

From the Celtic to the Abstract: Shifting Perspectives in the Music of John Buckley

Born on the 19th of December 1951, John Buckley is regarded as one of the finest Irish composers of his generation. Alongside Gerald Barry (1952), Jerome de Bromhead (1945), Frank Corcoran (1944), Raymond Deane (1953), Roger Doyle (1949) and Jane O'Leary (1946) among others, he emerged in the late 1960s as part of a new flowering in Irish composition. This phenomenon was not marked by homogeneity or bound by a unifying aesthetic but rather comprised a disparate body of composers who struggled to find their individual voices within a broader European context. It further paralleled the economic and social shifts of modern Ireland, which included the embracing of many European political and economic ideals (it joined the European Economic Community in 1973).¹ As a heretofore unacknowledged part of this *zeitgeist*, the young Irish composers appearing in the late 1960s and early 1970s engaged in this exciting pan-European commerce of musical ideologies and developments. Indeed, just as throughout the western world social change undermined the old order, across the island of Ireland there was a surge of political, social, and revolutionary reformism that had permanent and far reaching consequences.²

Extraordinarily, Buckley rose to prominence in Irish contemporary music despite the fact that he came from a relatively poor rural background in the southwest of Ireland. Even in Ireland today, government commitment to classical music in relation to education, infrastructure, radio and television broadcasting, professional development initiatives, etc., leaves much to be desired in comparison with broader European contexts. Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s, when Buckley was

¹ The European Economic Community (EEC) was founded with the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and became the European Union (EU) with the Maastricht Treaty of 1992.

² At the same period, a similar surge in contemporary poetic activity took place in Northern Ireland when a new generation of young poets emerged to form what became known as the Belfast Group. This was a gathering of eclectic voices united only by the social and political times of which they were part. It included such figures as Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Seamus Deane, Michael Longley, Derek Mahon and Frank Ormsby among others. For a history of this development see *The Ulster Renaissance: Poetry in Belfast, 1962-1972* - Heather Clarke, Oxford University Press, 2006. ISBN 978-0-19-928731-4.

growing up in County Limerick, was even more underdeveloped in all these areas. Furthermore, the period was dominated politically by Éamon de Valera,³ whose essentialist vision of the slowly developing Republic was tinged with romantic views of a self-sufficient Catholic Ireland that celebrated the more traditional aspects of Irish culture.⁴ Classical music, which in Ireland was historically (though not exclusively) practiced and enjoyed by the previously ruling Protestant class, was hardly an aspect of Irish culture likely to be afforded any great support from the government of this time.

Buckley's emergence as a leading figure in contemporary classical music is fascinating in light of the socio-economic and socio-political conditions he faced. He tackled the problem of working as a composer of contemporary art music in a relatively unsupportive environment by conducting a parallel professional life as an educationalist. Thus, he veered towards initial studies in education rather than pure music composition, and he worked as a school teacher throughout the 1970s. His financial concerns were alleviated to some extent in 1984 when he was elected to Aosdána.⁵ Even when he decided on a freelance career as a composer in 1982, teaching remained central to his ethos, and his involvement with music education cannot be separated from any thorough study of his work as a composer. Indeed, Buckley's contribution to music education in Ireland has exerted a remarkable influence over the past thirty years and continues to do so: he is presently Lecturer in Music at St. Patrick's College, Dublin.

³ Éamon de Valera (1882-1975) served as Taoiseach (Prime Minister) between the years 1937 and 1948, 1951-1954 and 1957-1959. He was President of Ireland from 1959 until 1973. His vision of the new Republic of Ireland (founded in 1922) dominated Irish political and social life for decades.

⁴ Éamon de Valera espoused a policy of self-sufficiency in an attempt to reduce the traditional economic links Ireland had with Britain. He once said: 'If there is to be any hope of prosperity for this country it is by reversing that policy which made us simply the kitchen garden for supplying the British with cheap food.'

⁵ Aosdána is the name given to an institution established by the Arts Council of Ireland in 1981 to honour those artists 'whose work has made an outstanding contribution to the arts in Ireland, and to encourage and assist members in devoting their energies fully to their art.' Membership of Aosdána, made by peer nomination and election, is limited to 250 living artists who have produced a distinguished body of work. Members must have been born in Ireland or have been resident there for five years, and must have produced a body of work that is original and creative. A number of members are recognised by their peers for outstanding achievement by the title of *Saói*. No more than seven current members may be so honoured at one time. The title of *Saói* is conferred by the President of Ireland and is held for life. Under certain conditions, members of Aosdána may avail of the *Chnuas*, a stipend which is designed to enable them to devote their energies fully to their work.

In the 1990s, Buckley came to the forefront of Irish music, composing a prodigious number of important large-scale compositions, many of which came about as commissions from major institutions in Ireland and abroad – the National Concert Hall (Dublin), St. Patrick’s College (now the National University of Ireland, Maynooth) and the University of Limerick - marking him as the preferred composer for celebrations of a national dimension. From this period onwards his music developed a more refined character and his *penchant* for French sonority came to the fore. This new timbral sheen, allied to a technique displaying a firm control of the materials and further enhanced by a growing interest in the virtuosic aspects of performance, characterises Buckley's impressive contribution to the concerto *genre*. The *Organ Concerto* (1992), one of his finest works, establishes him as among the leading figures in Irish music today. However, since Ireland continues to place classical music at the periphery of cultural life, Buckley remains relatively unknown inside and outside his own country.

Although all classifications run the risk of over-simplification, Buckley’s oeuvre to date can quite readily be broken into four defining periods: 1) the early works (written between 1973 and 1976) that represent his transformation from a student to a young professional; 2) a period of development (between 1977 and 1987), which delineates Buckley’s shifting focus between Celtic-inspired work and that which is more consciously avant-garde; 3) a middle period of consolidation (between 1988 and 1996) when many of his major scores were composed bringing together his post-tonal language into strict formal contours; and 4) the most recent phase (from 1997 to date), which sees Buckley’s music develop a new timbral refinement allied to a rigorous structural control.

Limited space will not allow me to discuss Buckley’s entire oeuvre. I will therefore give a brief overview of his major works, while concentrating specifically on the second and fourth periods spotlighting his Celtic affiliations, through his absorption of the European avant-garde, towards the

mastering of his mature style typified by a sensitivity to a French concern for timbre allied to rigorous formal structure. As we have noted, this shift parallels a particular period in modern Irish socio-political history that also witnessed a tremendous change and an invigorated attempt to embrace Europe in a wholly integrated manner. This was a period where established structures and features typical of Irish life - the Catholic Church, Civil War politics, limited economic expansion etc., would slowly be replaced by a more secular society, a greater international political standing and, through a fuller integration into Europe, a broader participation in global economics. In concentrating on two pivotal works I hope to show Buckley's unique handling of Irish mythology, the contexts in which he at first embraced Celticism, and subsequently shifted to more abstract models. I will highlight that Buckley's use of Irish mythology did not admit to a use of indigenous musical materials. He sought, rather, to investigate his Celtic heritage uniquely through a modernist language. A brief analysis of both works will highlight Buckley's technical innovations at this period of profound change.

Towards Ireland

In 1978, Buckley commenced his studies with Welch composer Alun Hoddinott. Commentators have been quick to identify in Hoddinott's music certain qualities suggesting a Celtic resonance. Basil Deane, for example, writing in 1978, remarks on the 'dominant characteristics in Hoddinott's music that betray a Celtic rather than an Anglo-Saxon temperament: obsessive drive, sombre brooding, rhetorical lyricism, fiery outbursts, and, embracing all these, a love of language itself, a delight in virtuosic manipulation of the means of communication.'⁶ Characterised by its delicate use of timbre, his orchestral writing employs dramatic percussion colouring and sumptuous textures wrought from multi-divided strings - sonorities which profoundly influenced Buckley. He found the teaching sessions with Hoddinott most productive and the two quickly established a rapport, which

⁶ *Alun Hoddinott – Composers of Wales 2*: Basil Deane, University of Wales Press, Ed. Roy Bohana, 1978.

may well have been nurtured by their shared Celtic background: Buckley remembers that Hoddinott would often refer to 'our common Celtic heritage'.⁷

Buckley's position *vis-à-vis* Celticism is of particular interest considering his personal background. Despite an early introduction to traditional Irish music, he never felt compelled to use folk materials as a source of inspiration for his work, believing that this reclamation had been achieved largely by previous composers. He states,

'By the 1970's, the expressive potential of Irish folk music had been fully exhausted by composers such as A. J. Potter (1918 - 1980), John F. Larchet (1884 - 1967), Arthur Duff (1889 - 1956) and Hamilton Harty (1879 - 1941), and through innumerable arrangements of traditional Irish tunes by Carl Hardebeck (1869 - 1945), Éamonn Ó'Gallchobhair (1900 - 1982), Walter Beckett (1914 - 1996) and others, and so didn't seem to offer any potential for further development along the lines I wished to pursue. Folk music didn't lend itself to the musical imagination and ambitions I had then.'

Although later Irish composers like Seóirse Bodley (1933) did attempt to subsume traditional Irish materials into a broader atonal canvas, Buckley felt he could not take this route. Describing the choices available to his generation, he says: 'Many of those composers studied abroad, and those who didn't study abroad full-time like myself, drew our influences from the models of the European *avant-garde*. And of that generation very few, if any, were drawn towards traditional or Celtic models.'

⁷ All quotes derive from a series of interviews undertaken by the author with John Buckley at his home between April 2004 and September 2007. Unless otherwise stated, all quotes derive from this source.

However, this reluctance to use traditional or folk music precedents did not prevent Buckley from leaning heavily on Celtic mythology as a source of inspiration for his own post-tonal harmonies, as *Taller than Roman Spears* (1977), *Oileáin* (1979), *Boireann* (1983) and *I am Wind on Sea* (1987) aptly demonstrate.⁸ *Taller than Roman Spears* and *Oileáin* in particular, followed on from earlier Irish composers who had made use of mythological sagas such as Brian Boydell's incidental music to Pádraig Fallon's play *The Wooing of Étaín* of 1954, James Wilson's 1970 monodrama *The Táin*, and Aloys Fleischmann's epic orchestral response to the same legend (*The Táin*, 1981).⁹ In this sense, Buckley followed a trajectory for which there was, at least, some precedent. The one vital difference was his use of modernist procedures. That he mined his Celtic heritage for inspiration while circumventing both classical tonality and traditional Irish music remains one of the most interesting facets of his work from this period.

Buckley felt that the neutrality of post-tonality and modernist processes offered the only adequate musical medium to reflect an ancient Irish past. Most of the 18th or 19th century musical forms are laden with nationalist and political baggage because of their use as propaganda by Irish Celtic revivalist and independence movements. In contrast, Buckley's modernist approach allows for access to the Celtic past without romanticizing it or using this access for political purposes. Buckley still rejects as misconceived any unexamined assumption that 18th or 19th century folk-inspired music is the ideal vehicle for cultural renovation.

As suggested, where Buckley's music very occasionally draws upon Irish folk elements (as in the second movement of *Taller than Roman Spears*, for example), those materials are subsumed and

⁸ *Oileáin* means 'islands'. *Boireann* translates literally as 'rocky country', but refers to the area known as the Burren in north County Clare.

⁹ Composer Brian Boydell (1917-2000) was a founder of the Music Association of Ireland and the Dowland Consort, and Professor of Music at Trinity College Dublin for twenty years from 1962. James Wilson (1922-2005), a Londoner, came to Ireland in the 1940s and was a prolific composer writing, among many other works, seven operas and twelve concertos. Along with his work as Professor at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, he was a founder-member of Aosdána and a leading figure in the Irish music scene for over half a century. Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992), was also a composer, and was Professor of Music at University College, Cork, for over forty-five years from 1934. He was founder of the Cork Symphony Orchestra and the Cork International Choral Festival.

transformed into a totally modernist idiom. This process is not an arrangement or juxtaposition of folk elements, but acts as a sublimation of cultural influences. Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*, with its incorporation of Russian folk material into a modernist context, exemplifies this method, as does Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* which, by way of an experimental cubism, forges a direct link to an ancient African primordialism. All these works cite or suggest elements they seek to purge. It should also be remembered that by the 1970s, most vestiges of nationalism or folk-inspired developments in contemporary art music had all but vanished.

Thus, in Buckley's music, ancient Celtic mythology found a new expression through a contemporary musical language that rejected the narrative, social and political ramifications of traditional forms as heretofore used in Ireland. Buckley's music from this period has a cold abstraction, but also displays a jagged roughness that is 'immediately pungent and barbaric'.¹⁰ It paints an epic barrenness of torrential soundscapes as unforgiving as any Irish landscape. Most pertinently, it largely circumvents recent Irish traditional music and European classical tonality in an attempt to tap into trace memories of what fellow Irish composer Frank Corcoran notably coined as an 'Irish dream-landscape.'¹¹

The finest example of this approach to composition is *I am wind on sea* (1987): a setting of *The Song of Amhergín* in Buckley's own translation from the Old Irish. Amhergín, the legendary poet of the Milesians, is said to have spoken these words as he first set his right foot upon the soil of Ireland when he and his invading kinsmen defeated the Tuatha Dé Danann. In the words of Alwyn and Brinley Rees, the poems of Amhergín are 'in the nature of creation incantations,' and the poet embodies 'the primeval unity of all things'.¹² Buckley set this mystical utterance for mezzo-soprano

¹⁰ Pat O'Kelly: Irish Press review 27th July 1978.

¹¹ Frank Corcoran: Introduction to his web site www.frankcorcoran.com.

¹² *Celtic Heritage - Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*: Alwyn Rees & Brinley Rees, Thames and Hudson 1961.

voice, unaccompanied except for the crotales and woodblocks that the singer plays. The highly embellished vocal line combined with the sounds of the percussion instruments creates an exotic-sounding work of extreme primitivism. *I am wind on sea* received its première with the Irish-American mezzo soprano Aylish Kerrigan (for whom it was written) in Madrid on the 4 October 1987 under the auspices of the Centro para la Difusión de la Música Contemporánea at the Círculo de Belles Artes.

I am wind on sea,
I am the mighty wave,
I am sound of ocean,
I am stag of seven fights,
I am hawk on cliff,
I am the sun's beam,
I am boar ready for combat,
I am a salmon in pool,
I am lake on plain,
I am word of poetry,
I am point of spear
pouring forth combat,
I am the giver of inspiration.
Who can make smooth the rock mountain?
I am wind on sea,
Who can tell the seasons of the moon?
I am wind on sea,
Who can tell where the sun sets?
I am wind on sea.

(Translation by John Buckley)

Although this is Buckley's most explicit exploration of Irish mythology, obvious reference to Irish music has been avoided. However, an elaborate use of vocal embellishment and ornamentation may

have some correlation with *sean-nós* singing. In *Traditional Music in Ireland*, Tomás Ó Canainn defines *sean-nós* as 'a rather complex way of singing in Gaelic, confined mainly to some areas in the west and south of the country. It is unaccompanied and has a highly ornamented melodic line [...] not all areas have the same type of ornamentation - one finds a very florid line in Connacht, contrasting with a somewhat less decorated one in the south, and, by comparison, a stark simplicity in the northern songs.'¹³ Buckley explores this ancient text through a 20th century vocal style, which, though it draws upon elements of *sean-nós* style, would be inconceivable before Berio. He has been careful, however, to avoid any blatant imitation of the Italian master. His approach allows an ingenious retention of his affection for a vocal lyricism, while simultaneously employing a battery of contemporary extended vocal techniques to very effective musical purpose.

In *I am wind on sea*, Buckley subjects to a considerable degree various phonetic characteristics of selected words and syllables to these extended vocal techniques, and, consequently, transforms their distinguishing features beyond recognition. However, the rhythmic and metrical components, the onomatopoeic characteristics extracted from the chosen words or phonemes, result in a new, inexhaustible semantic potential. As the literal surface of language is transcended and subtle meanings of the sounds latent within the words are exposed – text itself becomes music.

For example, music from the second half of system 8 sets the word 'wave'. Through rhythmic repetition, dynamic control of volume, and vocal and rhythmic modulation, the word is excavated for not only its latent phonetic variants, but also for a sonic description of a wave: first, of its rhythmic undulating energy, and second, of its dissipation after it has crashed.

¹³ *Traditional Music in Ireland*: Tomás Ó Canainn, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 49.

Ex. 1: *I am wind on sea*, section of system 8

There are numerous effective examples of the use of onomatopoeia. At system 10, with the words 'I am sound of ocean', the singer must create the sound 'sshhh' at the pertinent time when singing 'ocean'. The voice plunges from the note E down to the low B flat, effectively suggesting the depth of the ocean.

Ex. 2: *I am wind on sea*, system 10

The use of the percussion instruments provides a musical and theatrical ritualism. The crotales act as extensions to the voice: at the opening, the voice and crotales resonate at the same pitch. The percussion instrument integrates itself completely into the sound of the voice, creating a unique

timbre. Elsewhere the crotales act as sonic foils against which the voice resonates. Both percussion instruments maintain the flow of the music when the voice stops for breath. They perform a descriptive function when they paint the scenario offered in the text - for example, the use of woodblocks for the first time to powerful and surprising effect.

Ex. 3: *I am wind on sea*, system 13 [I am stag of seven fights]

The musical score for system 13 consists of two staves. The upper staff is for the Voice, written in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. It begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 52. The lyrics are "se - e - e - e - e - ven - figh -". The notes are mostly eighth notes with accents, and there is a fermata over the final note. An "accel." marking is placed above the staff towards the end. The lower staff is for Wood Blocks, written in a bass clef. It features a section of seven grace notes marked with a forte (*f*) dynamic, followed by three accented notes marked with fortissimo (*fff*) dynamics. The score ends with "etc." on both staves.

On the word 'fights' the woodblocks enter with a violent clash and three powerful *fff* accentuations on the consonants 'ts' conjure up the clashes of antlers. The seven grace notes on the woodblocks (before the first 'ts') rhythmically represent the 'seven fights' of the stag. The woodblocks continue as war instruments at systems 21/22 when they coincide with the vocal lines declaring 'I am boar ready for combat'. The vocal rolling of the 'r' of 'boar' demonstrates that the voice also participates in the sound painting of imagery. This use is most evident in the vocal stabs and thrusts at systems

28/9 where the text reads 'I am point of spear pouring forth combat'. Buckley resorts to a graphic notation to describe visually and vocally the puncturing of spears and the sheer violence of combat.

A work of great originality, *I am wind on sea* was Buckley's last significant investigation into Irish mythology; from this point onwards, his modernism becomes more abstract, and where he sets texts they emanate from broader areas such as Yeats's esoteric plays (the opera, *The Words Upon the Window Pane* - 1991), German Romantic poetry (*Abendlied* - 1989) and the documented journals of astronauts (*A Thin Halo of Blue* - 1990). Unique in the context of Irish music, *I am wind on sea* is a highly original transformation of archaic Celtic mythology making this tradition newly vital to contemporary Irish consciousness.

Towards Europe

By any standards, the decade following *I am wind on sea* was a most prolific one. Apart from a great number of occasional and educational pieces, Buckley composed an astonishing amount of large-scale works including *Symphony No. 1* (1988), *Where the Wind Blows* (1989) for wind band; *A Thin Halo of Blue*, for satb, orchestra, speaker and tape; a chamber opera, *The Word Upon the Window Pane* (1991); the *Concerto for Organ and Orchestra* (1992); *De Profundis* (1993) for soprano and alto soloists, satb chorus and strings; *Rivers of Paradise* (1993) for two speakers and orchestra; and the gargantuan *Maynooth Te Deum* (1995) for satb chorus, chamber choir, satb soloists, orchestra and organ, to name just the most prominent examples. This is Buckley's period of consolidation where he integrates fully a post-tonal language into large-scale structures and tightly-knit formats in chamber music.

This period also displays Buckley's refinement of the aleatoric processes he had been employing as far back as the 1970s. His contact in 1981 with John Cage during a two-week Summer school in

Guilford, Surrey, further affected this development. It was similar perhaps to Lutoslawski's experience following *his* confrontation with Cage. Charles Bodman Ray points out that Lutoslawski's shift in rhythmic technique 'occurred suddenly [...] the catalyst for change came in 1960, when he heard a radio broadcast of the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* by John Cage, which gave him the idea of using 'chance' procedures (he later expressed his gratitude to Cage by presenting him with the autographed score of *Juex vénitiens*).'¹⁴

What Cage was able to communicate in concept and theory, Lutoslawski utilised in application, though in a more controlled environment. Buckley similarly absorbed Cage's ideas of space, chance, and the broader definitions of what actually constituted sound and pitch, and applied them to his own needs within a much tighter and determined system. Improvisatory techniques, textural matrices, aleatoric configurations, spacial webs - fundamental aspects promoted by Cage as central to a new way of hearing music - were all adopted by Buckley. Though added to his armory, he always utilised them under a strict regime of control. This assimilation brought him into close kinship with Lutoslawski, and indeed, the Polish composer henceforth profoundly influence Buckley. In this context, Cage's importance for Buckley extends to the act of bringing him closer to Lutoslawski. The latter's *Symphony No. 2*, in particular, demonstrated most convincingly how procedures such as aleatoricism could be integrated into the larger structures of symphonic form, which paved the way for Buckley to attempt something similar with his own *Symphony No. 1*.

The connection with Lutoslawski had further implications for Buckley, however. A fascination with timbre and pure sonority was a feature of his music from early on: the influence of Messiaen is apparent in the piano work *Oileáin* of 1979. The decade following *I am wind on sea* brought Buckley closer to what might be described as a French obsession with pure sound, and Lutoslawski

¹⁴ *The Music of Lutoslawski*: Charles Bodman Rae, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1999 (Third Edition)

and Dutilleux provided a way forward. The latter in particular deeply influenced Buckley's new search for an harmonic refinement, and compositions such as *Timbres, Espace, Mouvement* (1976) provide the model *par excellence* for the glistening and ephemeral sound heard, for example, in Buckley's *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra* (1997), which most aptly represents his mature style.

Irish saxophone virtuoso Kenneth Edge and the Irish Chamber Orchestra jointly commissioned *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra*, which was first performed in the concert hall of the University of Limerick on the 27 September 1997. The Irish Chamber Orchestra consisted of sixteen strings with the following arrangement: five first violins, four second violins, three violas, three cellos, and one double bass. In many sections of the work, Buckley's sub-division of these small forces often results in only a single instrument per part, thereby creating a sense of transparency and evanescence. His ever-tightening grip on formal structure is a central feature of the *Concerto*: repetition (either exact or in inversion), acts as a pivotal process in the development of material and structural planning. The single-movement work falls into three parts – A – B – A1. [Note: The score does not have bar numbers. It uses rehearsal markings every two pages or so, with the page number upon which they appear. Therefore, 68+4 (p. 112) signifies the 4th bar of 68 on page 112.]

Fig. 1

A: Bar 1 to 22
B: 22 to 51
A1: 51 to end

There are no themes as such in *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra*. There are, however, substantial sections of music that are repeated exactly, or in inversion, a process most commonly used by Buckley to provide familiarity and to develop his material.

Fig. 2 Sections repeated:

From Section A	No. Of bars	Type of repeat & Section	Exact location
First 8 bars (p.1/2)	(8 bars)	exact repeat in A1 at:	68+5 (p. 112) to 69+2 (114)
3 (p.4) to 4 (p.6)	(7 bars)	exact repeat in A at:	16+6 (p.25) to 17 (p. 27)
4 (p.6) to 6 (p.7)	(15 bars)	inversion in A at:	17 (p. 27) to 18+5 (p.28)
6 (p. 7) to 6+4 (p.7)	(4 bars)	(almost) exact repeat in A at:	18+6 (p. 28) to 18+9 (p.29)
6+6 (p.8) to 8+6 (p.10)	(20 bars)	inversion in A at:	19-1 (p.29) to 21-2 (p. 31)
6+5 (p.8) to 13+4 (p.18)	(73 bars)	exact repeat in A1 at:	57-1 (p.89) to 63+1 (p. 100)
6+6 (p.8) to 8+6 (p.10)	(20 bars)	inversion in A1 at:	55-1 (p.87) to 56+7 (p. 89)
14+7 (p. 21) to 16+4 (p.25)	(18 bars)	exact repeat in A1 at:	66 (p. 105) to 67+4 (p.110)

This simple approach to prolongation and development of musical material is substantially different from the repeated sections found, for example, in much Baroque music where binary and ternary forms dominate. Performance practice in this period requires that repeats are to be embellished with ornaments and extemporisations in a way that completely alters the music in a material and rhetorical manner. In *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra*, the exact repeats (or inversions) signify a different application of form and structure. For this highly rigorous approach to creating structure and maintaining motivic consistency, Buckley repeats entire blocks of music. Section A1 is almost completely comprised of blocks of music extracted from section A (though not exclusively). Fig. 2 shows that, of the 200 bars making up A1, 119 bars (or almost 60%) derive from section A.

Buckley's manipulations of the repetitions can be found in correlating inverted sections. These inversions are almost identical. However, Buckley colours them differently by shifting the musical material from instrument to instrument: a given melodic phrase that originally appears on, say, the second violin, now emerges on the viola or cello in the repetition, presenting the same melodic phrase with a new colour and texture. Examples 4a (showing a 7 bar segment from 6+7 in section A) and 4b (highlighting its retrograde repeat from 55 in section A1) demonstrate Buckley's manipulation of the timbral qualities of the repeated material and the exact preservation of its formal structure.

Ex. 4a and 4b: Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra, (6+7, page 8, and 55, page 87 respectively)

Violin 1
Violin 2
Viola
Violoncello

$\text{♩} = 132$

7

mf, *mp*, *f*

Ex. 4b: Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra, 55, page 87

55

$\text{♩} = 132$

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Via.
Vc.

mf, *mp*, *f*

This use of self-reflecting structures also lies at the heart of the figurative images of Maurits Cornelis Escher and his experiments in Optical Art, which conceptually divide the plane through repeated mirror-like and compatible figures.¹⁵ Escher's images capture a sense of infinity. Though fixed in a finite structure, they suggest an impression of continuous rotation. Likewise, Buckley's use of block structures locate a space that is both temporal and static. The use of Escher-like mirrored structures and large quantities of previously heard (though timbrally altered) material displays an approach to composition that values segment duplication and factors of recognition over an ever-flowing release of newly composed material. It implies a self-censorship of any impulses

¹⁵ Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) is most famous for his so-called impossible structures, such as *Relativity*, *Ascending and Descending*, and his transformation prints such as *Metamorphosis I*, *Metamorphosis II*, *Metamorphosis III* and *Sky & Water I*. During his lifetime, he made 448 lithographs, woodcuts and wood engravings and over 2000 drawings and sketches. Escher became fascinated by the regular division of the plane, when he first visited the Alhambra in Granada, Spain in 1922.

that might disrupt the formal contour of the work. Although this self-discipline can be recognised as a prominent attribute of Buckley's music from the late 1990s onwards, it is at its most rigorous in the outer sections of *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra*.

As if to counteract the total hegemony of formal structure over content in the A and A1 sections, Buckley creates something quite the opposite in the central section: a place where pure discourse takes precedence over mirrored and repeated segments. The central B section is the slow 'movement' and is, in fact, an amplification of the melodic material provided by *Arabesque* - the work Buckley wrote for solo alto saxophone some years earlier. The section roughly divides into four sections:

Fig. 3

- 1) 22 (p. 33) - Adagio – Cadenza
- 2) 27 (p. 42) - Adagio – più mosso – Adagio
- 3) 37 (p. 61) Adagio – *accelerando*
- 4) 41 (p. 69) Adagio - *accelerando* to 51 (p.83) [beginning of A1 section]

The recurrence of accelerations and decelerations determine the numerous zones of varying densities and tensions. In this section, the string orchestration most strikingly invokes the French school with wide intervals in the lower strings and an incremental tightening of the intervals as the range gets higher (see Examples 5 and 6 below). The central section does not conform to a linear harmonic plan. When the strings enter, typically in support of a sustained note on the saxophone (see Example 5), Buckley constructs an harmonic frame around the solo instrument that is pertinent only to the moment and locale it serves. The harmonic result is often the aggregate of a series of melodic motifs dispersed throughout the range of the strings. Buckley creates his harmonic sound directly from melodic fragments, frequently introduced by the saxophone.

From 42, the strings develop an harmonic construct devised from a four note motif comprising a

minor 7th, a minor 2nd, and a tone. The cellos and double bass at 42 outline their F sharp, E, D sharp, and C sharp motif, above which the violas play the motif B, A, G sharp, and F sharp. The second violins (top system) add a further layer playing E, D, C sharp and B, while the first violins (top and centre stave) slightly alter the motif as C sharp, A, G sharp and F sharp. Having completed their motifs, all the strings sustain the last notes and the result forms the harmonic basis for the saxophone solo. The established motif is echoed by the saxophone at 42+4 (page 71) in the first three notes of the first group of demisemiquavers.

Ex. 5: Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra: (Bars 42 – 42+5)

The musical score for Ex. 5 consists of the following parts and markings:

- Alto Saxophone:** Starts at bar 42 with a *pp* dynamic. A motif of demisemiquavers begins at bar 42+4, marked with a bracket and the word "motif". The motif is repeated with a "3" (triple) marking. The score ends with "etc." and a bracketed "[42 + 5]".
- Violin 1 (top and middle staves):** Play a motif of demisemiquavers starting at bar 42, marked *p*. The top staff includes "div. a 3" and "chord IV". The middle staff includes "chord III".
- Violin 2 (middle and bottom staves):** Play a motif of demisemiquavers starting at bar 42, marked *p*. The bottom staff includes "div. a 4" and "chord III".
- Viola (top and middle staves):** Play a motif of demisemiquavers starting at bar 42, marked *p*. The top staff includes "div. a 3" and "chord II". The middle staff includes "chord II".
- Violoncello (top and middle staves):** Play a motif of demisemiquavers starting at bar 42, marked *p*. The top staff includes "div. a 3" and "chord I". The middle staff includes "chord I".
- Double Bass:** Play a motif of demisemiquavers starting at bar 42, marked *p*. The staff includes "chord I".

Bar 42+5 represents the aggregate of all these played fragments. The final harmonic result offers an opportunity to see how Buckley structures his harmonic plane (see Examples 5 and 6).

Ex. 6: Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra: (bar 42+5)

The image shows a musical score for strings in bar 42+5. The score is written for a string ensemble, with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The score is divided into four distinct chord groups, labeled 'chord I', 'chord II', 'chord III', and 'chord IV'. Each chord group is built upon a perfect 5th interval. Annotations with arrows point to the intervals between the roots of the chords, stating 'separated by 5th.' twice. A bracket above the final two chords (III and IV) is labeled 'increasing luster activity', indicating that the chords are placed very close to each other in the higher register.

For this harmonic complex, he has vertically superimposed four chords. Each chord is built upon a perfect 5th, the top note of which becomes the focus for a cluster of notes (typically with added major seconds and minor thirds). Chord I (on double bass and cellos) is built upon the 5th. F sharp and C sharp (the notes D sharp and E colour the upper C sharp). Chord II (on violas) shows the 5th. B and F sharp (the upper note upon which is added a G sharp and an A, heard on the second violin). Chord III (on second violins) is built on the E above this, with a B creating the perfect 5th. This upper B is coloured by a C sharp and D, the former of which takes the root of the final and fourth chord (on a second violin and first violins). Above the C sharp is placed a G sharp (creating the perfect 5th), which is further coloured by a lower F sharp and a higher A. Buckley has constructed these chords so that the top note of each cluster is a perfect 5th below the root note of the chord above, so that each chord group is also separated by the interval of the perfect 5th except for the two top chords, which are placed very close to each other thereby increasing the cluster activity in the higher register. This heightened cluster formation offers that particularly French effect perfected by

Dutillieux, while the 5th based harmony provides the elusive open sound. Four 5th-based chords constructed one upon the other defy tonal categorisation and reject a sense of harmonic movement in any traditional understanding of the term.

This 'in the moment' approach contributes to a sense of harmonic stasis and ambiguity. Despite the internal conflict in *Concerto for Alto Saxophone and String Orchestra* between formal construction and free discourse, the overall result remains consistently abstract. The distance in the language rejects sentimental indulgence and places the piece firmly within an objectivised neo-classicism. Furthermore, the harmonic consistency the work displays nominates it as among the most integrated in Buckley's *oeuvre* - formal structure and stylistic language interlock most convincingly.

Coda

The recently composed *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra* (2009) extends John Buckley's catalogue of compositions to an impressive ninety works spanning almost forty years creative production. He has composed music in practically every genre from the simplest of pedagogic pieces to the most advanced and expanded orchestral forces. The creative urge of Irish composers over the past century has forged an art genre that can be seen, despite its eclecticism, as a coherent body of creative energy. Buckley, who emerged in the 1970s was pivotal in forging a new modernism that exhibited Irish musical creativity in terms of a broader European and world context. As the aesthetic expression of this new musical modernism and the ensuing diversity it engendered in the younger generations was largely free of historical, colonial and political impediments (a claim that may only be made for Irish literature with some difficulty), it was (and remains) a fresh and vital expression of Irish cultural consciousness. The music of John Buckley, with its abstracted refinement, its unabated joy in pure sound and its finely honed contours stands as one of the finest expressions of this new cultural consciousness.

