifer Walshe and Pauline Oliveros and An Anatomical Study on Escape [Original Composition]’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2019); Macklay, Sky, ‘Violence and Empathy: Jennifer Walshe’s XXX\_LIVE\_NUDE\_GIRLS!!! as a Simulation of Acquaintance Rape and Microvariations’ (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2018); Karl Katschthaler, ‘From Cage to Walshe: Music as Theatre,’ in *Music on Stage*, Fiona Jane Schopf (ed.), (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 125–139.

notion of the composer-performer,<sup>49</sup> and the concept of authorship in relation to alter-egos.<sup>50</sup> Some scholars have taken feminist approaches to Walshe’s practice and reception, situating her in the context of other experimental female composer-performers.<sup>51</sup> The only extensive work on Walshe’s music is a recent book, *Spiel mit Identitäten* (2017), derived from a Masters thesis by Franziska Kloos, who inspected the role and meaning of adopting and presenting different artistic identities as one’s own. *Aisteach* has been described briefly in *Experimental Music Since 1970*, by composer Jennie Gottschalk, and an article by composer and musicologist Rob Casey has examined it through the lens of heritage studies.<sup>52</sup> *The Other Irish Tradition*, an anthology featuring experimental writings by Irish authors, contains a brief introduction to *Aisteach* and several entries on fictional Irish artists taken directly from the project.<sup>53</sup> Almost all of the academic studies on Dennehy investigate how he has incorporated sean-nós into his musical language.<sup>54</sup> This focus has resulted in a paucity of scholarship dealing with any other aspect of his work.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Goldberg-Baldwin, Anne H., ‘Semiology and Cognition: Contemporary Music, Notation, and Physicality in the Composer-Performer’ (Ph.D. diss., Manhattan School of Music, 2015).

<sup>50</sup> Franziska Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe. Spiel mit Identitäten* (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> See Marie-Anne Kohl, ‘Dezentrierungen des künstlerischen Selbst. Die Alter Egos von Laurie Anderson und Jennifer Walshe,’ *GENDER Zeitschrift für Geschlecht, Kultur und Gesellschaft* 4/1 (2012): 75–89; Lauren Redhead, ‘“New Music” as Patriarchal Category,’ in *Gender, Age and Musical Creativity*, Catherine Haworth and Lisa Colton (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2015), 171–184; Benjamin Piekut, Review of *The Ashgate Research Companion to Experimental Music*, James Saunders (ed.), *Second Series* 67/2 (December 2010), 312–17.

<sup>52</sup> Jennie Gottschalk, *Experimental Music Since 1970*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016); Rob Casey, ‘*Aisteach*: Jennifer Walshe, Heritage, and the Invention of the Irish Avant-Garde,’ *Transposition* 8 (2019).

<sup>53</sup> Rob Doyle, *The Other Irish Tradition* (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2018), 405–423.

<sup>54</sup> See Donnacha Dennehy, ‘Owning Overtones,’ *Tempo* 69/271(2015), 24–35; Stephanie Ford, ‘Marginalised and emerging identities: the traditional voice in Irish contemporary music,’ *New perspectives: Postgraduate Symposium for the Humanities – Reflections. Vol. 1* (2017): 123–137; Flynn, Dave, ‘Traditional Irish Music: A Path to New Music’ (Ph.D. diss., DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, 2010); Barber, Alyson, ‘Synthesising Folk Influences and Contemporary Compositional Techniques in Pursuit of an Original Musical Language’ (Ph.D. diss., DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, 2015); and Nicole Grimes, ‘Traditional Irish Music and Culture and The Music of Donnacha Dennehy,’ in *Oxford Handbook of Spectral and Post-Spectral Music*, Amy Bauer, Liam Cagney, and William Mason (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Forthcoming).

<sup>55</sup> An outlier is Paul Griffiths’ *Modern Music and After*, which contains a short discussion of Dennehy’s violin concerto *Elastic Harmony* (2005), connecting this work to music by Claude Vivier in its harmonic stasis and layered construction. Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 421–22.

Memory studies in modern Ireland began with the landmark publication of *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, edited by Ian McBride.<sup>56</sup> The most extensive, although uneven, contribution to this burgeoning field is the four-volume collection, *Memory Ireland*, edited by Oona Frawley.<sup>57</sup> At University College Dublin, the Irish Memory Studies Network, under the directorship of Emilie Pine, the author of a monograph on remembrance in contemporary Irish culture, has hosted seminars and conferences exploring the subject area. To date, only a few studies have examined the role of music in Irish cultural memory. Some texts, including Jennifer McCay's essay in *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, Hilary Bracefield's chapters in *Irish Musical Studies 4* and *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*, and David O'Connell's Masters dissertation *The Art Music Composer and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, explore issues pertaining to memory, contemporary classical music, Northern Ireland, and the Troubles.<sup>58</sup> Katie Brown in 'Music, Memory, and Irish Nationalism' discusses Irish nationalists, such as Thomas Moore, who wrote works that engaged 'with a discordant past so that [he] could advocate a different future for Ireland.'<sup>59</sup> Steve Coleman has portrayed 'music as a container of cultural memory' in Irish traditional music.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ian McBride, *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>57</sup> Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volume 1: History and Modernity* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012), Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volume 3: The Famine and the Troubles* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), and Frawley, *Memory Ireland: Volume 4: James Joyce and Cultural Memory* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

<sup>58</sup> Hilary Bracefield, 'The Northern Composer: Irish or European?', in *Irish Musical Studies 4*, Devine and White (eds.), 255–262; Hilary Bracefield, 'The Politics of Silence: The Northern Irish Composer and the Troubles', in *Music, Music Therapy and Trauma: International Perspectives*, Julie P. Sutton (ed.), (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2002); Jennifer McCay, 'From Inside my Head': Issues of Identity in Northern Ireland through the Music of Kevin O'Connell,' in *Music and Identity*, Fitzgerald and O'Flynn (eds.), 121–136; David O'Connell, *The art music composer and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, Masters dissertation (Glasgow: Glasgow University, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Katie Brown, 'Music, Memory, and Irish Nationalism,' in *Memory Ireland: Volume 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices*, Frawley (ed.), 160.

<sup>60</sup> Frawley (ed.), *Memory Ireland: Volume 2*, 132.



Outside the context of Irish memory studies, musicologist Amy Lynn Wlodarski has examined representations of the Holocaust, such as Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) and Steve Reich's *Different Trains* (1988), offering models for the interpretation of musical witness.<sup>61</sup> Maria Cizmic has inspected how music can bear witness to traumatic events and metaphorically perform the effects of trauma, using four compositions from Eastern Europe and Russia during the 1970s and 1980s as her case studies.<sup>62</sup> Wlodarski's and Cizmic's texts explore the relationship between musical remembrance and trauma and are therefore more applicable to Dennehy's project than *Aisteach*, which works through historical trauma in an oblique manner.

Considerable literature has explored the relationship between memory, history, heritage, and the archive, which has the power to privilege or marginalise historical narratives that 'create a past for tomorrow,' as Terrence Cook argues in *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory*.<sup>63</sup> Feminist approaches to the contemporary archive have been taken by Giovanna Zapperi in 'Woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art—feminist perspectives' and Griselda Pollock in *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive*.<sup>64</sup> Of particular relevance to this study is scholarship on fake archival projects by Walid Raad (b. 1967), a

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<sup>61</sup> Amy Lynn Wlodarski, *Musical Witness and Holocaust Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>62</sup> Maria Cizmic, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Terry Cook, 'Remembering the Future, Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory,' in *Archives, Documentation and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays From the Sawyer Seminar*, Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg (eds.), (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 169; Pablo Alonso Gonzalez, 'From a Given to a Construct: Heritage as a commons,' *Cultural Studies* 28/3 (2014): 359–390; Andrew Flinn, 'Archives and Their Communities: Collecting Histories, Challenging Heritage,' *Memory, Narrative and Histories: Critical Debates, New Trajectories: Working Papers on Memory, Narrative and Histories* 1 (2012): 19–35.

<sup>64</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007); Giovanna Zapperi, 'Woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art—feminist perspectives,' *Feminist Review* 105 (2013): 21–47.

Lebanese artist who invented *The Atlas Group*, an archive containing fake and real photographic, audiovisual, and written documents related to the civil war in Lebanon (1975–91), as well as Zoe Leonard (b. 1961) and Cheryl Dunye (b. 1966), who created *The Fae Richard's Photo Archive*, which chronicles the life of a black queer female actress appearing in films during the Golden Age of Hollywood through photographs captured from the 1920s until the early 1970s.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Van Alphen, 'The Politics of Exclusion,' 118–137; Sarah Rogers, 'Forging History: Performing Memory: Walid Raad's 'The Atlas Project,'" *Parachute* 108 (2002): 68–79; Zapperi, 'Woman's reappearance.'

## CHAPTER 1: COMBATting COLONIAL LEGACIES: REMEMBRANCES OF THE IRISH PAST IN MUSIC BY DONNACHA DENNEHY

I think that all art is about transcending the limits of the world, especially the limit imposed upon us by death.<sup>66</sup>

### I) Overview of Dennehy's Compositional Development

Donnacha Dennehy's compositional style has undergone several shifts. Roughly, one can separate his career into three periods. The first runs from his early years in Ireland until his departure for America in 1992. During this time, he was developing fundamental elements of craft. The second period includes his time in America, his studies with Gérard Grisey at IRCAM in Paris and with Louis Andriessen at the Institute of Sonology in Holland, and his subsequent return to Ireland. One can divide this phase into two stylistic sub-periods. From 1996 to 2005, he incorporated elements of minimalism into his music. Major influences in this time were composers such as Louis Andriessen, Steve Reich, and Gerald Barry. In the second sub-period, 2005–2007, Dennehy composed using spectral techniques. The third and final period lasts from 2007 to the present. In these years, he has assimilated sean-nós into his spectralist language. Works in Dennehy's historical project extend from his second period into his third. In 2012, Dennehy accepted a Global Scholar position at Princeton University. Two years later, the university offered Dennehy a full-time professorship, which he accepted and still holds today.

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<sup>66</sup> Rob Wendt, '5 questions to Donnacha Dennehy (composer, artistic director of Crash Ensemble)' (<https://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2013/05/5-questions-to-donnacha-dennehy-composer-artistic-director-of-crash-ensemble/>, 11 December 2019).

### i) Formative Years and Early Acknowledged Works

Donnacha Dennehy was born in Dublin in 1970. When he was a child, Dennehy performed the traditional folk music of Ireland on the tin whistle and flute and listened to sean-nós at his relatives' homes in Kerry each summer. These experiences influenced the 'folk-inspired pieces' that he composed when he was around ten years old.<sup>67</sup> Dennehy began studying the flute at the age of nine at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and the piano at ten. Around the same time, he also studied theory and harmony with William York, who introduced him to the music of Stockhausen, Stravinsky, Reich, and Glass; Reich in particular influenced his later writing.<sup>68</sup> In these early years in Dublin, Dennehy attended contemporary classical events such as the Dublin Festival of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Music and performances including music by Stockhausen and Cage, among others.<sup>69</sup>

After primary school, Dennehy entered Trinity College Dublin. Describing his experiences there, Dennehy says:

[W]hile in Trinity I was working on elements of craft. This was not necessarily my own voice, at all. In many ways, my voice was essentially very much closer to what I was doing as a young kid, actually. But I didn't have the technique to be able to realise it properly, then. My development only really got going in America.<sup>70</sup>

Dennehy's output from his time at Trinity reveals a composer developing fundamental techniques. In the second song from *Two Yeats Songs* (1992), a spare, generally homophonic and consonant setting of 'Three Things' for flute and soprano, the parts often move in close harmony or in octaves. Contrapuntal motion throughout shows a keen attention toward voice leading, although there are parallel octaves and fifths that deviate from the rules of academic

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<sup>67</sup> Dennehy, 'Owning Overtones,' (2015), 24.

<sup>68</sup> In 2006, when he was artistic director of the *RTÉ Living Music Festival* in Dublin, Dennehy chose to feature the work of Steve Reich.

<sup>69</sup> Burnard, *Musical Creativities*, 131.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Dervan, 'Elements of Craft,' *Irish Times*, 27 Oct 2000.

practice. This work suggests the influence of Joseph Grocock, Dennehy's theory professor at Trinity who taught students Bach and integrated elements of the Baroque composer's music into his work.<sup>71</sup>

ii) Studies in America and Return to Ireland (1992–2007)

Hormoz Farhat, Dennehy's composition teacher at Trinity who had been taught by Darius Milhaud, Lukas Foss, and Roy Harris in the United States, encouraged Dennehy to study in America after completing his bachelor's degree at Trinity. He decided to pursue graduate studies at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where his teachers included Salvatore Martirano, Herbert Brün, and William Brooks. While in Illinois, Dennehy wrote several 'tape pieces.' One example is *GUBU* (1995), the title of which refers to then-Taoiseach Charlie Haughey's response ('grotesque, unbelievable, bizarre and unprecedented') to events surrounding a double murder in 1982.<sup>72</sup> *GUBU* is the first piece in Dennehy's catalogue that uses folk elements, which he adapted 'in a deliberately cheeky way.'<sup>73</sup> Other sounds in *GUBU* include a person panting, sweeping electronic descents, and buzzing swells. Dennehy wrote pieces for tape alone less often in the years to come. While in America, Dennehy also composed several works for tape and solo instrument; his later output shows a continued interest in mixing recorded or live electronics with acoustic instruments.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Dennehy's exploration of electronic music when he was studying in Illinois can be attributed to Martirano and Brün, who both composed for electronics and computers.<sup>75</sup> In addition,

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<sup>71</sup> *Two Yeats Songs* is Dennehy's earliest work in the Contemporary Music Centre's catalogue.

<sup>72</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, a politician and historian, coined the acronym in a column for the *Irish Times*.

<sup>73</sup> He quotes a dance from the Chieftains, a traditional Irish band formed in 1962. Dennehy, 'Owning Overtones,' (2015), 24.

<sup>74</sup> The grouping of a solo instrument with a tape part appears several times in his later work, such as *fAt* (2000), *Stainless Staining* (2006–2007), and *Overstrung* (2010).

<sup>75</sup> In the programme note for his composition, *To Herbert Brün* (2002), Dennehy called Brün 'an inspirational man who opened up an entire world to me.' He apparently pushed Dennehy to experiment with different techniques, as Dennehy wrote, 'I still hear him saying, in his strong Jewish-German accent, "You must write

Martirano and Brün expressed political views through their work. Martirano's *L's G.A.* (1967), for instance, features a narrator who recites an altered version of Lincoln's Gettysburg Address while wearing an amplified gas mask.<sup>76</sup> These political leanings could have affected how Dennehy has engaged with history in his music.

Dennehy briefly studied with Gérard Grisey at IRCAM in Paris in 1996. Frustrated by the hierarchical teaching system and the uniform style of the composition students, Dennehy left Paris to study with Louis Andriessen at the Institute of Sonology in Holland.<sup>77</sup> One can also attribute Dennehy's interest in composing music with political overtones to his studies with Andriessen, whose early work, Dennehy said, 'was basically protesting for left-wing causes.'<sup>78</sup> Commenting on the effects of Martirano, Brün, and Andriessen on his political works, Dennehy said, 'I must have been drawn to those figures because of that kind of engagement with extra-musical ideas driving the music, because it's very prevalent in my music.'<sup>79</sup>

In 1996, Dennehy returned to Ireland to teach music technology at Trinity College Dublin. A year later, he co-founded the Crash Ensemble, an amplified music group specialising in contemporary classical works and mainly performing in Ireland.<sup>80</sup> Dennehy cites Andriessen as an influence in setting up an ensemble where 'you take the making of

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music that you do not like YET.'" Dennehy, programme note for *To Herbert Brün* (2002) (<https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/56563/>, 9 March 2020).

<sup>76</sup> According to one former student, Brün 'asserted that composition was traces of deliberately stipulated processes whereby the composer critiqued the current social system, and/or proposed a different desirable one.' Angela Inez Baldus, 'Composing change with Susan Parenti' ([https://www.smilepolitely.com/arts/composing\\_change\\_with\\_artist\\_susan\\_parenti/](https://www.smilepolitely.com/arts/composing_change_with_artist_susan_parenti/), 28 January 2020).

<sup>77</sup> *Donnacha Dennehy: II. Grisey, Andriessen and Gender Confusion* (<https://www.wqxr.org/story/donnacha-dennehy-movement-two/>, 28 January 2020).

<sup>78</sup> Ian Maleney, 'Hearts of darkness: Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement in the Congo,' *Irish Times*, 11 December 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Interview with the composer by the author conducted on 17 October 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Crash proved invaluable for Dennehy's development because he could consult and collaborate with members of the group about how to achieve various musical results. When composing *Grá agus Bás* (2007) for example, Dennehy worked with the cellist Kate Ellis to work out 'all these gymnastic fast patterns made up of natural harmonics.' Burnard, *Musical Creativities*, 134.

your music into your hands.’<sup>81</sup> The economic upswing in Ireland in the 1990s undoubtedly benefited this ensemble, as the Arts Council had more funds available for cultural projects. At their first concert, Crash played music by Roger Doyle, Andriessen, and Dennehy, whose *Junk Box Fraud* (1997) was premiered. In this piece, minimalist and rock influences are evident in repeating figures in the trombone and clarinet (bars 44 and 66) and in the angular part in the first keyboard starting at bar 85. Two speakers perform non-literal sounds, including audible inhalations and exhalations (see bars 1–11), held ‘s’ sounds (bar 30), and ‘high ingressive sighs’ (bars 249–250). Theatricality is involved as well as the vocalists are told to ‘half yawn’ (bars 200–201), perform a ‘blasé chuckle’ (bar 217), change positions on the stage, and say a fragment of the word ‘stop’ lasciviously (bars 313–314). The various components of *Junk Box Fraud* create a sensory overload for the audience. Overall, the work can be seen as representative of Dennehy’s compositional aesthetic at that point in his career.

Although Dennehy had worked with alternative tunings, especially gradual changes in tuning,<sup>82</sup> and experimented with juxtapositions of differently-tuned instruments in the late 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>83</sup> it was not until around 2005 that he began to incorporate spectralist techniques into his music. In pieces from that period, such as *The Weathering* (2005), *Hive* (2005), and *Bulb* (2006), Dennehy used the overtone series to construct ‘fusions of harmony and timbre.’<sup>84</sup> Grisey stimulated Dennehy’s interest in spectral music;<sup>85</sup> however, Dennehy

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>82</sup> See *The Traces of a Revolutionary Song* (1998).

<sup>83</sup> See ‘O’ (2001–2002) for orchestra.

<sup>84</sup> Dennehy, ‘Owning Overtones,’ (2015), 27.

<sup>85</sup> Donnacha Dennehy, ‘Owning overtones: The impact of spectral approaches on my music’ (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014).

has listed Claude Vivier and James Tenney as having a stronger influence than Grisey on how he integrates concepts associated with spectralism into his practice.<sup>86</sup>

iii) 'A Step in a New Direction' (2007–present)

Dennehy's musical style underwent its most immediate change in 2007, when he composed *Grá agus Bás* for the Crash Ensemble and Iarla Ó Lionáird, a prominent sean-nós singer.<sup>87</sup> Until that point, Dennehy had avoided incorporating traditional music into his work because, in part, he felt something close to an 'embarrassed contempt' for it.<sup>88</sup> Still, it held 'a magnetic pull,' in large part because of his childhood experiences hearing and playing it in Kerry each summer.<sup>89</sup> Sean-nós songs in particular attracted Dennehy because of their microtonal variations, which the composer could adapt into his spectralist language: 'In a way, at this juncture in my compositional life, *sean nós* had become instantly transformed for me from something that had a deep emotional resonance to something that was also pregnant with artistic possibility.'<sup>90</sup> He incorporated sean-nós into his vocabulary by recording Ó Lionáird singing much of his repertoire unaccompanied and then using a software called Melodyne to clearly see the deviations from standard tuning in the songs and 'put a microscope to some of the ornamentation patterns.'<sup>91</sup> This process provided him with the material from which he developed *Grá agus Bás*. After writing this work, which he called 'a step in a new direction,'<sup>92</sup> Dennehy adapted or set sean-nós songs in *One Hundred Goodbyes* (2011) and *3 Sean-Nós Settings* (2013). Sean-nós influences his output in other ways as well. *That the*

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<sup>86</sup> In 2006, around when he was developing his spectral language, Dennehy interviewed Tenney. See Donnacha Dennehy, 'Interview with James Tenney,' *Contemporary Music Review* 27/1 (February 2008): 79–89.

<sup>87</sup> Dennehy was drawn to Ó Lionáird after being inspired by his sean-nós performances on the album *Seven Steps to Mercy* (1997) in the early 2000s.

<sup>88</sup> Dennehy, 'Owning Overtones,' (2015), 24.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> Burnard, *Musical Creativities*, 131.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.



*Night Come* (2010), a song cycle set to six poems by W.B. Yeats, contains ‘melodic and ornamental pattering’ found in the sean-nós tradition.<sup>93</sup> In recent years, Dennehy has turned toward dramatic musical forms, composing two operas—*The Last Hotel* (2015) and *The Second Violinist* (2017)—in collaboration with Irish playwright Enda Walsh.

## II) Dennehy’s Historical Project

When Dennehy visited Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum, which houses artefacts from around the world, he felt compelled to leave. ‘I found [it] a distressing place [...] I thought, this is all from plundering these nations that [the Dutch] colonised,’ he said.<sup>94</sup> This strong anti-colonial stance has guided five of his works that critique the ideologies underlying imperialism, racism, and colonialism in Irish history. These works are: *The Pale* (2003/2016), an ironic reflection on contemporary leaders who have created situations similar to the one in and around Dublin in the 14<sup>th</sup> century; *Hive* (2005), which focuses on the experiences of Irish people in London slums in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; *If he died, what then* (2011–2012), which sets excerpts from *Annals of the Famine in Ireland in 1847, 1848, and 1849*; *The Dark Places* (2016), which commemorates the centenary of the Easter Rising of 1916; and *The Hunger* (2012–2016, revised 2019), in which he returns to *Annals of the Famine in Ireland in 1847, 1848, and 1849* and incorporates two recordings of traditional Irish vocal music as well as five contemporary scholars.

Dennehy’s critique of colonialism fits in a broader historical context in Ireland. Starting in the 1990s, critics, writers, historians, and scholars such as Seamus Deane, Declan Kiberd, and David Lloyd, applied postcolonial ideas to Irish history. Their work took inspiration from scholarship by Edward Said, particularly *Orientalism* (1978), which

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>94</sup> Interview with author.

analysed how the West has dominated, restructured, and held authority over the Orient.<sup>95</sup> Postcolonial writers in Ireland also engaged with ideas from Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Albert Memmi, Aimé Césaire, Ashis Nandy, and Salman Rushdie, whom Dennehy quoted in an article on *The Hunger* that he wrote for the *National Sawdust Log*.<sup>96</sup> Postcolonial studies in Ireland have sought to determine how the economic, political, and cultural repercussions of colonialism and imperialism have shaped the course of Irish history and have affected the modern nation.<sup>97</sup> In *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation*, Kiberd argues colonialism took the form of ‘an accompanying psychology of self-doubt and dependency among the Irish, linked to the loss of economic and political power but also the decline of the native language and culture.’<sup>98</sup> He also believed ‘the effects of cultural dependency remained palpable long after the formal withdrawal of the British military: it was less easy to decolonize the mind than the territory.’<sup>99</sup> On a daily basis growing up in Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s, Dennehy had a direct view of the consequences of British rule in Northern Ireland because of violent events happening there; he was thus continually exposed to the legacies of imperialism and colonialism.

In addition to asserting anti-colonial messages, Dennehy’s historical project challenges the legacy of revisionism in Ireland that emerged in the 1970s and continued into the 2000s. Historian Roy Foster, the symbolic figurehead of this practice, argued in 1976 that revisionist scholarship seeks to uncover and upend myths surrounding Irish history,

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<sup>95</sup> In effect, *Orientalism* launched colonial and postcolonial discourse in academia. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 3.

<sup>96</sup> Donnacha Dennehy, ‘Variations: Contested Ground: On *The Hunger*’ (<https://nationalsawdust.org/thelog/2016/11/09/variations-donnacha-dennehy-politics-crusading-opera/>, 11 December 2019).

<sup>97</sup> Although the postcolonial label seems appropriate, there have been debates surrounding Ireland’s postcolonial status, given its location (it was the only colonial country in Europe) and predominantly white population.

<sup>98</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), 6.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

which act as ‘refuge in which to evade analysis.’<sup>100</sup> Revisionist ideas entered the mainstream through the public media rather quickly in the 1970s and 1980s, possibly because they provided an appealing way to distance oneself from republican violence in Northern Ireland and England. Around the time of the peace process in the 1990s, however, revisionism began to encounter considerable pressure as people felt more inclined to approach and discuss the violent past of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Diarmaid Ferriter posited that revisionism ‘attempted to downplay the significance of violence in Irish history,’<sup>101</sup> Seamus Deane believed it was underpinned by terms such as ‘unionist,’ ‘partitionist,’ ‘pluralist,’ and ‘British nationalist,’<sup>102</sup> and historian Christine Kinealy concluded:

Although revisionism claims to be objective and value-free (a philosophical impossibility), in reality it has had a covert political agenda. As republican violence intensified, so did the determination of revisionist historians to destroy nationalist interpretations of Irish history. This has sometimes resulted in an equally unbalanced view [...] <sup>103</sup>

Dennehy made his reaction to revisionism explicit in an article from 2016, calling it ‘a well-meaning but misplaced period [...] in Irish history.’<sup>104</sup> He cites the work of Kinealy, whose research showed that Britain increased the exportation of food from Ireland during the famine, as an example of anti-revisionist scholarship. While some might attribute the disaster to the potato blight, which was caused by a disease that came to Ireland from America, Dennehy believes ‘if it was just a blight, [the famine] wouldn’t have happened.’<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Roy Foster, ‘The emerald image,’ *Times Literary Supplement*, 4 June 1976, 673.

<sup>101</sup> Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile, 2005), 747. Moreover, Ferriter said Foster’s ‘call for more mature reflection [in 1986] seemed politically convenient, given the new emphasis on Anglo-Irish relations in the search for an inclusive settlement of the Northern problem.’ *Ibid.*, 748.

<sup>102</sup> Seamus Deane, ‘Wherever Green is Read,’ in *Revising the Rising*, Máirín Ní Donnchadha and Theo Dorgan (eds.), (Derry: Field Day 1991), 91–105.

<sup>103</sup> Christine Kinealy, ‘Beyond Revisionism: reassessing the Great Irish Famine’ (<https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/beyond-revisionism-reassessing-the-great-irish-famine/>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>104</sup> Dennehy, ‘Contested Ground.’

<sup>105</sup> Megan McGibney, ‘A new slant on Ireland’s Great Hunger comes to Brooklyn’ (<https://www.irishcentral.com/culture/entertainment/a-new-slant-on-ireland-s-great-hunger-comes-to-brooklyn>, 12 December 2019).

Despite his anti-revisionist stance, Dennehy does not side entirely with nationalists, nor does he think opening up the wounds of the past continually is beneficial; he sees value in some forgetting because it helped resolve conflict in Northern Ireland in the 1990s.<sup>106</sup>

Dennehy traces his musical engagement with history to late 2004, when he became interested in incorporating sean-nós into his work.<sup>107</sup> The genre's connections to national history could explain this turn in his output. Sean-nós is part of indigenous Gaelic culture, much of which British colonialism threatened, reduced, or destroyed. The single greatest marker of the effects of British rule is the Irish language, in which sean-nós is sung. The famine triggered the precipitous decline in the language, and it has held a marginal status in Irish culture since, despite the national government's massive financial and organizational efforts to encourage its growth. 'It is in the two languages of Ireland that the history of power and powerlessness is most deeply inscribed,' writes Seamus Deane.<sup>108</sup> In adapting these songs, then, Dennehy roots his music in a sense of place. 'It's this investigation of where I come from in my music,' he says.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, he would be uncomfortable adapting a musical tradition from outside his culture, such as indigenous African music. 'It would feel like I was raiding that imperialistically,' he says.<sup>110</sup>

Although Dennehy connects his engagement with history to his developing interest in adapting sean-nós, he wrote two works prior to 2004, *Traces of a Revolutionary Song* (1998) and *The Pale* (2003, 2016), that deal with the Irish past. In *Traces of a Revolutionary Song*, a bicentennial commemoration of the 1798 Irish Rebellion written for ten brass

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<sup>106</sup> Dennehy, 'Contested Ground.'

<sup>107</sup> Jonathan Grimes, 'Interview with Donnacha Dennehy' (<https://soundcloud.com/cmccireland/interview-with-donnacha>, 28 January 2020). It is probable that he is referring to his first meeting with Ó Lionáird in Dublin in December 2004.

<sup>108</sup> Seamus Deane (ed.), *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 1* (Derry: Field Day Co. 1991), xxiv.

<sup>109</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>110</sup> Burnard, *Musical Creativities*, 132.

instruments, Dennehy manipulates the French national anthem (*La Marseillaise*) using algorithmic software.<sup>111</sup> The manipulations function on the level of pitch and intervallic materials, as the composer erases the rhythmic profile of the original tune. Dennehy chose this song because the French Revolution inspired the Irish Rebellion of 1798. ‘What I was looking at was the way revolutionary ideas from one society grew in a different way in another,’ he says.<sup>112</sup> While this transformation of ideas holds an historical impetus, the piece differs from the composer’s five other historical works because it does not offer a critique of colonialism; it is much more abstract than the other five works (apart from the title and the source material there are no links to historical ideas) and indicates a surface-level engagement with history.

i) *The Pale*: Neo-Colonialism and the Iraq War

*The Pale* constitutes a deeper engagement with the legacy of colonialism in Ireland and the West more generally. The first version of this work combines the forces of a saxophone quartet and a percussion sextet; in 2016, Dennehy reset the piece for saxophone quartet and percussion quartet. Both versions last about 10 minutes. This study will refer to the 2003 version of *The Pale*.

Dennehy provides some reasoning for the historical angle of *The Pale* in the programme note for the piece:

The ‘Pale’ was the area encompassing Dublin and its environs where British rule was at its strongest in the 14th century. In fact they even protected this area with ditches and fences to keep the barbarous, thuggish Irish out – the great unwashed were, as the phrase became, ‘beyond the pale.’ I wanted to write obsequious, fawning music to glorify the wisdom of our great and holy leaders in their attempts to build new Pales for the twenty-first century. With healthy bounding major chords and stirring

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<sup>111</sup> In perhaps a diplomatic move, Music Network commissioned these works for a programme performed by London Brass.

<sup>112</sup> Interview with author.

marches I could in my own small way honor their omnipotence and visionary leadership. However like the original Pale I failed. Well, at least, only 700 years later, things are starting to work out. This piece may fawn more 700 years from now too.<sup>113</sup>

The British treatment of the Irish as the ‘great unwashed’ calls to mind ethnic cleansing and othering, which are both indicative of colonial attitudes toward the colonised. Although Dennehy does not identify the ‘great and holy leaders’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in his programme note, he said he wrote the composition when he was upset about the role of then-UK Prime Minister Tony Blair in the Iraq War and the discussions about ‘spreading democracy across the world,’<sup>114</sup> which the composer has linked to a ‘self-serving neo-colonialism’ in countries like America.<sup>115</sup> ‘*The Pale* was probably the closest I ever came to a visceral protest piece,’ Dennehy said.<sup>116</sup> In drawing parallels between past and present events, he asserts his belief in the repetition of history, which he explores in greater depth in *The Hunger*.

One can divide *The Pale* into six main sections: 1) the opening, which contains loud syncopations, wide semiquaver leaps, and microtonal oscillations (figures A–H); 2) a quick and generally softer syncopated section characterised by groups of quavers that decrescendo and repeating blocks of minimalist figures in each part (H–L); 3) a return of the opening section (L–P); 4) a brash section, in which the saxophones play loud, accented, and dissonant chords (P–W); 5) a quicker, driven segment in the percussion alone leading to cross-rhythms and microtonal oscillations in the saxophones (W–gg); and 6) an even faster conclusion featuring accented bursts of semiquavers that break up soft repeating quavers (gg–end).

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<sup>113</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *The Pale* (no date) (<https://www.prismquartet.com/touring/color-theory/>, 23 January 2020).

<sup>114</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>115</sup> Dennehy, ‘Contested Ground.’

<sup>116</sup> Interview with author.

Because of its rhythmic intensity and its combination of metallic and wooden timbres, it is probable that Andriessen's *Hout* (1991), or works like it, influenced *The Pale*.

Dennehy's negative reaction to the Iraq War comes across in his music, which is generally dissonant, rebarbative, and littered with microtonal inflections. At figures P and T, for instance, the saxophones play loud and accented chords in a 'flatulently ugly' manner. The ending, in which the saxophones repeat staccato or legato quavers and, at irregular intervals, the whole ensemble plays fortissimo accents that jolt the listener out of the softer texture, conjures up militaristic overtones. Such music provides the opposite to the 'healthy bounding major chords' and 'stirring marches' in the programme note. However, since *The Pale* does not set any words, a listener's perception of the political nature of the work is entirely dependent on whether they read the programme note. The subsequent pieces in Dennehy's historical project all incorporate texts, which allow him to communicate more directly his political messages.

## ii) Immigration and the Irish 'Other' in *Hive*

In *Hive* (2005), for orchestra and chorus, Dennehy sets selections of *Don Juan* (1819–1824) by Lord Byron and *The Rookeries of London* (1850) by Thomas Beames, a British clergyman. From *Don Juan*, the composer uses a broad impression of London that depicts the city's steeples, ships, smoke, and brickwork. This passage comes from stanza 82 of Canto X in the epic poem. Against this selection, Dennehy sets three sections from Beames's account that describe Irish immigrants in the rookery of St. Giles, an infamously destitute quarter of the capital.<sup>117</sup> The text for the first section comes from page 30 in Beames's book,

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<sup>117</sup> The text includes descriptions of other rookeries and possible ways to remedy them; however, Dennehy only uses the reflections on the Irish in the St. Giles slums. It is likely that Dennehy found Beames's text through

the second from page 26, and the third from page 38.<sup>118</sup> One line in Beames’s account, which falls immediately after the second passage that Dennehy sets, describes the rookery as a hive, giving Dennehy his title. Describing his use of these texts, Dennehy said, ‘The whole idea was this oppositional view. So in the poem from Byron, it’s this incredible vista, this thing we all feel when we encounter great cities, or I do anyway, against this text about this slum living in it.’<sup>119</sup> In its hysteric portrayal and condemnation of the disadvantaged Irish population in the rookery, Beames’s account acts as a sociological barometer of British national and public policy toward the Irish, at home and in colonial Ireland, during the famine. *Hive*, therefore, forms the first part in a series of works that addresses the repercussions of the famine.

**Table A: Structural Overview of *Hive***

| Section | Description  | Bars    |
|---------|--|---------|
| 1       | Setting of passage from Byron’s poem   | 1–160   |
| 2       | Orchestral interlude   | 161–269 |
| 3       | First selection from Beames’s text, which focuses on the rookery of St. Giles. Loud, breathless speaking by the chorus   | 270–281 |
| 4       | Brief orchestral interlude   | 282–292 |
| 5       | First selection from Beames’s text (continued). Whispering by the chorus. Starting in bar 297, the brass introduces rhythmic pattern A   | 293–310 |
| 6       | Orchestral interlude in which winds and strings introduce rhythmic pattern B   | 311–331 |
| 7       | Second selection from Beames’s text. Two groups of vocalists sing overlapping texts using rhythmic pattern A. Brass and strings join the chorus in playing rhythmic pattern a starting in bar 350. Rhythmic pattern B maintained in winds and strings (in the latter case, only until bar 350) | 332–373 |
| 8       | Short orchestral interlude   | 374–376 |

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Peter Ackroyd’s *London* (2000), which the composer said he read. The second chapter of that book includes passages from Beames’s text that Dennehy uses in *Hive*. Interview with author.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas Beames, *The Rookeries of London: Past, Present, and Prospective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1852).

<sup>119</sup> Interview with author.



|    |  |         |
|----|--|---------|
| 9  | Third selection from Beames's text. While chorus members hold syllables dispersed amongst them that together form larger lines using rhythmic pattern B, winds and strings, along with piano and vibes, which enter in bar 385, perform rhythmic pattern A with some of the pitches that the chorus used in bars 332–373 | 377–417 |
| 10 | A varied return of bars 1–17. Chorus sings same words and pitches but with a different orchestral accompaniment marked by the continuation of rhythmic pattern A in the strings, piano, and vibes  | 418–440 |

Two rhythmic patterns appear in table A above. Pattern A alternates between three groups of triplets and four groups of semiquavers and first appears in bar 297 in the brass. Pattern B is comprised of interlocking, sustained notes and first appears in bar 314 in the winds and strings. Throughout, Dennehy divides the members of the orchestra into two groups. About two-thirds of the ensemble play at standard pitch; the other third is tuned down a quarter tone.

**Example 1.1** Dennehy: *Hive*, Bars 297–300 (Rhythmic Pattern A)

The image displays a musical score for four instruments: Horns 1/2, Horns 3/4 (-1/4), Trumpet 1, and Trumpet 2 (-1/4) in the first system, and Hns. 1/2, Hns. 3/4 (-1/4), Tpt. 1, and Tpt. 2 (-1/4) in the second system. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with accents and rests, often grouped in threes (trios). The first system shows the initial four staves, and the second system shows the next four staves, with a double bar line at the end of the second system. The notation includes various rests, eighth notes, and triplet markings.

**Example 1.2** Dennehy: *Hive*, Bars 314–319 (Rhythmic Pattern B)

Flute/Piccolo 1

Flute/Piccolo 2 (-1/4)

Oboe 1

Oboe 2 (-1/4)

Clarinet

Bass Clarinet

Violin 1

Violin 1

Violin 2 (-1/4)

Viola

Viola (-1/4)

Fl./Picc. 1

Fl./Picc. 2 (-1/4)

Ob. 1

Ob. 2 (-1/4)

Cl.

B. Cl.

Vln. 1

Vln. 1

Vln. 2 (-1/4)

Vla.

Vla. (-1/4)

Detailed description: This page of a musical score features six systems of staves. The first system contains five staves for woodwinds: Fl./Picc. 1, Fl./Picc. 2 (-1/4), Ob. 1, Ob. 2 (-1/4), Cl., and B. Cl. The second system contains five staves for strings: Vln. 1, Vln. 1, Vln. 2 (-1/4), Vla., and Vla. (-1/4). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 3/4. The woodwind parts include various note values, rests, and phrasing slurs. The string parts feature sustained notes with phrasing slurs and dynamic markings.

The chorus speaks the opening selection from the Beames text, which describes ‘squalid children, haggard men, [...] many speaking Irish’ in the slums, ‘breathlessly’ and in a ‘slightly stilted artificial way.’ Semiquavers on the beat create an anxious, accented effect. Although Dennehy marks the passage as spoken, the actual effect is closer to shouting because the choir’s dynamic is fortissimo. Since this shouted section conveys the manic state of Beames in response to the Irish in the slums, it could evoke a populist politician—hysteria in a suit and tie, xenophobia yelled to persuade and incite.<sup>120</sup> The premiere of this work in Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2005 could have even conjured up images and sounds of familiar political figures in the country. *Hive*’s depiction of British and Irish relations would have resonated with audiences in Northern Ireland because of the nation’s long history of sectarianism. Despite these possible associations, Dennehy says he did not choose the Beames text for its potentially controversial nature in Northern Ireland.<sup>121</sup>

The text in this first section includes Beames’s observation that many people were speaking Irish in the slums. It is likely that these people fled Ireland and settled in London to escape the famine.<sup>122</sup> In fact, the rookery of St. Giles ‘often served as the first accommodation for those [Irish] newly arrived in the city’ and a settlement at its heart ‘became known during the eighteenth century as the ‘Irish Rookery’ or ‘Little Dublin.’’<sup>123</sup> Dennehy feels an affiliation with this demographic because of his ancestry; his identity motivated him to complete this work:

I had relatives who emigrated to England and to America. [...] So there is a kind of blood recognition there. Whereas that could be any immigrant population, like the

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<sup>120</sup> In an older version of the score held by the CMC, Dennehy tells the choir to sing with ‘straight-jacketed hysteria’ in this shouted section.

<sup>121</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>122</sup> Although not stated in the passages Dennehy selects, other sections in the text indicate that Beames knew many of the Irish he saw had fled to London because of the famine.

<sup>123</sup> Richard Kirkland, ‘Reading the Rookery: The Social Meaning of an Irish Slum in Nineteenth-Century London,’ *New Hibernia Review* 16/1 (Spring 2012), 16.

Caribbean population in London, it's just that I have an angle through the Irish. That's where I know it from.<sup>124</sup>

Following the shouted passage, Dennehy includes a short orchestral interlude, in which the third and fourth horns, tuned a quarter tone below the first and second horns, play a notated F# and F, respectively, and the first trumpet crescendos on a repeating, slurred tritone, and then decrescendos on a repeating, slurred diminished sixth. Dennehy sets the first trumpet against the second trumpet, which plays a notated B, tuned down a quarter tone.

**Example 1.3** Dennehy: *Hive*, Bars 217–219

Musical score for Example 1.3, showing Trumpet 1 and Trumpet 2 (-1/4) parts for bars 217–219. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 112. Trumpet 1 plays a tritone (B $\flat$ ) with a crescendo and decrescendo, while Trumpet 2 plays a diminished sixth (B $\flat$ ) with a similar dynamic contour. Both parts feature triplet patterns.

**Example 1.4** Dennehy: *Hive*, Bars 238–240

Musical score for Example 1.4, showing Horns 1/2 and Horns 3/4 (-1/4) parts for bars 238–240. Both parts play a descending sequence of notes (F $\sharp$ , F, E, D) with a dynamic marking of forte (*f*).

In the first trumpet (example 1.3), the half-step descent in the lower pitch from the first to the second figure (from B to A $\sharp$ ) evokes the Doppler effect. In addition, the pattern in the horns (example 1.4) in this interlude evokes the siren of a European ambulance. (The first and second violins play this figure as well in bars 223–263.) In an interview about the work,

<sup>124</sup> Interview with author. As Christopher Fox notes in his study of Irish composer Linda Buckley (b. 1979), relocation has been ‘at the heart of the Irish experience’ for centuries. Christopher Fox, ‘The Bright Places of Life as Clearly as the Dark’: The Music of Linda Buckley,’ *Tempo* 72/284 (April 2018), 32.

Dennehy even remarks that one section of the work feels ‘like all these ambulances passing by. It has this feeling that you’re immersed in a city: you’re here in this district and you’re aware of another district over there.’<sup>125</sup> He also said he thinks of the work ‘almost like a city, with its various layers of simultaneous activity.’<sup>126</sup>

These ‘ambulance’ sounds lead into an extended passage of whispering, in which the chorus describes the Irish as a ‘population stagnant in the midst of activity; lounging about in remnants of shooting jackets’ (see bars 293–310). Dennehy tells the singers to whisper frantically at a forte dynamic, using rhythms from the previous shouting section, and notes they do not have to perform in unison. Audiences, consequently, cannot clearly understand the text; they may only be able to hear certain words or phrases. In bars 293–297, the horns perform their alternating two-note figure against the whispering singers, situating them in a cosmopolitan setting. Because the singers perform in this context, it is possible that they represent the Irish Beames heard and saw in London. The freneticism of the chorus also brings to mind associations with the title.

In the second selection from the Beames text, which offers more descriptions of the slums, Dennehy divides the choir into two groups that each execute the same text and rhythms. The sopranos perform with the first altos, tenors, and basses; the second altos and second tenors, who sing down a quartertone in most of this section, constitute the other group. The first group sings the text for this section in a mostly linear manner (without repeating words or phrases). The second group repeats two textual segments: ‘lowest lodging houses lowest (sic) in London’ in bars 332–345, underlining the environments in which the

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<sup>125</sup> Dennehy prefigures this ambulance section in bars 217–228 and 237–243 of the orchestral interlude that falls between the selections from Byron and Beames. The trumpet figure appears earlier as well in bars 55–60, which occur in the Byron section.

<sup>126</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *Hive* (2005)

(<http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/4958/56550>, 23 January 2020).

Irish lived, and ‘the hordes of Irish who annually seem to come in and go out with the flies and fruit’ in bars 346–373, portraying the Irish as parasites who harm the capital.

There are two instances where the texts in the groups overlap: bars 332–333 and bars 346–349. While both sections provide moments where listeners can understand the otherwise obscure text, the latter is significant because it is the only passage where the first group repeats a phrase. There they repeat ‘the hordes of Irish,’ placing a weight on the identity of Beames’s target demographic. Dennehy further emphasises the importance of this moment by writing a harmonic shift in the full ensemble in bar 350 and incorporating brass and string instruments into the texture of the chorus. Whereas the first group moves on from this section to sing the rest of their textual selection, the second group repeats ‘the hordes of Irish who annually seem to come in and go out with the flies and fruit,’ sounding a constant refrain. This structural junction marks the approximate midpoint of the second section from Beames’s text.

The focus on ‘the hordes of Irish’ sets up the third and final selection from *The Rookeries of London*. ‘The Irish coming to London seem to regard it as a heathen city, and to give themselves up at once to a course of recklessness and crime. [...] They bring their bad habits with them, and leave their virtues behind,’ Beames writes, defining his nation and national identity—the self—in opposition to the Irish—the squalid, hysteria-inducing other.<sup>127</sup> The other, in this case, acts as a great threat to the well-being and greatness of Britain, the imperial power. Beames seems to blame the Irish for their situation in the slums; the Irish, in his view, exacerbate their terrible living conditions.<sup>128</sup> Such a portrayal evokes

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<sup>127</sup> In light of this passage, Dennehy’s description of Beames’s text as ‘somewhat racist’ seems to be an understatement.

<sup>128</sup> *Hive* therefore develops the idea of victim blaming in colonial systems. Dennehy works through this concept in *The Hunger* as well. See Dennehy, ‘Contested Ground.’



oft-repeated xenophobic practices with which politicians and other authorities have attempted to persuade national audiences not to allow certain immigrants into their country. The Irish are no longer the subject in the West; instead, such thinking has fueled discrimination against Africans and Muslims, among other groups. The practice also portrays the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, namely how the coloniser uses ‘othering’ to degrade and subjugate the colonised. In this case, Dennehy shows the emotional backlash of the imperial homeland when the colonised Irish other came to live in the capital. Dennehy thus uses a text whose tropes have recurred, supporting a cyclical view of history that he develops further in *The Hunger*.

In bars 377–401 (example 1.5), Dennehy disperses the first line from Beames’s harsh judgment of the Irish amongst the chorus members. Because they hold syllables that together create larger lines, the listener cannot clearly understand the text.

**Example 1.5** Dennehy: *Hive*, Bars 377–401

Triangular noteheads indicate the notated tone is sung down a quartertone

The musical score consists of seven staves. The top two staves are for Soprano, the next two for Alto, and the bottom three for Tenor and Bass. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: 'The rish co - to don' and 'I - rish ming Lon -'. Triangular noteheads are used to indicate a quartertone descent in the lyrics 'I - rish ming' and 'Lon -'.

At the same time, the orchestra plays rhythmic pattern A with some of the pitches that the chorus sang in bars 332–373. In bars 399–401, the orchestral accompaniment builds in intensity, as Dennehy writes a crescendo in the timpani and adds crotchets in the bass drum. These percussive effects climax in bar 402, where the bass drum plays quaver triplets against dotted crotchets in the timpani and another percussionist rubs cast-iron pot lids against each other. This climax coincides with the opening of the second line, which, unlike the first, is clearly understood because the singers cut off each syllable right before the next one starts.

Throughout this section, the tension between the condemning words and the slow, harmonic music indicates a satirical tone that undercuts the hysteria of Beames's account.

iii) Colonial Ghosts: Reading the Rising Through Roger Casement and Joseph Conrad in *The Dark Places*

*The Dark Places* (2016), for orchestra and two vocal soloists, premiered in a programme called *Imagining Home: On Revolution*, which was part of a seven-concert series in March and April 2016 that commemorated the centenary of the Easter Rising. This particular programme featured music and prose by composers and writers from Ireland and abroad. Colm Tóibín (b. 1955), an Irish novelist and essayist who wrote the libretto for *The Dark Places*, chose the international writers to discuss revolutionary ideals and their effects, thus placing the Rising in a broader context. Dennehy and Tóibín each selected compositions that were performed at the event.

In his fictional text for *The Dark Places*, Tóibín writes through the friendship of Roger Casement (1864–1916), a revolutionary figure who was tried and hanged by the British government because of his role in the Rising, and the Polish author Joseph Conrad (1857–1924). Instead of portraying the military matters of the Rising or depicting any part of Casement's role in the rebellion, such as his gun-running efforts, Tóibín's text focuses solely on the relationship between these men to show how the personal became political, thus displacing the work away from the Irish revolution.<sup>129</sup> Conrad and Casement shared quarters in the Congo for a few weeks in 1890 and remained in contact afterward. The two men responded to the colonial atrocities they witnessed in the Congo in different ways. While

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<sup>129</sup> In an interview with the *Irish Times*, Tóibín said, 'Casement's interest in revolution in Ireland arose from what he saw in the Congo, as did Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, one of his best-known pieces of fiction and, through that, you could once more connect what had happened in Ireland in 1916 to what had happened in the outside world.' Maleney, 'Hearts of darkness.'

Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness*, which was published in 1902, based on the horrors he witnessed in the Congo, Casement returned to that country in 1903 to report on the atrocities happening there for the British government. His report, which described the subjection of the Congolese through forced labor and detailed the tax system that ‘enslaved the population,’<sup>130</sup> was published in 1904. In the same year, Casement founded the Congo Reform Association (CRA) with E.D. Morel (1873–1924), a British journalist and politician. The CRA and Casement’s report together ‘contributed greatly to the eventual downfall of the Leopoldian system and the annexation of the Congo by Belgium.’<sup>131</sup> Although Tóibín does not include any part of the report, he does engage with its contexts, images, and messages. For instance, in the first section of *The Dark Places*, Casement recalls a scene he witnessed: ‘One morning, I saw a line of the natives coming towards the camp. A cruelty no one had imagined. Women and children with the men, all carrying more rubber than they could bear, and white men with whips and clubs goading them on.’ Besides this description, there are no portrayals of what Casement and Conrad witnessed; the text mostly provides general reflections on their experiences in the Congo and on their actions after they lived there.

When Casement was under trial for treason in Britain for gun-running in 1916, supporters tried to free him; however, after the British government leaked his diaries, which contained explicit references to sexual experiences with men, the campaign for Casement’s freedom disintegrated. Tóibín links Casement’s sexuality to his patriotic activities, arguing his homosexuality was ‘essential to [his] revolutionary spirit as [he] sought to liberate

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<sup>130</sup> Pierre-Luc Plasman, ‘The Three Lives of the Casement Report: Its Impact on Official Reactions and Popular Opinion in Belgium,’ *Breac* (<https://breac.nd.edu/articles/the-three-lives-of-the-casement-report-its-impact-on-official-reactions-and-popular-opinion-in-belgium/>), 1 April 2016).

<sup>131</sup> William Roger Louis, ‘Roger Casement and the Congo,’ *The Journal of African History* 5/1 (1964), 117.

[himself] from traditional ideas of sexuality.’<sup>132</sup> Tóibín’s interpretation comes across on pages 34–36 in *The Dark Places*, where the author connects Ireland’s freedom with Casement’s ‘[bodily] freedom,’ his ‘freedom to love,’ and his ‘freedom to love as [he] would,’ positioning the freedom of Ireland as liberation from British rule over the nation and the body and displacing the work away from the Irish revolution.<sup>133</sup> Such a text fits in a larger contemporary context, as Ireland had become the first country to legalise same-sex marriage by popular vote in 2015, only one year before *The Dark Places* premiered. Tóibín supported the cause in the period leading up to the vote, arguing the referendum campaign allowed LGBTQ people to ‘set out publicly and communally who [they] are and how [they] wish to be treated in [their] country in the future.’<sup>134</sup> It is even possible that the author wrote the text for *The Dark Places* during the campaign or in its direct aftermath.

*The Dark Places* differs from the rest of Dennehy’s historical output because he did not have sole control over the creative process; he and Tóibín decided on the topic together, but the author wrote the libretto on his own.<sup>135</sup> Nevertheless, the resulting work still fits into Dennehy’s historical project because of how he interpreted and set it.<sup>136</sup> Whereas Tóibín was primarily concerned with how Casement’s sexuality related to his revolutionary activities, Dennehy was driven by the colonial undercurrents of the libretto and how those relate to Irish history. The collaborators interpreted the same subject differently because of their contrasting artistic views and their diverging interests. Dennehy referred to the colonial side

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<sup>132</sup> Colm Tóibín, ‘Romancing rebellion: the culture that spawned the Irish rebels of Easter 1916,’ *New Statesman*, 2 October 2014.

<sup>133</sup> Laws in Ireland criminalised homosexuality until 1993. These laws were holdovers from British rule in Ireland.

<sup>134</sup> Colm Tóibín, ‘Colm Tóibín: The same-sex marriage referendum and the embrace of love,’ *Irish Times*, 14 May 2015.

<sup>135</sup> Casement has preoccupied Tóibín, who also wrote an article about him for the *London Review of Books* in 1997. In addition, the reception of Casement is an example of contentious memory, as different interpretations of his life and work have produced considerable conflict since his death in 1916. Colm Tóibín, ‘A Whale of a Time,’ *London Review of Books* 19/19 (October 1997): 24–7.

<sup>136</sup> Dennehy set the text with only some small alterations. Interview with author.

of the story in an interview before the premiere, ‘What inspired me here was the very specific scenario between Joseph Conrad and Roger Casement. [...] Both Conrad and Casement were in the Congo together, and both were aghast at the colonial atrocity there.’<sup>137</sup> In this case, the colonialist focus was the Congo; however, Casement’s experiences there made him consider the colonial situation in his homeland, which means *The Dark Places* obliquely relates to the effects of colonialism in Ireland and the struggles of Irish people against British authorities.

*The Dark Places* divides into three main parts: solo reflections and dialogues between the men about their experiences (pages 1–48), a sustained climax (pages 49–58), and an elegiac conclusion (pages 58–64). A baritone represents Casement, and a bass voices Conrad. Throughout, the vocalists’ words come through the musical texture clearly; the audience understands what they sing because Dennehy does not fragment the text and only sometimes briefly layers one line over another.<sup>138</sup>

While Casement was combative and revolutionary, the more reserved Conrad preferred the privacy of his home and the safety of literature. Tóibín underscores their differences through Conrad’s text: ‘What I wanted then was peace, a desk, a pen, the night falling in England. What he wanted were years of struggle.’ Dennehy’s setting illustrates and juxtaposes the different dispositions of these men, placing Conrad almost always in a lower register than Casement and giving him more subdued passages. As Conrad reflects, ‘[Casement] was pure emotion, in the years when I grew cold.’ When the pair sings together,

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<sup>137</sup> *Donnacha Dennehy World Premiere to Feature in Imagining Home Series* (<https://journalofmusic.com/news/donnacha-dennehy-world-premiere-feature-imagining-home-series>, 23 January 2020).

<sup>138</sup> This perception corresponds with the reviewer’s in the *Journal of Music*: ‘For much of *The Dark Places*, the Crash Ensemble was confined to providing a discreet sonic backdrop to the two singers, whose vocal lines allowed for clear enunciation of the text.’ Barra Ó Séaghdha, ‘Commemorating 1916 By Not Thinking About It’ (<https://journalofmusic.com/criticism/commemorating-1916-not-thinking-about-it>, 23 January 2020).

they do so in close homophony, which suggests they formed a bond through their shared experience of witnessing colonial atrocities in the Congo. Yet, above all, the musical differences between the men show how the colonial exploitation in the Congo affected them differently.

Dennehy's placement of the climax centres *The Dark Places* on the colonial atrocities Casement and Conrad witnessed in the Congo: 'I set [the work] so that it's quite restrained until it gets to [the climax]. [...] Where the music hits its high point, is about the bigger thing they're embroiled in.'<sup>139</sup> This setting results in a tension with Tóibín's text, which displaces the work away from revolution, thus supporting Dennehy's viewpoint that 'the music in the way it reveals itself can read the text differently than the writer even intended. [...] I don't want the music to always tell [the story] as the words do. That kind of friction is where the beauty comes.'<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>140</sup> Interview with author.

**Example 1.6** Dennehy: *The Dark Places*, Bars 253–257

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral layout. The instruments and their parts are as follows:

- Bass Clarinet:** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplet markings (3) and a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Trombone:** Remains silent, indicated by a whole rest.
- Baritone:** Features a vocal line with lyrics: "The dark plac - es the haunt - ing sounds,". The dynamics range from *f* to *ff*.
- Violin I:** Plays a sustained chord with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Violin II:** Plays a sustained chord with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Viola:** Plays a sustained chord with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Cello:** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Bass Viol:** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplet markings (3) and a dynamic marking of *f*.
- Double Bass:** Plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with triplet markings (3) and a dynamic marking of *f*.



The image displays a musical score for Example 1.6, featuring a vocal line and an orchestral arrangement. The vocal part, in baritone clef, includes the lyrics: "— and then the night comes down." The orchestral parts are arranged in a grand staff format, including Bass Clarinet (B. Cl.), Trombone (Tbn.), Baritone (Bar.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Cello, Bass Violin (B. Viol.), and Double Bass (Db.). The score is characterized by complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and cross-rhythms, and dynamic markings such as *f* (forte) and *p* (piano). The vocal line is marked with a fermata over the first measure, followed by the lyrics. The orchestral parts feature intricate rhythmic textures, with the Trombone part showing a dynamic shift from *f* to *p* across the measures.

As shown in example 1.6, the build to the climax begins in bars 253–254, where Casement sings the first utterance of ‘the dark places’ and a dramatic shift occurs in the musical intensity, as Dennehy writes loud cross-rhythms such as semiquavers set against quaver and crotchet triplets in the orchestra. After Casement sings bars 253–257, Dennehy inserts a lengthy orchestral passage in bars 257–273. This is the most animated section in the work so far, with dynamic markings of forte and fortissimo and cross-rhythms such as dotted semiquavers set against semiquavers, quavers, quaver triplets, and crotchet triplets. Most prominent in this interlude is a rising trombone, which plays high in its range. This unspoken

section could address ‘what’s left unsaid’ by the characters and ‘where the room is for the music,’ as it sets up the intensity of the climax.<sup>141</sup>

**Example 1.7** Dennehy: *The Dark Places*, Bars 274–286

The musical score for Example 1.7 shows two systems of vocal parts. The first system features a Baritone and a Bass part, both marked *ff*. The lyrics are: "We saw. We imagined the dark". The second system continues the lyrics: "plac-es. We, we hear." The notation includes various time signatures (4/4, 3/4) and musical ornaments like triplets and slurs.

Casement and Conrad join this charged atmosphere in bar 274 (example 1.7), signaling the start of the climax, in which they exclaim, ‘We saw. We imagined the dark places. We, we hear.’ These words bind the men through their witnessing of colonial horrors in the Congo, and Dennehy shows this connection through music by writing their parts together in octaves. In addition, their lines rise over the course of the climax, heightening the emotional effect of this section.

After the climax, *The Dark Places* transitions into its elegiac conclusion, which begins in bar 290. There the rhythmic intensity decreases, as fewer instruments play the cross-rhythms, and the dynamics drop to piano and mezzo piano in the orchestra. In bars 290–298, Casement and Conrad sing they ‘hear still the voices echoing that no one heard’;

<sup>141</sup> Maleney, ‘Hearts of darkness.’

along with the mournful character of the music, these words serve as a commemoration to those who died in the Congo. This commemoration reaches beyond the Congo to encompass the forgotten dead of the Amazon Basin, where Casement witnessed a genocide as well, and those who died in the Irish famine of 1845–1852 because earlier in the work (in bars 216–230) Dennehy sets the text: ‘The voices of those who cried out in pain and will not be heard, who will not be heard. The forgotten dead. The dead of the Congo, the Amazon Basin. The Famine dead.’

**Example 1.8** Dennehy: *The Dark Places*, Bars 223–230

The musical score for Example 1.8 consists of four staves. The top two staves are for Baritone and Bass, and the bottom two are for Baritone (Bar.) and Bass (B.). The lyrics are: 'The for-got-ten dead. The dead of the Con-go, the A-ma-zon Ba sin. The Fam-ine dead. The Fam-ine dead.' The music features triplets and rests, with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.

Singing together in bars 223–227, Casement and Conrad refer to each of these groups once, yet Casement repeats ‘The Famine dead’ in bars 228–230 with longer rhythms that extend the impact of these words. Dennehy’s setting of this text, moreover, draws a broader connection to his historical project.

iv) Representing the Great Irish Famine in *If he died, what then* and *The Hunger*

In 2011–2012, Dennehy composed *If he died, what then*, an adaptation of text from *Annals of the Famine in Ireland in 1847, 1848, and 1849*, by Asenath Nicholson, an American humanitarian. The composition, for solo soprano and chamber orchestra, sets selections that focus on Nicholson’s story about an old man she witnessed and aided during the famine. Dennehy incorporated almost all of the same text and vocal melody, as well as most of the same orchestral accompaniment, into *The Hunger* (2012–2016, revised 2019), a mixed-media, ‘docu-cantata’ that also adapts additional selections from the book. *The Hunger*, which exists in a concert and stage version that last 45 and 70 minutes respectively, is Dennehy’s most extended, and complex, historical work. One can view it as a culmination of the composer’s engagement with the Irish past.<sup>142</sup> Through the work, Dennehy presents a multivalent argument about the effects of colonialism, the repetition of history, and how musical remembrances can combat damaging historical processes. *The Hunger* also opposes revisionist histories that have obscured the extent to which Irish people suffered during the famine.

a) The History of the Famine and the Narrative of *The Hunger*

The famine was the most traumatic event in modern Irish history. Between 1845 and 1851, around 1 million people died in Ireland of starvation and hunger-related disease.<sup>143</sup> About 2.1 million people emigrated from the country between 1846 and 1855.<sup>144</sup> Of those who went to America, between a quarter and a third spoke Irish; their departure contributed to the

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<sup>142</sup> Dennehy called the work a ‘docu-opera’ up until 2019, when he changed the label to ‘docu-cantata.’ The author has based analyses in this thesis on the most-recent performance score of the 2019 stage version, unless otherwise specified. In addition, the author has referred to the stage version of *The Hunger* as an opera throughout.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Gray, ‘The Great Famine, 1845–1850,’ in *The Cambridge History of Ireland Vol. III 1730-1880*, James Kelly (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 664.

<sup>144</sup> Kevin Kenny, ‘Irish Emigration, c. 1845–1900,’ in *The Cambridge History of Ireland Vol. III*, Kelly (ed.), 669.

precipitous decline in the language.<sup>145</sup> A population shift in the country during the famine affected the decline of the Irish language as well; many Irish speakers fled from rural areas to cities and larger towns, where they assimilated to the culture they had entered, using English to acquire and keep jobs. Those who left the island often did not come back; well under 10% returned after emigrating.<sup>146</sup> In addition, there were 0.4 million ‘averted births;’ not only did people leave, but fewer were born.<sup>147</sup> This massive demographic drainage continued after the famine as well; between 1850–1900, the Irish population was reduced by half.

Many Irish speakers who lived during the famine were illiterate and, as such, could not write down their stories. As Dennehy explains, ‘One tragedy of our understanding of the famine is that precious little is available from those who directly suffered. There is no published account from the Gaelic-speaking majority that experienced the most.’<sup>148</sup> This lack supports Christopher Morash’s view that ‘the defining feature of the famine [...] is absence. There is the absence of food, the absence of the culture that was uprooted, and most of all, the absence of the human beings who died or who emigrated.’<sup>149</sup> George Petrie, a famous collector of folk songs, observed absences in traditional Irish musical culture during the famine:

The ‘land of song’ was no longer tuneful; or if a human sound met the traveller’s ear, it was only that of the feeble and despairing wail for the dead. This awful unwonted silence, which during the famine and subsequent years, almost everywhere prevailed, struck more fearfully on their imaginations, as many Irish gentlemen informed me,

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<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 675.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 687.

<sup>147</sup> Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland: a new economic history*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 173–187.

<sup>148</sup> Donnacha Dennehy, programme note for *The Hunger* (2016)

([https://www.bam.org/media/7345758/The\\_Hunger.pdf](https://www.bam.org/media/7345758/The_Hunger.pdf), 23 January 2020).

<sup>149</sup> Christopher Morash, ‘An afterword of silence,’ in *Hungry Words: Images of Famine in the Irish Canon*, George Cusack and Sarah Goss (eds.), (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 306.

and gave them a deeper feeling of the desolation with which the country had been visited, than other circumstances which had forced itself upon their attention.<sup>150</sup>

The few songs that were written and sung during the famine enabled those who witnessed or experienced suffering to share and pass on their grief. Dennehy turns to the sean-nós tradition, which is associated with the rural Irish culture affected by the famine the most, to invent ‘an indigenous Irish thread in [the] multi-dimensional narrative [of *The Hunger*.]’<sup>151</sup> The result is a nameless Irish man, who, at times, represents the old man Nicholson described toward the end of her book, and, at other points, ‘embodies the peasant Irish who suffered in [the famine] the most,’ Dennehy says.<sup>152</sup> Hence his anonymity; he stands in for anyone and everyone. Such anonymity underscores the effects of the famine; the calamity killed people like him and erased them from the historical record. This man, ‘the voice of the voiceless,’<sup>153</sup> as director Tom Creed says, revives the spirit of those who suffered, emigrated, or died during the famine—the people who permanently altered the narrative of Irish culture and history.<sup>154</sup>

Dennehy assembles most of the man’s music using three sources from indigenous Irish culture. The first is a recording of a keening for a dead child performed by Cítí Ní Ghallchóir, from Gweedore, County Donegal, which Alan Lomax recorded on a trip to Ireland in 1951.<sup>155</sup> This performance provides one of the ‘feeble and despairing wail[s] for

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<sup>150</sup> Dennehy cites Petrie’s book in the programme note to *The Hunger* in 2016. See George Petrie, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, vol. 1 (Dublin: Society for the Preservation and Publication of the Melodies of Ireland, 1855), 21.

<sup>151</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *The Hunger* (2016).

<sup>152</sup> *Making The Hunger, BAM 2016 Next Wave Festival* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i8v3JEmFVak>, 23 January 2020).

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> In productions of the stage versions, the man, dressed as a peasant, digs a grave for the child on his back. His appearance corresponds with the historical record because the vast majority of those who died in the famine were ‘labouring and smallholding’ peasants who lived in rural areas. See Gray, ‘The Great Famine,’ 642.

<sup>155</sup> Keening was traditionally performed over a corpse and ‘was intrinsic to the ritual of the wake and funeral obsequies.’ Ní Ghallchóir wrote the words, but not the melody, for this keening. Mary Mc Laughlin, ‘Keening the Dead: Ancient History or a Ritual for Today,’ *Religions* 10/4 (2019), 1.

the dead' described by Petrie.<sup>156</sup> Dennehy also includes the recording in the work itself. The second source is the sean-nós song, 'Black Potatoes,' which Máire Ní Dhroma, who lived in Ring near Dungarvan, probably composed during the famine. In adapting 'Black Potatoes,' which describes the despair, sorrow, and hardship of famine sufferers and questions God about why the misfortunes are happening, Dennehy connects the man directly to the disaster.<sup>157</sup> This 'nontraditional historiographical source,' moreover, offers a 'representative expression of a community' that conveys the trauma of the situation to modern audiences, and 'its continuous handling down from generation to generation ensures that the feeling is an enduring one.'<sup>158</sup> The third source is a recording of an old man singing 'An Draighneán Donn' ('The Brown Thorntree') from 1920, although the song predates the famine by at least one hundred years. This recording plays near the end of the work. All three of these sources are in Irish, which supports the depiction of the man as a representative from the demographic that suffered the most in the famine.

#### b) Overview of *The Hunger* (Stage Version)

*The Hunger* combines a cast that includes two figures from the famine and five scholars from the present. This mix gives the work its 'docu-cantata' status. Nicholson describes what she witnessed as an outsider, and the man embodies one of the sufferers she saw and aided. They indirectly interact through their musical lines, as the man sings after Nicholson recalls what she witnessed during the famine. Tom Creed, the director for all staged productions of the famine to date, interviewed economists Paul Krugman and Branko Milanovic, historians

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<sup>156</sup> Petrie, *The Ancient Music*, 21.

<sup>157</sup> The Catholic Church censored this song because of its religious messages. Triona Ní Shíocháin, *Singing Ideas: Performance, Politics and Oral Poetry* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 49.

<sup>158</sup> Erick Falc'her-Poyroux, 'The Great Irish Famine in Songs,' *French Journal of British Studies* 19/2 (2014): 157–172.

Maureen Murphy and Megan Vaughan, and linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky.<sup>159</sup> The concert version removes the scholars and the recordings to foreground the relationship between Nicholson and the man. Throughout both versions, the work moves between overtone-based and equal-tempered tuning.

**Table B: Structural Overview of *The Hunger***

| Part | Description   | Bars      |
|------|---|-----------|
| 1    | Dennehy introduces Nicholson, who recalls an old suffering man she witnessed carrying a nearly-naked, starving child on his back. The nameless man enters in bar 96, near the end of this part, singing a section of ‘Na Prátaí Dubha’ (‘Black Potatoes’), one of the only extant sean-nós songs from the period. <sup>160</sup> Also in this part, Dennehy includes commentary from Maureen Murphy, who provides background on Nicholson, and from Paul Krugman, who discusses why famines happen. (Murphy and the other scholars appear in the first four parts of the opera, but not the fifth.) | 1–127     |
| 2    | Nicholson continues to describe the man, who expresses his sorrow using music from the keening recording, which has not yet been heard.   | 128–540   |
| 3    | After Nicholson recounts a relief officer’s unsympathetic question (‘If he died, what then?’), the man sings fragments from ‘Black Potatoes’ in bars 868–1065. Following these fragments, the keening recording plays in bars 1076–1129.  | 541–1148  |
| 4    | Nicholson depicts more scenes of Ireland during the famine and laments she ‘shall never forget’ what she witnessed. Also in this part, Dennehy constructs a ‘babble’ period in which all the scholars speak simultaneously.   | 1149–1813 |
| 5    | After the recording of ‘The Brown Thorntree’ plays, Nicholson and the man sing their final lines using music from the recording.  | 1814–1919 |

As illustrated by table B above, *The Hunger* functions mostly as a narrative shared by Nicholson and the man, with the scholars interspersing contextual passages in parts 1–4 that interrupt this developing narrative and the recordings offering musical materials that Nicholson and the man adopt.

<sup>159</sup> Murphy wrote a biography of Nicholson called *Compassionate Stranger: Asenath Nicholson and the Great Irish Famine* (2015) and edited an edition of Nicholson’s *Annals of the Famine in Ireland* in 1998. Maureen Murphy, *Compassionate Stranger: Asenath Nicholson and the Great Irish Famine* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015); Asenath Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine in Ireland*, Maureen Murphy (ed.), (Dublin: The Lilliput Press Ltd, 1998).

<sup>160</sup> For this song’s text, see Micheál Ó Conghaile, Lochlainn Ó Tuairisg, and Peadar Ó Ceannabháin (eds.), *Leabhar Mor na nAmhran* (Inverin: Cló Iar-Chonnacht, 2012), 476.



Dennehy's selections from Nicholson's text focus on the people she aided and witnessed in rural parts of Ireland and how her experiences affected her. He starts with a set of recollections from the final chapter of her book.<sup>161</sup> These memories unfold on pages 197–199 of her account and constitute the longest textual excerpt.<sup>162</sup> Because these recollections account for about half of *The Hunger*, Dennehy lends a weight to their messages. In this section, Nicholson tells a story about an old man she met on two occasions who was turned away from a relief station without food, to criticise the relief officers for their treatment of Irish sufferers. Dennehy chooses this story to show 'how incapable bureaucracy is at dealing with a quickly transforming crisis, and how that bureaucracy can be used as a screen for being unfeeling.'<sup>163</sup> This focus fits into his larger arguments about how political-economic systems have allowed famines to happen. Dennehy takes Nicholson's next story, which is about a dead girl whose hair she saw 'waving gently through a little cleft of stones,' from page 94 of the book. He builds her following account about her experiences in Arranmore from an excerpt on page 85 and a longer passage on page 73. Into this narrative period, he adds 'I shall never forget' from her previous story about the girl. Nicholson's subsequent text in the opera comes from a letter she wrote to an unidentified English man in which she beseeched England to aid the Irish by creating employment opportunities for them.<sup>164</sup> This letter falls on pages 100–103 in the book. Dennehy adapts two sentences from the penultimate page of Nicholson's book for her final text in the opera.

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<sup>161</sup> Dennehy omits everything from the first three chapters of the book, which discuss Nicholson's experiences in Dublin and Belfast, provide background context on the famine, and state the objective of the account.

<sup>162</sup> Dennehy only uses these recollections in *If he died, what then*. See Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine*.

<sup>163</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *The Hunger* concert version (no date) (<http://www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/60128>, 23 January 2020).

<sup>164</sup> She sent the letter on 30 October 1847 from Belmullet, a coastal town in County Mayo, where many people experienced the worst effects of the famine. Maureen Murphy suggests the recipient of the letter is 'an English Quaker familiar with famine conditions in the West of Ireland, [...] an abolitionist and [...] probably a radical in his political views.' Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine*, 14.

c) Overview of Arguments Asserted Through *The Hunger*

Dennehy's personal identity has greatly influenced his engagement with the famine in *If he died, what then* and *The Hunger*. His mother speaks Irish, and both his parents grew up near the Gaeltacht, which is located in the rural areas of Ireland that the famine hit the hardest.<sup>165</sup> While he doesn't know whether the famine affected his ancestors,<sup>166</sup> his connection to the Gaeltacht could have sharpened his feelings about the disaster, which he says he knows 'on an emotional level.'<sup>167</sup> In fact, he has always felt an emotional connection to the famine and wanted to write about it for a long time; Nicholson's *Annals of the Famine in Ireland* provided him a way into this history and allowed him to reach an international, American audience.<sup>168</sup> His public defense of *The Hunger* in his article for the *National Sawdust Log*, which he wrote after several American critics responded negatively to the work, further supports his personal affiliation with the famine; he did not publicly defend any of his work before and has not since.

In this article, which was published a few days after the election of Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States, Dennehy links his docu-cantata to Trump's exploitation of 'othering.' This practice entails portraying people from other cultures and countries as subhuman. Dennehy argues that it 'allows the more powerful to manipulate the dominated 'other' while simultaneously blaming the 'other' for what transpires.'<sup>169</sup> During the famine, *Punch*, a widely-read British satirical magazine that one can interpret 'as a simultaneous

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<sup>165</sup> Tom Moore, 'A conversation with Donnacha Dennehy' (<http://sonograma.org/2017/04/a-conversation-with-donnacha-dennehy/>, 11 December 2019). Although Dennehy learned Irish at school, English is his main language.

<sup>166</sup> Interview with author.

<sup>167</sup> Wendt, '5 questions.'

<sup>168</sup> Donnacha Dennehy, 'The Hunger - Donnacha Dennehy on his famine opera'

(<https://www.rte.ie/culture/2019/0815/1068995-the-hunger-donnacha-dennehy-on-his-famine-opera/>, 11 December 2019).

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

shaper and expression of British public opinion,<sup>170</sup> performed such ‘othering’ in their cartoons, which depicted the Irish as roguish monkeys or people with simian characteristics. One British authority, Lord Trevelyan, the Assistant Secretary to the Treasury who oversaw relief operations in Ireland, believed the ‘Famine had been ordained by God to teach the Irish a lesson, and therefore should not be too much interfered with.’<sup>171</sup>

Dennehy’s link between Trump and colonialism supports his belief that history repeats itself, despite ostensible moral and political ‘progress’:

[*The Hunger* is] not just about the Irish famine, but rather about the resurgence of certain nineteenth century approaches to government in American political thought today: domestically, the idea that one should not interfere with the free market (neo-liberalism); and in foreign policy, the idea that America is the world’s policeman, unequivocally a force for good (a kind of neo-colonialism).<sup>172</sup>

England would have been considered the ‘world’s policeman’ during the famine. Some colonial powers may have lost their direct political grip on former territories, yet issues that trace back to imperialism and colonialism still affect modern nations.

Dennehy connects the famine to contemporary problems through the scholars, who ‘jolt the listener/viewer out of this historical world into the present and [...] contextualize the historical sources, as it were, in an argument of today’s making.’<sup>173</sup> The academics speak about famines in abstract and specific terms, addressing recurring causes and effects of socio-economic disasters. Paul Krugman, an economist and columnist for *The New York Times*, comments, ‘[I]f you think that what happened during the Irish Famine was a unique kind of,

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<sup>170</sup> Peter Gray, ‘Punch and the Great Famine’ (<https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/punch-and-the-great-famine-by-peter-gray/>, 11 December 2019).

<sup>171</sup> Dennehy cites this quote in the programme note for *If he died, what then*. This quote is an interpretation derived from two letters by Trevelyn, and therefore does not represent his exact words. Dennehy, programme note for *If he died, what then* (2012); Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>172</sup> Dennehy, ‘Contested Ground.’

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

inhumanity that, couldn't possibly happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people don't change that much.' This repetition of history has unsettled Dennehy:

I am not convinced [...] that Europe, which has largely moved beyond a colonialist attitude, has altogether learned from the sins of the past. [...] Most of my otherwise very well-read English friends know very little of the workings of the Raj in India, and almost nothing of the Penal Laws or Famine in Ireland.<sup>174</sup>

The traumatic nature of the famine could have influenced Dennehy's interpretation. As literary scholar Robert Garratt writes, '[T]he sense that history repeats itself [...] is a central tenet of trauma theory and traumatic experience.'<sup>175</sup>

Dennehy develops his belief in the repetition of history through two scholars who detail other examples of famines. Noam Chomsky discusses a famine that occurred in colonial India during the Victorian period. Churchill 'insisted that Indian grain be sent to England [...] because [English people] like[d] white bread,' Chomsky says. In his article for the *National Sawdust Log*, Dennehy mentions the increased exportation of food from Ireland during the famine; such exportation parallels what happened in India, which the British government also owned and controlled. In the fourth part of the opera, Vaughan discusses the famine in Malawi in 1949. A lot of the British records were destroyed, she suspects, because it 'was an embarrassment.' Vaughan also mentions the ongoing famine in Sudan, which the government has exacerbated by manipulating relief. The Sudan example shows how historical tragedies repeat in the present. Dennehy's message about the repetition of history comes across clearly because he presents each of these examples in a lucid manner;

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.* A recent poll found that 32% of British people 'are proud of the British empire,' while 33% of the same population believe 'countries that were colonised by Britain are better off overall for being colonised.' In addition, 12% did not know whether to be proud of the empire, and 28% did not know whether countries were better off for being colonised by Britain, demonstrating a general lack of education in the subject area. Robert Booth, 'UK more nostalgic for empire than other ex-colonial powers' (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/uk-more-nostalgic-for-empire-than-other-ex-colonial-powers>, 17 March 2020).

<sup>175</sup> Robert Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 163.

there are no other scholars talking at the same time, and the singers are not performing. Moreover, these examples refer either to failures in colonial systems (in the cases of India and Malawi) or repercussions of colonialism (in the case of Sudan). It is likely that Dennehy selected these three examples to place the history of colonialism in Ireland in a broader context.

#### d) Representing Trauma in *The Hunger*

After Nicholson concludes her narrative about the old man, the man sings fragments of 'Black Potatoes' 'as a starving man would sing [them]' in bars 868–1065. His entrance indirectly responds to an officer's question, 'If he died, what then?', which Nicholson sings in bars 854–862. This question ended Dennehy's previous work on the famine (*If he died, what then*); however, in *The Hunger*, the man's answer implies that if he dies, Irish society loses him and his stories, and, as a result, historical gaps and voids, today's realities, would emerge. Thereafter he could only exist as a ghost, conjured by the scant resources from the time, haunting the stage after his death.

Dennehy marks the man's part in this section as 'Defiant'; the man confronts the officer's question, declaring he will not be erased nor forgotten. In writing accents in the violins, violas, celli, and trombone and placing the piano in an extremely low and resonant register, the composer provides an appropriately charged context for the man's perseverance. The man's resistance suggests a political stance, as he could represent the struggle of colonial subjects against more powerful colonisers. By framing this music as a defiant gesture, Dennehy indicates the man's will to endure subjugating forces and shows that, despite everything that happened in the famine, at least some of the traditional Irish culture from the

period survives, and will not be silenced. This position underscores the importance of alternative sources that can offer direct insights into a period.

Dennehy's adaptation of 'Black Potatoes' captures the effects of the famine because the man sings a shattered version of the song, with fragments derived from different verses. Shattering conveys the brokenness of the Irish people who suffered as well as the fragmentation of their culture. Such a setting contrasts standard sean-nós songs, in which musical lines are typically legato and continuous. 'If truth is located in fragmentation, disruption, [and] gaps of silence,' writes Maria Cizmic, 'then capturing these experiences [...] provides a way of keeping faith with trauma, truth, and history.'<sup>176</sup> Such disruption and fragmentation 'can engage complicated issues around suffering and historical memory and prompt audiences to experience empathy that widens their understanding of the world.'<sup>177</sup> And while 'trauma forces representation to fall apart,' representation can also offer 'an important path to recovery,' in this case, the rehabilitation of traditional Gaelic culture.<sup>178</sup> Dennehy does not represent the dead in their absence, as he does in *If he died, what then*, rather he resurrects the man to express an 'urgent need' to keep the history of the famine alive.<sup>179</sup> His portrayal of trauma thus gives 'voice to the past while coming to terms with traumatic experiences and their aftereffects.'<sup>180</sup>

Dennehy's setting of the man relates to what composer and musicologist Benjamin Dwyer has called an 'aesthetics of damage.'<sup>181</sup> Dwyer coined this term to describe his

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<sup>176</sup> Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 18.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>179</sup> Ernst Van Alphen, 'The Revivifying Artist: Boltanski's Efforts to Close the Gap,' in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (ed.), (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 243.

<sup>180</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 186.

<sup>181</sup> Benjamin Dwyer, 'Sheela-na-gigs and an "Aesthetics of Damage,"' *Enclave Review* 16 (2018), 12.

compositional approach to traditional Gaelic culture, in particular Sheela-na-gigs, ‘stone carvings of naked female figures’ created in Ireland sometime between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries which have inspired several of his works.<sup>182</sup> ‘By creating music from an ‘aesthetics of damage’ and by subjecting it to processes of decay and transformation,’ he writes, ‘I’ve tried to echo sonically, to transmit into sound the cultural loss the Sheela has both endured and witnessed [...] I see it as a necessity, if it is not to fall into a soporific slumber of conforming privilege devoid of political consciousness.’<sup>183</sup> For Dwyer, the nature of the artistic source demands an ethical representation that does not suggest an entirely coherent nor celebratory tradition and avoids airbrushing over ‘actual histories of oppression and destruction.’<sup>184</sup> Dwyer’s methodology sheds light on how Dennehy creates the voice of the nameless man. The man’s shards more effectively convey the terrible realities of the famine than a fully intact version of the song would. The destructive process of the disaster could have even demanded this setting. While Dennehy alters ‘Black Potatoes’ to create fragments that can represent the trauma of the famine, the keening recording itself contains fragments of words, such as ‘leanbh’ (‘child’) and ‘Neilí’ (the name of the singer’s loved one), that he directly set in the man’s part to evoke emotions that famine sufferers could have felt when their family members died.

Although Nicholson was not affected by the famine in the same way as those she aided, she did witness its traumatic effects, and her musical account shows the emotional and psychological repercussions of such witnessing. Her part lacks an overarching linear narrative; she thrusts listeners into each recollection without much context and offers only snippets of her experiences. Such a disorder corresponds to traumatic events from the famine,

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

which broke up any sense of continuity. On a micro-level, Dennehy illustrates how the traumatic events could have influenced Nicholson’s recollections in four sections of the opera where she repeats the word ‘I.’ These repetitions foreground her role as a primary, empathic witness; act as periods of narrative reflection that suggest her disbelief about what she witnessed and her difficulty in returning to her memories and coming to terms with them; and, in some instances, provide distance from the stories that she had just told, allowing audiences time to recalibrate and recover from what they heard. Furthermore, the repeated fragmentation indicates she cannot easily communicate the trauma she acquired; the pain blocks her from direct, uninhibited expression. The repeated ‘I’’s also function as structural markers in three places where they mark the beginning, middle, and end of the work.

In the opening three bars of the opera, Nicholson sings ‘I’ with a line that decrescendos and retards each time (example 1.9).

**Example 1.9** Dennehy: *The Hunger*, Bars 1–3

The musical notation shows a soprano line in 6/8 time with a tempo of 96. The first measure contains six eighth notes, each with the text 'I' underneath. A slur above the notes indicates a decrescendo from *mf* to *p*, with a 4:3 ratio marked above the first two notes. The second measure contains a dotted quarter note followed by a quarter rest. The third measure contains six eighth notes, each with the text 'I' underneath, with a similar decrescendo and 4:3 ratio marking.

Her text is comprised solely of the word ‘I’ until bar 19, at which point she begins her first story. In bar 20, she sings a fragmented version of ‘seen,’ notated ‘se-ee-ee-en,’ with a line that recalls her opening motif, connecting her difficulty to recount her experiences to her witnessing, which triggered and facilitated her empathy. She also sings the fragments of ‘seen’ using the fundamental pitch, the primary building block in spectralist music.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>185</sup> In this case, an A.



Dennehy's musical materials (the overtones) emanate from this tone. Likewise, Nicholson's narrative grows out of this moment of witness. In addition, her difficulty in recollecting what she witnessed and her subsequent breakthrough correspond with an analysis that Robert Garratt offers of late-20th-century Irish historical novelists, who allow 'history to unfold through recollection, as characters strain through memory to construct a sense of the past.'<sup>186</sup> Repetitions of 'I' fall at the end of her first textual line (see bars 25–26) and after her first narrative episode about the man concludes (see bars 71–72) as well.

The second section of the repeated 'I's begins at figure L1 (bar 541). This repetition falls directly after the man expresses sorrow over his departed child; Nicholson could therefore be reflecting on the pain she just witnessed. The orchestral accompaniment in this section corresponds to the orchestral accompaniment in the opening of the work. The repeated 'I's return at figure T2 (bar 1149). The orchestral accompaniment in this section corresponds to the orchestral accompaniment in the opening of the work as well. This period of reflection falls at the midpoint of the opera. The repeated 'I's return for the last time near the end of the opera in bar 1821. These repetitions precede Nicholson's story about her departure from Ireland. Dennehy changes the tone of her 'I's in this section over time; he marks her part 'pained' in bar 1825, 'less pained, more objective' in bar 1835, and 'nostalgic' in bar 1851. This transformation suggests that Nicholson is detaching herself from the stories she has recounted. After she begins her next and final story in bar 1856, Nicholson repeats fragments from the word 'come' in bars 1857–1858. In its rhythms and placement near the start of a narrative episode, this repetition parallels her fragmentation of 'seen' in her first story. She repeats the second syllable from 'away' at the end of this phrase as well in bars

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<sup>186</sup> Robert Garratt, *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 3.

1863–1864. The repetition of ‘way’ mirrors the repetition of ‘I’ in the opening three bars of the opera, thus creating a structural symmetry between the beginning and end of the work.

In her analysis of compositions that perform musical witnessing of the Holocaust, musicologist Amy Lynn Wlodarski writes, ‘[T]he interjection of sonic disjunctions into an overarching musical structure or language, often designed to mirror the nonsequential interjections of traumatic memories, [...] produce disorientation or narrative disruption within a testimony.’<sup>187</sup> While the fragments of ‘seen,’ ‘come,’ and ‘I’ function as ‘sonic disjunctions’ that produce discontinuity in Nicholson’s account, Dennehy creates a larger structural discontinuity by juxtaposing the scholars, who speak from the present, against Nicholson and the man, who represent figures from the famine.<sup>188</sup> Although transcriptions of the scholars’ speeches allowed him to place the videos rhythmically and influenced harmonic changes at these points, he rarely incorporated the speech melodies directly into the orchestra. In comparison, when Nicholson and the man sing, the orchestra plays segments from their melodies. This decision, Dennehy writes, ‘means that each video snippet serves as an interruption to the strange, almost ritualistic, narrative developing between Asenath (the observer) and Man.’<sup>189</sup> This discontinuity pulls a listener between two contrasting sonic realms, resulting in an unsettling live experience. Dennehy’s removal of the scholars in the concert version of *The Hunger* supports his point that they function on a separate plane from the famine voices, acting as aural and visual interruptions.

Dennehy’s juxtaposition of the scholars and the voices from the famine creates several contrasts. Nicholson and the man’s foregrounded bodies onstage force audiences to personally confront the history of the famine. Although these singers did not actually live

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<sup>187</sup> Wlodarski, *Musical Witness*, 7.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>189</sup> Dennehy, ‘Contested Ground.’

during the famine, they can still elicit strong feelings because, as Stephen Davies argues, ‘The *image* of human expressiveness is often as evocative as the real thing.’<sup>190</sup> Conversely, the scholars speak from video screens. Their mediated, pixelated forms reduce the immediacy of their answers. This representational disparity, as well as the emotional differences between the famine voices and the scholars, privileges accounts from those who experienced the period over academic reflections.

In his juxtapositions against the scholars, the man sometimes underscores or even challenges what they say. In bars 74–94, Krugman explains people in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century rationalised injustices through the language of ‘classical political economy.’ The man’s indirect response in bar 96, in which he appeals to God to save him from misery and not to abandon him, highlights the actual effects of the famine on people like him. A much stronger example occurs in bars 262–275, where Vaughan says people in power are not always in favor of giving relief because the underlying politics are ‘quite complicated.’ The man enters in bar 281, despairing over the suffering of his ‘little child.’ His focus on the suffering of a child could elicit a strong empathic response; here Dennehy uses the documentary practice of showing the effects of a catastrophe through its impact on one child to heighten the emotional intensity.

Near the end of the opera in bars 1765–1770, Dennehy sets video clips from all five scholars together and transforms their responses harmonically and timbrally. A listener, consequently, cannot understand their words. The composer places this babble against anguished cries in the man’s part. The scholars, whose detached commentary is reduced to meaningless noise, greatly contrast the lived experience of the man, whose text is understood

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<sup>190</sup> Italics his. Stephen Davies, ‘Infectious Music,’ in *Empathy: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie (eds.), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 141.

throughout the work. (The same can be said about Nicholson's text.) The incomprehensibility of the scholars could also be interpreted as a political message (intended or unintended) about the ineffectiveness of experts who appear on news segments and in documentaries as well as a reflection on the ideological echo chambers that are emblematic of contemporary politics. This climatic moment marks the final appearance of the academics in *The Hunger*; after this point, the opera transitions into its conclusion.

Nicholson indirectly interacts with the scholars as well. After Krugman explains that charity is insufficient in extreme scenarios like a famine in bars 564–576, Nicholson recounts how the man was given money to buy food in bars 581–594. Nicholson's text implies she gave him the money, for which he thanked her and God. The juxtaposition between Krugman and Nicholson in this section raises the question of whether one should still do something, no matter how insignificant, in such a situation.

#### e) The Role and Implications of Empathy in *The Hunger*

Nicholson developed empathy for those who suffered in the famine as she became more involved in and affected by what she was witnessing and who she was aiding. Likewise, in the opera, she incorporates traditional Irish musical culture over time and uses it to tell the stories of those she encountered, thus giving them a voice through their music.<sup>191</sup> This transformation is illustrated in table C below, which shows how she incorporates the keening recording and 'The Brown Thorntree' into her musical account and traces the relationship between her and the man.

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<sup>191</sup> Dennehy notes this development explicitly in an article he wrote in 2019. Dennehy, 'The Hunger.'

**Table C: Tracing the relationship between the man and Nicholson in her narrative episodes**

| The man  | Nicholson       | Narrative topic         | Musical source   |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------------|--|
|          | 19–24,<br>34–66 | Story about the old man |  |
| 96–120   |                 |                         | All of the sixth verse in ‘Black Potatoes’ (fragmented)    |
|          | 175–256         | Story about the old man |  |
| 281–297  |                 |                         | All of keening segment A                                   |
| 303–309  |                 |                         | First line from keening segment B                          |
|          | 324–378         | Story about the old man |  |
| 340–344  |                 |                         | Second line of keening segment B                           |
| 389–397  |                 |                         | Second and third lines of keening segment B                |
|          | 418–480         | Story about the old man |  |
| 463–471  |                 |                         | Original music derived from Nicholson’s part               |
| 483–536  |                 |                         | All keening segments                                       |
|          | 581–594         | Story about the old man |  |
| 595–601  |                 |                         | Third line of keening segment C (with repeated fragments)  |
| 601–626  |                 |                         | First line of keening segment D (with repeated fragments)  |
|          | 611–617         |                         | Second line of keening segment D (with repeated fragments) |
| 641–647  |                 |                         | Second line of keening segment D                           |
|          | 649–862         | Story about the old man |  |
| 868–1065 |                 |                         | Extended section of various excerpts from ‘Black Potatoes’ |

|   |                      |                             |   |
|---|----------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| Keening recording, segment A, 1076–1090 |                      |                             |   |
| Keening recording, segment B, 1091–1106 |                      |                             |   |
| Keening recording, segment C, 1107–1121 |                      |                             |   |
| Keening recording, segment D, 1123–1129 |                      |                             |   |
|   | 1244–1266            | Story about the little girl | Told using second line of keening segment C   |
| 1304–1320                               |                      |                             | All of keening segment A  |
| 1326–1332                               |                      |                             | First line of keening segment B   |
|   | 1366–1372            | Story about the little girl | Told using music from the first line of keening segment B                             |
| 1375–1383                               |                      |                             | Second and third lines of keening segment B (picks up where Nicholson left off)       |
|   | 1390–1399            | Story about the little girl | Told using music from the first two lines of keening segment C                        |
| 1417–1423                               |                      |                             | Finishes keening segment C (picks up where Nicholson ended)                           |
| 1423–1448                               |                      |                             | First line of keening segment D   |
|   | 1479–1516, 1532–1539 | Story about Arranmore       |   |
| 1544–1549                               |                      |                             | First line of keening segment D   |
|   | 1571–1712            | Letter pleading for action  |   |
| 1680–1685                               |                      |                             | First line of second verse in ‘Black Potatoes’  |
| 1733–1739                               |                      |                             | Derived from first line of fourth verse in ‘Black Potatoes’ (some small textual cuts) |
| 1749–1754                               |                      |                             | First line of keening segment A   |

|   |           |   |  |
|---|-----------|---|--|
| 1759–<br>1761                                   |           |   | Segment from third line of second verse in ‘Black Potatoes’          |
|   | 1856–1864 | Story about leaving Ireland                                     |  |
| ‘The Brown Thorntree’ recording, bars 1867–1884 |           |   |  |
|   | 1887–1906 | Story about leaving Ireland                                     | Told using music derived from the recording of ‘The Brown Thorntree’ |
| 1902–<br>1914                                   |           | The last two textual lines from ‘The Brown Thorntree’ recording | Using music derived from the recording                               |

While in most cases the man embodies famine sufferers by singing music from indigenous Irish culture, in bars 463–471 he sings ‘I must go home and die on the hairth with the hungry ones’ in Irish, adapting a melody from Nicholson’s part in bars 454–462 (example 1.10).<sup>192</sup> Nicholson sings the same text in English with approximately the same music in bars 465–480.

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<sup>192</sup> Dennehy added this quote in the man’s part in the 2019 version of *The Hunger*.

**Example 1.10** Dennehy: *The Hunger*, Bars 454–475

Soprano  
 This poor man\_\_\_\_\_ had not a pen-ny

Sean-nós singer

Sop.  
 nor a mouth ful of food,\_\_\_\_\_ and he said trem-u lous

Sean-nós singer

Sop.  
 ly,\_\_\_\_\_ 'I must

Sean-nós singer  
 Beidh - orm dul a-bhai le\_\_\_\_\_ chun bás.\_\_\_\_\_

Sop.  
 go\_\_\_\_\_ home\_\_\_\_\_ and die\_\_\_\_\_

Sean-nós singer  
 Beidh orm dul a - bhai-le\_\_\_\_\_ chun bás.\_\_\_\_\_ cois na hiar-ta\_\_\_\_\_

Sop.  
 I must go home\_\_\_\_\_ and die\_\_\_\_\_ on the

Sean-nós singer  
 \_\_\_\_\_ leis na h'o- craigh\_\_\_\_\_

*heartfelt*



Sop. hairth with the hung - gry ones.'

Sean-nós singer

Not only does this man’s quote provide rare firsthand information about those who suffered, it also performs a significant function in Nicholson’s musical transformation, as her first engagement with traditional Irish culture occurs only after the man sings this quote (see table C). This sequence indicates the man needed to reach out to Nicholson with her music to bridge the distance between them and pull her into his story. This process reflects how Nicholson’s direct encounters with Irish sufferers drew her into their plight and caused her to empathise with them.

Although she briefly sings music and text from the keening recording in bars 611–617, Nicholson’s sustained engagement with indigenous Irish culture begins after that recording plays in bars 1076–1129.<sup>193</sup> Starting in bars 1366–1376 and continuing in bars 1390–1399, she tells a story about a dead girl she saw lying in the grass, her ‘brown silken hair’ blowing in the wind ‘through a little cleft of stones,’ using music from the keening. Her melody in this section corresponds with the music from the first line of keening segment B and the second and third lines of segment C. The grief of the keening transfers into Nicholson’s narration, imbuing it with a deep pathos. As Stephen Davies argues, ‘[M]usic sometimes leads the attentive listener to share the emotions she hears it as expressing,’ and in this way Nicholson’s embrace of the keening lines could cause audiences to feel directly some level of identification with those who experienced the harshest effects of the famine.<sup>194</sup>

<sup>193</sup> Dennehy removes the keening recording from the concert version of *The Hunger*. Nicholson sings the keening instead.

<sup>194</sup> Davies, ‘Infectious Music,’ 137, 147.

Such feeling can allow audiences to reach deeper understandings of the disaster. The set-up of the concert hall or opera house facilitates this empathy, as ‘people should be more likely to catch others’ emotions if their attention is riveted on the others than if they are oblivious to others’ emotions.’<sup>195</sup>

Another musical transference occurs near the end of the work. In bars 1864–1884, Dennehy incorporates a recording of an old man singing one stanza from ‘The Brown Thorntree.’ Nicholson then sings her text about her departure from Ireland in bars 1888–1906 with music that recalls this recording. Her final line, ‘When my heart shall cease to feel for their [the Irish people’s] sufferings may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,’ indicates that empathy was, for her, a requisite that someone needed to feel before they recorded the stories of a group.<sup>196</sup> Dennehy supports her point by setting this text with music from the ‘The Brown Thorntree,’ thus illustrating how all aspects of traditional Irish culture had infiltrated her mind. He also emphasises the importance of her words by placing them at the end of her part. Furthermore, with Nicholson’s message, Dennehy confronts revisionist Irish historians, who have often failed to take an empathic approach in their writings.

Despite her musical transformation, Nicholson’s style remains operatic throughout; she does not improvise nor sing with microtonal inflections. She and the Irish characters thus maintain differences and hold individual identities. These distinctions also suggest that Nicholson remains an ‘outside viewpoint,’ affected by the famine, but not totally immersed in it.<sup>197</sup> (Her luxury of being able to return to New York at any point supports this

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<sup>195</sup> Elaine Hatfield, John T. Cacioppo, and Richard L. Rapson, *Emotional Contagion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 148.

<sup>196</sup> Nicholson’s phrase ‘may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth’ quotes Psalm 137:6 from the King James Bible. ‘If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.’

<sup>197</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *The Hunger* (2016).

interpretation.) Nicholson's different vocal style implies that empathisers can attempt to feel the pains of others, but they (the empathisers) can never fully relive or recreate such suffering; emotional distance always remains. Ernst van Alphen underscores this crucial disparity in reference to the Holocaust: 'The audience of whatever Holocaust representation will never be part of the event s/he is witnessing despite the confrontational immediacy of the representation.'<sup>198</sup> Nicholson supports Van Alphen's assessment in the preface of her text, stating that the events she records are '*realities* which none but eye-witnesses can understand, and none but those who passed through them can *feel*.'<sup>199</sup> Still, Nicholson's empathic account allows one to gain a more immediate and complete perspective on a history through the eyes of someone who experienced it.

#### f) Memory and Historical Resistance

Dennehy shows that Nicholson carries the memories of those she witnessed and aided through her relationship with the man. As shown by table C, the man's lines follow Nicholson's recollections, acting as indirect responses. Because he sings after Nicholson, there is an impression that she conjured him from her memory. This analysis corresponds with a reflection from Iarla Ó Lionáird, the sean-nós singer who has performed the part of the man in all productions of the work to date. 'Although I'm alive, as it were, I sometimes think perhaps I'm not; I'm rather more a memory.'<sup>200</sup> Since the man's music does not develop over time, his representation of memory from the famine is fixed. The ritualistic formalism of the narrative structure—Nicholson recounts a story and the man indirectly responds—

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<sup>198</sup> Van Alphen, 'The Revivifying Artist,' 237. 'All a poet can do today is warn,' writes Wilfred Owen. Benjamin Britten included this quote on the title page of his *War Requiem* (1962).

<sup>199</sup> Italics hers. Nicholson, *Annals of the Famine*, vii. This message could have influenced how Dennehy set Nicholson's recollections.

<sup>200</sup> *Watch: The Story of Donnacha Dennehy's 'The Hunger'* (<https://www.nonesuch.com/journal/watch-story-donnacha-dennehy-the-hunger-2019-08-20>, 24 January 2020).

contributes to the static nature of the work and lends it additional gravitas. Furthermore, since the man generally responds to Nicholson using musical materials from the keening, his part functions as a recurring refrain that carries associations from the ancient act of keening.

In four sections where Nicholson repeats ‘I shall never forget’ (see bars 1395–1570), Dennehy portrays memory as a way to resist historical forgetting that has enabled the repetition of mistakes and problems. This repetition of ‘never forget’ functions as an imperative to learn from the history of the famine and apply lessons derived from it to address current issues.<sup>201</sup> Dennehy derives Nicholson’s music for this repeated phrase from the second line of segment C from the keening recording. The text, ‘I shall never forget,’ appears in only one selection from the book, but Dennehy uses it in a few locations.<sup>202</sup> After seeing a dead girl lying in the grass, Nicholson asserts she ‘shall never forget it.’ Shortly thereafter, starting in bar 1417, the man expresses his intense desire for his departed family member: ‘And me on my own. If I only had you healthy here now’ (example 1.11). Over his line, Nicholson sings ‘I shall never forget’ three times.

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<sup>201</sup> Dennehy’s position is consistent with Eric Alterman’s view that ‘one who knows and understands history through the perspective of those who experienced it is better equipped to address, affect, and avoid repeating similar problems in the present.’ Eric Alterman, ‘The Decline of Historical Thinking,’ *The New Yorker*, 4 February 2019.

<sup>202</sup> Besides the repeating ‘I’s, ‘I shall never forget’ is the most repeated text in the work.

**Example 1.11** Dennehy: *The Hunger*, Bars 1417–1440

Soprano

Sean-nós singer

A - gus m - é é A - gus m - é é

Sop.

Sean-nós singer

é é liom féin Dá mei- theá go maith

Sop.

Sean-nós singer

shall ne - ver for - get go maith go maith Dá

Sop.

Sean-nós singer

I shall ne - ver mei- theá go maith go maith go maith

Sop.

Sean-nós singer

for - get I shall Dá mei- theá go maith go maith

Sop.  
ne- ver\_ ne- ver\_ ne-ver for -

Sean-nós singer  
go maith a - gam\_ Dá mei- theá\_ go maith\_

Sop.  
- get.

Sean-nós singer  
\_ go maith go maith\_ a - gam

The close counterpoint between Nicholson and the man implies she holds an intimate relationship with her memories. Dennehy's removal of the 'it' in this phrase (previously the text was 'I shall never forget it') broadens the scope of Nicholson's narration to encompass all she has seen and experienced. Nicholson ends this section with another statement of the phrase 'I shall never forget' in bars 1454–1458. Nicholson continues to frame the relationship between forgetting and remembering in bars 1474–1488. There she recalls 'the scenes of the dreadful winter' and asks 'who that saw them can ever forget?' After describing the dogs and the 'death-like stillness' on 'the once pretty island of Arranmore' in bars 1489–1516, Nicholson answers her question in bars 1522–1532: She 'shall never forget.' The 'sleek dogs of Arranmore,' she sings in bars 1532–1539, 'have stamped on my mind images which can never be effaced.' In the conclusion of this episode, which starts in bar 1543, Nicholson and the man sing together again. The man expresses longing for his departed loved one, and Nicholson repeats she 'shall never forget' twice. Performing without Nicholson in bars 1562–1564, he sings a wordless vowel sound with the music she used for her repetitions of 'I shall never forget.' Nicholson sings this phrase for the final time in bars 1566–1570.

The repetitions of ‘I shall never forget’ do not just emphasise the text, they also imitate the prolonged intrusiveness of the memories themselves and show the effects of witnessing traumatic events. Since Nicholson repeats this phrase with music from the keening recording, her part carries the memories of those from traditional Irish culture who suffered during the famine. This grappling with history brings the living into dialogue with the dead and moves ‘beyond ‘a deep concern for the past’ to the necessity of preventing the recurrence of that trauma in the future.’<sup>203</sup> Moreover, the keening music gives her repeated phrase a sense of mourning, which indicates the traumatic effects of the famine. Nicholson’s negative rhetoric (‘never forget,’ instead of ‘always remember’) signals the traumatic effects as well.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory*, 13. As American author Eudora Welty writes, ‘The memory is a living thing—it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead.’ Eudora Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 104.

<sup>204</sup> American audiences at the performances of *The Hunger* in Brooklyn and Washington D.C. in 2016 could have interpreted Nicholson’s phrase ‘never forget’ in context of the terrorist attacks on those cities on September 11, 2001 because American society has used ‘never forget’ as a slogan in reference to those traumatic events.

## CHAPTER 2: INVENTING HISTORY, REIMAGINING THE FUTURE:

### REMEMBRANCES OF THE IRISH PAST IN *AISTEACH*

#### I) Overview of Walshe's Compositional Development

Jennifer Walshe's career divides into roughly three periods. The first runs from her early years in Ireland until her departure to America in 1997. This period included time spent studying with Kevin Volans in Dublin. The second period, from 1997–2003, consists of her time in America, where she studied at Northwestern University. The third and final period lasts from 2003 to the present. In these years, she has been particularly active in Germany. She was a fellow of Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart in 2003–2004 and lived in Berlin in 2004–2005 as a participant in the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) Berliner Künstlerprogramm. In July 2019, she was elected to the Akademie der Künste (Academy of the Arts), which selects artists considered important to artistic developments in Germany, and in September of the same year, she started working at the Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst, Stuttgart as Professor of Experimental Performance.

Walshe was born in Dublin in 1974. Her mother is a writer and her father has played guitar in a pop band. When Walshe began learning the piano, her father only bought her music by Chopin and Satie. 'There was a time when I thought that Satie's performance directions – "from the corner of your hand", "be alone for a moment" – were totally normal,' she said.<sup>205</sup> Her studies of Satie's piano music evidently influenced her musical development, as she later gravitated toward the work of John Cage, who championed Satie. ('It's not a question of Satie's relevance. He's indispensable,' Cage wrote.<sup>206</sup>) As a child and teenager,

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<sup>205</sup> Bob Gilmore, 'Don't Do Permission Isn't – The Music of Jennifer Walshe' (<https://journalofmusic.com/focus/dont-do-permission-isnt-music-jennifer-walshe>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>206</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 82.



Walshe wrote short stories that won competitions.<sup>207</sup> These creative endeavours demonstrate a literary interest that has persisted in her compositional output.

For her undergraduate degree, Walshe studied trumpet and composition at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama (RSAMD). There she worked with composers John Maxwell Geddes and James MacMillan, who introduced her to Morton Feldman's music. After finishing her studies at the RSAMD, Walshe decided to pursue a doctorate at Northwestern University in Illinois because she did not want to return to Ireland, nor did she want to study in the United Kingdom. At that stage, her main compositional influences were all American (Cage, Feldman, Robert Ashley, Alvin Lucier, and La Monte Young), 'so it seemed natural to go across the water,' she said. 'I can't imagine being where I am today without it.'<sup>208</sup> At Northwestern, her primary teachers were Amnon Wolman and Michael Pisaro. In her studies with Wolman, Walshe worked on developing and honing unconventional notational forms that could accurately convey the effects she desired. Wolman also introduced Walshe to Meredith Monk, who has affected how she has written for her own voice. Improvisation sessions with composer and violinist Jonathan Chen proved significant as well. Describing the importance of these experiences, Walshe said, '[I]f it weren't for our improvising [...] I never would have explored the vocabulary of my voice.'<sup>209</sup> These sessions also gave her the confidence to play different instruments, such as the violin, on which she learned how to create sounds that she used in *dirty white fields* (2002).<sup>210</sup> This do-it-yourself ethic has permeated her catalogue.

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<sup>207</sup> Liam Cagney, 'New Horizons – meet Jennifer Walshe' ([https://ivorsacademy.com/info\\_advice/new-horizons-meet-jennifer-walshe/](https://ivorsacademy.com/info_advice/new-horizons-meet-jennifer-walshe/), 12 December 2019).

<sup>208</sup> Jonathan Grimes, 'An Interview with Jennifer Walshe' (<https://www.cmc.ie/features/interview-jennifer-walshe>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

In the archives at Northwestern, Walshe studied original manuscripts by George Brecht and other Fluxus artists.<sup>211</sup> ‘I think for composers born from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, Fluxus [...] seemed like a step forward and a ripping up of all the rules, and that’s something that is very dear to everybody,’ Walshe says.<sup>212</sup> One can see the effects of this genre on Walshe’s music in *THIS IS WHY PEOPLE OD ON PILLS / AND JUMP FROM THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE* (2004), a text piece printed on a T-shirt that prompts the performer to learn how to skateboard, imagine a skating path, and then ‘skate’ that path on a pitch using an instrument. Dadaism, a precursor to Fluxism, has also affected Walshe’s output, as demonstrated by *Happiness is a Warm Gun* (2002), a fragmented re-working of a Beatles song that brings out the dark, underlying message of the original text, and *G.L.O.R.I.* (2005), in which she sings snippets of pop songs.

In the last year of her doctoral studies, Walshe curated a Composer’s Choice concert at the National Concert Hall in Dublin that included Wolman’s *imaginary music* (1999), which describes sounds and prompts audiences to consider them.<sup>213</sup> Considering the effects of such a work, Walshe has commented, ‘There’s a very strange and special feeling in a concert hall when people sit reading a description of sound and everyone is imagining the same thing at the same time. I like that notion, that part of being a musician, a composer, is imagining sound.’<sup>214</sup> This position has affected her scores containing instructions that function as ‘conceptual descriptions.’<sup>215</sup> As Walshe explains:

The performer for example might be required to imagine the inside of their body as the interior of a mountain full of mines, feel the blood moving through their veins as

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<sup>211</sup> Gilmore, ‘Don’t Do Permission Isn’t.’

<sup>212</sup> Jack Sheen, ‘Interview with Jennifer Walshe’ (<https://www.ddmmyseries.com/Interview-with-Jennifer-Walshe>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>213</sup> Conor Kostick, ‘Live Reviews: Imagination and Music’ (<https://journalofmusic.com/criticism/live-reviews-imagination-and-music>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>214</sup> Paul Kilbey, ‘5 questions to Jennifer Walshe (composer)’ (<https://www.icareifyoulisten.com/2014/03/5-questions-to-jennifer-walshe-composer/>, 12 December 2019).

<sup>215</sup> Saunders, ‘Jennifer Walshe,’ 344.

tiny carts carrying diamonds to and fro through a tunnel system, and then tip these tiny imaginary diamonds into their lungs to prepare for creating a sound. The audience of course can't 'see' the performer creating blasts of white light in their lungs to pulverise the diamonds they just tipped into them. But my intention is that all this preparation and delicate attention means that when the performer emits a vocal sound which atomises the diamond dust, creating a crystalline mist through the air, there's a quality to the sound which comes from these imaginings.<sup>216</sup>

While Walshe asks performers to imagine some sounds, others she draws from the world around her. In *unbreakable line. hinged waist* (2002), a flautist, clarinetist, and oboist sitting in the audience produce rustling and whistling sounds loosely based on recordings Walshe captured of the heating system in her Chicago apartment. She has also incorporated a 'roiling, blustery, metallic sound,' which she heard the wind make, blowing through her childhood home, into several pieces.<sup>217</sup> 'It's very Cageian in that it's a philosophy of life, which is this idea of trying to see beauty in everyday things,' she says.<sup>218</sup> Although these sounds hold particular associations for her, she also recognises they will elicit different responses in audiences based on their personal experiences and identities: 'I actually like this idea that there is a space where people ultimately hear the sounds for themselves. This can result in quite beautiful stories from listeners about what they heard in the piece.'<sup>219</sup> Walshe connects her use of everyday sounds to a German term, 'Diesseitigkeit' (this-worldliness), which scholars have applied to analyses of music that engages with the real world.<sup>220</sup> Walshe's interest in the quotidian is also evident in how she incorporates materials from the internet. *ALL THE MANY PEOPLES* (2011), for solo voice, DVD, and electronics, combines elements such as texts from Amazon.com message boards about vampire physiology, YouTube videos made by U.S. and British soldiers of themselves blowing up objects in Iraq,

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<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 343.

<sup>218</sup> Grimes, 'An Interview with Jennifer Walshe.'

<sup>219</sup> Saunders, 'Jennifer Walshe,' 346.

<sup>220</sup> Ben Jameson, 'Interview with Jennifer Walshe' (<http://blog.soton.ac.uk/music/2014/03/12/interview-jenny-walshe/>, 24 January 2020). See for example studies of music by composers in the German-based collective stock11, of which Walshe is a member.

and the Courage Wolf meme, creating a sensory overload that mirrors a contemporary user's experiences on the internet.<sup>221</sup> The internet in such work functions as an archive from which Walshe freely borrows. Discussing her engagement with 21<sup>st</sup>-century media, she says, 'I think of it in terms of this is what it's like to be alive right now. [...] How I try to be present, and engaged, and critical, is through the work.'<sup>222</sup>

Although Walshe deals with the real world in *ALL THE MANY PEOPLES*, she evokes alternative realities in other works. *set phasers on KILL!* (2004) is an episode from a collaborative opera saga called *Kommander Kobayashi*, which centres on the activities of the title character, an 'inept but lovable' captain of a spaceship 'searching for intelligence related to inter-planetary terrorism' in the year 2527. The characters in Walshe's opera sing in animal sounds, such as 'furious hamster/rasping cat' and 'hovering cicada;' play John Dowland's *Flow, My Tears* on a Theremin; and sing fragments from pop songs about space (including Styx's *Come Sail Away* and David Bowie's *Space Oddity*). *IS IT COOL TO TRY HARD NOW?* (2017), for voice, film, and electronics, is a science fiction exploration of how compositions created using artificial intelligence might look and sound in the future.

In an article from 2016, Walshe outlines an artistic practice she calls the New Discipline. An encapsulation of her current artistic ethos, this term refers to a way of working that draws on dance, theatre, film, video, visual art, installation, literature, and stand-up comedy, among other practices, to find, learn, and develop compositional and performative tools.<sup>223</sup> '[M]aybe what is at stake is the idea that all music is music theatre,' Walshe writes, echoing Cage's lines, 'Where do we go from here? Towards theatre. That art more than music

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<sup>221</sup> Daniel, 'ALL THE MANY PEOPLES.'

<sup>222</sup> Joseph M. Colombo, 'Interview with Jennifer Walshe' (<https://centerfornewmusic.com/interview-with-jennifer-walshe/>, 24 January 2020).

<sup>223</sup> Jennifer Walshe, 'The New Discipline' (<http://milker.org/the-new-discipline>, 24 January 2020).

resembles nature. We have eyes as well as ears, and it is our business while we are alive to use them.’<sup>224</sup> Indeed, theatricality is integral to her music, as she tells performers how they should dress or act in almost all of her pieces. In *WASH ME WHITER THAN SNOW* (2013), for instance, the violinist and cellist hold poses based on two photos by Weegee, the pseudonym of the photographer Arthur Fellig (1899–1968), and a painting called *The Execution of Lady Jane Grey*, by Paul Delaroche (1797–1856).

## II) Walshe’s Historical Project

Several elements of Walshe’s practice, including her use of the internet, her creation and evocation of alternative realities, and her engagement with experimental artistic traditions, have influenced the construction and design of *Aisteach*, an imagined depiction, curation, and collection of an Irish avant-garde that never existed. A collective, led by Walshe, who curates and edits the submissions, has created *Aisteach* by inventing Irish avant-gardists and inserting them into Irish history. These made-up figures span 153 years, from 1860 to 2013. Strains of this Irish avant-garde unfolded alongside and, in some cases, earlier than similar practices abroad. The major creative output of most *Aisteach* artists stops around 1985 because the Contemporary Music Centre, which houses documents and works by Irish composers, regardless of their perceived merit, opened in Dublin in that year.<sup>225</sup>

*Aisteach* emerged from *Grúpat*, a sound-art collective consisting of ten alter egos whom Walshe invented in 2007–2009 (she added an eleventh artist in 2010). Walshe received money for this venture from the South Dublin County Council at the height of the

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*; Cage, *Silence*, 12.

<sup>225</sup> Ian Maleney, ‘A Droning In The Eire: Jennifer Walshe On The Irish Avant-Garde’ (<https://thequietus.com/articles/17777-jennifer-walshe-aisteach-foundation-irish-avant-garde-interview>, 24 January 2020). Although some artists, such as Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire (1924–1992) and Sr. Anselme O’Ceallaigh (1940–1988) lived past 1985, most, if not all, of their work falls before that date.

Celtic Tiger. The alter egos include Turf Boon, a sculptor, sound artist, and musician who creates art using found objects (such as his *Kuscheltiermarimbaphon*, a marimba composed of stuffed animals); Violetta Mahon, a recluse who builds holy grottoes ‘in fields, along roads, and [in] various rural and urban landscapes;’<sup>226</sup> and the Dowager Marchylove, a drag queen interested in the sounds of the world around her who is an alter ego of another made-up artist, Niall Quinlan.<sup>227</sup> Information about these figures is available on Walshe’s website, [milker.org](http://milker.org), which she designed to look like a ‘fake corporation’ with different departments in which one can find her compositions.<sup>228</sup> This website functions as another way that she constructs and presents an alternate identity.

A year after the commission for *Grúpat* ended, Walshe curated an exhibition at the Chelsea Art Museum in New York called *Irish Need Not Apply* for which she invented Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire (1924–1992), who was allegedly an early practitioner of drone music. For this exhibition, Walshe also displayed ceramics that she claimed were used by Robert Boyle, an actual Irish chemist, for alchemical experiments. She also said they were on loan from the National Museum of Ireland. The concept for Mac Giolla Mhuire came about during a conversation Walshe had with Tony Conrad, a composer and violinist who performed drone music with La Monte Young in the Theatre of Eternal Music, which was founded in New York City in 1962. Walshe and Conrad were discussing drone music and its contested origins, when she wittily claimed the practice could have started in Ireland.<sup>229</sup>

*Irish Need Not Apply* marked the first time Walshe created artists from the past. As she notes, ‘[I]n that show [...] I started exhibiting works that played with the idea of created

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<sup>226</sup> Jennifer Walshe, *Violetta Mahon* (<http://milker.org/violettamahon>, 24 January 2020).

<sup>227</sup> Jennifer Walshe, *The Dowager Marchylove* (<http://milker.org/thedowagermarchylove>, 24 January 2020).

<sup>228</sup> Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 118.

<sup>229</sup> Louise Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe Spins a Fine Tale’ (<https://www.musicworks.ca/featured-article/profile/jennifer-walshe-spins-fine-tale>, 24 January 2020). Mac Giolla Mhuire would later be entered into *Aisteach*.

history.’<sup>230</sup> While *Grúpat* is also a fictional history because Walshe had to imagine the backgrounds of its artists, *Aisteach* is different because all its members lived and worked exclusively in the past. *Aisteach* artists also differ from those in *Grúpat* because, in Walshe’s view, they function as distinct personae; conversely, the *Grúpat* artists, all born within five years of Walshe, represent her contemporary alter-egos whom she could have worked with and befriended when she was growing up (if they existed).<sup>231</sup>

Walshe revealed another future member of *Aisteach* in August 2011, when she exhibited work by Caoimhín Breathnach (Kevin Walshe in English), at the Roscommon Arts Center, alongside art by *Grúpat* members Turf Boon and Freya Birren. Walshe had recently bought a home in Knockvicar, County Roscommon, when Breathnach, she said, ‘sort of started happening in [her] head.’<sup>232</sup> The fictional artist supposedly created ‘subliminal tapes,’ for which he recorded sounds onto cassettes, ‘before subjecting the tapes to a wide range of physical processes, such as burying, burning or encasing them in various materials such as velvet, paper or moss.’<sup>233</sup> These tapes were allegedly found in a cottage in Knockvicar, the same town Walshe moved to, after his death in 2009. In September 2012, Walshe collaborated with Japanese composer and improviser Tomomo Adachi, composer Alessandro Bosetti, and artist and poet Cia Rinne for a concert in Berlin sponsored by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). This concert, entitled *MAVOtek*, traced connections between MAVO, a real Japanese Dadaist group active in 1923–1924, and, according to the programme note, ‘European Dada, especially Irish Dada.’<sup>234</sup> Before her

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<sup>230</sup> Barry Mc Hugh, ‘Making History: Jennifer Walshe’ (<https://paintingintext.com/2018/10/18/making-history-jennifer-walshe/>, 24 January 2020).

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Jennifer Walshe (ed.), *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-garde* (Dublin: Milker Corporation and the Aisteach Foundation, 2015), 105.

<sup>234</sup> Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, ‘berliner künstler-programm des daad’ ([berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/veranstaltungen\\_druck.php?id=729](http://berliner-kuenstlerprogramm.de/en/veranstaltungen_druck.php?id=729), January 23 2020).

performance, Walshe presented a lecture about the Irish Dadaists, a group she had recently invented. The Irish Dadaists, active from c. 1920–1922, were also known as the Guinness Dadaists, Walshe explained, because the three most active members of the collective, Dermot O’Reilly, Kevin Leeson, and Brian Sheridan, worked for the Guinness brewery in Dublin. These men created drawings and sculptures, held performance events, and composed sound poetry using the Irish alphabet, which Walshe performed after her talk.

The climax of Walshe’s historical output arrived in 2015, when she and several collaborators released the first works under the auspices of *Aisteach*. Walshe and some of her collaborators marked the launch by performing selections of music by *Aisteach* composers at The Little Museum of Dublin in January 2015. Walshe’s collaborators were Irish and Irish-based artists from different backgrounds, including academia, music, sculpture, film, knitting, sound art, and literature, who were all engaged with avant-garde disciplines in some way. Walshe encouraged the collaborators to engage with the ‘idea of Irishness,’ but otherwise gave them creative license.<sup>235</sup> As she explains:

[T]he brief was, it can begin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has to end by 1985, and we had a huge spreadsheet online. If somebody wrote the Dadaists, they put it, [...] so that we didn’t get ten articles that all overlapped. But other than that, I just wanted people to feel very, very free.<sup>236</sup>

The group published a website that includes articles on the imaginary artists, recordings of their works, and images of their art, among other resources. Written in musicological or journalistic styles, the articles provide background information on these figures and present arguments about their significance. All imaginary figures in this release of *Aisteach* are artists, except for Chancey Briggs (1892–1970), a philanthropist who sponsored unusual events such as ‘an all-male silent performance of Benjamin Britten’s

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<sup>235</sup> Casey, ‘*Aisteach*.’

<sup>236</sup> Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 132.



*Peter Grimes* in the foyer of Cork Opera House in 1956.<sup>237</sup> On the website, one can sort the entries by themes, such as ‘Traditional Music,’ ‘The West,’ ‘Vocal,’ and ‘Feminism.’ The fake artists covered a wide-range of avant-garde disciplines, such as noise music, electronic music, Fluxism, minimalism, surrealism, futurism, indeterminacy, and Dadaism. In some cases, *Aisteach* creators knew the artists and disciplines they wanted to create, and researched to determine where they could develop them. In other cases, *Aisteach* creators scanned the history of Ireland and found ideas they then fleshed out. All the figures were invented, except for Reverend Joseph Garvan Digges (1858–1933), who is considered the father of Irish beekeeping. Figures invented at this point included Sr. Anselme O’Ceallaigh (1940–1988), a composer and conductor who performed drones on the organ that she considered ‘a form of contemplative prayer;’<sup>238</sup> Billie Hennessy (1882–1929), a painter and composer who used the concept of automatic writing to create her work;<sup>239</sup> and Zaftig Giolla (1906–1959), a traditional fiddle player and composer who combined field recordings of marshes and bogs in Galway with electro-mechanical sounds produced by a Theremin and intonarumori ‘noise box.’<sup>240</sup> The collective also released a book, which contains all the materials from the website except for the recordings, mounted exhibitions, and produced concerts. Both the website and book contain a disclaimer confessing the project is fictional. The website’s disclaimer is located under the ‘About Aisteach’ tab, and the book’s disclaimer is in the foreword. Walshe cites *UbuWeb*, a digital archive of real avant-gardists, as a significant inspiration for the design of *Aisteach*’s website.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 111.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>241</sup> Jennifer Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories’

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqbCcvuB21s&t=1493s&pbjreload=10>, 30 January 2020).

*Aisteach* continues to expand as more people contribute to it. The most recent exhibition, called *The Worlding*, occurred in Sligo in September 2018, introducing more made-up artists into Irish history. These artists include a ‘nun who teaches a bird how to sing;’<sup>242</sup> Gohnait Sheehan (1901–1958), an artist and filmmaker who transported arms for the First Cork Brigade of the IRA during the Irish War of Independence;<sup>243</sup> and Philippa Byrne/Áine Ní Dhomhnaill (1902–?), an Irish-American writer best known for her play *Galatea’s Manners* (1936), in which ‘a mad scientist creates an artificial woman – who, because she was created as a fully-formed adult in the lab, has not been socially conditioned to defer to men or tiptoe around their egos.’<sup>244</sup> Part of *Aisteach’s* disclaimer, ‘If you feel there’s something we missed, something you want to have happened and would like to bring into being, please let us know,’ reflects the expansive nature of the project. *Aisteach* thus acts as an open call to rewrite Ireland’s cultural history.

After *Aisteach* publishes the sources on these Irish avant-garde artists, they take on lives of their own. In 2017, Julia Douhin and Phillipa Stafford, who are based in Australia, designed a performance on a beach of Tasmania inspired by the work of radio operator, composer, and sound artist Róisín Madigan O’Reilly as part of their Sisters Akousmatica radio project.<sup>245</sup> At least one website has written about *Aisteach* art as if it were real.<sup>246</sup> Also, an Irish broadcaster contacted Walshe about the Guinness Dadaists and then planned on completing a documentary about them with her.<sup>247</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Mc Hugh, ‘Making History.’

<sup>243</sup> Doireann Ní Ghríofa, ‘Gohnait Sheehan,’ in *Lives of the Irish Avant-Garde Vol. II*, Jennifer Walshe (ed.), (Dublin: Aisteach Foundation, 2018).

<sup>244</sup> Jack Fennell, ‘Philippa Byrne/Áine Ní Dhomhnaill,’ in *Lives of the Irish Avant-Garde*, Walshe (ed.).

<sup>245</sup> Mc Hugh, ‘Making History.’ Julia Douhin and Phillipa Stafford, ‘Waves are Waves’ (<http://www.sistersakousmatica.org/locate/waves-are-waves/>, 12 October 2020).

<sup>246</sup> See the relevant analysis on page 99 below.

<sup>247</sup> Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe.’

i) *Aisteach*'s Desire to Change the History of Irish Art and Music in Modernity

*Aisteach* fills in significant lacunae in Irish musical history. The arrival and acceptance of modernism in Irish music occurred much later than in many other European nations. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Irish composers such as Seóirse Bodley, Gerard Victory, A.J. Potter, James Wilson, and John Kinsella used twelve-tone pitch collections, 'sometimes as the basis of serial writing and sometimes as the basis of simpler variation and motivic techniques.'<sup>248</sup> However, their perfunctory engagement (with the exception of Bodley) did not move beyond 'mere dutiful experimentation,' argues Gareth Cox.<sup>249</sup> Many avant-garde disciplines, including Fluxism, futurism, noise music, surrealism, and Dadaism, had no parallels in Ireland and no apparent influence on Irish composers. As Mark Fitzgerald posits in his study of modernism in Irish music, an Irish avant-garde only emerged in the 1970s and 1980s through the works of composers such as Raymond Deane and Gerald Barry.<sup>250</sup> Moreover, these composers eschewed the experimental. Consequently, when Walshe searched the CMC's catalogue, she could not find experimental disciplines in it: 'There is a lot missing from that archive. And there's a lot missing, not just because [...] it existed, but [also] because it never existed, because there was never space for it to exist, probably outside of people's heads.'<sup>251</sup>

Walshe believes people in Ireland must have created unusual art or thought of doing so, but their cultural or physical context did not provide them with the necessary opportunities: 'It was happening all the time, but a lot of this stuff was lost. Or it was found in a suitcase and half of it had rotted away in the Irish damp.'<sup>252</sup> Her position supports

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<sup>248</sup> Fitzgerald, 'A belated arrival.'

<sup>249</sup> Cox, 'The bar of legitimacy?' 201.

<sup>250</sup> Fitzgerald, 'A belated arrival.'

<sup>251</sup> Casey, '*Aisteach*.'

<sup>252</sup> Maleney, 'A Droning In The Eire.'

Umberto Eco's claim that 'if no one has ever written what [a character] says, someone, however confusedly, should surely have begun to think it (perhaps without saying it, blocked by countless fears and by shame.)'<sup>253</sup> Although it is unlikely these *Aisteach* artists could have existed because of historical conditions in Ireland throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, 'the impossibility of determining whether what we see could really have happened,' writes Giovanna Zapperi in her feminist analysis of contemporary art employing archival documents, 'opens up a liminal space between documentation and desire that engages the reader's imagination.'<sup>254</sup> A similar re-investigation of history occurs in LGBTQ historical fiction, which imagines how LGBTQ people acted in, and were shaped by, the past. 'What the characters do serves to make history, what happened, more comprehensible. Events and characters are made up, yet they tell us things about [...] the period that history books have never told so clearly,' Eco argues.<sup>255</sup>

The driving force behind *Aisteach* is a desire to rewrite Ireland's past. This desire, which 'mediates the relationship between past, present and future,' addresses the absences and gaps in Irish music history, constructing 'alternative forms of knowledge.'<sup>256</sup> In a literal sense, *Aisteach* rewrites history by writing through previous literature. As Walshe explains, in conceptual poetry 'they talk about writing through a text, and I imagined I was writing through *Modern Music* by Paul Griffiths.'<sup>257</sup> In rewriting the past, the *Aisteach* creators build a national tradition of artists with whom they can connect. Reflecting on her relationship with these figures, Walshe says, 'My feeling is that these should be parallel histories that should exist. I need them to exist because they justify my existence as an artist. It makes

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<sup>253</sup> Umberto Eco, *Reflections on The Name of the Rose*, William Weaver (trans) (London: Minerva, 1994), 76.

<sup>254</sup> Zapperi, 'Woman's reappearance,' 33.

<sup>255</sup> Eco, *Reflections*, 75.

<sup>256</sup> Zapperi, 'Woman's reappearance,' 27.

<sup>257</sup> Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 131.

sense to me that these people were my ancestors.’<sup>258</sup> Walshe even claims actual kinship with the *Aisteach* artist, Caoimhín Breathnach, whose name is Kevin Walshe in Irish. When audiences in Ireland ask her if she is related to him, she tells them he is her great-uncle. Walshe emphasises the significance of this relationship by calling him ‘the persona in *Aisteach* that’s closest to [her]’ and saying he fulfills her desire for a link to Irishness that is ‘strange’ and ‘working with outsider culture.’<sup>259</sup> With *Aisteach*, then, Walshe not only invents a tradition, but also rewrites her own past.

## ii) The Construction of *Aisteach*

When Walshe was growing up in Ireland in the 1980s, she was introduced to a number of contemporary composers through a series of articles in *The Sunday Times*. She recalls being fascinated by La Monte Young; however, none of his music was readily available to her because the internet did not exist, and she had no opportunity to hear such work in Ireland at the time. Instead of acting as a hinderance, this absence became Walshe’s path to creative imagining:

I remember reading about La Monte Young, and him putting somebody inside a double bass during a piece, and what his music sounded like, and these crazy frequency proportions and installations that lasted forever in his Tribeca loft. And I’ve since been to the Tribeca loft [...] and seen him perform, but to me there was a magic in the imagination of what that music sounded like.<sup>260</sup>

What Walshe imagined was actually music by herself, which sounded very different to the music by Young the article described.

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<sup>258</sup> Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe.’

<sup>259</sup> Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories.’ In one interview, Walshe said, ‘*Aisteach* introduced me to strange dead weirdos who I’ve viewed as my great uncles and aunts, and great-great granddaddies and grandmammies artistically.’ Mc Hugh, ‘Making History.’

<sup>260</sup> Abie Philbin Bowman, ‘Arena Feature: Historical Documents of the Irish Avant Garde edited by Jennifer Walshe’ (<https://www.rte.ie/radio/radioplayer/html5/#/radio1/20756882>, 14 October 2020).

*Aisteach* constructs itself through such experience. The archive, Walshe says, has ‘to do with this imaginative space that opens up in people’s heads, which computers can help create but they can’t access.’<sup>261</sup> At one exhibition featuring a supposed ancient stone circle from Knockvicar and alchemical apparatuses from made-up experiments by Robert Boyle, both of which Walshe claimed were on loan from the National Museum of Ireland, audience members came up to Walshe and shared stories they imagined about the work on display. The art fascinated them as the Young article fascinated Walshe.<sup>262</sup>

*Aisteach* creates imaginative realms by researching history and then determining how avant-garde artists could have emerged from it. As Walshe has commented:

The whole thing with *Aisteach* was that there was no way to go back and just say okay these things happen[ed]. We had to go back and look at history. It was like looking at a tarmac carpark and [thinking] there’s a tiny crack there, maybe a seed could just land in that crack and there be just enough dirt that that seed could grow into a plant.<sup>263</sup>

To illustrate how this works in practice, in one case, the creators located a genuine newspaper article on alleged black mass sites in Northern Ireland during the Troubles (example 2.1 below)—an account the British government made up, and printed and sold in Northern Ireland to discourage fighting—and used it to imagine a musical story; they invented the Kilbride and Malone Duo, noise musicians appropriate for the aesthetic of this supposed black mass site, and situated them in this fictive context, thus filling in an absence in Irish compositional history.

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<sup>261</sup> Jack Chuter, ‘Interview: Jennifer Walshe’ (<https://www.attnmagazine.co.uk/features/9159>, 30 January 2020).

<sup>262</sup> Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories.’

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*

# SUNDAY WORLD

Vol. 1 No. 32 October 28, 1973 6p

IRELAND'S ONLY COLOR SUNDAY

**RAIN TO SHINE**  
RAIN clearing to bright weather with isolated showers. Light or moderate southerly winds force 3 to 4 along the coast. Temperatures between the 11 to 14 mark. Future forecast: cold and hazy.

## Be-Leagured!

### IRISH SOCCER—MONEY SHOCK



THE Football League of Ireland is a mere £400 from the red. And to realise that, they would have to sell their bonds and investments.

TURN TO BACK PAGE

# BLACK MAGIC FEAR IN TWO BORDER TOWNS

BY BRIAN BRENNAN

THE wretched scare that has taken grip on two border towns is gathering momentum as the Halloween deadline for a threatened human sacrifice approaches.

The origin of the rumours has now been traced back to a British army raid on a black magic ceremony in a ruined castle overlooking Newry town. Clergy of all denominations, RUC and teachers in Newry have entered into a grim pact of silence in an attempt to stop the panic spreading.

But sources in the towns are convinced that three of the ten "witches" who were interrogated during their black ritual one night last month, are being held hostage by a local group ("not

the cross force") and that if any child is kidnapped or interfered with before next Wednesday the three will be punished, perhaps shot.

The RUC in Newry would not discuss the matter. A spokesman would only say that they were treating it as a rumour.

Rev. R. S. Peters, Newry's Church of Ireland rector, said his own children had been terrified by the stories and that he didn't want to repeat what he had heard because it would only spread the panic and

hurt more children. Canon Edward Hamill of the Catholic Cathedral parish here might be able to say more "because it happened near one of his churches".

WHAT was supposed to have happened near a Catholic church? Mr. Peters would not say.

Canon Hamill was tight-lipped. He knew nothing about the affair, he said, and showed us the door. Teachers also refused to make any comment. A Dominican priest had given a sermon about the black magic stories, we were told, but when we

called to the priory, no-one would see us.

After extensive enquiries in the towns we contacted a young man who claimed he knew about the incident which had started the scare and offered to show us the spot where it had happened.

He brought us to an old ruined castle known locally as "Chucky Eddie's", perched on a hillside overlooking the town. The castle contains a number of small, dark rooms into which daylight never, through an occasional circular hole in the ceiling,

One night last month an army patrol spotted a fire close to the castle, one source said. He pointed out charred furniture in the shadow of the castle.

When the soldiers arrived, they found a group of ten people standing around the recently discovered remains of a man which was suspended upside down from the ceiling. A girl was drinking the man's blood.

This girl was the sister of a young man who had been killed and she was trying to contact him, our informant said. The ten were taken away by the army and seven of them were released the next day. The

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## Joan gan focal ar bith!

From LIAM MacGABHANN, Moscow, Saturday.



THE communist story that has come out of an otherwise peace World Peace Congress from the Irish viewpoint was sparked off today by the League for Democracy Movement representatives in the groups that make up the Irish delegation.

Some of these are angry about the speech Joan O'Brien handed a speech before she left to the Dublin papers which she said would be made in the Congress.

She was not aware that the Irish groups had made some kind of an agreement to make a concerted contribution to the Congress arguing that the nations try to help in the Irish problem and put an end to Irish violence.

Represented are the Irish Labour Party, some trade unions, civil liberty groups, the Gaelic League, the Irish Communist Party and Official Sinn Féin.

Sean McElreid had handed over the chair to Ramchandra of India and various delegates had talked on the

To page 2

## He's a little brick!— TURN TO PAGE 11



As Walshe says, the aim was to ‘find pieces of reality that smack of surreality... And then trying to make pieces of fiction that we buff enough so that they feel like they could be real.’<sup>264</sup>

In its imaginative design, *Aisteach* participates in an alternative Irish tradition that includes works by Laurence Sterne, Beckett, and Joyce. Most influential for *Aisteach*, though, is Flann O’Brien.<sup>265</sup> Walshe has lauded him as *Aisteach*’s ‘great spiritual ancestor;’ he is ‘a given condition. You absorb it as if it’s in the water, growing up in Ireland.’<sup>266</sup> Because of O’Brien, she says, working with multiple identities is an ‘instinctual way of working’ for her.<sup>267</sup> The *Aisteach* disclaimer even says the creators ‘like to think Flann O’Brien would have approved’ of the archive.<sup>268</sup> O’Brien wrote several novels, including *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939), his widely-acknowledged masterpiece, and from 1940–1966 penned a column called ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ for the *Irish Times* under several pseudonyms, the most prominent of which was Myles Na Gopaleen, Irish for ‘Myles of the Ponies.’<sup>269</sup> In ‘Cruiskeen Lawn,’ O’Brien enacted witty dialogues between his multiple personas and wrote commentaries and stories that satirised Irish culture.<sup>270</sup> Many of his articles took current events as starting points for his digressions into fantasy. One can view his column as a model for *Aisteach* because of the way it presented imaginative stories through an official, public

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<sup>264</sup> Casey, ‘*Aisteach*.’

<sup>265</sup> Flann O’Brien was a pseudonym. The man’s legal name was Brian O’Nolan.

<sup>266</sup> *In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkoWFZrPIdU>, 30 January 2020).

<sup>267</sup> Gray, ‘Jennifer Walshe.’

<sup>268</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, xi.

<sup>269</sup> The Na Gopaleen pen name comes from Dion Boucicault’s play *The Colleen Bawn* (1860), which is itself an adaption of a novel by Gerald Griffin called *The Collegians* (1829). At times, Niall Montgomery and Niall Sheridan contributed to ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ under the pseudonym as well. Christine O’Neill (ed.), *Niall Montgomery Dublinman. Selected Writings Introduced by Christine O’Neill* (Dublin: Ashfield Press, 2015), 92.

<sup>270</sup> Maleney, ‘A Droning In The Eire.’



platform;<sup>271</sup> the manner in which it combined reality and fiction, evoking a simultaneous impression of foreignness and familiarity; and how it employed creative personas.

### iii) Scarcity of Resources and the Role of the Internet

*Aisteach* opens up imaginative space by referring to a scarcity of resources on the fake Irish artists. The only extant resources from the Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers are ‘a collection of postcards;’<sup>272</sup> none of the early films by Gobnait Sheehan survived a fire in 1923;<sup>273</sup> Stephen Graham presents ‘the only concrete documentary evidence that survives of [the Keening Women’s Alliance’s] activities;’<sup>274</sup> and the best-known play by Philippa Byrne is ‘the only one to have been preserved.’<sup>275</sup> These scarcities invite audiences to imagine how other works by these artists could have sounded or looked. The paucity of materials therefore act as a productive resource, just as the absence of an avant-garde tradition in Ireland served as a trigger for *Aisteach*. In this way, the project is a byproduct of the world before the internet, when people could not easily access recordings and needed to imagine what music sounded like, and is also an oblique commentary on how increased access to music provided by the internet has paradoxically led to a decreased engagement with it. Audiences today only need to complete a quick search online to find music, and they feel less of an imperative to do so because they can access it at any point. Because of the internet, there is also much less of a need to attend concerts and listen to radio broadcasts.

Although *Aisteach* reveals its fake nature, each entry does not include the disclaimer. An online user could therefore read or skim an article on an artist, listen to some of their

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<sup>271</sup> *Aisteach* designs itself as an open-access archive, and ‘Cruiskeen Lawn’ was published in one of the most influential national newspapers.

<sup>272</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 65.

<sup>273</sup> Ní Ghríofa, ‘Gobnait Sheehan.’

<sup>274</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 15.

<sup>275</sup> Fennell, ‘Philippa Byrne.’

music, and then leave the website with the false belief that they existed. *Aisteach* exploits this type of cursory consumption through its design. Most of the articles are less than 1,000 words, are written in short paragraphs, and contain images that can engage readers. Online users might perceive some of the other articles as too long or academic and might be impelled to stop reading.<sup>276</sup>

As a result, there has already been some dissemination of information about the fictive artists as if they were real. *Stair na hÉireann*, an Irish history blog, wrote a post about Madigan O'Reilly in February 2016.<sup>277</sup> The post, which is very close in content to the original article on the composer, lists *Aisteach* as its source; however, the author did not specify Madigan O'Reilly never existed. Other bloggers in turn shared the post, and social media users accessed, liked, and shared it. In creating an archive that seems authentic as a medium for disseminating fake knowledge, *Aisteach* obliquely argues that one should question and inspect online sources. Commenting on the validity of information on the internet, Walshe says:

I would hope we are becoming more used to the idea that we go online, and we might not necessarily trust the sources of news we are getting, because there was Sheryl Sandberg and Jack Dorsey testifying to the United States Congress about Russian actors having influence, these Russian ads that have been on Facebook to try to sway the election, to sow deception.<sup>278</sup>

Walshe herself has urged her students to investigate the agendas and disclaimers of websites.<sup>279</sup> One of her students once wrote about a *Grúpat* character, the Irish-Japanese

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<sup>276</sup> Accessing online content on one's phone has especially contributed to such practices.

<sup>277</sup> Every year since 2018, the same blog has re-published the content from its original post on 21 January to commemorate the birthday of Madigan O'Reilly. *Stair na hÉireann | History of Ireland* (<https://stairnaheireann.net/2020/01/21/otd-in-1903-birth-of-roisin-madigan-oreilly-in-dublin-at-aged-13-she-became-the-youngest-member-of-cumann-na-mban-3/>, 12 October 2020).

<sup>278</sup> Mc Hugh, 'Making History.'

<sup>279</sup> Bowman, 'Arena Feature.'

artist Ukeoinn O'Connor, as if he were real, saying where and when he was born without specifying or perhaps realising he never actually existed.<sup>280</sup>

#### iv) *Aisteach* and Authenticity

The construction of every archive involves an array of selection processes that reveal the biases and subjectivities of those who are deciding what to include, and what to exclude. Because of this 'metacultural process of selection,'<sup>281</sup> every archive is vested with power, 'whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize.'<sup>282</sup> Despite its productive aims, *Aisteach's* archival design also grants it its own power to privilege and to marginalise different historical narratives.

*Aisteach* engages with the archival convention of authenticity by situating its artists in the real past and by designing itself to look like an archive through the inclusion of ephemera, scores, images, letters, and other resources. The project thus subverts the authenticity and trust inherent in archives; situates the archive as a medium for cultural investigation; questions how an archive is constructed; defies the inauthenticity that it establishes in its disclaimer; prompts audiences to consider the historical conditions in Ireland that thwarted the creation and development of this avant-garde tradition; and opens up spaces for audiences to imagine realistic artists and works. Although *Aisteach* authenticates itself, anyone with a working knowledge of Irish history would find aspects of it risible and unbelievable.

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> Gonzalez, 'From a Given to a Construct,' 11.

<sup>282</sup> Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory' *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 1-19 (13).

Many of the *Aisteach* entries contain bibliographies, footnotes, and/or endnotes, which can invoke a feeling of trust in the unsuspecting reader. The entry on Sinéad and Fiachra Ó Laoire references Dr. Barry Walken, a made-up musicologist who supposedly wrote a paper on these siblings in 1988, stimulating interest in their work.<sup>283</sup> Teresa Flynn was allegedly quoted in Terrence Brown's real book *Ireland: a Social and Cultural History 1922–1985*, justifying her performance of Cage's *0'00'* as a 'homage to the student demonstrations of May 1968.'<sup>284</sup> Flynn's quote connects her to a wider historical context, yet also underscores that such demonstrations did not actually occur in Ireland. Her supposed inclusion in Brown's text confronts the paucity of Irish art musicians in social and cultural histories as well.<sup>285</sup> *Aisteach* claims the *Encyclopedia of Music in Ireland* described Ultan O'Farrell, the uilleann piper known for performing drones that lasted about 45 minutes, as an early practitioner of drone music in the nation.<sup>286</sup> This inclusion could be read as Walshe's response to her search for avant-garde artists in Irish history because when she checked this encyclopedia, she could not find such figures in it.<sup>287</sup>

A common thread running throughout *Aisteach* is the connection between the fictive artists and the real avant-garde. This relationship situates the *Aisteach* figures in broader historical contexts, shows how they could have affected real avant-gardists, and conflicts with actual Irish history, in which musicians did not extensively engage with the avant-garde until the 1960s. Pauline Oliveros apparently cited Ultan O'Farrell as an influence in a 1972 interview;<sup>288</sup> the Kilbride and Malone Duo allegedly played with John Zorn and Lydia Lunch

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<sup>283</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 111.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>285</sup> The recent four-volume *Cambridge History of Ireland*, for example, does not contain any reference to art music in Ireland.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–32.

<sup>287</sup> Casey, 'Aisteach.'

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

in New York and Boston and were featured in films by ‘maverick ‘no-wave’ Irish film-maker Vivienne Dick’ after emigrating to America in the mid-1970s;<sup>289</sup> and Máirtín O’Heaney supposedly corresponded with George Brecht about a collection of ‘sound schemas’ by himself and fellow Irish artists.<sup>290</sup> The author of the entry on O’Heaney claims these sound schemas ‘suggest a burgeoning Fluxus-influenced experimental composition scene in Ireland.’<sup>291</sup>

It is perhaps unsurprising that Cage appears several times in the archive, given his significance in experimental music. The American composer inspired public performances by the Keening Women’s Alliance and indirectly connected to Andrew Hunt (1860–1946), a hedge-school teacher whose musical practice incorporated elements of occultism and proto-Fluxism. Erik Satie influenced Hunt, who owned a score of *Trois Sonneries de la Rose+Croix* (1892) and dedicated his *Poem for Kettle, Mantel and Table* (1918) to Satie.<sup>292</sup> Hunt’s music, in turn, influenced Henry Cowell, who allegedly referenced its ‘pioneering Spirit’ in a letter to the Irish poet John Varian in 1917.<sup>293</sup> *Aisteach* also claims that Cowell owned copies of Hunt’s *Automatic Music-Making* (1893), *Poem for Kettle, Mantel and Table*, and *Whhhsst!* (1931). In 1933, Cowell tutored John Cage, ‘whose meditative and open-ended approach to sound,’ the article claims, ‘was perhaps foreshadowed by Hunt’s pieces, most especially *Whhhsst!*’<sup>294</sup> which is for a singer who extemporises a ‘one-note hieratic vocalization interspersed with long periods of silence using the word “Whhhsst.”’<sup>295</sup> The article thus positions Hunt along a linear axis of composers who developed experimental

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<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

music, offering him as a proto-Cage and increasing the impact of Irish culture and Irishness in the international avant-garde.

*Aisteach* inspects several examples of real avant-gardists visiting Ireland and imagines how their trips could have affected or involved the fake Irish artists. These connections allow *Aisteach* to create almost historically plausible accounts. In 1937, Andrew Cullinane, an Achill-based musician and dramaturgist who incorporated elements of surrealism into his practice, allegedly traveled with Antonin Artaud, a French dramatist who in fact came to Ireland ‘to plant an elaborate walking staff [...] into the base of Croagh Patrick.’<sup>296</sup> The author of the article claims Artaud had a direct influence on Cullinane’s works such as *Garçons condamnés à carboniser (Boys Condemned to Burn)* (1937), a play he allegedly wrote in response to a true story about the tragic deaths of ten young men from Achill in a fire that broke out in a bothy where they were sleeping in Kirkintilloch, Scotland on 16 September 1937.<sup>297</sup> By inserting Cullinane into the true story of Artaud’s visit, *Aisteach* imagines how Artaud could have affected artists in Ireland at the time. Furthermore, because Artaud’s real actions seem unreal, *Aisteach* creates even more confusion in the reader and argues that Irish history contains strange elements that could have triggered alternative art.

Another example of a visit by a real avant-gardist occurred in 1979, when Cage traveled to Ireland to record sounds that Joyce described in *Finnegans Wake*. After collecting these sounds, Cage arranged them in the order they appear in the novel and added a live accompaniment by traditional Irish musicians. The composer called the resulting piece *Roaratorio* (1979). The article on the Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers claims the

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<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>297</sup> Ranging from 13 to 23 years old, the young men were seasonal emigrants who worked as potato harvesters in Scotland. *Ibid.*, 89–91.

pseudonyms of these fake artists appear in pencil on the back of photos from Cage's visit, thus implying they had some affect on Cage.<sup>298</sup>

*Aisteach* imagines connections between the invented avant-garde artists. The archive thus situates these figures in a national tradition. Such relations between made-up artists mirror how O'Brien treated his pen names in his column for the *Irish Times*; he imagined personas and then invented interactions between them. The Keening Women's Alliance apparently used a text that is 'believed to be extracted from Zaftig Giolla's *Eyre Square Encyclical*'<sup>299</sup> and was rumoured to have had two performances at Dunne's *Dérives* in 1963.<sup>300</sup> Andrew Hunt called Billie Hennessey a 'True Gnosister of the Art' in a diary entry from 1919.<sup>301</sup> Chancey Briggs sponsored artist retreats on Achill that were inspired by Cullinane's theatrical experimentation.<sup>302</sup> These connections prompt audiences to imagine a world where these artists affected each other.

The authors of the *Aisteach* articles, aware of the made-up figures, wrote comparisons between them that contribute to the impression of historical authenticity. The author of the article on Hunt traces an intersection between Hunt and Hennessey, who employed 'similar compositional approaches' and drew inspiration from Satie's music and 'resolute individualism.'<sup>303</sup> Cullinane, Majella Munro argues, did not experience 'the extreme condemnation with which other avant-garde interventions, such as those of Chancey Briggs, were met.'<sup>304</sup> Digges's unusual realisation of *The Honeysuckle & The Bee*, a song found in the first edition of *The Irish Bee Journal*, which he edited, is 'hypnotic and drone-like and

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<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–38.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

bears some similarities to the much later works of Sr Anselme O’Ceallaigh.’<sup>305</sup> These intertextual connections bind the articles in *Aisteach* together and reinforce the impression that this tradition existed.

#### v) Musical Examination

Walshe believes official institutions have historically favoured and funded precisely notated instrumental works.<sup>306</sup> The *Aisteach* catalogue, in turn, privileges untraditionally notated and improvised music (it does not include any traditionally notated scores among its resources), generally lacks complexity, and leaves out several major strands of avant-garde music, including serialism, in its many forms and stages; New Complexity; spectralism; the Manchester School; collage music; and polystylism. Because the *Aisteach* creators omitted the genres that did not interest them, this invented history, like a commemoration, acts as an index with which one can gauge their current beliefs, styles, and ideas.

Recordings of music allegedly by the made-up artists add a further layer to the project. In some cases, recordings supposedly capture performances by the *Aisteach* artists. *Aisteach* creators corroborate this claim by manipulating their recordings. For instance, they designed a recording of a performance allegedly by Ultan O’Farrell, the uilleann piper who played long, uninterrupted drones, to sound like it was recorded on wax cylinders in 1910.<sup>307</sup> In other cases, *Aisteach* presents performances by contemporary musicians who have ‘rediscovered’ the work.

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<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>306</sup> Casey, ‘*Aisteach*.’ In one interview, Walshe commented: ‘[Y]oung composers are told that the path to success is winning competitions and getting performances by big-name ensembles. So they trawl through Gaudeamus Foundation news or whatever, and all that is available to them are competitions for pieces which are 10–12 minutes long, for flute, oboe, violin and piano or some such ensemble, and everyone knows that if you were to submit a non-traditional score you would not have a hope.’ Saunders, ‘Jennifer Walshe,’ 348.

<sup>307</sup> Walshe refers to this process as ‘trickery in post-production.’ Bowman, ‘Arena Feature.’



The music in *Aisteach* groups into different avant-garde disciplines. *Aisteach* creators wrote the compositions they attribute to the *Aisteach* artists in styles that establish previous links to the artistic traditions with which they currently affiliate, positioning themselves in a wider national and artistic context. To imagine and develop the musical voices of the fake artists, *Aisteach* creators wore masks that allowed them to communicate their positions on the historical conditions in Ireland that they believe disenabled the creation of an avant-garde tradition, thus supporting Oscar Wilde's dictum that, 'Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.'<sup>308</sup>

Some pieces fall into a Fluxist school. These include Andrew Black's *Caoineadh AB* (1953), a lament printed on palm-sized cards that instruct the performer to create shapes and images with an instrument;<sup>309</sup> Caoimhín Breathnach's *Song Roll 5* (1984), aleatoric music realised through a graphic score notated on a piano roll;<sup>310</sup> and Andrew Hunt's *Automatic Music Making* (1893), which tells the performer to focus on a 'magical image' and then 'let the [eternal] music play.'<sup>311</sup>

A few other works fit into a Dadaist category. Examples are four sound poems allegedly by the Irish Dadaists, but in reality by Walshe, included in a track called *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde Volume 1: Dada* (1921). Three of these pieces are for electronics and voice; the fourth is for voice alone. In the first, a singer chants over a sonic backdrop comprised of electronic hums, tics, and grinding noises reminiscent of overtones

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<sup>308</sup> At the launch of *Aisteach* on 31 January 2015, Nick Roth quoted these lines before performing a piece. Richard Ellman (ed.), *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 389. The creators also used masks in writing the articles on the fake artists. Some pseudonyms are Dr. Leopold Robartes, ostensibly an academic whose surname could refer to Michael Robartes, a recurring Yeats character involved in the realm of the occult; Sloan Ravenscroft, a blogger for a radio station in New Jersey; and Julian A Dalton, a journalist for the *Irish Times*. Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 134, 73, and 29.

<sup>309</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 38.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 136

produced by a saxophone or oboe; fast and repeating textual fragments alternate with a recurring chant in the second; the third combines electronic scratches, a woman speaking indecipherable words, and a tune that sounds like a folk song; and the fourth uses standard gestures such as rising and falling scales that mimic speech patterns. Walshe invented these fake artists because of the absence of Dadaism in Irish history and the importance the genre has held in her development as a composer. Walshe's decision to depict these Dadaists as Guinness employees creates an international appeal that plays off the stereotype linking the company to Irishness. Walshe's grandfather even worked for Guinness, which strengthens her affiliation with these artists she invents. Her presentation of the article on the Guinness Dadaists at a public discussion with the Irish author Rob Doyle in 2016 possibly reflects her predilection for this artistic group.<sup>312</sup>

One can label other works as 'noise music.' In *The Death of King Rí-Rá* (1910), attributed to Sinéad and Fiachra Ó Laoire but actually by Walshe, performers strike their bows on the strings of prepared instruments called 'ruaillebuailles' to create 'subtones, undertones, and scratch tones.'<sup>313</sup> Giolla allegedly composed *Prismatic Sounds* (1958), an 'electric bog piece.'<sup>314</sup> A recorded excerpt of this piece on the *Aisteach* website consists of sounds that he ostensibly recorded in a bog near his home in Galway and a melodic passage played on a Theremin.

Several works fall into a minimalist school. Walshe has suggested a link between drone music, a subgenre of minimalism, and the Irish language. From an etymologist she

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<sup>312</sup> *In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle.*

<sup>313</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 110–11.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

learned there are several Irish words for different types of droning. Walshe ‘really loved’ dordán because it connects etymologically to the Irish mythological heroine Deirdre.

I think [drone is] the core [of the early Irish avant-garde], because you have the uilleann pipes and you have these drones, so it seems completely natural that you’d get rid of all the diddly-eye bit. You just sort of hose that off so you just have this core of the drone that’s in there.<sup>315</sup>

In *Virtue IV* for organ by Sr. Anselme O’Ceallaigh, a wall of sound expands over a single drone, growing in magnitude and intensity as the composition adds more pitches. In the recording attributed to Ultan O’Farrell, the uilleann piper plays a single, continuous drone for seven-and-a-half minutes. In this recording, *Aisteach* omits the melodic material in the uilleann pipes, leaving behind only the drone; it uses a traditional form of Irish culture—traditional music, which carries connotations of a more essentialist national identity—and alters it to invent an avant-garde discipline. There is thus a deliberate incongruity between the materials *Aisteach* uses and the products it creates; the materials represent older, stereotypical elements of Irish culture that the products subvert, thereby moulding alternative versions of Irish history and expression that broaden conceptions of Irishness in art. It is therefore also possible to say this avant-garde tradition arose from the established normative tradition in Ireland.

Other examples in the *Aisteach* catalogue that support this interpretation include a performance by the Guinness Dadaists in which Kevin Leeson created a wall hanging made from barrel braces in front of which Dermot O’Reilly placed ‘a pile of potatoes’ that he stood on to perform, ‘wearing a green jacket which he had twisted out of shape with wire;’<sup>316</sup> the meetings of The Keening Women’s Alliance followed a performance schedule that included

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<sup>315</sup> Maleney, ‘A Droning In The Eire.’

<sup>316</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 122.

a solo introit and a ‘wordless section of unloosed keening from all in attendance,’ demonstrating a feminist and politicised weaponisation of traditional Irish culture;<sup>317</sup> and *Transubstantiate* (1975), in which the Kilkenny Engagists dressed as priests, bishops, and nuns and performed various acts that criticised the influence of the Catholic church in Ireland (one performer stripped naked and cut himself in the thigh with a crucifix, another masturbated ‘while using a set of rosary beads,’ and a third ‘stuffed pieces of turf and crushed Communion wafers into her vagina’).<sup>318</sup> A duo playing tin whistles ‘in unorthodox keys’ and with ‘non-standard playing techniques’ accompanied these acts with dissonant distortions of musical selections from the orders of the mass.<sup>319</sup> In the first, third, and fourth excerpts from a made-up CD of music by Mac Giolla Mhuire, flurries of dances whirl in a tin whistle over sonorous drones in the uilleann pipes. These distorted dance tunes also demonstrate how *Aisteach* bends traditional elements of Irish culture to develop its alternative national tradition.<sup>320</sup> In parodying the insular Irish past, *Aisteach* reimagines the relationship Irish artists hold with their collective history, functioning as a way for them to deal with their heritage. ‘If we are going to exoticise, let’s exoticise ourselves for our own ends,’ Walshe says.<sup>321</sup>

Such a transformation of Irishness is apparent in how several *Aisteach* artists use the Irish language, as well. These artists did not engage with the language for nostalgic reasons; instead, they employed it as an anti-sentimental device that fashions alternative expressions

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<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–16.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>319</sup> *Ibid.*, 125. The *Aisteach* website includes recordings of the ‘Introit,’ ‘Gloria,’ and ‘Alleluia,’ which comprise the first three movements of the work.

<sup>320</sup> For real compositions that place Irish traditional music in an avant-garde context, see *Exultation* (1919) and *The Lilt of the Reel* (1928), by Henry Cowell. Axel Klein has argued that Cowell was the only modernist composer with ties to Irishness before the Cold War. Axel Klein, ‘How Ireland Came to Shape Musical Modernism,’ Paper Read to the Ninth Annual Conference of the Society of Musicology in Ireland on 25 June 2011, 1–5, <https://www.axelklein.de/academic-papers/>

<sup>321</sup> Casey, ‘*Aisteach*.’

of national identity. The Guinness Dadaists worked with Irish for political reasons; they were not ‘looking to folk culture for a sense of identity,’ rather they ‘used Irish as a medium’ that they ‘sought to weaponize.’<sup>322</sup> Madigan O’Reilly translated *Ursonate* (1932) by Kurt Schwitters into Irish. The title of her translation *Os Ard*, which means ‘Out Loud’ in English, emphasised ‘her political interest in making the Irish language once again the dominant sound in Irish public life.’<sup>323</sup>

In other cases, *Aisteach* uses the Irish language to target Irish audiences. The Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers operated under ‘pseudonyms thought to be anagrams of Nationalist Irish ballads including: *Oró Sé do Bheatha ‘Bhaile* (a rebel song popularised by nationalist poet Padraic Pearse) and *Amhrán na bhFiann* (*The Soldier’s Song*; an Irish Volunteers anthem).’<sup>324</sup> *Amhrán na bhFiann* is not just the anthem of the Irish Volunteers; it is the anthem of the modern nation. Irish audiences know *Oró Sé do Bheatha ‘Bhaile* much better as a tune they learned and sang in primary school. Because they know these modern contexts, Irish audiences would pick up on these cultural references. Without this knowledge, non-Irish audiences do not perceive the strangeness and risibility of the project. Similarly, when audiences proficient or fluent in Irish hear the title word of the archive (*Aisteach* means strange in Irish), they would immediately know that something is ‘slightly afoot.’<sup>325</sup> Non-Irish audiences miss this trigger, and the strangeness therefore remains hidden. When reading about Fiachra and Sinéad Ó Laoire and their ‘ruaillebuailles,’ experimental instruments with which they played *The Death of King Rí Rá* (1910), those familiar with the Irish language would also pick up on the reference to ‘rí rá agus ruaille buaille,’ a colloquialism meaning

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<sup>322</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 122.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 55. Walshe performed *Ursonate* in a concert she curated during her fellowship at the Schloss Solitude. Saunders, ‘Jennifer Walshe,’ 347.

<sup>324</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 65.

<sup>325</sup> Walshe, ‘Imaginary Histories.’

‘hubbub and mayhem,’ and would thus understand the joke.<sup>326</sup> Such audiences would also perceive the parody of *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde Volume 1: Dada* (1921), in which Walshe satirises the tendency of the Irish language to adopt English words by Gaelicising them.<sup>327</sup> For instance, although there is a distinct term for ‘mineral water’ in Irish, Walshe sings these words in English at the top of one musical phrase, amidst Irish words and nonsense syllables that sound ‘Irish.’

While non-Irish audiences can access *Aisteach*, these examples engage with the Irish language so that certain audiences can pick up on insider references to Irish identity and culture. There is thus an impression that the *Aisteach* creators are attempting to figure out what a distinctly Irish artistic tradition could be, that the medium of the archive itself is Irishness, and that this history could have only happened in Ireland. This rootedness in a sense of place answers Walshe’s call for Irish contemporary compositions different than those by composers from other countries:

[I]f you were to go to a concert of Irish new music, a lot of the time you wouldn’t be able to tell that Irish people wrote it, as opposed to German people or American people. It all is this sort of common lingua franca of new music. I’m interested in, well, what happens if you can tell it apart? Because what happens if there’s something weird in the Irish DNA of it that infects it.<sup>328</sup>

vi) Conclusion: Reimagining a More Diverse Artistic History in Ireland

*Aisteach*’s insertion of female and LGBTQ artists into Irish history reflects the creators’ concerns over contemporary representation and curation in classical music. As Walshe explains:

One thing that *Aisteach* tries to talk about is, who gets to curate? Who gets to choose what an artistic canon is and why? What do we say is worthy, and if we are making a combination of Irish music from the last hundred years, who should be in there?

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<sup>326</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 110–11.

<sup>327</sup> The technical term for this practice is *Béarlachas*.

<sup>328</sup> Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 130.

Who are the people making those choices and why are they in there? And with *Aisteach*, in a way we just said, ‘hey, we’re going to make those choices by just making it up!’ Because we realised a lot of the people who would be represented (and are represented) within *Aisteach*, those kinds of people *wouldn’t have been represented*.<sup>329</sup>

*Aisteach* thus confronts *Composing the Island*, the curation of art music from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries that featured a much greater percentage of works by men than women in its programmes. In response to criticism (discussed in the introduction of this study), the festival stated that ‘a retrospective of the 21st century will look very different’ and they could not ‘rewrite history.’<sup>330</sup> Eventually, the festival added a piano recital featuring seven works by women. This programme included Walshe’s *becher* (2008); before the concert was added, she did not feature in the festival at all, despite her successes abroad. In an article published on the last day of the festival, Walshe said, ‘That’s when the true history is written, as a generation of girls don’t pursue their dreams because they are constantly getting the message, whether subconsciously or consciously, that their music is not valued as much as music by boys.’<sup>331</sup>

In its invention of a more diverse history, *Aisteach* reimagines the importance of Irish female and LGBTQ people in the nation’s artistic history. The project claims for example that Madigan O’Reilly and her husband used 2RN radio equipment in the 1920s to conduct illegal experiments that allegedly affected works by Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Lord Dunsany, thereby situating an Irish female composer in a broader literary context and offering a feminist slant on history.<sup>332</sup> Such a fictionalised past also provides role models that can enable contemporary and future generations of Irish artists, underscoring the power of

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<sup>329</sup> Mc Hugh, ‘Making History.’ Italics in original.

<sup>330</sup> Fitzgerald, ‘Composing Equality.’

<sup>331</sup> Darragh Kelly, ‘Composing the Feminists’

(<https://www.tn2magazine.ie/composing-the-feminists/>, 30 January 2020).

<sup>332</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 61.

archivists in constructing cultural memory. Walshe has reflected on the impact of role models, saying:

Whether it's an Indian kid who wants to be a fashion designer, or an Afro-Caribbean kid who wants to be a circuit bending free improviser, or a kid from a working-class estate that wants to be a lawyer, all these kids need to see role models which make them feel those possibilities are open to them, that those paths are available.<sup>333</sup>

This future-oriented mission relates to Terrence Cook's argument that 'appraisal occurs primarily today on the records of yesterday to create a past for tomorrow.'<sup>334</sup> As Griselda Pollock writes, 'What is included [in the archive] shapes forever what we think we were and hence what we might become.'<sup>335</sup>

For as much as it projects ahead, *Aisteach* looks back at an unreal past, excavating and organising the private memories of people who never existed. In this institutionalisation, *Aisteach* exemplifies Michel Foucault's notion of a counter-memory, a social and political practice of memory formation that conflicts with official historical narratives, mainstream media, and the society of the spectacle by memorialising suppressed, lost, and excluded histories.<sup>336</sup> Sr. Anselme O'Ceallaigh mainly played her organ compositions 'for herself alone';<sup>337</sup> journalist Julian A. Dalton pieces together the life of Andrew Black, who was called the Sligo Secret Outsider because he performed his music in a shed generally by himself, through a study of 'scant materials and anecdotes' and interviews;<sup>338</sup> Stephen Graham allegedly learned about the artistic activities of the underground avant-garde venue Dunne's *Dérives* through oral testimonies from patrons Clancy Makem,<sup>339</sup> Thomas

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<sup>333</sup> Sheen, 'Interview with Jennifer Walshe.'

<sup>334</sup> Cook, 'Remembering the Future,' 169.

<sup>335</sup> Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, 12.

<sup>336</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F Bouchard (ed.) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 160.

<sup>337</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 116.

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>339</sup> This name refers to the folk duo Makem and Clancy, active in the 1970s and 1980s.



McKenna, and Brian Pace;<sup>340</sup> and Madigan O'Reilly executed solo and unaccompanied Primal Language Performances on Great Blasket Ireland and around the Dingle Peninsula.<sup>341</sup> (Several documents providing evidence for these works are allegedly in her private estate.)<sup>342</sup> Besides the alleged performances of the Keening Women's Alliance at Dunne's Dérives and Chancey Briggs's rumoured support for the same organisation, there is not a single direct interaction between the made-up figures and groups, which could emphasise the isolation that they faced as outsider artists in a largely indifferent society in the 1800s and 1900s, as well as reflect the lack of opportunities to collaborate in the economically underdeveloped nation.

In making these private memories public, an archival process that Jacques Derrida views as an 'institutional passage,'<sup>343</sup> *Aisteach* affirms Walshe's belief that some people in Ireland must have been creating or thinking about making experimental art; underlines how hegemonic processes of historization in Ireland can overlook and exclude personal memories, especially those of artists like the *Aisteach* figures because of their identities and because their work does not neatly fit within pre-existing narratives and traditional conceptions of Irishness; evokes and reactivates the memories of those who actually lived but were airbrushed out of history; and questions the privileging of an audience in recognising artistic achievement.<sup>344</sup> *Aisteach* thus attempts to reclaim lost and hidden

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<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>343</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Eric Prenowitz (trans.), (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>344</sup> For a related example, see the *Black Photo Album*, by South African photographer Santu Mofokeng, who investigated images commissioned by black working-class and bourgeois families in 1890-1950. Because they did not fit the ideology of African people as 'natives,' Ernst Van Alphen argues, these photos were 'excluded from the archives of official knowledge.' Van Alphen, 'The Politics of Exclusion,' 123. See also the case of Elizabeth O'Farrell, a nurse photographed at the surrender of the rebel Irish forces on April 29, 1916. In some versions of the image, O'Farrell's boots and skirt have been painted or airbrushed out. For the original photo, see *Forgotten Revolutionaries: Cumann na mBan*

(<https://www.rte.ie/news/galleries/2014/0328/605105-cumann-na-mban/>, 30 January 2020).

memories of strange artists in Irish history and re-assert their significance. These acts of retrieval pervading the archive pay homage to these ghosts and evoke a sense of melancholy for a history that never happened, indirectly arguing that the nation lost out on a chance for this artistic history and that the only way to reclaim it is by reimagining it.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING AND SHAPING NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH  
REMEMBRANCES OF THE IRISH PAST

I) How Dennehy and Walshe Negotiate Historical Absences and Gaps

Irish culture has repeatedly remembered its cultural and national histories to define and redefine its sense of self. This identity is mutable, as each generation engages with the past in different ways. One feature of Irish memory though has remained the same, and that is the absences and gaps in cultural and national histories which have greatly contributed to the peripheral status of both the Irish language and Irish classical music in the modern nation. Dennehy and Walshe take these absences and gaps as starting points for their engagement with Irish history. While Dennehy uncovers aspects of the past that have been deemphasised or overlooked in a more serious and earnest manner, Walshe grapples with the past in a dynamic and subversive way, as her project invents history. Despite these differences, a common thread links their historical work, namely the employment of real documents and resources to create historical representations that fill absences and gaps in Ireland's cultural and national histories.

*The Rookeries of London* provided Dennehy an entrance into the historical experiences of Irish emigrants, although he does not accept the author's messages, choosing instead to put pressure on the text through his setting of it. In *The Dark Places*, Tóibín imagines a dialogue between Casement and Conrad hours before Casement's death that Dennehy sets in a way that honours the cultures and traditions permanently damaged by colonialism in Brazil, the Congo, and Ireland. The examples of colonial hardship in Brazil and the Congo reinforce Dennehy's messages on the Irish famine and provide broader contexts similar to those created by the scholars in *The Hunger*. The composer's incorporation of musical materials with explicit or possible connections to the famine in *The*

*Hunger* implicitly argues for the use of alternative sources as a way to learn more about the period, thereby opposing scholars who claim there are not enough testimonials from those who suffered the most.

The absence of an avant-garde tradition in Ireland can be viewed as a benefit, as it opens up space for the *Aisteach* creators to develop their ideas. However, the creators also engage with actual elements of the past, including a newspaper article fabricated by the British government, visits of international avant-gardists to Ireland, and cultural features with strong ties to modern Irishness such as the songs *Oró Sé do Bheatha 'Bhaile* and *Amhrán na bhFiann*. In one case, they even use the story of the real Irish beekeeper, Reverend Joseph Garvan Digges, and reimagine his life, portraying him as an experimental organist and composer whose artistic practice incorporated his work with bees.

Dennehy's use of the Irish language as an identifier of traditional Irish culture in *The Hunger*, emphasises the gaps between the contemporary nation and Ireland during the famine, as the language suffered from a massive decline during this traumatic period and is now rarely spoken by most people in the country, outside the context of school. Walshe addresses the linguistic effects of the famine as well by using English-sounding 'Irish' words in *Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde Volume 1: Dada* (1921), which she composed and attributed to the imaginary Irish Dadaists. Because Irish was largely out of use until its revival in the 1890s and early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, it does not have unique words for inventions after the Industrial Revolution. It therefore needed to be quickly adapted to the times through the incorporation of English-sounding words, which evoke a humorous artificiality in Walshe's work.

## II) History, Remembrance, and Irish Identity

The periods these composers have chosen were determined by their identities. Dennehy's concern for how the Irish past has been represented and interpreted in recent years, especially in instances that downplay the extent to which Irish people were harmed under British rule, has affected his historical works, all of which deal with events from before the independence of the nation.<sup>345</sup> His project can thus be read as a response to the broad reach of revisionism, which has affected not only historical writing, but also the news media in Ireland. It is likely that Dennehy was driven to complete his historical project because of his connections to the legacy of loss precipitated by colonialism in Ireland through his mother's side of the family. As a child at traditional music sessions in his grandmother's home in Kerry, he had direct exposure to this legacy when he heard performances of sean-nós, an element of the indigenous Irish culture permanently altered by colonialism. It is therefore also revealing that he has used this genre in his historical project and that he traces his musical engagement with history to his interest in adapting this material. While the history of traditional music in Ireland provided him a way into the wider history of the nation, gaps and absences in the classical music tradition had a similar effect on Walshe.

Like Dennehy, Walshe's early experiences growing up in Ireland have determined how she has remembered national history: 'I didn't feel that it was an experimental tradition, and I really thought I'm never going to fit in in Ireland.'<sup>346</sup> One could therefore argue that *Aisteach* is aimed at her younger self as well as future generations of artists. In fact, when Walshe was creating entries for the project, she imagined she was writing through *Modern Music*, by Paul Griffiths, which she remembers being excited to read in school, but ultimately

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<sup>345</sup> This is not to say, however, that the reach of his project ends with the founding of the nation, as *The Hunger* addresses contemporary problems and issues.

<sup>346</sup> *Cross Currents: Episode 1* (<https://www.cmc.ie/features/cross-currents-episode-1>, 31 January 2020).

disappointed by. As she reflects, '[W]hen I wrote through it, it was also about trying to make my eighteen-year old self get excited again.'<sup>347</sup> It bears mentioning that there was no Irish equivalent to *Modern Music* that Walshe could have read at that time, and even today there is a paucity of material on classical music in Ireland in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. *Aisteach* can therefore be interpreted as a response to these gaps as well.

Walshe and Dennehy's interest in representing Irish history can also be connected to their experiences abroad, where they have spent considerable time for study and work. According to Walshe, this distance has affected how they have engaged with their Irishness:

I think there's a timely thing happening now in Irish culture where you do have people, and especially I think, you have people like myself or Donnacha [Dennehy], who were born and raised in Ireland but left and went other places, and came back and left and came back and left, and everybody is trying to figure out, what does it mean to be Irish?<sup>348</sup>

Like Joyce moving away from Ireland and focusing on notions of national identity in almost all of his work, Dennehy and Walshe's time spent away from the country, paradoxically, has brought them closer to it. Indeed, leaving the nation to gain international perspective has been at the heart of Irish artistic identity, as demonstrated not only by Joyce, but also Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, and Eileen Gray, among other well-known figures. One can trace the effects of this distance on Dennehy's output, as all five of his historical works date from after his return to Ireland. Living abroad, he said, allowed him to see what is unusual about his own country and reflect on it.<sup>349</sup> Dennehy and Walshe's remembrances therefore underscore that how we engage with history is greatly determined by our personal experiences and desires. Who we are shapes what we remember, and how we remember shapes who we might become.

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<sup>347</sup> Kloos, *Jennifer Walshe*, 131.

<sup>348</sup> Gray, 'Jennifer Walshe.'

<sup>349</sup> Interview with author.

### III) Evaluating Remembrances of the Irish Past by Dennehy and Walshe

Remembrances can enable a culture to reconcile the traumatic sides of its history and develop ways to move forward. As French philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes:

[T]he duty to remember consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation. The duty, therefore, is one which concerns the future, it is an imperative directed towards the future, which is exactly the opposite side of the traumatic character of the humiliations and wounds of history. It is a duty, thus, to tell.<sup>350</sup>

Remembrances also have the potential to hold a nation in the grip of its own past. This is especially the case in representations of the Irish past that exploit nostalgia for commercial purposes, depicting a version of history that often runs contrary to reality. Describing *Aisteach*'s relationship with nostalgia, Walshe writes:

*Aisteach* is haunted by a past which suppressed, marginalised and erased many voices. *Aisteach* is not interested in fetishising this past. The crackle on the recordings is not there for cosy retro warmth or nostalgia for the rare oul times—it's sand on the lens, grit between the tape heads, violently hacking history to urge us to create a better future. And a better future means being alert and responsible to the present.<sup>351</sup>

Although *Aisteach* aims to open up spaces for the creation of avant-garde art in Ireland, its depiction of the nation's history is sometimes problematic. In a homage to its 'great spiritual ancestor,' *Aisteach* includes a made-up article attributed to Flann O'Brien, writing under his pseudonym Myles Na Gopaleen for 'Cruiskeen Lawn.'<sup>352</sup> The article, which imitates Na Gopaleen's style, describes the lives and works of four made-up Irish Dadaists. Jim Paddy O'Mackitty composed perplexing poems that could have been sound-poetry; Oisín O'Dubhghaill was known for performance-based art targeting Civil Servants

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<sup>350</sup> Paul Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting,' in *Questioning Ethics Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney (eds.), (London: Routledge, 1999), 9–10.

<sup>351</sup> Walshe, 'Notes on Being an Irish Composer,' 244.

<sup>352</sup> *In Conversation: Jennifer Walshe & Rob Doyle*. This article only appears in the *Aisteach* book. It is likely that *Aisteach* affiliates itself with Flann O'Brien's journalistic work and not his novels because the latter are more stringently modernist and hence more difficult to assimilate.

on their way to and from work in Dublin (O'Brien himself could have been one of these fictive targets because he worked as a Civil Servant in the same city); Brian Bealaithe painted off-colour shamrocks, platonic forms, and spiders; and Helmut O'Cinnéide tried 'to raise and speak to the spirits of dinosaurs,' which was 'frowned upon' by society.<sup>353</sup> 'Na Gopaleen' accounts for the obscurity of these artists by explaining that little or none of their output survives. He also demonstrates the effects of the environments in which these men worked (three lived in Ireland, the fourth in Algiers). Institutions associated with the establishment brushed these artists aside; O'Cinnéide's posthumous play was banned from performance, and one newspaper wrote that 'as for [O'Mackitty's] paintings, why bother discussing them at all?'<sup>354</sup> The article could indicate that an avant-garde tradition never stood a chance of success in the hostile environment of Ireland. In another interpretation, one could read it as succumbing to an oft-repeated historical narrative of failure in the historicization of Irish art and music. This potential problem runs throughout *Aisteach*, which exaggerates actual historical conditions in Ireland, assuming they would have thwarted an avant-garde musical tradition, when in reality this tradition did not exist primarily because of the lack of necessary infrastructures. Furthermore, in claiming that censors from the Department of Defense shut down the imaginary underground concert series Dunne's *Dérives*, hosted in the backroom of one of Dublin's first gay bars, Bartley Dunne's, in December 1964, after they 'accidentally picked up the thread of its existence,' and that the Royal Irish Academy of Music fired a made-up professor named Theresa Flynn in 1968, after she destroyed a grand piano 'with a blunt hammer' as part of her performance of John Cage's *0'00''* (1962) in the main hall of the university, *Aisteach* extrapolates the censorship of film and literature in

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<sup>353</sup> Walshe, *Historical Documents*, 127.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



Ireland to cover music as well.<sup>355</sup> This decision could be interpreted as a way of giving music greater prestige by making it important enough, or enough of a threat to those in power, to make them restrict it. While this depiction of history is understandable because the contemporary artists believe they do not have a tradition with which they can engage, it imparts a misleading impression of the Irish past and obscures any real sense of the Irish art and music that was created, possibly discouraging a healthy investigation of the artistic and musical contributions to cultural heritage in Ireland in the 1800s and 1900s.

The project's humorous nature brings into question other potential issues. In employing Irish stereotypes, such as potatoes, shamrocks, Guinness, the Catholic Church, and 'Danny Boy' (which was sung during a performance in Sligo in 2018), *Aisteach* presents a narrow view of Irishness that potentially succumbs to clichés restricting national identity to the past, instead of developing ways to reimagine it for the future. However, one could interpret these elements as constituting a parody undercutting quintessential notions of Irishness.

One could also argue *Aisteach* does not fully accomplish its main objectives because it omits any artist with non-western heritage. With the exception of Madigan O'Reilly, whose mother was born in Germany, it also omits any figure with non-Irish heritage. Even though the percentages of non-white and non-Irish heritage people in Ireland were lower in the 1800s and 1900s than they are today, one questions why *Aisteach* let this historical fact get in the way of inventing a non-white or non-Irish heritage member, especially since the project fabricated and reimagined the past in the other cases. Such an addition could recognise the Irishness of those with ties to other nations. Walshe does so in *Grúpat* through her invention of Ukeoim O'Connor, a composer, musician, and improviser who is Irish-Japanese, and

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<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 21 and 8.

Detleva Verens, a sound artist born in Estonia who allegedly moved to Ireland in 2004.<sup>356</sup> Non-white or non-Irish heritage audiences might otherwise find *Aisteach*'s history of Irish art unwelcoming or inhospitable because they cannot connect with the ethnicity of anyone in it. In addition, one wonders whether the project could be too restrictive to effectively critique Irish artistic modernity, given its current omissions of several avant-garde musical genres. *Aisteach*'s open design, which allows modern artists to contribute what they would have liked to have happened in Irish history, could provide a way to address these potential issues.

In his article on Irish theatre written during the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger, Jason King considers the critiques leveled against *The Hunger* and notes 'the more pressing question of whether the musical culture of Famine Ireland can be recovered from Petrie's "great unwonted silence" remains unexplored.'<sup>357</sup> To answer this question, one could say Dennehy's adaptation of music that could have been sung during the famine such as 'Black Potatoes,' the keening, and 'The Blackthorn Bush' succeeds in voicing that 'unwonted silence.' However, his incorporation of the scholars poses considerable concerns. Even though they draw explicit parallels between the famine and the present, pivoting the issues underlying the famine to disasters that happened afterward, these academics are personally unaffected by socio-economic disasters and therefore come across as detached from reality. Their appearances and speaking manners also give off a professorial (sometimes even aloof) impression, which makes them seem ill-fitting in the emotionally-charged context of the

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<sup>356</sup> In the mid-2000s, the Contemporary Music Centre (CMC) conducted several interviews consisting of the same twenty questions with real Irish composers such as James Wilson and Judith Ring (b. 1976). Supporting the fabrication of Ukeoirn O'Connor as a fictional character, Walshe answered these questions from his perspective. The interview was then published on the website of the CMC. *What's it like to be Ukeoirn O'Connor?* (<https://www.cmc.ie/features/whats-it-be-ukeoirn-oconnor-0>, March 25 2020).

<sup>357</sup> Jason King, 'Performing Famine Memory: Irish Theater and the Great Hunger during the Rise and Fall of the Celtic Tiger,' *Breac* (<https://breac.nd.edu/articles/performing-famine-memory-irish-theater-and-the-great-hunger-during-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-celtic-tiger/>, 12 December 2019).

opera. Furthermore, the scholars risk speaking in a discursive echo chamber because their views correspond with accepted left-wing perspectives; nothing they say comes across as unsettling or provocative.<sup>358</sup>

Whereas the Irish famine benefits from primary stories told by those who experienced them, present and modern disasters since that catastrophe fail to benefit from such advantages because the scholars only briefly discuss three examples (India in 1943–44, Malawi in 1949, and Sudan in the present). Because of their immediacy and empathic potential, images, videos, music, or other primary sources from these famines or other modern events, such as the famine in Yemen that began in 2016, could ground the scholars' assessments and create more impactful and direct links to broader historical issues, although one recognises the possibility of aestheticizing suffering and the ethical sensitivity with which one must treat traumatic sources that lie within living memory. Without such direct, aural and visual connections to modern issues, *The Hunger* risks ineffective communication of its main points on the cyclicity of history.

However, it is important to recognise the great difficulty of producing political art, in which the creator contests moral and ethical problems and negotiates the pitfalls of a manifesto. As Steve Smith said in his review of *The Hunger* in 2016:

Political theater is a challenging balancing act, one that requires a creative team to tread a thin line stretched precariously high – which is to say, getting a potentially controversial or divisive message across to audience members efficiently, while still satisfying the urge for cultured diversion that drew them into the house in the first place.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Dennehy deliberately excluded more right-wing views from *The Hunger*. If he included them, he would have to dismantle them; otherwise, a listener could side with them. As a result, the scholars impart a homogeneous impression. Dennehy, 'Contested Ground.'

<sup>359</sup> Steve Smith, 'Performance Review: Donnacha Dennehy, *The Hunger*' (<https://nationalsawdust.org/thelog/2016/10/06/performance-review-donnacha-denney-the-hunger/9/>, 24 January 2020).

In contrast to the stage version of *The Hunger*, the concert version omits the scholars and the recorded voices and cuts all of Nicholson's repeating 'I's except for some in the opening of the work. 'More is implied rather than stated in this version,' Dennehy writes.<sup>360</sup> Because he removes these elements, which create distance from the narrative developing between Nicholson and the man, the concert version places audiences up against the music and stories of these two figures. These changes also allow listeners to hear more clearly how Nicholson and the man occupy different realms and how, over time, Dennehy narrows the gap between these characters by giving Nicholson music from Irish traditional culture, foregrounding her empathic transformation.

Another difference in the concert version occurs in bars 871–924, where Nicholson sings the music and text from the keening recording, thus expressing grief over those she encountered using traditional Irish culture. This transference strengthens her empathic bond with those she witnessed and aided during the famine. Nicholson's onstage movements in this section of the concert version can visually represent her development of empathy, as she starts offstage or 'very far upstage' and, over time, moves farther downstage, coming closer to the man.<sup>361</sup>

Although the concert version lacks the broad contexts and direct parallels to the present that the scholars provide, it can still prompt listeners to make connections between the famine and modern events in the passages where Nicholson sings from the letter she wrote to an unnamed English man. In one excerpt from the letter that falls in bars 1078–1088, Nicholson repeats, 'What am I to do? What can I do?' three times, which could cause

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<sup>360</sup> Dennehy, programme note for *The Hunger* concert version.

<sup>361</sup> The author presumes the man is downstage throughout the concert version because there is no indication stating otherwise.

audiences to consider how they can address contemporary inequalities and catastrophes. After these questions, Nicholson appeals to the recipient of the letter to aid Ireland. Unlike the stage version, the concert version concludes shortly after Nicholson sings the selections from the letter; it excludes Nicholson's story about her departure from Ireland, which unfolds near the end of the stage version. The different ending in the concert version underscores the importance of finding ways to alleviate problems caused by inequalities and lends additional weight to Nicholson's questions. Overall, the various changes in the concert version result in an emotionally more immediate and affecting experience that still allows listeners to consider the effects of colonialism and capitalism in the past and present.

Considering Dennehy's historical project on the whole, one could question whether his engagement with colonialism in Ireland functions as an unhealthy fixation that risks opening up the wounds of the past, without developing ways to move forward, and it could even be interpreted as reinforcing a narrative of guilt and trauma in Irish history. In a more sympathetic reading, one can view his remembrances as rehabilitating Irish historical identity from the traumatic weight of colonialism, as combating the effects of revisionism on the portrayal of the national past, and as advocating for consciousness of history as a way to address current problems. His project thus opposes modern politics in countries such as the United Kingdom, where lawmakers have sometimes exhibited an unawareness of historical relations between Britain and Ireland. In December 2018, for instance, Tory MP Priti Patel suggested using food shortages against Ireland if the Brexit deal did not pass.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Sam Coates and John Walsh, 'Warning of food shortages in Ireland' (<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/3d9d4f44-f9ad-11e8-83e5-4dc2d31f2a89>, 31 January 2020).

#### IV) A Final Word on the Invisibility of Contemporary Classical Music in Irish Culture and the Applicability of Memory Theories in this Subject Area

Although remembrances by Dennehy and Walshe pose interesting concerns and questions, contemporary classical music in Ireland's cultural consciousness remains 'honourably non-existent,' as Raymond Deane has argued.<sup>363</sup> In the recent *Cambridge History of Ireland*, Beiner contributed a chapter in which he posits that the path for innovation and progress in Irish cultural memory lies in the hands of community groups and individuals, such as writers, cinematographers, documentarians, and playwrights, yet fails to mention contemporary classical composers.<sup>364</sup> This omission indicates that historians on Irish cultural memory have not recognised or perhaps been aware of work by contemporary composers, despite their engagement with national history. It is possible, however, that Irish composers might receive further scholarly attention, as the historical projects by Dennehy and Walshe have not been confined to New Music contexts. In August 2019, for instance, *The Hunger* was performed in Dublin's Abbey Theatre, the nation's premier theatrical institution, while *Aisteach* has reached a wide audience through its online, open-access archive; its exhibitions in museums and galleries; and its broad range of contributors from disciplines such as film, visual art, poetry, and science fiction literature. These developments also give one hope that the field might one day achieve more public recognition in Ireland.

In addition to Dennehy and Walshe, Irish composers such as Gerald Barry in *The Conquest of Ireland* (1995), which uses opprobrious texts describing people in Ireland in the

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<sup>363</sup> Raymond Deane, 'The Honour of Non-Existence – Classical Composers in Irish Society,' in *Musical Studies 3: Music and Irish Cultural History*, Gerard Gillen and Harry White (eds.), (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1995), 199–211.

<sup>364</sup> Guy Beiner, 'Irish Memory in the Long Twentieth Century,' in *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume IV*, Bartlett (ed.), 723.

12<sup>th</sup>-century, Andrew Hamilton (b. 1977) in *Proclamation of the Republic* (2016), which sets the document that Patrick Pearse read in front of the General Post Office in Dublin during the Rising, and Linda Buckley (b. 1979) in *Mother's Blood, Sister Songs* (2019), a radio and podcast documentary exploring the legacy of Irish women brought to Iceland by Norsemen in the 9<sup>th</sup>-century, have engaged with the Irish past, indicating the possibility for further research in this subject area. This dissertation therefore aims not only to add contemporary classical music to the discourse of Irish memory studies, but also to provide hermeneutical frameworks and strategies that can aid similar studies in the future.

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