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# Retrieving the Real Frederick May

MARK FITZGERALD

Although Frederick May (1911–85) is seen as holding an important position in the history of twentieth-century composition in Ireland, due in the main to his String Quartet of 1936, writing about May has been sporadic. There exists no serious biographical study to date and most of the commentary on his music has been superficial and frequently misleading.<sup>1</sup> Much of May's output—consisting of chamber works, songs, theatre music, orchestral pieces and numerous arrangements—remains generally unknown, unperformed and in some cases in un-performable condition.<sup>2</sup> No

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<sup>1</sup> These accounts of Frederick May and his music include Joseph Ryan, *Nationalism and Music in Ireland* (PhD Dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth 1991) and the related work of Philip Graydon—*Modernism in Ireland and its Cultural Context in the Music of Frederick May*, Brian Boydell and Aloys Fleischmann (MA dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1999) and the eponymous article in Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds.) *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003), 56-79. General descriptions of the String Quartet and *Songs from Prison* can be found in Axel Klein, *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms AG, 1996). A more considered attempt to grapple with May's idiosyncratic harmonic language can be found in Robert W. Wason, 'Interval Cycles and Inversional Axes in Frederick May's String Quartet in C minor' in Cox and Klein, *Irish Musical Studies 7*, 80-93. A particularly bizarre characterisation of May can be found in David Wright's article 'Frederick May', [www.wrightmusic.net/pdfs/frederick-may.pdf](http://www.wrightmusic.net/pdfs/frederick-may.pdf), which mixes close paraphrases of newspaper articles and reviews with biographical details diametrically opposed to the facts.

<sup>2</sup> Until the time of May's centenary in 2011, when the national broadcaster Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) released a CD of five of his orchestral works—*Frederick May Sunlight and Shadow*, RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra, Robert Houlihan, RTÉ Lyric Fm CD 135, (CD, 2011), (track listing: Scherzo, Suite of Irish Airs, *Spring Nocturne*, *Songs from Prison* and *Sunlight and Shadow*)—the String Quartet was the only original composition available via two recordings—*Frederick May: String Quartet*, Aeolian Quartet, Claddagh Records Ltd, CSM2, (Vinyl record, 1974) and *Frederick May and Aloys Fleischmann Chamber Music*, Vanbrugh Quartet and Hugh Tinney, Marco Polo 8.223888, (CD, 1996)—and a published score (without parts): Frederick May, *String Quartet in C minor* (Dublin: Woodtown Music Publications, 1976). In 2016 the present author produced a score and accompanying CD of May's mature songs prepared from manuscript sources. Mark Fitzgerald (ed.), *The Songs of Frederick May* (Dublin: DIT, 2016). There is also an earlier recording of the Suite of Irish Airs: *New Music from Old Erin*, RTÉ Symphony Orchestra, Milan Horvat, Decca USA, DL 9843, (Vinyl record, 1958).

reliable chronological listing of his compositions has been available.<sup>3</sup> The major primary source is the collection of May's manuscripts, which ranges from student exercises from his late teens in Dublin and later in London, to sketches, drafts and final scores of the mature work, which was donated by May's solicitor on his behalf in 1970 to the Manuscripts and Archives Research Library in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). The recent sorting and re-cataloguing of this material has provided us with a more exact listing of the surviving work by May for the first time, enabling one to get a stronger sense of May's development as a composer.<sup>4</sup> Using this material and also libraries and public collections in Cork, the United States, London, the Czech Republic and Vienna as well as a number of private archives, this essay attempts to build a clearer picture of Frederick May, although there are still a number of gaps and periods for which it has been impossible to find information.<sup>5</sup> It also clarifies May's position on a number of issues that have been misrepresented or omitted in the literature to date. This essay aims to provide a more reliable basis from which future studies of May's music and the development of his style can draw.

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<sup>3</sup> The most important listings until now have been those in two catalogues of Irish music: Edgar M. Deale (ed.), *A Catalogue of Contemporary Irish Composers*, 2nd edn. (Dublin: Music Association of Ireland, 1973) and Bernard Harrison (ed.), *Catalogue of Contemporary Irish Music* (Dublin: Irish Composers Centre, 1982). However, even the more detailed catalogue by Harrison gives an incomplete listing, contains errors and the vast majority of May's compositions are undated.

<sup>4</sup> When the material was originally transferred to TCD, Brian Boydell was asked to catalogue it, but apart from isolating some of the larger manuscripts, he left the majority of the music unidentified and in a scattered and fragmented form. The recent sorting and re-cataloguing of the material was undertaken by the present author during a period as TCD Long Room Hub Visiting Fellow in 2016–17. As a result of this work a number of manuscripts thought to have been lost have now been identified within the collection. Boydell was also responsible for failing to transfer May's personal papers 'including photographs, an autograph album and drafts of radio scripts etc.' to the library and as a result these were lost. See TCD MS 11128/1/23/66–70.

<sup>5</sup> I am particularly indebted to Anne, Maeve, Ruth and Max Fleischmann, who digitized parts of their family archive and provided me with copies of a number of letters and manuscripts. The present article draws all of its quotations from letters to the Irish composer Aloys Fleischmann (1910–1992) and his mother—the pianist and pedagogue, Tilly Fleischmann—from this archive. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance given by Garech Browne, who gave me access to his private archive of manuscripts and letters.

### May as student in Dublin and London

Born in 1911, May's father worked in Guinness's brewery and both parents were members of the Church of Ireland.<sup>6</sup> May studied music theory privately with John Larchet and piano with Madeline Larchet before transferring to the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM). Here he continued to study harmony and counterpoint with Larchet while Annie Lord and later Michele Esposito became his piano teachers. Lord was responsible for introducing May to the music of César Franck, nurturing a passion which survived his later teacher Vaughan Williams's dislike of the composer. Esposito's lessons were described by May as 'a liberal education in music' and he also looked over and advised on May's early attempts at composition.<sup>7</sup> In 1925 May won the Coulson Scholarship and this was followed by the Vandeleur Scholarship for Harmony and counterpoint in 1927 and 1929, as well as the TCD Arthur Oulton Prize and the Stewart Memorial Prize for composition in 1929.<sup>8</sup> From 1927 onwards May began making appearances as a pianist in both solo and chamber competitions, winning the Caroline Elisabeth Reilly Cup at the Feis Ceoil in 1928.<sup>9</sup> He was a member of the Student's Musical Union (SMU) in the RIAM and it was at their concerts that he had some of his most formative encounters with music. In particular, he recalled being impressed by César Franck's Piano Quintet in F minor, which was performed in both 1925 and 1926, as well as a performance in 1926 of Vaughan Williams's *On Wenlock Edge*.<sup>10</sup> The impact of the

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<sup>6</sup> May's father, also named Frederick, is described in the 1911 census as a clerk with Mayo given as his birth place. May's mother, Jeannie, was born in Antrim. [http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Dublin/Pembroke\\_West/St\\_Mary\\_s\\_Road/9619/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Dublin/Pembroke_West/St_Mary_s_Road/9619/)

<sup>7</sup> Frederick May, 'Intermezzo' in Richard Pine and Charles Acton (eds.), *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 391–2. In the 1958 broadcast *Composers at Work*, the introduction also noted that 'In Esposito [May] found a constructive critic for his youthful attempts at composition'. Contemporary Music Centre Library Ireland, RTÉ 09. In a letter to Fleischmann regarding *Music in Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1952), May noted 'I've always had a great admiration for Esposito, and if this publication of yours is regarded as authoritative and is quoted in the future, I want to make certain that he gets an honoured mention'. May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 28 April 1947.

<sup>8</sup> Pine and Acton, *To Talent Alone*, 392.

<sup>9</sup> Surviving records from the RIAM and the Feis Ceoil suggest that May studied the standard repertoire (with Esposito's music unsurprisingly being the one 'contemporary' exception) and also a certain amount of chamber music. For the Feis Ceoil records, see National Library MS 40,231 /1. Unless otherwise referenced, information regarding May's time at the RIAM, concerts he attended at the SMU and repertoire he performed derives from the archive of the Student's Musical Union (SMU) held in the Library of the RIAM. I am indebted to Philip Shields for providing access to this archive.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick May, 'Intermezzo', 391–2. The 1926 performance of Franck's 1879 Quintet was part of a concert of 'modern composers', an indication of what modernity in music was perceived to be in Dublin in the 1920s.

latter piece is clearly demonstrated not only in his decisions regarding his future studies but also in his 1933 *Four Romantic Songs*, scored for the same forces of tenor, string quartet and piano.

Table 1: Early Compositions

February 1927	Suite for Piano
June 1927	<i>Variations on a Rouen Church Melody</i> for piano
October 1927	Pieces for Pianoforte
1927–8	‘The Stolen Child’ for voice and piano (text: W. B. Yeats)
1927–8	‘When death to either shall come’ for voice and piano (text: Robert Bridges)
1927–8	‘Spring’ for voice and piano (text: Thomas Nash)
1927–8	‘Beautiful Deirdre’ for voice and piano (text: ?)
c1927–9	[Violin Sonata] Untitled three movement work for violin and piano
c1927–9	Easy Suite for violin and piano in A
1928–9	‘Molly my own Love’ for voice and piano (text: ?)
1928–9	‘Sheep and Lambs’ for voice and piano (text: Katherine Tynan)
?1929	‘Irish Love Song’ for voice and piano (text: Douglas Hyde trans. Lady Gregory; Published 1930)
?1929	‘Hesperus’ for voice and piano (text: James Stephens)
c1930–1	Quartet in A minor—exercise for MusB at TCD
Early 1930s	String Quartet movement in D minor
Early 1930s	String Quintet in D minor
Early 1930s	‘Star of England’ for voice and piano (text: Anon)
Early 1930s	‘The Little Black Boy’ for voice and piano (text: William Blake)
Early 1930s	‘Evening on Road, Dun Laoghaire’ for voice and piano (text: Irene Haugh)
Early 1930s	‘The Voice of Nature’ for chorus and orchestra (text: Robert Bridges)
1930s rev 1950s	<i>Idyll</i> for violin and piano

1931	'Drought' for voice and piano (text: Katherine Tynan)
1931	Incidental music for Padraic Colum's <i>Mogu the Wanderer</i> for voices, flute, violin, cello, double bass and piano
February 1933	Scherzo for Orchestra. (Orchestration of undated movement for strings)
1933	Incidental music for Denis Johnston's <i>A Bride for the Unicorn</i>
May–October 1933	<i>Four Romantic Songs</i> for tenor, string quartet and piano (texts: John Masefield, D. H. Lawrence & Thomas Hardy)
1933–35	'Herdsman' for voice and piano (text: Seumas O'Sullivan)
1933–35	'I sing of a maiden' for voice and piano (text: Anon)
1933–35	'April' for voice and piano (text: Robert Bridges)

As May was a pianist, it is no surprise that his earliest surviving attempts at composition are for piano and the Suite of 1927—which consists of an Allemande, a Pavane and a Gigue—indicates that he was drawing inspiration from the Bach Suites he was performing at this time. A number of the surviving manuscripts of the songs from this period contain corrections in what is presumably Larchet's or possibly Esposito's hand. These corrections focus on harmonic problems but also demonstrated how to vary the piano writing and move away from simple chordal accompaniments. May also arranged a number of pieces ranging from traditional airs (for strings) to Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll* (arranged for piano and strings). Along with a series of violin pieces, these may have been partly intended to familiarize May with string writing, in preparation for the MusB examination at TCD.

In May 1930 he was to make his first public appearance as a composer, with two songs scheduled for performance, 'Hesperus' and 'Spring'. At the time of the performance, the singer Renée Flynn was taken ill and 'Spring' was instead sung by Flynn at a concert in the Gresham Hotel in Dublin in June, an event that marked May's departure from the RIAM to study in London ('Hesperus' was not performed). In the same year 'An Irish Love Song' was published by McCullough Pigott and Co.. This song, which marks a considerable advance on the simple 'Spring', is not far removed from the world of Larchet's songs, but while the latter tend to be more wedded to periodic phrasing and conventional form, May already shows a certain flair for breaking away from rigid structuring and greater variation of material, despite its short length of 27 bars. The same year he was awarded the Esposito Cup at the Feis Ceoil and as a result of this he was nominated, on the recommendation of the adjudicator in the piano class,

Ambrose Coviello, as the first recipient of a new scholarship prize worth £100 to be spent on the further study of piano.<sup>11</sup> In July he took his preliminary examination for the MusB at TCD before departing Dublin to utilize his scholarship in London.

In September, he enrolled at the Royal College of Music (RCM), but chose composition as his principal study and only took piano as a second study. This flexible interpretation of the rules of his bursary was retrospectively ratified by the Feis Ceoil board the following month.<sup>12</sup> May's composition teachers included Charles Kitson, Ralph Vaughan Williams, R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob while his piano teacher was Edward Mitchell. He also studied conducting with W. H. Reed and Aylmer Buesst.<sup>13</sup> May's surviving exercise books from this period indicate his progression from species counterpoint exercises to inventions, fugues, madrigals and string quartet textures.<sup>14</sup> He continued to work on song writing but whereas his earliest songs demonstrate an interest in literature of the Irish revival, the vocal works written after 1930 demonstrate a shift to English texts by William Blake, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy and two Poets Laureate, Robert Bridges and John Masefield. Among the few exceptions to this shift is the setting of Katherine Tynan's 'Drought' from 1931, which was commissioned for a memorial broadcast given by Lennox Robinson.<sup>15</sup> It is notable that after 1935 May's only song to use an Irish text was an entry to the 1940 Feis Ceoil competition which stipulated the use of a text by an Irish writer.<sup>16</sup> In 1931 May entered a song in the composition

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<sup>11</sup> Feis Ceoil Minutes, 29 May 1930, National Library MS 34,915 /5. See also *The Irish Times*, 13 May 1930 for details of the programme performed.

<sup>12</sup> Feis Ceoil Minutes, 23 October 1930.

<sup>13</sup> E-mail from Mariarosaria Canzonieri, Assistant Librarian (Archives), RCM, 5 May 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Combined with recently discovered books and printed music belonging to May from this period, now housed in the Early Printed Books Department of TCD Library, it will be possible to build a more thorough picture of May's education in London and Dublin and determine how his original work developed in parallel with this.

<sup>15</sup> Lennox Robinson papers, 1/4/MSS 091 Series: Non-fiction writings, 1919-1924: Box 12, Folder 2, III - Katherine Tynan, 9. Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

<sup>16</sup> On this basis, it is possible that the setting of Seumas O'Sullivan's 'Herdsman' was also composed for the Feis Ceoil. The setting of Irene Haugh's 'Evening on Road, Dun Laoghaire' is difficult to date with certainty but May was acquainted with Haugh from the 1920s as May recalled she asked A. E. (George Russell) to contact James Stephens on his behalf when he wished to get permission to set 'Hesperus'. See Donncha Ó Dúlaing, Interview with Frederick May, Three-O-One, 18 February, 1975 (Contemporary Music Centre Library Ireland, uncatalogued). The lack of a final definitive manuscript and any record of it in any of the catalogues of May's work suggests 'Evening on Road' was never

competition at the Feis but the adjudicator Hamilton Harty decided no first prize should be awarded, giving commendations to the entries of May and Elizabeth Maconchy.<sup>17</sup> The Feis board however did decide to renew his scholarship for a second year to enable him to continue his studies in London.<sup>18</sup> He took his final TCD examination in December submitting a string quartet, and on 10 December his degree was conferred.<sup>19</sup>

The same month he provided songs and incidental music for a new production of Padraic Colum's play *Mogu of the Desert* at The Gate Theatre in Dublin.<sup>20</sup> It is intriguing that such a large task was handed to a twenty-year-old with no practical experience of writing for the theatre. As one song for the production was provided by Larchet, it is possible that he was instrumental in acquiring the commission for May, although perhaps May had found it difficult to complete the work on time and asked for assistance from his former teacher. Alternatively, May could have come to the attention of the Gate's artistic directors Mícheál Mac Liammóir and Hilton Edwards via homosexual, left-wing, literary or theatrical circles. It is also possible that the company needed to find someone who would accept a small fee or possibly no fee as The Gate Theatre was constantly in financial difficulties at this time.<sup>21</sup> Mac Liammóir and Edwards must have been happy with May's music as in 1933 he was asked to provide music for the first production of a new play by Denis Johnston, *A Bride for the Unicorn*. May had to miss the actual production as it opened during the RCM's term time. Johnston's surviving papers from the period indicate that the production was not a success and he decided to revise the play radically.<sup>22</sup> Music was provided for this new version by Arthur Duff but it is not clear whether this was because Johnston was not

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performed. The 1940 song for the Feis setting Joseph Campbell's 'The Traveller' was only commended, with the first prize going instead to Lindsay Seymour from Sussex. Should the compositions of Seymour ever surface they would provide a clear insight into what was expected by successive Feis adjudicators in Dublin, as he won prizes most years through the 30s and 40s.

<sup>17</sup> Feis Ceoil Minutes, 18 June 1931. Unfortunately, no record was taken of the title of the song.

<sup>18</sup> Feis Ceoil Minutes, 2 July 1931.

<sup>19</sup> E-mail from Roy Stanley, Music Librarian TCD, 25 April 2014.

<sup>20</sup> See 'Mogu of the Desert: New Play at Gate Theatre', *The Irish Times*, 28 December 1931. One of the songs for the production 'O Forest Bird' briefly gained an independent life as it was included a number of times by May in recitals of his work in the 1930s. The cast was led by Hilton Edwards in the title role and also included Orson Welles as the King of Persia.

<sup>21</sup> For more regarding the financial situation at The Gate Theatre in 1930–31 see Christopher Fitz-Simon, *The Boys* (Dublin: New Island Books, 2002), 65–7.

<sup>22</sup> See TCD MS 10066/166 and MS 10055/167.



happy with May's music or because May was not in Ireland at the time the revision was staged. A letter from May to Johnston gives us an insight into May's character:

I noticed you at one of the rehearsals at which my music was being tried over, and I wanted very much to go up to you and ask whether you liked it at all, but I was too shy to do anything of the sort, but just stood there and pretended not to see you; so that it is delightful to know that the music has given you pleasure.<sup>23</sup>

During 1932, May's study in London was funded by the RCM's Foli Scholarship and in October May was awarded the Octavia Travelling Scholarship, although it would seem that some of this was used to cover the remainder of his sojourn at the RCM, as the Foli Scholarship expired by Easter of 1933.<sup>24</sup> We get a further glimpse of May at this time from the diaries of his fellow student at the RCM, Benjamin Britten. In October 1932, Britten wrote that May was asked to assist with the preparation of parts for a performance of his Phantasy for Oboe and String Quartet.<sup>25</sup> May does not appear in the diaries again until March of the following year when among other encounters Britten recorded May's performance of a 'bit of Schumann's Phantasy' at an RCM chamber music concert. On 17 March he noted 'After lunch I go to R.C.M. to hear 1<sup>st</sup> orch. (under G. Toye) run throu [*sic*] F. May's Scherzo'.<sup>26</sup> The Scherzo was originally intended to be a multi-movement work for strings but at some stage the unfinished second movement was abandoned and the first movement (*Allegro feroce*) was rescored for full orchestra as a stand-alone piece. This received its first public performance on 1 December 1933, when it was heard as part of the Patron's Concert.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Frederick May letter to Denis Johnston, 7 June [1932]. TCD MS10066/287/2083. In other letters, May sometimes commented on his own personality, such as in 1935 when he noted 'You know, publicity of this sort always makes me want to run my hands through my hair, a sure sign of embarrassment' while in 1952 he wrote 'Whenever I've had to write anything about something of my own, I've always cut it to a minimum. A combination of modesty and inferiority complex, I suppose'. May letters to Aloys Fleischmann, 4 December 1935 and 5 January 1952, respectively.

<sup>24</sup> For more regarding this see Mark Fitzgerald, 'Inventing Identities' in Mark Fitzgerald and John O'Flynn (eds.), *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 89–91.

<sup>25</sup> John Evans (ed.), *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928–1938* (London: Faber, 2010), 119–20. It seems May was not the most reliable of copyists as he told Britten he hadn't time to copy the cello part and there is a further note in the diary that he had to 'alter bits of May's 1st fiddle part.'

<sup>26</sup> Evans, *Journeying Boy*, 135

<sup>27</sup> The Patron's Fund was established by Ernest Palmer in 1903 'for the encouragement of native composers by the performance of their work'. E-mail from Mariarosaria Canzonieri, 5 May 2011.

Between the months of May and October 1933, May composed his *Four Romantic Songs*, a work whose composition overlaps with the completion of his studies at the RCM. Many of the stylistic features of his later work are here in embryo—for example the sudden shifts in harmonic centre by a semitone, textural passages built on trills and the text's concern with the idea of spring. By this time, May's harmonic language had become considerably richer and more chromatic, while the contrapuntal working of the individual parts sometimes leads to passages of passing dissonance. Vaughan Williams had come to dislike the original version of *On Wenlock Edge*, May's model for these songs, and favoured his later orchestration because of the problems of balance and density of the texture in the original.<sup>28</sup> May's work poses even greater problems for performers as the piano part contains much dense chordal writing and there are few lightly scored passages. The other problems are structural, as May set the four texts as a continuous work with numerous climaxes, which are difficult to pace. The first performance was given in London at a Macnaghten-Lemare concert on 22 January 1934.<sup>29</sup>

### Vienna and the question of influences

While it is not currently possible to determine exactly the date or duration of May's trip to Vienna, the weight of evidence suggests that he travelled there in the second half of 1933.<sup>30</sup> He brought with him a letter of introduction to Egon Wellesz from Vaughan Williams which described May as 'a young English composer who is making a short stay in Vienna', before adding 'Mr May has for some years been a pupil of mine and has, I think, considerable talent'.<sup>31</sup> Vaughan Williams's reference to 'a short stay' would seem to suggest that May's visit was not protracted and that any study with Wellesz was of a similarly short duration. In addition, one newspaper report suggests that he also travelled to Florence and Rome on his scholarship, although it is impossible to know how accurate this is.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, in a letter to Nancy McCarthy from 1937 May

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<sup>28</sup> Michael Kennedy, *The Works of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980), 120.

<sup>29</sup> [Review], *The Times*, 26 January 1934.

<sup>30</sup> It is unlikely that his Octavia scholarship would have been postponed until 1934 as May had concluded his study at the RCM. James Plunkett in his biographical note to the first recording of the String Quartet in 1974 states that May visited Vienna for the first time when he was 22. *Frederick May: String Quartet, Aeolian Quartet*, Claddagh Records Ltd, CSM2, (1974). Also, in a newspaper article from 1975 May states that his visit took place in 1933. For more about the debates regarding May's study in Vienna see Fitzgerald, 'Inventing Identities', 89–91.

<sup>31</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams letter to Egon Wellesz, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, F13 Wellesz 1656.

<sup>32</sup> [Untitled] *Irish Independent*, 25 August 1935.

comments in passing ‘I always hated moving my belongings from place to place when I lived in digs on the continent’, which seems to suggest a longer period of time spent abroad.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a newspaper article from 1960 states that May’s scholarship ‘enabled him to spend about ten months in Vienna under Professor Egon Wellesz.’<sup>34</sup> It is also likely that May visited Vienna several times in the 1930s; his account of an occasion when he was at the opera and ‘gas was poured into the hall and the audience had to take refuge on the roof’, for example seems to refer to a later visit.<sup>35</sup>

The only concrete information regarding May’s studies in Vienna comes from a 1958 radio broadcast which notes that while there May ‘made an intensive study of Mahler and Hugo Wolf and here he may be said to have completed his period of apprenticeship’.<sup>36</sup> This suggests that the emphasis of whatever lessons he received was on the technicalities of song setting. May frequently referred to Wolf’s songs in later writings and it is also notable that in a radio talk from the early 1950s on Mahler it is the songs that May singled out as Mahler’s most important achievements.<sup>37</sup> How much time was spent examining May’s own compositions is not known but if May did work on any compositions while with Wellesz, he would have encountered a very different approach to teaching. Wilfred Mellers noted of Wellesz’s teaching style that ‘he made no attempt to tell me how to write; he rather tried to indicate how what I had written might have been more effectively realized’ and emphasized his focus on ‘the nature of musical textures’ and scoring.<sup>38</sup> According to Michael Mulliner, Vaughan Williams in

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<sup>33</sup> May letter to Nancy McCarthy, 5 November 1937. Boole Library, University College Cork, BL/PP/NMC/96 (3).

<sup>34</sup> “‘Exciting’ is verdict of Irish composer’, *Irish Independent*, 28 November 1962.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Triumph of a Composer’, *Irish Independent*, 12 February 1975. A similar description of an attack by Nazi sympathizers on theatres in Vienna in 1936 is given in Bruno Walter, *Themes and Variations: An Autobiography*, James A Galston (trans.), (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1946), 320.

<sup>36</sup> *Composers at work*.

<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Tina Byrne at the RTÉ Written Archive for locating a number of May’s radio scripts. ‘Composers and their Works: Gustav Mahler’, Radio Scripts 3.172 Frederick May, P260/717, document number 2032–9, RTÉ Written Archives. While the songs may be seen as more suitable as examples for a short broadcast, May also included two excerpts from the Ninth Symphony to represent Mahler’s non-vocal output. May owned scores of Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* and *Das Lied von der Erde* and Wolf’s *Spanisches Liederbuch* and ‘Alles endet, was entstehet’. See TCD MS 1128/1/23/79.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Egon Wellesz: An 80th birthday Tribute’, *Musical Times* Vol. 106 no. 1472, October 1965, 766–7: 767. Accounts of Wellesz’s stylistic development and compositions (and as a result his accounts of his influence on May) in Ryan, *Nationalism and Music*, 412, are incorrect.

his lessons would query weak passages in a student's work and ask that the student reconsider these, but:

If after all you cannot realise that they are weak, and so cannot think his way, he does not wish them to be altered.

If he considers that a work which falls short of being satisfactory could possibly be improved, he will offer his ideas, but only as suggestions, and he will not allow you to adopt them unless you really feel that way and can make the ideas your own. ...

His leading advice is, 'That one must always write what one *feels*, and never what one thinks one ought to feel'.<sup>39</sup>

Grace Williams, who like May used an Octavia Travelling Scholarship to study with Wellesz in Vienna in 1930 after studying with Vaughan Williams in the 1920s, summed up the difference in their approaches to teaching:

[Wellesz] was marvellous, and had so different an approach from Vaughan Williams, who was the sort of personality to whom you could only take your best music. Vaughan Williams knew his limitations as a teacher though; he would say 'I know there's something wrong, but I can't put my finger on it', but Egon Wellesz could. He had a way of saying 'it begins to get weak at this point, so you will scrap from here onwards and re-write'. But then he'd been a pupil of Schoenberg, whose method this was.<sup>40</sup>

Determining how much impact Wellesz might have had on May is made somewhat more complicated by the striking fact that no major composition by May can be dated to the period between the completion of the *Four Romantic Songs* in October 1933 and the completion of the String Quartet in 1936. It is even unclear where exactly May was in 1934 and whether or not he attended the premiere of the *Four Romantic Songs* in London in January that year.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jennifer Doctor, 'Working for her own salvation: Vaughan Williams as teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams and Ina Boyle' in Lewis Foreman (ed.), *Ralph Vaughan Williams in Perspective: Studies of an English Composer* (Colchester: Albion Music, 1998), 181–201: 187. In this case the ellipsis is part of the quotation.

<sup>40</sup> Doctor, 'Working for her own salvation', 193.

<sup>41</sup> In a letter from Britten to Grace Williams, dated 22 September 1934, he writes 'Many thanks for telling Fred May to write to me'. Williams's original letter is lost so the context is unknown. However, Britten spent October and November travelling in Europe on his scholarship from the RCM and so perhaps May was to impart some advice regarding Vienna. The wording may suggest that Williams had encountered May in London at this time. Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed (eds.) *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976: Volume One 1923–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 346.

1935 is somewhat more clearly documented with a range of concert and radio performances in Ireland at several points through the year, while in June he won the composition prize at the Feis Ceoil for one of his songs.<sup>42</sup> In October, along with the English tenor Stuart Wilson and musicians from the RIAM, he performed the *Four Romantic Songs* in an SMU concert and a broadcast that evening on Radio Éireann (RÉ). In addition, the *Irish Press* noted that the broadcast would include ‘a first performance of three other of Mr May’s songs’ by Dorothy Griffith, accompanied by Eileen Buckley.<sup>43</sup> A month later, Griffith performed what we can presume are the same three songs, ‘Herdsman’, ‘I Sing of a Maiden’ and ‘April’, at a further SMU concert along with the early ‘Spring’ and ‘Forest Bird’ from the music for *Mogu*.<sup>44</sup> Around this time May also began deputising for Larchet at the Abbey Theatre.

Towards the end of 1935 May made contact with Alban Berg and a letter survives from November in which, in somewhat ungrammatical German, May acknowledges a letter received from Berg and outlines his intention of visiting him in Vienna either in March or in the summer of 1936.<sup>45</sup> These plans were overtaken by Berg’s death in December 1935, which was reported in the main Irish newspapers in the ensuing days.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear how much of Berg’s music May was familiar with, although at some stage he acquired a pre-war score of the *Lyrische Suite* and most references to Berg in his writings relate to *Wozzeck*. While there were opportunities to hear the *Lyrische Suite* and the *Drei Bruchstücke aus Wozzeck* in London during May’s period of study it seems May did not actually attend a performance of the opera until 1975:

When I travelled to Vienna in 1933 as a student from the Royal College of Music in order to learn more about composition, I was looking forward with eager anticipation to attending more than one performance of *Wozzeck* at the Vienna State Opera. However, I reckoned without the composer’s compatriot Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuß, who banned the work as being decadent, and unfit for human consumption. I had passionately desired to be present at a performance of it all during my adult life, but even the fall of Fascism and the restoration of something approaching civilisation left my wishes unfulfilled for many long years. When I saw it was to be revived at Covent Garden this spring [1975], I knew it was a case of ‘now or never’ and Friday, April 11th,

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<sup>42</sup> While the Feis minutes take the trouble to record a pseudonym used by May for the competition there is no record of the song’s title.

<sup>43</sup> ‘Irish composer’s new songs’, *Irish Press*, 19 October 1935.

<sup>44</sup> May later noted that ‘April’ was to have been published by Augener and Co. but they could not come to an agreement with the estate of Robert Bridges regarding royalties for the use of Bridges’s text. Catalogue of works, TCD MS uncatalogued.

<sup>45</sup> May letter to Alban Berg, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek F21.Berg. 1073 Brief Nr. 179/13-M/Har.

<sup>46</sup> Articles reporting Berg’s death appeared in the *Irish Press* on 25 December and the *Irish Independent* on 27 December.

## Retrieving the Real Frederick May

will always remain as a red-letter day in my memory ... Infusing it as he did with his own deep compassion and love for suffering humanity, [Berg] produced a work that bids fair to outlast all the changes of fashion, a work that will come to be acknowledged by succeeding generations as one of the glories of the 20th century.<sup>47</sup>

A letter from 1941 suggests that May had at some point consulted a copy of the vocal score:

A friend of mine has translated Büchner's *Wozzeck* into English and it may quite possibly be produced at a Dublin theatre during the coming season. He wants to incorporate certain portions of Berg's music and he has asked me to collaborate with him in arranging it for a small theatre orchestra; therefore I was wondering if you could let me have the vocal score on loan for a certain period. I suppose this would be more practicable than asking for the full score, and I seem to remember that the instrumentation is fairly clearly marked on the vocal score.<sup>48</sup>

Whatever May's level of knowledge of Berg's music in the 1930s, it seems that he represented to May an ideal of innovative compositional practice. In an article he wrote in 1935, May noted:

The people [in Austria] are worn out by suffering and strife, and they prefer to dream themselves back into the glory of their past than to honour their own fellow-countrymen who are wrestling with contemporary problems of life and art.

The only type of living composer who is honoured by the people is a man like Franz Lehár, who takes the easy path travelled by Johann Strauss and countless other light Viennese composers of last century; those who, like Alban Berg, attempt to open up new territory are met by blank indifference or open hostility.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Frederick May, 'Wozzeck and its Composer', *The Irish Times*, 25 June 1975. The *Lyrische Suite* was performed in London by the Kolisch Quartet in April 1932 and February 1933 while the *Drei Stücke aus der Lyrischen Suite* was conducted by Webern alongside the *Kammerkonzert* in April 1933. The *Drei Bruchstücke aus Wozzeck* were directed by Henry Wood in May 1932 and again in March 1933 while Adrian Boult performed them in February 1934, a month before conducting the complete opera in a broadcast performance. See Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music 1922–1936: Shaping a Nation's Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), in particular 337–365.

<sup>48</sup> May letter to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941, GB-Lbl Add. 61886, f. 68. While the idea that some of Berg's music might be incorporated into a production of the play might suggest very little familiarity with the opera, the full letter suggests that this request for a score is merely an excuse for writing to the publisher to see if he might be interested in publishing May's *Songs from Prison*. On the other hand, May did have connections with a number of people involved in the production of *Wozzeck* by the Dublin Drama League in December 1941. The translation was provided by Nigel Heseltine who was to translate the text of May's *Songs from Prison* and May's sister Sheila was in the cast.

<sup>49</sup> Frederick May, 'Music and the Nation', *Dublin Magazine* 11 (July–September 1936), 50–6: 50.

However, May's interest in Berg was not the only one he had at this time or even the dominant one. Vaughan Williams was still a major influence on his music and the 1935 article quoted above refers at another point to Sibelius as 'the greatest living composer.' He also admired minor English composers such as George Butterworth and had a particular love for the music of Frederick Delius.<sup>50</sup> Within the first few months of his tenure at the Abbey Theatre he was involved in a production of James Elroy Fletcher's *Hassan*, directing a group of instrumentalists in Delius's 1923 incidental music for the play.<sup>51</sup> The musical ambition of this production is so far in excess of anything else May was involved in during his tenure that one wonders if he had some role in initiating the production.<sup>52</sup> It is clear that whatever exposure he had to Berg's music and whatever the extent of his experiences in Vienna with Wellesz, these were outweighed in his own music by the formative impact the English school had on his compositional approach.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> May, 'Music and the Nation', 51–2. May's view of Sibelius was in line with contemporary English thought. Although published in 1936 the article contains a note stating that it was written while Berg was still alive.

<sup>51</sup> *Hassan* opened on 1 June 1936.

<sup>52</sup> In a 1937 letter May noted that he had spent a holiday in Grez-sur-Loing 'because the composer Frederick Delius had made Grez his home for over 30 years'. May letter to Nancy McCarthy, undated 1937. Boole Library, University College Cork, BL/PP/NMC/96 (2).

<sup>53</sup> In a 1974 interview he listed as his 'most admired' composers the Beethoven of the late quartets, Schubert, Mahler, Delius and Sibelius. He also mentioned his 'great regard' for Bartók's String Quartets and his 'great respect' for Vaughan Williams, singling out his *Serenade to Music* and *Job*. 'Kay Kent talks to Frederick May', *The Irish Times*, 12 December 1974.

String Quartet and the Abbey: 1936–8



Illustration 1: Picture in *Irish Independent* 1 January 1936 announcing May's appointment at the Abbey Theatre (Lafayette)

Table 2: Compositions 1935–7

1935–6	String Quartet in C minor
c1936–7	<i>Symphonic Ballad</i> for orchestra
1936	Incidental Music for Shakespeare's <i>Coriolanus</i>
1936	Incidental Music for Yeats's <i>The Shadowy Waters</i>
March–August 1937	<i>Spring Nocturne</i> for orchestra
1937	'By the Bivouac's fitful flame' for voice and piano (text: Walt Whitman)
1937	<i>Suite of Irish Airs</i> for orchestra
1937	Incidental Music for Louis Dalton's <i>The Man in the Cloak</i>



On 1 January 1936 May took up the position of Director of Music at the Abbey Theatre.<sup>54</sup> His primary duty was to provide musical entertainment during the intervals of plays as director of the grandly named Abbey 'orchestra' —in May's time this was generally a piano trio.<sup>55</sup> Occasionally he provided a few bars of original incidental music, usually to cover scene changes, but it is clear from both the music archive at the Abbey Theatre and surviving material at TCD that pre-existing music was generally used and May never had to provide the sort of extended score that had been demanded at The Gate. It is also clear from contemporary minutes of the Abbey Board that May's time there was not only artistically completely unfulfilling but was also personally difficult and that the role of Director of Music was viewed by the Board as insignificant.

In June the Board decided to defer confirmation of May's appointment due to 'criticisms of the orchestra as conducted by Mr May'.<sup>56</sup> They also turned down May's application for the appointment of a viola player to the orchestra. May was finally confirmed as director a month later and in August requested a meeting with the Board to persuade them to reverse the decision to reduce the size of the orchestra from its original formation of five instrumentalists to three. However, the Board insisted that any statement could only be made in writing and censured him for his temerity in attempting to approach individual members of the Board in person.<sup>57</sup> By the following year relations had become increasingly strained due to what is described as May 'continually interfering with the matters in the Theatre which were no concern of his'. On 29 September May was sent a letter suspending him from his job for 'inattention to duty and interference with the business of the Theatre' and rather more bizarrely for contemplating 'the bringing of the Abbey Theatre Company to Carnlough without the knowledge of the Directors'.<sup>58</sup> A letter from May defending himself was dismissed by

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<sup>54</sup> *Irish Independent*, 1 January 1936.

<sup>55</sup> For information regarding repertoire see [www.abbeytheatremusic.ie](http://www.abbeytheatremusic.ie)

<sup>56</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 5 June 1936 and Abbey Theatre minutes, 12 June 1936. [www.nuigalway.ie/abbeytheatreminutebooks](http://www.nuigalway.ie/abbeytheatreminutebooks). It is notable that one board member, Walter Starkie, insisted on minuting that he disagreed with these criticisms

<sup>57</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 17 July 1936, 21 August 1936 and 1 September 1936.

<sup>58</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 22 September 1937 and 29 September 1937. May's first letter responding to the allegations notes that he had missed a single rehearsal as he had not been informed that the start time had been changed. Interestingly it happened to be a rehearsal attended by one of the directors of the theatre. The charge of bringing the company secretly away is, I would suggest, clearly wilful distortion of a conversation May had regarding the writer George Sheils. It is difficult not to come to the conclusion that the charge had little or nothing to do with May's suspension and that putting May

the Board as it 'contained no expression of regret and no promise that he would in future avoid interference with the business of the Theatre complained of' and May was only reinstated after he had sent a written apology and been interviewed by two members of the Board to gauge his level of contrition.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the problems May was encountering in the Abbey, this was a notably productive period in his compositional career. Dating exactly when the String Quartet was composed is made difficult by the fact that, uniquely for a large-scale work by May, no sketches or initial drafts have survived. May later stated that the last movement was written first and that the central section of the second movement was inspired by the news of Berg's death.<sup>60</sup> A letter to Aloys Fleischmann casts some further light on the genesis of the work.

As you probably know, by this time, that movement from my Quartet, owing to a chain of unfortunate circumstances, was never performed at all. Anyway the work is finished, fertig beendet, vollebracht [sic], and I wish we could go over it together on the piano. I think there's a certain passionate intensity about it, but I'm not sure whether it makes a successful whole. I think you'd agree, however, that it shows a certain development on the part of its composer. I'm sending it in for an American prize, which would come in very handy ... The Abbey closes on Saturday week for a month, and I'm going to Vienna: I'm simply dying for an orgy of music, and also very anxious to see some friends of mine there ... When I come back from Vienna and get the Quartet finally off my chest, I'll tackle the Suite in earnest.<sup>61</sup>

The references to a single movement that was to be performed separately and concerns regarding whether the piece works as a successful whole, coupled with the stylistic and structural approaches in the work, corroborate the idea that the third movement was written first. There is some ambiguity between the fact that the Quartet is declared

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firmly back in his place was the real motivation behind the whole affair. See May letter to the Board of the Abbey 4 October 1937, Fleischmann Archive.

<sup>59</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 6 October 1937 and 20 October 1937.

<sup>60</sup> Frederick May, String Quartet in C minor.

<sup>61</sup> Frederick May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 26 May ?1936. Although the letter does not give the year a number of things in it point to 1936. May promises Fleischmann that when he is finished with the Quartet he will get to work 'in earnest' on the *Suite of Irish Airs*—this work was completed in March 1937. Also, there is a reference to 'remarks' May had made and that 'if you'd mentioned me I couldn't possibly have done so, as it might have looked to our enemies (if we have any) like a piece of mutual back-scratching'. May had taken part on 20 May 1936 in a broadcast debate with Walter Starkie entitled 'Are we on the eve of an Irish Musical Renaissance?' as part of a series of broadcasts in which Fleischmann had also taken part.

finished on the one hand and May's reference to finally getting the quartet 'off his chest' on his return from Vienna; it is not clear whether this latter comment relates to the process of writing out parts or whether there was to be some further revision or tidying of the work after leaving it aside for a time. It could also refer to May's general practice with large-scale works, which involved writing them first in short score, before producing a fully scored draft and from this a third and final score.<sup>62</sup> That the work represents 'a certain 'development' is abundantly clear from comparison with the *Four Romantic Songs*; structurally the climaxes are more carefully placed and there is a greater attempt to integrate the three movements motivically than in the song cycle. The work was not to receive a public performance until 1948 when it was performed by the Martin String Quartet at the Wigmore Hall under the auspices of the London Contemporary Music Centre.<sup>63</sup>

Two original works for orchestra also date from this period: the *Symphonic Ballad* written for the Belfast Wireless Orchestra and E. Godfrey Brown, premiered in August 1937, and *Spring Nocturne*, commissioned by Aloys Fleischmann for a concert of Irish compositions he gave with the Radió Éireann Symphony Orchestra (RÉSO) in April 1938. The fact that the first draft of the orchestral score of the *Symphonic Ballad* was originally entitled *Sinfonietta* may suggest that, like the Scherzo, it was originally conceived as a multi-movement work, although no trace of any further movements survives. Both titles suggest that May saw the work as being more symphonic in construct than *Spring Nocturne*, which was bluntly described by May:

I don't regard it as a masterpiece—it was intended as an evocation of County Meath and is in the same genre, I daresay, as similar idylls by Butterworth and Moeran ... the coda is the best part of it.<sup>64</sup>

The *Symphonic Ballad* is the more ambitious of the two works both in its language and its formal structure, but while *Spring Nocturne* was eventually to receive relatively

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<sup>62</sup> There is also the intriguing possibility that May brought the work to Vienna, perhaps showing it to Wellesz or someone else; it is noticeable, for example, that the structure in the first two movements of the Quartet is much tighter than in May's other large-scale compositions. This idea is put forward tentatively as at present there is no evidence that this was the case.

<sup>63</sup> The performance was arranged by Edward Clark. The Martin Quartet consisted of David Martin, Neville Marriner, Eileen Grainger and Bernard Richards. May told Fleischmann 'I had a great week in England' before referring him to a notice in *The Irish Times* which states that the Quartet 'was received with genuine enthusiasm'. May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 22 March 1948 and 'London Letter', *The Irish Times*, 19 March 1948. The following year the Martin Quartet performed the piece at the RDS Dublin.

<sup>64</sup> May letter to Clarence Raybould, 20 January 1943, BBC Written Archives.

regular performances by the RÉSO, the *Symphonic Ballad* was to suffer a different fate; after a second performance in Dublin under Michael Bowles in 1941, the score of this fifteen-minute piece seems to have been lost and there were no further performances until 2016.<sup>65</sup>

### **Nationalist interlude: politics and traditional music**

We have little information about May's upbringing apart from a late interview in which he states that he was reared in 'a rather Anglo-Irish atmosphere' and it was only when he was in his late teens, through study of literature and history, that he began to 'reflect upon what one's duty as an Irishman was'.<sup>66</sup> It is clear from May's surviving letters that he remained a staunch republican for the rest of his life and when discussing achievements by himself or others in letters he tends to emphasize the benefit of this for the Irish nation over any personal benefit. In surviving documents we find references to contacts and friendships with left-wing Republicans such as Leslie Daiken and Brendan Behan, while in a letter from 1954 May talks of visiting Cork to meet 'people like Seamus Murphy whom I haven't seen for years, and some of my ex-IRA friends'.<sup>67</sup> He also appears in state security files as one of a group along with Behan, Mick Riordan and Séan Nolan who met with Jim O'Regan in October 1948 upon his release from prison in England for his part in an IRA bombing campaign,<sup>68</sup> while May's sister noted in 1971 that, when she tried to talk to him about rescuing some of his music, he 'only wanted to talk about Haughey, Boland and Blaney', who were at this time involved in the Arms Trial.<sup>69</sup> Such details help to undermine comprehensively the simple representations of May as 'Anglo-Irish' or even anti-Irish in the literature.

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<sup>65</sup> The score was reconstructed from surviving parts by the present author for the performance, given by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra conducted by Gavin Moloney on 9 September 2016 as part of the Composing the Island Festival at the National Concert Hall, Dublin.

<sup>66</sup> Donncha Ó Dúlaing interview with Frederick May. See note 16.

<sup>67</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 4 January 1954.

<sup>68</sup> See DFA A55/1 'Communist and other left wing labour groups. Activities. 11/10/1948 Re John Nolan', National Archives. Both O'Regan and O'Riordan had served with the International Brigade in Spain and were members of the IRA. Nolan was a co-founder of the reformed Communist Party in 1933 and along with O'Riordan played a key role in the communist movement in Ireland. For more on this see Matt Treacy, *The Communist Party in Ireland 1921–2011: Volume 1 1921–1969* (Dublin: Brocaire Books, 2012).

<sup>69</sup> Charles Haughey and Neil Blaney were dismissed from the Irish government and put on trial due to alleged involvement in an attempt to smuggle arms to the IRA in Northern Ireland. Kevin Boland

May's view of traditional music and arrangements of it is also far more nuanced than might be suggested by the selective decontextualized quotation of lines from individual essays by May that one finds in previous published accounts of May's work. It is not surprising that a pupil of Vaughan Williams would be interested in exploring traditional music throughout his life. As early as 1935 *The Irish Times* noted:

Mr May tells me he is going to remain in Dublin. He is deeply interested in folk music, especially Irish music, and has come back stimulated by his Viennese experiences, to steep himself in the atmosphere of native music.<sup>70</sup>

May was certainly not a fan of hunting for Irish inflections in works where they did not exist to justify a composer's status as an 'Irish' composer. This is evidenced by his mild rebuke to Fleischmann who, when performing May's Scherzo in Cork in 1935, suggested that the trio was 'Gaelic' in feeling, presumably in an attempt to appeal to any national sentiment in the audience:

Do you really think there's a Gaelic atmosphere about the Trio? Personally, I've no opinion and I always try to write straight ahead without any prepossessions or theories, but if there is a Gaelic feeling about the section, that's grand. Still, I feel that the aggressive Daniel Corkery might hit me a blow on the head with his shillelagh if I came within striking distance.<sup>71</sup>

However, when the opportunity arose to work directly with traditional music May accepted it. In March 1937 he completed the *Suite of Irish Airs* which was premiered by Fleischmann's University Orchestra in Cork in a performance that was broadcast by Radio Athlone (the forerunner of R ) in December of that year. While this work has been misdated to 1953 by commentators such as Joseph Ryan and Philip Graydon in support of a simplistic narrative of an Anglo-Irish or 'cosmopolitan' May being forced to concede to corrosive national sentiment in the 1950s, May's letters and writings (and the correct date of composition) directly contradict this view.<sup>72</sup> The challenge for May

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resigned from the government in protest at the sackings. Sheila May to Brian Boydell, 29 May 1971, TCD MS 1128/1/23/74.

<sup>70</sup> Kitty Clive, 'Echoes of the Town', *The Irish Times*, 22 November 1935.

<sup>71</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 4 December [1935]. Interestingly, what May dismisses here— attempts to identify specifically 'Irish' elements in the music—is central to the writings of Ryan, Graydon, Klein and others. For more on this issue see Fitzgerald, 'Inventing Identities', 92–3.

<sup>72</sup> For example, describing the work as being in a 'prevailing nationalist idiom' that was 'foreign to his accustomed voice' and 'without marked personality or commitment' Ryan adds 'That such works exist in the canon of a leading cosmopolitan artist is testimony to the perseverance of nationalist sentiment; that May was impelled to write them for practical reasons evidences the true ascendancy of that sentiment.' Ryan, 'Nationalism', 426–7. This is repeated pretty much verbatim by Graydon, who

when composing the *Suite* was not one of being forced by outside forces to use Irish airs but rather how a composer could do justice to the original airs and not in any way damage their essence:

I must confess that traditional airs always make me feel like a unicorn is said to feel at the sight of a virgin—terribly shy and abashed. I'm always afraid that some error of taste on my part will sully their native, wild beauty.<sup>73</sup>

On another occasion when he was arranging some songs he noted in a similar vein 'Arranging these songs is an art in itself, isn't it, and it is terribly easy to destroy the spirit of the words'.<sup>74</sup> It is notable therefore how careful and restrained the settings in the *Suite of Irish Airs* are and indeed the newspapers were informed in advance by the composer that 'the interesting feature of this *Suite* lies in the fact that it contains scarcely a bar of original music or of 'padding'—the airs are allowed to speak for themselves'.<sup>75</sup> In this way the *Suite* breaks decisively with the Stanford/Harty tradition of orchestral fantasies on Irish airs.

May certainly reacted strongly against anyone who dogmatically declared that it was essential to utilize traditional music at the surface of one's compositions. Instead he insisted that it was crucial for a composer to find their own individual voice, whatever that might be:

The idea that a composer must, to justify his position, write music in a definitely national idiom is manifestly absurd, and there is far too much loose thinking on that subject in many countries, including our own, at the present time. The main thing is that a composer shall have the courage to be himself, because it is by so doing that he can best serve his fellows.<sup>76</sup>

However, his belief in the value of traditional music for aspiring composers was most clearly expressed when in 1955 Denis Donoghue argued that there was no Irish composer 'whose work an intelligent European musician must know, in the sense in which that musician must be familiar with the work of Walton, Hindemith, Vaughan Williams, Sibelius and other composers' and declared this was caused primarily by the

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prefaces it with the reproving words 'May's firm opposition to the prevailing nationalist idiom ... did not prevent him from directly succumbing to it.' Graydon, M Phil, 67.

<sup>73</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 26 May [1936?]

<sup>74</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 18 November [late 1940s]

<sup>75</sup> *Irish Press*, 3 December 1937.

<sup>76</sup> 'Composers and their Works: Kodály', Radio Scripts 3.172 Frederick May, P260/717, document number 2032-9, RTÉ Written Archives.

pernicious influence of traditional music, or as he termed it ‘the trap of folk-music’.<sup>77</sup> May responded by first pointing out the irony of Donoghue thinking that the solution would be for a composer such as Vaughan Williams to be brought to Ireland to rescue young Irish composers from such an interest: Vaughan Williams was not only heavily influenced by folk music but he actively encouraged his students to engage with it. Acknowledging that some may have used folk music to conceal their lack of creative gifts, May argued:

As Vaughan Williams said in his book ‘National Music’ ‘nobody ever created or ever will create something out of nothing’ and intimate association with the beauties of traditional music and poetry cannot help but fertilise a composer’s mind, and widen and deepen his experience ... But there is really no such rigid dividing line between ‘Folk music’ and ‘Art music’ as Mr Donoghue would have us believe ... If a composer had not a touch of that divine fire which Beethoven recognised as burning so brightly in Schubert he will never acquire it from folk-song, but if he has, folk-song will never destroy him – rather, it will widen his sympathies and enrich his art.<sup>78</sup>

### **Breakdown: otosclerosis, homosexuality and alcoholism**

May’s burst of creative activity was curtailed at the end of May 1938 when he was admitted to Stewart’s Hospital in Palmerstown with a nervous breakdown. Initially leave of three months was requested from the Abbey Theatre, however May remained at Stewart’s until the end of October.<sup>79</sup> At this point May’s father appealed to the Abbey Board to extend May’s leave until the end of the year. One of the directors Frederick Robert Higgins met with May but stated to the Board that:

In my opinion he is not fit to take over complete charge of the orchestra for some time to come. However, I entered into an arrangement with him that he would come here for two evenings a week, without pay, and take over temporary charge so as he would get used to the work, at the same time keeping on Mrs Gore, our temporary leader so as to watch that nothing awkward occurs under Mr May’s direction. Mrs Gore tells me that he is very jiggy and irregular in his attendances ... I have had a rather pathetic letter from Mr May who is very eager to get back but very nervous of his own condition.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Denis Donoghue, ‘The Future of Irish Music’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, 44 (1955): 109–14.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Composing and Arranging’, Radio Scripts, P260/718 document number 3466.

<sup>79</sup> He was discharged on either 23 or 24 October. E-mail from Joan Rapple, Freedom of Information Officer and Data Protection Officer, Stewarts Care Ltd., 19 February 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 16 December 1938.

May was allowed back to work in January after his doctor strongly advised it in order to facilitate May's recovery and by mid-January the Board was informed that May was now working fulltime and that his behaviour was satisfactory.<sup>81</sup>

The cause of May's breakdown is unclear and could have been triggered by a number of factors. At some point May began to suffer from otosclerosis, which would eventually result in increased deafness combined with severe tinnitus. Writing about his Quartet in a letter to Boydell May noted:

It was written at a time when I believed that my ear trouble would give me little further prospect of any creative activity, and consequently I was in a state of inner tension. Of course, as you know yourself, musical themes & ideas generate their own logic & certainly I wasn't thinking along these lines the whole time, but that was the general basis.<sup>82</sup>

This would place the onset of the otosclerosis to the mid 1930s. While the exact progress of his illness is impossible to chart, by 1942 a letter from Brendan Behan indicates that May was 'slightly deaf (left ear almost totally so)'.<sup>83</sup>

Another possible factor was May's homosexuality. As this was illegal at the time little information survives regarding May's personal life. Some details regarding his relationship with Brendan Behan have been recorded by Michael O'Sullivan who states that they first met when Behan was 15. If this is correct, it suggests that this meeting occurred shortly before May's breakdown as Behan's fifteenth birthday was in February 1938.<sup>84</sup> Homosexuals in the arts world who were careful or who conformed in other ways to society's expectations frequently managed to live without incurring any legal problems. Composer James Wilson who lived openly with his partner in Dublin from the late 1940s onwards and whose social circle was dominated by ambassadors and other 'high society' figures recalled that homosexuals 'were left more or less alone' but

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<sup>81</sup> Abbey Theatre minutes, 20 December 1938 and 13 January 1939.

<sup>82</sup> May letter to Boydell, undated. TCD MS 1128/1/23/89.

<sup>83</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1997), 93.

<sup>84</sup> O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan*, 91. I am indebted to John Brannigan for alerting me to the close links between May and other members of the Behan family and his involvement in attempts to mitigate Behan's sentence after he had been imprisoned for attempting to shoot two policemen in April 1942. More naively May also requested permission for the imprisoned Behan to attend a performance of the Scherzo at the final Oireachtas concert in the Olympia Theatre in November 1942, adding in his letter that the Governor of the prison and his wife would be welcome to join the group. See O'Sullivan, 92.



this was not necessarily the case for less exalted parts of society.<sup>85</sup> References that survive suggest that May's sexual behaviour was less conformist than Wilson's. Louis Marcus recalled an occasion when May had not appeared at the hall by the beginning of a concert of the Cork Symphony Orchestra featuring one of May's works:

Frau Tilly [Fleischmann] determined to find him, and Seamus [Murphy], knowing the composer's personal predilections, suggested she might try the pubs on the docks which sailors frequented. Quite unabashed, Tilly called a taxi and sallied into a succession of waterside dens until she discovered Freddie, dragged him into the car and had him in the City Hall in time to take his bow.<sup>86</sup>

Just as it is clear from surviving letters that the String Quartet contains programmatic ideas related to the onset of deafness there are a number of tentative suggestions that other works may have similar autobiographical aspects related to his sexuality. In a letter written while May was completing the orchestration of *Spring Nocturne* he commented:

Each day you wonder whether you're hammering a fresh stone into the monument of your immortality or merely beating the air with vain wings. I couldn't resolve the problem, so I went out and paid Cyril a visit: he showed me a poem which I thought full of beauty and tenderness and I felt glad for his sake though rather envious for my own.<sup>87</sup>

He later adds that the countryside at Grez-sur-Loing in France is 'not unlike County Meath, where Cyril and I spent last Sunday'. For the first performance May stated that *Spring Nocturne* was inspired by the landscape of Meath and the line from a Frank O'Connor translation of an Irish poem 'Meadow lands and Plough Lands, lie in Valleys far away'.<sup>88</sup> This verse continues 'Where apple-trees and sloe-bushes grow thickly as at home. / If my love say nothing, what matter what all say?'<sup>89</sup> May's *Lyric Movement* similarly may have some personal significance as in the 1950s May attempted to get Fleischmann to mount a performance arguing 'my main wish is that this work should

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<sup>85</sup> Mark Fitzgerald, *The Life and Music of James Wilson* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2015), 15. For more on prosecutions in this period see Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009).

<sup>86</sup> Louis Marcus, 'The Cork Symphony Orchestra' in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Aloys Fleischmann: A Life for Music in Ireland Remembered by Contemporaries* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 2000), 135–6. A number of other anecdotes suggest occasions when May's sexual behaviour resulted in difficulties with police abroad.

<sup>87</sup> May to Nancy McCarthy, undated.

<sup>88</sup> 'Radio Concert next Sunday', *Irish Press*, 21 April 1938.

<sup>89</sup> Frank O'Connor, *Leinster, Munster and Connaught* (London: Robert Hale Ltd, 1950).

be heard in Cork, for personal reasons which I've explained to you'.<sup>90</sup> It is also notable that he selected verse by homosexual poets such as Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. Unless more evidence emerges, however, exploration of this aspect of May's life and work will remain speculative.

A third possible factor behind May's breakdown is suggested by the fact that in March 1939 May was given a final warning by the Board, having turned up drunk at the Abbey.<sup>91</sup> Heavy alcoholic consumption was to be a recurring problem with May but at this point it is hard to determine whether this was a factor in May's behaviour prior to his breakdown or if it was a coping mechanism adopted after his return to work. As May was not dismissed from the Abbey in 1939 it would seem that at this point it was something he was able to keep under control.<sup>92</sup>

### The war years

The early years of the war coincide with the next large burst of creative activity on May's part, including a number of compositions inspired directly by contemporary events in Europe. May stated that six songs were composed 'immediately prior to *Songs from Prison*' and they form a series of pairs with two settings each of poems by Lillian Bowes-Lyon, Hart Crane and Ivor Gurney.<sup>93</sup> While Bowes-Lyon's 'The Finch' seems entirely in line with the type of text May usually chose, the darkness of the other songs – most notably Crane's depiction of a journey towards 'no Spring, no birth, not death, no time nor sun' in 'North Labrador' – is interesting both in the context of the time and in relation to May's own personal experience. More directly related to the war are the two First World War poems by Ivor Gurney, both of which juxtapose the beauty of nature with the destruction of war.

May was also commissioned to provide music for the UCD Dramatic Society's production of Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, which opened in March 1941. Written for an ensemble of flute, oboe, clarinet, timpani, strings and piano, this was the most substantial theatre score May had composed since his time working for the Gate Theatre and in it he utilized ideas from other pieces including *Songs from Prison*, which he would

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<sup>90</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 16 May [?1955].

<sup>91</sup> Abbey Theatre Minutes, 24 March 1939.

<sup>92</sup> The fact that Ernest Blythe got May to visit Seán O'Casey in December 1942 to see if it would be possible to obtain the premiere of *Red Roses for Me* for the Abbey also suggests that at this point May's drinking was controlled. See Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey, Writer at Work: A Biography* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>93</sup> May letter to Adrian Boult, July 15 1941, BBC Written Archive.

have been completing at the same time. Brian Boydell, who played in the ensemble at the premiere, noted that ‘Fred’s music was first rate – but in spite of huge notices on the programme, the audience talked through most of it, which was most annoying’.<sup>94</sup>

Table 3: Compositions 1939–55

1939	Incidental music for Daniel Corkery’s <i>Fohnam the Sculptor</i>
1940	‘The Traveller’ for voice and piano (text: Joseph Campbell)
c1940	‘The Finch’ for voice and piano (text: Lillian Bowes-Lyon)
c1940	‘Millpond’ for voice and piano (text: Lillian Bowes-Lyon)
c1940	‘Brimscombe’ for voice and piano (text: Ivor Gurney)
c1940	‘Communion’ for voice and piano (text: Ivor Gurney)
c1940	‘North Labrador’ for voice and piano (text: Hart Crane)
c1940	‘Garden Abstract’ for voice and piano (text: Hart Crane)
1941	<i>Songs from Prison</i> for baritone and orchestra (text: Ernst Toller and Erich Stadlen; English translation by Nigel Heseltine)
1941	Incidental Music for Maxwell Anderson’s <i>Winterset</i> for flute, oboe, clarinet, timpani, strings and piano
1942	‘Dialogue’ for voice and piano (text: Jaroslav Kvapil)
1942	<i>Lyric Movement</i> for strings
1952	‘O Breathe not his name’ and ‘You Remember Ellen’ arranged for SATB
1954	<i>Luggelaw</i> /Piano Suite of Irish Airs (Two movement suite of arrangements, the first movement published by McCullough as <i>Luggelaw</i> for piano).
1955	<i>Sunlight and Shadow</i> for orchestra

*Songs from Prison* is May’s most explicit engagement with the contemporary political situation. In a letter to a London publisher he noted that the piece was

<sup>94</sup> Baron Ballybride [Boydell] undated letter [1941] to Charles Acton, Charles Acton Papers ACC6797, National Library of Ireland.

...deeply and urgently relevant to the present situation, and I most earnestly hope that it may obtain a hearing while this war is raging. Indeed it was meant as a contribution to the period through which we are now trying to live, and I am convinced that it is a contribution not without value.<sup>95</sup>

Reflecting on May's career in a 1986 broadcast Boydell stated:

Fred had an ardent sympathy for those whose liberty of thought was threatened. A stay in Vienna during the traumatic years preceding the war undoubtedly had a great deal to do with this.<sup>96</sup>

The fragmentary evidence we have regarding May's Viennese connections suggests that May's abhorrence of Fascism was not merely part of his left-wing ideology or a generalized sympathy for the oppressed, but was also influenced by personal knowledge of some of those affected.

In 1939 May was contacted by a Jewish man, Arthur Kohn, who was looking for assistance to escape Vienna, which since the *Anschluß* in 1938 was part of the German Reich. Kohn also contacted Adolf Mahr, who had studied in Vienna and was now the Keeper of Irish Antiquities at the National Museum of Ireland, presumably not realising that Mahr was also head of the Nazi Party in Ireland. May's level of knowledge is impossible to gauge but in a letter to Mahr dated 20 May 1939 he told Mahr that Kohn would need a financial guarantor to be allowed enter Ireland noting 'I don't know of anybody in a position to do this. I personally couldn't, though I'm sorry for him'.<sup>97</sup> May also wrote to Erich Stadlen of the Guarantee Department of the German Emergency Committee in London about Kohn. A letter dated 14 June from Kohn to Mahr mentions May's efforts on his behalf before announcing that an English 'Reverend' had undertaken to harbour Kohn and his wife but that he would not be able to leave for another two or three months. Kohn did not manage to escape from Vienna and was instead deported to Terezin where he died.<sup>98</sup> May's letters refer to the Irish government not allowing Kohn to take 'a musical or a business position' and he was on the artistic

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<sup>95</sup> May to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941, GB-Lbl, Add. 61886, f. 68.

<sup>96</sup> Brian Boydell, 'Classics of XXth Century Irish Music: A series of 5 programmes for RTÉ, Autumn 1986', 23 September 1986.

<sup>97</sup> David O'Donoghue, *Hitler's Irish Voices: The Story of German Radio's Wartime Irish Service*, (Bantry: Somerville Press, 2014), 169. Mahr had succeeded Fritz Brase, composer and director of the Army School of Music, as head of the Irish branch of the Nazi Party.

<sup>98</sup> O'Donoghue, *Hitler's Irish Voices*, 170–2.

committee in Terezin so it is likely he got to know May through Viennese musical circles.<sup>99</sup>

The aforementioned Erich Stadlen and his brother Peter, who is remembered today as both a musicologist and as the pianist who gave the world premiere of Webern's *Variationen* op. 27, were also friends of May and as late as the 1960s May stayed on at least one occasion with Peter and his family during one of his trips to London, even though by this stage his drinking had become problematic.<sup>100</sup> It is most likely that they met in Vienna, although Peter Stadlen visited Dublin on two occasions in the 1930s. His first visit was as part of the Budapest Trio, who gave two concerts at the RDS on 11 November 1935.<sup>101</sup> May attended these which may suggest that he already knew Stadlen.<sup>102</sup> In November 1937 Stadlen returned to give two solo recitals at the RDS. At the time he was not as well-known as most of the other performers (and was paid at a substantially lower rate) so it is possible that the invitation to perform had been prompted by May.<sup>103</sup>

It was Erich with whom May was to collaborate on his largest composition from this period. *Songs from Prison* for baritone and orchestra sets extracts from Ernst Toller's *Das Schwalbenbuch*. Lines by Erich Stadlen conclude the work and serve to draw a direct connection between the massacre of the swallows in Toller's text and the victims of the

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<sup>99</sup> Letter from Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, 28 January 2016. See also [www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-victims/victim/53386-arthur-kohn/](http://www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-victims/victim/53386-arthur-kohn/)

<sup>100</sup> E-mail from Jonathan, Anthony and Godfrey Stadlen, 12 February 2014.

<sup>101</sup> Letter from Wiener Stadt- und Landesarchiv, 28 January 2016.

<sup>102</sup> Concert scrapbooks, RDS Archive.

<sup>103</sup> While May was not on the Board it is possible that he had some influence on the decision via John Larchet or some other member. This visit was to have particularly momentous consequences for the Stadlen family, as Peter Stadlen's grandson recalled: 'In 1938 my grandfather, the pianist Peter Stadlen, was returning to his native Austria from a concert tour of Ireland when he happened to meet a girl on the ferry home. As a result he caught a cold from chatting to her on deck, and had to stop over in Amsterdam. The fates were with him, because the following day ... the Nazis marched into Austria; Peter was a secular Jew. He was able to communicate with his mother and sister, who were still in Vienna, and urge them to leave by the next train to Holland. From there, all three made it to London as refugees, and that is where my family has been based ever since'. Matthew Stadlen, 'Family history: retracing the steps of a romance disrupted by war,' *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 2013. Stadlen's Dublin recitals were on 22 November 1937 and the Anschluss took place on 12 March 1938. If the Irish invitation was due to May's influence these events would doubtless have strengthened ties between May and the Stadlens. For the Dublin audience it provided a very rare foray into contemporary European modernism as his programmes included *Trois mouvements de Petrouchka* by Stravinsky and Schoenberg's Fünf Klavierstücke opus 23.

Nazis. It is not clear how this collaboration developed. Was it May's idea to set Toller's text and did he ask Stadlen for the final lines or did Stadlen suggest the text and select the extracts, before adding these lines?<sup>104</sup> May's description of the work as a setting of 'six poems taken from the late Ernst Toller's volume *Das Schwalbenbuch* followed by two more specially written for me by an Austrian who is a friend of mine' could apply to both scenarios.<sup>105</sup> May set the texts in German but in order to facilitate performances in Ireland and Britain he asked Nigel Heseltine to provide an English translation, for which May then provided an altered vocal line.<sup>106</sup> However, his plans to obtain a performance of the work turned out to be far more difficult to realize. In Dublin the work could not be performed because of what May referred to in a letter as its 'un-neutral text'.<sup>107</sup> In Britain, where such an issue did not arise, the work ran into other obstacles.

May perhaps somewhat naively had not considered the objections that might arise regarding his choice of Toller who was not only German but was also widely known as a leading figure of the socialist movement. The internal correspondence from the BBC demonstrates the ways in which the political situation cut across musical decisions regarding May's work. The BBC and the Ministry of Information were favourably inclined to perform May's work as a propitiatory gesture towards neutral Ireland in the hope that such gestures would contribute to efforts to persuade de Valera's government to join the allied forces. May's music was also seen as being of high enough quality for inclusion in a broadcast. However, the BBC Symphony Orchestra's principal conductor, Adrian Boult, viewed the matter differently and tried to block the performance, declaring:

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<sup>104</sup> Toller was a well-known figure in Dublin at this time. A number of his plays were performed in Dublin in the 1920s and '30s including *Masses and Man* at the Abbey in 1925. The Abbey School of Ballet under Ninette de Valois put on a work based on Toller's poem 'Rout' in 1929 and in the 1930s an adaptation of his play *Blind Goddess* by Denis Johnston entitled *Blind Man's Buff* was hugely successful at the Abbey. In addition to this much publicity surrounded an incident in January 1935 when Toller was invited to Dublin by the Irish Labour League Against Fascism to speak in Rathmines. The visit was effectively banned by the Irish government. For more on Toller in Ireland see Joachim Fischer, 'Ernst Toller and Ireland' in Richard Dove and Stephen Lamb (eds.) *German Writers and Politics 1918–39* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), 192–205.

<sup>105</sup> May letter to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941.

<sup>106</sup> May's comment 'I set the poems in the original German, but have had an English translation made, to which they can also be sung' would suggest a preference for a German language performance, although it is possible May never heard the piece in this form. May letter to E. Chapman, 28 August 1941.

<sup>107</sup> May letter to Victor Hely-Hutchinson, 5 December 1944, BBC Written Archive.

The poems don't seem to me to have any particular propaganda value, certainly not just because they are written by a German Communist; and the music of these extracts is stark and miserable—rather like some of the more lugubrious efforts by Alan Bush. On purely musical grounds the Music Department would, I am sure, not support the idea of the performance.<sup>108</sup>

May travelled to England in June 1941 to try to expedite matters, equipped with references from John Larchet and E. J. Moeran that referred positively to the work. On 3 June, knowing of Boult's cordial relations with Vaughan Williams, he visited his former teacher and played the work to him. Vaughan Williams provided May with a further reference addressed directly to Boult. Introducing May as 'my friend and ex-pupil' Vaughan Williams declared the work 'well worth your consideration'.<sup>109</sup> Despite Boult's predictions, the internal advisory committee assessing the work decided that it could be recommended on musical grounds, noting that it was 'quite out of the ordinary' but once again, the text proved problematic, with the committee deciding that it was of 'too sombrely hypersensitive a type to be suitable for performance at the present time'.<sup>110</sup> This gave Boult the excuse he needed, and he wrote to May stating:

We do however think that this is not quite the right moment to put out a work whose theme is so sombre and harrowingly introspective. Our space for new choral compositions is strictly limited and we have works waiting for performance which deal with more comforting or heartening subjects and this helps to maintain the spirit of our listeners.<sup>111</sup>

In the meantime, May probably compounded the problem by writing to Boult's assistant, Clarence Raybould, emphasising the socialist aspect of Toller's work:

Incidentally, since my return to Dublin, I met an Austrian refugee to whom I played the score some time before. He said he thought it would be great if it could be broadcast to the Germans in German, as he believed it would have a powerful effect, partly because Toller is something of a legendary name to the Socialists and Social-democrats. This is an idea which I had myself also, as I think I told you.<sup>112</sup>

The same approach was taken in his reply to Boult, where he again stressed Toller's reputation in Europe and also the message of hope contained in the concluding section of the work before adding that it was to be shown by a third party to the socialist

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<sup>108</sup> Adrian Boult letter to J S McGregor (Ministry of Information), 17 May 1941, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>109</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams letter to Adrian Boult, 3 June 1941, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>110</sup> Internal memoranda, June 1941, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>111</sup> Adrian Boult letter to May, 4 July 1941, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>112</sup> May letter to Clarence Raybould, 3 July 1941, BBC Written Archive.

composer Alan Bush, something which could only have damaged prospects for performance by the BBC even further.<sup>113</sup> Another reading of the score of *Songs from Prison* in June 1942—this time with May at the piano—resulted in the work being recommended ‘urgently and unreservedly’ by the music panel, however, Boult refused to conduct the work and so the premiere was directed by Clarence Raybould in December 1942.<sup>114</sup> Attempts to obtain a further performance of the work by the BBC in 1944 once again foundered on the issue of Toller’s text.

In contrast with the complicated machinations regarding *Songs from Prison*, several of May’s other compositions were taken up by the BBC without objections. In December 1941 four of his songs were broadcast, with two more broadcast the following October.<sup>115</sup> The Scherzo was performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Boult in April 1942, after which Boult travelled to Dublin where the work was also included in his programme with the RÉSO. The *Suite of Irish Airs* was also broadcast in October. A decision to reject the String Quartet seems to have had less to do with the music than with May’s own careless presentation; the quartet deemed it ‘too difficult to read the notes let alone play them’.<sup>116</sup>

While *Songs from Prison* could not be performed in wartime Dublin, RÉ did broadcast a portrait concert of May’s music on 4 September 1941 which included *Spring Nocturne*, the *Symphonic Ballad* and the songs ‘Communion’, ‘Irish Love Song’, ‘The Finch’ and ‘North Labrador’. The orchestra was directed by Michael Bowles who also conducted *Spring Nocturne* at a concert on 27 November 1941.<sup>117</sup> In January 1942, RÉ broadcast a new song by May, ‘Dialogue’, a work which on the surface is not remotely political, but that May clearly intended as a political gesture, albeit one that could subvert the censorship regulations. Czechoslovakia had since the beginning of the war effectively ceased to exist due to the German invasion and the presence of a legation for the Czech government in exile had initially caused some concern in government circles due to their neutrality policy. May contacted the Czech legation asking about Czech poetry that was available in English translation with the intention of composing a series of songs with

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<sup>113</sup> May letter to Boult, 15 July 1941, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>114</sup> Internal memorandum, June 1942, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>115</sup> Which four songs these were is unknown.

<sup>116</sup> Internal memorandum, 1943, BBC Written Archive. The quartet in question is unknown.

<sup>117</sup> Report on RÉ broadcast, BBC Written Archive.



Czech texts as an act of cultural solidarity. However, apart from 'Dialogue' no further settings or sketches survive.<sup>118</sup>

One final substantial composition dates from this period, namely the *Lyric Movement for Strings*, which was premiered at the RDS on 15 February 1943 by the Dublin String Orchestra under Terry O'Connor. Whatever the personal significance of this work, it marks the end of the main period of composition in May's career.



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<sup>118</sup> May also made contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the exiled Czech government in London. Zastupitelský úrad Dublin: 1929–50: 8, Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí, Prague. I am indebted to Daniel Samek for sourcing and copying this material and to Patrick Devine for translating it. As late as 1963 May wrote 'Although I myself am quite prepared to be friendly with Germans nowadays and treat them like fellow human beings ... I could not still be nice to any German who had served Hitler, either ideologically or in his bestial army, and I feel as passionately about this as when I wrote Songs from Prison.' May letter to Leonard Isaacs circa April 1963, BBC Written Archives.

Illustration 2: Frederick May at the premiere of the Lyric movement for Strings with conductor Terry O'Connor (seated) and Nancy Lord, leader of the Dublin String Orchestra (*Irish Press*, 16 February 1943)

### From post-war period to disappearance

Biographical details for the post-war period are somewhat scant. May was involved in the meetings which resulted in the foundation of the Music Association of Ireland and was also involved in concerts given under the auspices of the Association in the 1950s. At some point around 1948 he was dismissed from his position at the Abbey, although the circumstances and exact date remain unclear due to the inaccessibility of the Abbey archive for the period. This clearly had a severe impact on May as a note in Boydell's diary from 1950 attests: 'Was glad to see Fred again — and he seemed quite normal again after time has mellowed the shock of his losing the Abbey job'.<sup>119</sup> His position at this point must have been somewhat precarious, with his income presumably derived from the programme notes which he wrote for the RÉSO's concerts, broadcasts about music on RÉ and possibly any arrangements that might date from this period.

As against these problems his position as a composer was consolidated during this period by performances of his works; clearly many musicians felt that May was, as one BBC advisor put it, 'one of the very few Irish composers with something to say', even if the critics were still slow to come to this realisation.<sup>120</sup> *Spring Nocturne* was repeated by the RÉSO in October 1944 while Jean Martinon included the Scherzo and *Spring Nocturne* in his concerts in 1947 and 1948.<sup>121</sup> *Songs from Prison* had a somewhat more chequered post-war career in Ireland. The first Irish performance in December 1946 was an unsatisfactory run through under Bowles with Boydell, whose voice was not up to the demands of the part, taking the solo. The next performance, conducted by Boydell in February 1942 with Frederick Fuller as soloist, seems to have been disastrous due to

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<sup>119</sup> Extract from Brian Boydell diary for 7 January 1950. Barra Boydell (ed.) *Rebellious Ferment: A Dublin Musical Memoir and Diary: Brian Boydell* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2018), 127.

<sup>120</sup> Leonard Isaacs, internal memorandum, 25 May 1959, BBC Written Archives.

<sup>121</sup> Joe Kehoe, *The Evolution of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra 1926–1954*. (PhD dissertation, Dublin Institute of Technology, 2017), 266, 278 and 284. Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), 83 claims that a performance of the *Lyric Movement* took place on 19 March 1944 but the surviving programme material suggests this is incorrect. He also states that a further performance took place on 18 November 1947. It has not been possible to verify the programme for this radio concert.

poor ensemble and flat singing.<sup>122</sup> It was only in October 1953 that the work received an adequate performance, this time conducted by Milan Horvat who also conducted *Spring Nocturne*, the *Lyric Movement* and the *Suite of Irish Airs* during his tenure.<sup>123</sup> Indeed, throughout the 1950s there were performances of all May's major compositions with the sole exception of the *Symphonic Ballad*.

In London, apart from the premiere of the Quartet in 1948, the London Philharmonic Orchestra performed the *Lyric Movement* on 24 June 1954, a number of songs were performed on the BBC by Rene Soames in 1957 and *Songs from Prison* was performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Kurt Woess with Gordon Clinton in January 1960.<sup>124</sup> The New London Quartet took the String Quartet into their repertoire in the early 1950s and their championing of the Quartet led to May contacting Britten in March 1958 requesting a reference from him regarding the piece as he believed from talking to the director of the Irish branch of the Philips Company that they would be interested in recording it.<sup>125</sup> Although Britten provided a letter describing the quartet as an intense, moving and rewarding work, it transpired that Philips had no intention of recording the work of an unknown composer.<sup>126</sup> May continued to search for a way of having the Quartet recorded, asking Britten if he could persuade another company to take it on and approaching Garech Browne around 1962.<sup>127</sup> These continual attempts may reflect a realisation not only that this was his best composition, but that he was unlikely ever to compose anything of this importance again.

May's work was also championed by conductor Sixten Eckerberg in Sweden whom May had met when he was conducting the RÉSÓ in Dublin. On 3 June 1954 the *Lyric Movement* was broadcast on Swedish radio. The circumstances surrounding this latter performance give an insight into the increasingly unreliable nature of May's behaviour. May applied for a grant of £50 from the Committee for Cultural Relations to cover the

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<sup>122</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 20 February 1952. May noted in a catalogue of his work from c1953 that although the work had been performed a number of times 'none of [the] performances was good'.

<sup>123</sup> May in return dedicated the score of *Sunlight and Shadow* to Horvat.

<sup>124</sup> Clinton was replacing the original singer Geraint Evans who could not get leave for the concert from Covent Garden. Internal Memorandum, December 1959, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>125</sup> May letter to Benjamin Britten, 31 March 1958. He also wrote to Vaughan Williams and a number of other figures. Letter provided by the Britten-Pears Foundation. <http://www.brittenpears.org/>.

<sup>126</sup> Benjamin Britten letter to May, 14 July 1958, Letter © Britten-Pears Foundation <http://www.brittenpears.org/>.

<sup>127</sup> May letter to Britten, 8 October 1958 and 'The composer we all forgot', *Sunday Independent*, 22 December 1974. Browne determined that if the opportunity ever arose he would ensure a recording was made, a promise he was to realize in the 1970s.

cost of travel to Sweden for the performance and living expenses, and this was granted. However, to the consternation of the department officials, instead of obtaining a first-class return ticket as had been stipulated, May instead purchased a third-class one-way ticket and converted the rest of the money into travellers' cheques. Interestingly, the internal memos from the department note that 'It is disturbing to learn now, especially in view of Mr May's rather odd personality and character, that in effect the grant made has not been used for the purpose for which it was intended'.<sup>128</sup> Whatever the reason for their characterisation of May, their worst fears were realized when the Legation in Sweden contacted the department to ask for assistance in repatriating May. May's first report merely refers to the trip as 'highly successful' and outlines the possibility of further trips. However, in a further letter May explained that he had not realized it was possible to obtain a return ticket, the 'musical authorities' had booked him into a very expensive hotel and in addition a sum of money had been stolen leaving him with no option but to appeal to the legation for assistance. It seems May had also lost his passport as the Legation mentions that they had no emergency certificates of nationality available.<sup>129</sup> Surprisingly, considering this experience, May was able to obtain funding to travel to Sweden again in 1956 for a performance of the String Quartet which he hoped might be recorded. He stayed this time for some months and his report mentions a radio recording he made and an article he wrote about Vaughan Williams as well as a performance of *Sunlight and Shadow* to take place in Finland. *Songs from Prison* was performed in Sweden in 1959.

Perhaps the increased attention his music was receiving encouraged May to return to composition. He had made a number of arrangements in the early 1950s including *O Breathe not his name* and *You Remember Ellen* for the RÉ Singers and *Luggelaw* for piano. Referring to the latter as 'a little effort that McCullough's have just published'<sup>130</sup> he explained to Tilly Fleischmann how he had come to write the work:

I want you to understand though, that I did it only as a duty to enter for the Moore competition and at the time I was feeling very depressed and didn't think I'd be capable of any further original creative work.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> DFA/6/438/287 1954, National Archives of Ireland.

<sup>129</sup> May's mother had to provide a guarantee for the return of the money spent on repatriating May, including the cost of the phone call from the Legation. See DFA/6/438/287 1954, National Archives of Ireland.

<sup>130</sup> May letter to Tilly Fleischmann, 5 January 1955.

<sup>131</sup> May letter to Tilly Fleischmann, 3 February 1955.

By contrast, he was able to report ‘At the moment I’m at work on something for orch [sic] which is making slow, but, I hope, satisfactory progress’.<sup>132</sup> The piece in question was *Sunlight and Shadow*, a ten-minute orchestral piece, which was to be May’s last original composition, premiered on 22 January 1956.<sup>133</sup>

The reception of this work gives an insight into the critical climate in Dublin at the time. While earlier works—most notably the Quartet—had frequently been poorly received by Irish critics, *Sunlight and Shadow*, despite or possibly because of the fact that this is May’s weakest and most insipid large-scale work, received an uncharacteristically positive review from Charles Acton, critic of the *Irish Times*, who felt that it was superior to works such as the Quartet and *Songs from Prison*, which he dismissed saying:

...for all their value as expressions of personal anguish they are too prolix to live permanently. This last barren decade has been perhaps, his ‘darkest hour before the dawn.’ Now we have this work to mark his new day, and one hopes that he can now go forward in peace with full vision. That this is not fanciful is shown by the serene, fresh, diatonic clarity of *Sunlight and Shadow*. Mr May has left behind him the decaying jungle of dying Vienna that he explored in his dark nightmare: he can now see that there is more in life than *Wozzeck*.<sup>134</sup>

Acton followed this with a review of the *Lyric Movement*, which he described as juvenilia that ‘he should seriously consider withdrawing’.<sup>135</sup> Acton’s appreciation of *Sunlight and Shadow* seems to have inspired him to start berating the composer for allowing his mental and physical state stop him from composing. He felt the piece demonstrated that ‘if Mr May will now settle down to writing, we should have a succession of impressive works’.<sup>136</sup> Acton later wrote:

In the 40s and early 50s he behaved, musically, as though it was enough for a composer to wait for inspiration. And I was rude enough to tell him to his face and write it that Schumann had very properly announced that it is the composer’s duty to compose. Trollope wrote 500 words before breakfast every day. And I learnt early on with the IT that if one doesn’t write one’s 300–500 words a day something goes wrong. It was surely difficult for anyone in the 40s and 50s to write, even though, in those days, RÉ would broadcast anything competent that any Irish composer submitted

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<sup>132</sup> May letter to Tilly Fleischmann, 5 January 1955.

<sup>133</sup> In the 1958 *Composers at Work* broadcast the presenter notes that May was about to start work ‘on a piece depicting the capital in holiday mood’ but no completed composition survives.

<sup>134</sup> Charles Acton, ‘New Work Performed at Winter Prom in Gaiety Theatre’, *The Irish Times*, 23 January 1956.

<sup>135</sup> Charles Acton, ‘Third Winter Prom’, *The Irish Times*, 4 February 1957.

<sup>136</sup> Charles Acton, ‘New Work Performed at Winter Prom’.

## Retrieving the Real Frederick May

– unlike during the last two decades. But Fred would not be a Telemann or a Mozart or most others and write the stuff. Like Seán Ó Riada, in his different way, he staked out his claim to be a great Irish composer, but he wouldn't really work at it.<sup>137</sup>

These constant attacks provoked May into responding in a letter possibly sent in the late-1950s in which he attempted to explain his position to Acton:

Just for your private information, I thought I'd like to tell you that some very severe ear trouble, which has been very unpleasant for some considerable time, has prevented me from completing anything on an extended scale lately, although I have tried very hard. It has been a great worry to have had to confine oneself to arrangements and that kind of thing, but I'm in hopes that something can be done to improve the situation. I know you won't mind my writing to you like this, but I thought I'd like to give you a brief private explanation.<sup>138</sup>

These feelings are also reflected in a more restrained fashion in his contribution to RE's *Composers at Work* series in 1958:

I have often felt myself to be like a rock on the seashore that is covered over by the incoming tide every so often, but when the tide withdraws again, it is left once more desolate and forsaken. Sometimes one may ask oneself in moments of depression whether it would not be better never to have been given any creative gift at all than only to have been granted an unserviceable kind of half-gift, so variable, so uncertain and so capricious.<sup>139</sup>

A memo from 1954 at the BBC indicates that May had had a recent breakdown while severe ear trouble and a further breakdown seems to have prevented May from attending the BBC performance of *Songs from Prison* in 1960.<sup>140</sup> It may have been at this stage or possibly earlier that he underwent some ear operations which only made his hearing worse.<sup>141</sup> In an undated letter from roughly the same period May apologizes to Fleischmann for a delay in acknowledging one from Fleischmann and states:

The truth is that my ear trouble took a turn for the worse, or rather it seemed to affect me more, and I've had to go into hospital for a prolonged course of treatment aimed at reducing the noises. I've been so worried about this that I'm afraid my correspondence got a bit neglected, but I feel some improvement and I hope it will be permanent. I had been working hard, but some

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<sup>137</sup> Acton letter to Joan Trimble, 7 May 1991, Acton Papers ACC6797, National Library Ireland.

<sup>138</sup> May letter to Charles Acton, 22 October [?], Acton Papers ACC6797, National Library Ireland.

<sup>139</sup> *Composers at Work*.

<sup>140</sup> Internal memorandum, 1954 and letter from May, December 1959, BBC Written Archive.

<sup>141</sup> May letter to Garech Browne, 1977, private collection.

arrangements and a new composition I'd been tackling weren't going well, and it seemed necessary to get some help.<sup>142</sup>

In later years, commenting on the 'infernal noise' in his head and the effect on his behaviour, he noted 'I did the best I could ... but with that racket torturing me all the time, and my anger at not being given a fair chance, it wasn't always possible to work and behave in a civilized fashion.'<sup>143</sup>

In the early 1960s these behavioural problems became particularly problematic, although for a time he managed to continue to undertake work for RTÉ and a variety of newspapers.<sup>144</sup> However, his behaviour was unpredictable. One person recalls the embarrassment of being with May at a concert in the Royal Albert Hall around 1963, at which May at one point stood up in the aisle and began 'conducting' the orchestra.<sup>145</sup> A brief visit to Aldeburgh in 1962 seems to have led to some sort of incident to judge by a postcard that makes cryptic references to a 'stormy' and 'hectic 48 hours' and asks for his regards to be conveyed to 'that very kind policeman'.<sup>146</sup> In addition a further letter from 1963, in which May proposes returning for the 1963 Aldeburgh Festival, notes 'I'm looking forward tremendously to seeing Aldeburgh (and Mr Britten!) properly on this occasion and assure you that my conduct will be completely impeccable'.<sup>147</sup> The Stadlen family recall him in this period as a 'shabby and haunted' figure and 'looking rather rough, like a frail vagrant'.<sup>148</sup> In January 1963 things came to a head when he was convicted at the Dublin District Court of causing malicious damage and of assaulting Mrs Fortunate Macari at a restaurant on St Stephen's Green.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> May letter to Aloys Fleischmann, 1 October [?]. A further undated letter to Fleischmann mentions 'a slight operation' for his ear trouble.

<sup>143</sup> 'Kay Kent talks to Frederick May'.

<sup>144</sup> Reviews of English festivals appeared in the *Irish Press* and the *Irish Independent* and he also on at least one occasion wrote a review for the *The Manchester Guardian*.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with John Heron, 6 March 2012.

<sup>146</sup> May letter to Jeremy Cullum, 23 November 1962. Letter provided by the Britten-Pears Foundation <http://www.brittenpears.org/>.

<sup>147</sup> May letter to Jeremy Cullum, 6 May 1963. Letter provided by the Britten-Pears Foundation <http://www.brittenpears.org/>.

<sup>148</sup> E-mail from Jonathan, Anthony and Godfrey Stadlen, 12 February 2014.

<sup>149</sup> Mrs Macari refused to serve May due to his troublesome behaviour on a previous occasion. He hit her in the face and then fell through a glass panel in a door. 'Composer fined for assault,' *Irish Press*, 29 January 1963. The court was clearly not convinced by the defence offered by a programme controller

This instability in May's life is reflected in his writings on music from this period which are highly problematic due to their erratic nature. A lack of engagement is reflected in the way many of them recycle not just ideas but entire passages of earlier writings, but whereas originally these may have formed part of a coherent argument the later writings often descend into bitter complaints. In 1962 Schoenberg could at least receive a backhanded compliment when May states: 'that he was one of the greatest masters of instrumental, as well as vocal technique that ever lived is an unquestionable fact, and he must be saluted as a truly great, if somewhat bizarre, genius'.<sup>150</sup> However, his increasingly difficult relationship with the music of the Second Viennese School and contemporary trends began to centre on a criticism he had obtained from Bax:

Sir Arnold Bax once remarked perceptively that the atonal system was well adapted to express all that is morbid, terrifying, tragic and soul-destroying but that it could never give voice to such life-enhancing emotions as love, joy or the tranquillity of a heart at peace with itself; nor could it depict the coming of spring or a high mood under a cloudless summer sky. But the new technique served Berg magnificently when he came to compose *Wozzeck*.<sup>151</sup>

May's attitude towards atonal music at this point may have been coloured by his fears about the dominance of a musical aesthetic that viewed second-rank English composers such as Bax and Delius as old fashioned or uninteresting and the implications this might have for his own work. Commenting on this in a passage almost reminiscent of Acton's attacks on his earlier music, he wondered:

Why, for example, has there been a steady swing away from these composers and others of their ilk and what is it about them that has aroused, if not the ire, at least the condescending and somewhat acidulated patronage of a highly placed and very vocal body of critics, many of them with their roots 'somewhere in central Europe,' who conceive it as their duty to mould the contemporary musical world in their image ... But nothing, after all, is ultimately certain in this world except death, and it is my firm belief that Sibelius, Vaughan Williams, Elgar, Delius and Bax himself have left us a heritage of very great beauty and that they have illuminated and enriched the life of which they once formed a part; and I feel certain that when the neurotic frenzy that is such an unpleasingly characteristic of our present troubled era shall have spent itself, these men, at present suffering a temporary obscurity, will emerge once more into the sunlight.<sup>152</sup>

Apart from the differing merits of his selection of composers, the idea that this is due to people from 'somewhere in central Europe' seems at odds with May's sympathy for refugees and immigrants from the war period, not to mention the fact that several of his

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from RTÉ who stated that 'it was possible that May sometimes acted in an odd sort of way. As was often the case with people of his talents, May did not have an ordinary manner.'

<sup>150</sup> May 'Antal Dorati is "Truly a Wonderman"', *Irish Independent*, 30 November 1962.

<sup>151</sup> Frederick May 'Wozzeck and its Composer'.

<sup>152</sup> Frederick May, 'Composers in temporary obscurity', *Irish Independent*, 13 July 1963.



own friends and supporters from this time also originated from 'somewhere in central Europe'. In an article published earlier the same year he tackles this idea from a different angle but this time Vaughan Williams is one of those in the firing line:

For example there is one school of thought, the national school, which holds that a composer's music should be based on the traditional music of the country in which he happens to be born and that it is the peasantry from which these tunes spring who alone have the power to lead our feet into the path of peace and point us to the way of salvation.

One of the greatest protagonists of this school of thought was Vaughan Williams, who elaborated his ideas in two controversial books, 'National Music' and 'Beethoven's Choral Symphony and other Essays.' [Vaughan Williams] had a very short way with those who would not lie down readymade on the Bed of Procrustes he had designed for them ... I myself love and admire much of Vaughan Williams's music, although some of it sounds to me like a skit on itself ... I sometimes think that theorists such as Vaughan Williams, just like even more dogmatic theorists and practitioners of the twelve-tone school, seemed to have forgotten the truth of that mighty saying, 'In my Father's house are many mansions', and have failed to realise that what is right for them may, quite conceivably, not be all right for everybody else.<sup>153</sup>

May had continued to live at his parents' house on Marlborough Road and when they died May and his friends sold anything of value. At some point May disappeared from public view and it seems he eventually ended up homeless, sleeping at night in Grangegorman Asylum, although he had not been formally admitted as a patient.<sup>154</sup>

### Last years

In 1970 Garech Browne attempted to meet May in order to make arrangements to record the Quartet but his former music colleagues were unable to say where he was. Browne eventually located May in St Brendan's Hospital Grangegorman and it was on Browne's first visit to Grangegorman that the most famous photograph of May was taken. May was in a stone-flagged dormitory with a lot of other men who were busy repeatedly lacing and unlacing their boots. Brought outside for the photograph Browne recalled:

He could not keep his tongue in his mouth and his tongue went wandering around sort of salivating his lips. He wouldn't talk to anybody except me. It was very hard to get the photograph taken, because I would have to ask him a question and he was deaf so I had to come very close

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<sup>153</sup> Frederick May, 'On Being a Composer', *Arena* no. 1 Spring 1963, 16.

<sup>154</sup> Interview with John Heron, 6 March 2012. May's mother died on 1 November 1960 and his father died on 23 March 1969 after a period in a nursing home in Glasnevin. See CS/HC/PO/4/113 Calendar of grants of probate of wills and letters of administration made in the Principal Registry and its district registries, 1960 and CS/HC/PO/4/122 Calendar of grants of probate of wills and letters of administration made in the Probate Office and its district registries, 1969, National Archives of Ireland.

and to get my head out of the photograph for long enough for him to answer a question which was not very easy because he frequently only answered yes or no.<sup>155</sup>

Browne took him out of Grangegorman and together with other friends began the process of returning May to normal life. In an attempt to encourage May to return to composition Browne offered May £5 for each song he copied out for him with the intention that at some point they might be recorded. May began diligently writing out his early songs making a number of important revisions to the works as he did so, but after writing out five songs May began to take the short-cut of sending unaltered photocopies of the manuscripts in TCD to Browne instead, even though in the case of 'April', for example, the copy was almost completely illegible.

May resided in a number of different locations in the early 1970s and by 1974 was living temporarily with the Little Sisters of the Poor at Sybil Hill, Raheny.<sup>156</sup> Kay Kent, who interviewed him that year noted:

Frederick May's deafness has for many years made conversation with all but close friends almost impossible. However, he now has a new type of hearing aid which helps considerably. Conversation must be a severe trial for him still.<sup>157</sup>

In July 1975, he was involved in a car accident and at some point after this was taken to the orthopaedic hospital in Clontarf. It seems that when the nuns who ran it found he had nowhere to live they allowed him to stay and so he spent the remaining years of his life in the hospital. In the late seventies, he was in receipt of a 'nominal' arts council pension and when Aosdána was founded in 1981 May was selected as one of the founding members.<sup>158</sup> The String Quartet, Scherzo, *Spring Nocturne*, *Songs from Prison* and *Sunlight and Shadow* all received RTÉ performances during the last years of May's life and *Sunlight and Shadow* was one of the works chosen by the RÉSO for its 1976 tour. May died on 8 September 1985.

May remains a fascinating figure not just for his music but also for the ways in which he cuts across a range of other circles, musical, theatrical, literary, gay and political and as more research is carried out on each of these areas it is likely that some of the gaps in our current knowledge will be filled. This biographical study not only illustrates May's

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<sup>155</sup> *The Lyric Feature: Sunlight and Shadow – The Composer Frederick May*, produced by Celia Donoghue, first broadcast 10 June 2011, RTÉ Lyric FM.

<sup>156</sup> Ralph G Walker letter to Brian Boydell, 7 October 1974, TCD MS 1128/1/23/66.

<sup>157</sup> 'Kay Kent talks to Frederick May'.

<sup>158</sup> Who did come to the composer's rescue? Sunday Independent, 16 July 1978.

own position, but also illuminates aspects of the musical world in which composers worked in Dublin in the middle of the twentieth century and how different artistic groups could interact in a small city. Further analytical work on the actual music will elucidate May's individual language and enable a clearer picture to emerge of his structural models. May's engagement with traditional music via his arrangements also deserves close study, though at present this remains difficult as the location of many of the scores is not clear.<sup>159</sup> This essay is therefore just a first step in building an accurate picture of May's work and life and it is hoped that it will also contribute to the creation of a more rounded and realistic picture of the Irish compositional scene than has dominated the literature to date.

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<sup>159</sup> Only a few complete scores of May's arrangements are in TCD but the scores and fragments there range from large-scale settings such as *Tho' the last glimpse of Erin*, arranged for orchestra, or *Two Irish Lullabies*, for orchestra and choir, to a number of works for SATB. A letter from an RTÉ Librarian dated 4 February 1975 to Brian Boydell lists about thirty further settings then housed in the vocal music library. See TCD MS 1128/1/23/76. It is likely, based on early catalogues, that a number of these scores are still located in the RTÉ archives. RTÉ is currently working to establish a project to identify and catalogue material. E-mail from Lynsey Dowling, Music Librarian RTÉ, 9 November 2017.