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‘Politicians and Artists Do Not Go Well Together’: Propaganda Music in World War Two Britain

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Abstract

While biographical studies of British composers’ experiences in World War Two abound, little attention has been paid to how the demands of ‘total’ war impacted on music’s ideological status. This article sheds new light on how composers and critics negotiated the problematic relationship between art music and politics in this period. John Ireland’s *Epic March* – a BBC commission that caused the composer considerable anxiety – provides a case study. Drawing first on the correspondence charting the lengthy genesis of the *March*, and then on the work’s critical reception, I consider how Ireland and his audiences sought to reconcile the conflicting political and aesthetic demands of this commission. With its conventional musical style, *Epic March* offers an example of a ‘middlebrow’ attempt to bridge the gap between art and politics.

Biographical Statement

Kate Guthrie is an AHRC-funded doctoral student at King’s College London, working on a thesis entitled ‘Sounds of War: Music, Politics and Culture in London, 1935-1948’. She has presented at conferences and seminars on Vera Lynn, Powell and Pressburger’s film *The Red Shoes* and John Ireland’s *Epic March*. She has a review article forthcoming with *Music and Letters*.

Keywords

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‘Politicians and Artists Do Not Go Well Together’:

Propaganda Music in World War Two Britain

In February 1945, the BBC began to make plans for a new programme entitled ‘What’s the Point Of...?’, during which ‘eminent men and women’ would be invited to discuss ‘the purpose and the use of a subject which is their life study’.¹ The proposed topics – things which ‘judged from a purely utilitarian standpoint – [seem] to the ordinary man to be of little obvious use’ – included everything from ‘(pure) mathematics’ to mountaineering, music and poetry. The series ran from 16 April to 18 June and was given a primetime broadcasting spot: 7.40-8.00pm on Monday evenings. Supplementary materials were provided for those who wished to use the opportunity to organize a discussion group.² Music was represented by the conductor Reginald Jacques on 11 June. Having recounted his wartime experiences as a touring conductor as evidence of music’s universal appeal, Jacques arrived at the critical question: ‘what is this enjoyment’ that music inspires? If this was a hard question to answer, he had no trouble explaining what enjoyment *wasn’t*: ‘It’s got no utilitarian value’ (‘except’, he added, ‘to the man who earns his living by it’). He went on to describe some of the positive characteristics of music – ‘it stimulates your imagination, it opens new worlds of beauty, it colours your life’ – attributes that critics had recently used to justify music’s usefulness to wartime Britain, but that Jacques now presented as antithetical to ‘utilitarianism’. ‘When all’s said and done’, he concluded, ‘the point of music is music’. His sentiment is similar to that expressed by film producer Michael Powell in relation to the ballet film *The Red Shoes* (1948): ‘A great war was over and a great danger to the whole world had been eliminated. The message of the film was Art. Nothing mattered but Art’.³

Powell’s and Jacques’ desire to distinguish the post-war present from the wartime past was widely shared. It also lay at the heart of the BBC’s vision for ‘What’s the Point Of...?’, as the Director of Talks, G.R. Barnes, explained in a memo on 16 April 1945:

In wartime, or if you like under fire, values change as well as circumstances. Are those which we have acquired in wartime the proper ones for the immense task of

I am particularly grateful to Harriet Boyd, Christopher Chowrimootoo, Daniel Grimley, Thomas Irvine, Roger Parker and Flora Willson for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this article. Thanks are also due to BBC archivist Jeff Walden and the Director of the John Ireland Charitable Trust, Bruce Phillips.

1 The programme was initially going to be called ‘What’s the Use of...?’, but this was changed after a member of the BBC Talks Department, G. Grigson, complained that ‘it seems to me pretty appalling to suggest that people should go to poetry, painting, music, for example, simply because they can find them useful, or simply because delighting oneself and ordering oneself has a utilitarian function’. G. Grigson, ‘Memo: What’s the Use Of...’ (21 February 1945), BBC WAC, R51/637 (see footnote 57 for details of archival materials).

2 These included lists of topical questions to stimulate and guide further discussion. It was not uncommon for the BBC to produce such materials.

3 Michael Powell, *A Life in the Movies: An Autobiography* (London, 1986), 638.

reconstruction now before us? This seems an appropriate time to question the value of many things which we have had to live without in the last five years.⁴

Envisaged as a ‘light and unpolitical’ show, ‘What’s the Point Of...?’ would create a distance between the past and the future by questioning the values of wartime Britain. Whereas for the past six years BBC programming had exhibited a ‘mean-minded utilitarianism’, this series would do the opposite:⁵ the producers hoped that, through personal anecdotes and enthusiasm, speakers would persuade listeners of the importance of their non-utilitarian specialisms. In April 1945 the conflict might not have been over, but victory had seemed imminent for some time.⁶ Britain was ready to move on.

If this radio programme offers a tantalising snapshot of one way in which British ideologues responded to victory (namely, by taking the opportunity to re-imagine art’s role in society), it also begs the question: how did British culture get to a point where such a self-conscious re-positioning of the arts, especially music, seemed necessary? Or, to put it another way, how had war impacted on musical ideologies in Britain? The present article aims to elucidate these questions in relation to one aspect of Britain’s wartime musical culture that proved exceptionally problematic: the politicisation of art music as propaganda. The appropriation of art for political ends was, of course, neither specific to wartime nor in any sense a new phenomenon (of which more later). But the situation of artists in wartime was different on two counts. First, war quickly made the politicisation of culture part of a broader, official agenda. What is more, the extent of this conflict was unprecedented: World War Two was, after all, the paradigmatic ‘total’ war – the usual distinctions between home front and frontline, and between civilian and soldier, collapsed. As Ben Anderson explains, ‘these two changes make war “total” in the sense that the apparatuses of the state aim to expand to every sphere of life and all of life must, consequently, be mobilized for, and subordinate to, the war effort’.⁷ This situation inevitably placed new demands on Britain’s musical culture. Some arose from practical constraints imposed by conscription, the requisitioning of performance venues, shortages of materials and so on; but critics and practitioners also found themselves having to adjust musical ideologies in order to accommodate the refashioned value system. While this reassessment agenda touched the entire spectrum of musical life, the commissioning of propaganda music from what one might call ‘high art music composers’ brought a specific set of challenges – ones of which such composers were uncomfortably aware.

4 G.R. Barnes, ‘Memo: “What’s the Point Of...?”: Announcement’ (16 April 1945), BBC WAC, R51/637.

5 Grigson, ‘Memo: What’s the Use Of...’ .

6 As early as June 1943, a BBC employee had suggested that Vaughan Williams might be approached to write ‘an anthem for the Service of Thanksgiving for victory’: C.V. Taylor, ‘Memo’ (15 June 1943), BBC WAC, R27/55/2. After the success of the Normandy Landings in June 1944, victory seemed to most people inevitable: Mark Donnelly, *Britain in the Second World War* (London, 1999), 104-6; Philip Ziegler, *London at War 1939-1945* (London, 1995), 308-11.

7 Ben Anderson explains that ‘total’ war is ‘a concrete historical phenomenon’ associated with the twentieth century, when new technologies enabled war to be conducted on a previously unimaginable scale. In particular, advances in aeroplane and bomb technologies forced civilians into the frontline, while the expansion of mass media made psychological warfare viable. Anderson, ‘Modulating the Excess of Affect: Morale in a State of “Total War”’, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham and London, 2010), eds. Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, 161-85; especially 169-71.

This awareness was particularly acute in the case of the man whose work provides a case study for this article: John Ireland. Ireland was one of a several composers who received a commission from the BBC, as part of a scheme to ‘stimulate the production of patriotic music’.⁸ The scheme was the brainchild of the Ministry of Information (MoI), which in February 1940 decided to invite ‘carefully selected composers and authors’ to write patriotic poems, songs and marches; the MoI also felt that the BBC was the best placed to facilitate this. Although such blatantly propagandistic motives caused some concern at the BBC, in August 1940 the scheme became official. Within just three months, Ireland had received his commission for a ‘patriotic march’. The composition of the piece that resulted, Ireland’s *Epic March*, was protracted: the final manuscript was not completed until the end of March 1942.⁹ In contrast, its shelf-life was short: while it outlived the war by a few years, it failed to secure a prominent place in the canon of Ireland’s works, let alone in that of British music.¹⁰ If this trajectory seems unsurprising for what was essentially an ‘occasional’ work, it points to the paradox that Ireland perceived in his commission: he wanted to produce a work that would resist the ephemerality so often resulting from heightened momentary relevance.¹¹

The notion that ‘topicality’ and durability might be mutually exclusive was obviously not new. It dates back at least as far as the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when, as Nicholas Mathew has shown, the emergence of the ‘work concept’ brought with it what might be called a co-dependent Other: the ‘occasional work’.¹² In contrast to the work concept’s emphasis on an autonomous aesthetic, Mathew explains, occasional works are ‘pieces whose meaning and aesthetic viability remain bound to specific historical periods or events’ – a characteristic that broadly applies to music commissioned for propaganda purposes. Of course, what around the turn of the nineteenth century was a dichotomy-in-the-making was, by the mid twentieth, a well-rehearsed cliché: criticism – most famously Adorno’s – drew a distinction between highbrow and lowbrow, between art music and ‘art music’s Others’. This body of discourse, which sought to negotiate the unstable high/low dualism, gave rise to a discursive chasm for which Andreas Huyssen coined the term ‘the Great Divide’. Huyssen argues that the ‘Great Divide’ was one of the

8 BBC ‘Memo: Note on a Scheme for Commissioning of Patriotic Songs’ (August 1940), R27/58. The idea for a patriotic march came from a certain Mr. Pick: Lewis Foreman, ‘John Ireland and the BBC’, *The John Ireland Companion*, ed. Foreman (Woodbridge, 2011), 79-115; 94.

9 This was due first to difficulties in negotiating a suitable fee and then to the slow speed at which Ireland worked.

10 The publisher’s hire records appear incomplete, so it is difficult to chart the work’s performance history exactly. The records suggest that performances of *Epic March* peaked in 1945-46, averaging almost one a month, then began to dwindle around the turn of the decade, before increasing again (though not to previous highs) during the Coronation year and its immediate aftermath. The last recorded hire on these old records was by Fulham Borough Council for a rehearsal in 1962. Boosey and Hawkes, *Hire Records for John Ireland’s Epic March* (1943-1962).

11 Daniel Grimley finds a similar tension – between autonomy and appropriation – in Elgar’s music. Daniel Grimley, ‘“The Spirit-Stirring Drum”: Elgar and Populism’, *Elgar and his World*, ed. Byron Adams (Princeton, 2007), 97-123.

12 Starting from the paradox that such ‘historically situated music somehow created the very pieces that supposedly instantiated the historically resistant “work concept”’, Mathew suggests that, although Haydn’s ‘heroic’ compositions were written for occasions, they had more political clout than the term ‘occasional work’ implies. Mathew persuasively argues that Haydn’s increasing freedom from institutional pressures enabled him to compose ‘“modern” political music’ that mediated ‘the emerging ideal of aesthetic autonomy and the reality of political appropriation’. Nicholas Mathew, ‘Heroic Haydn, the Occasional Work, and “Modern” Political Music’, *Eighteenth-century Music*, 4 (March 2007), 7-25.

primary means by which modernism was defined: through a ‘conscious strategy of exclusion’ that insisted on ‘the autonomy of the art work, its obsessive hostility to mass culture, its radical separation from the culture of everyday life, and its programmatic distance from political, economic, and social concerns’.¹³ Put another way, the Great Divide was a rhetorical device, designed to draw a categorical distinction between high and low that was more critical construction than reality. But, as a growing body of scholarship has shown, this paradigm fails to account for the complexity of twentieth-century culture.¹⁴

The question of topicality is a case in point. Briefly, by the 1930s, the growing political instability in Europe was adding increasing force to sense among artists that – *pace* proponents of the Great Divide – art could and should be politically and socially engaged. In Britain, the mantra was promoted primarily by the Left in the 1930s, but gained a broader acceptance in the early 1940s.¹⁵ Propaganda, by its very nature, required an extreme form of topicality – one that spoke indisputably, and frequently in black and white terms, to the concerns of moment. But the topicality of such occasional music existed in an uneasy relationship with the long-established ideal of aesthetic autonomy. Nor was this dubious status alleviated by propaganda’s target audience, which was, more often than not, the masses. This article, then, explores the claim that *Epic March* might offer an example of what happened when one of the grounds on which high and low were often distinguished – the idea that art and politics were mutually exclusive – was challenged by war. A brief account of the contention surrounding the idea of propaganda in mid-twentieth-century Britain precedes a consideration of its awkward relationship with art. I then consider how the aesthetic and ideological problems of propaganda music were reflected in the composition and reception of Ireland’s *Epic March*.

The Propaganda Problem

That is nothing more or less than propaganda. Why not use the word, and have done with it? We should surely be the last people to boggle

13 Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indianapolis, 1986), vii.

14 Among recent critiques of traditional understandings of modernism are: Christopher Chowrimootoo, ‘The Timely Traditions of *Albert Herring*’, *Opera Quarterly*, 27 (2011), 379-419; Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, 2004); Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*; Lawrence Napper, ‘British Cinema and the Middlebrow’, *British Cinema, Past and Present*, eds. Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (London, 2000), 110-23; Heather Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge, 2012).

15 Chowrimootoo explains how the modernist reaction against tradition, arising in part from the belief that the unprecedented experiences of twentieth century life could not be adequately represented by traditional art forms, manifested itself in a new emphasis on topicality in ‘The Timely Traditions’. That the question of art’s relevancy to modern life greatly influenced Britain’s Left-leaning artists in the 1930s has long been recognised; but recent work has shown that this was not a concern solely of the Left. See for example Thomas Irvine, ‘Hindemith’s Disciple in London: Walter Leigh on Modern Music, 1932-1940’, *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960*, ed. Matthew Riley (Farnham, 2010), 197-220.

at the word “propaganda”. It is a weapon of war, and a very potent one – and one which we very largely invented.

– Cpt. D.L. Gammans, House of Commons, 3 July 1941¹⁶

If, as Gammans suggested, Britain can be credited with initiating the use of propaganda as a weapon of war, it is not an invention the country has always been proud to own – not least because of the word’s negative connotations. As one of the 1933 *Oxford English Dictionary*’s quotations demonstrating usage explained, ‘in modern political language’, propaganda was ‘a term of reproach ... viewed by most governments with horror and aversion’.¹⁷ While this view of propaganda as dishonourable and deceitful clearly pre-dated World War Two, it was only further exacerbated by the practices of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.¹⁸ Knowledge of these extreme cases inevitably blunted any willingness to recognize the same sort of practices in Britain. Indeed, in spite of Britain’s record in World War One and its uncertain fortunes in World War Two, in the late 1930s and early 1940s the idea of propaganda made the British public uncomfortable. Why was propaganda so problematic for the British public? How did people deal with this discomfort at a time when necessity made its use inevitable?

Propaganda was obviously not a new phenomenon in the 1940s, but it had nonetheless taken on a new political significance since the turn of the twentieth century, as the expansion of mass media enabled its use on an unprecedented scale.¹⁹ World War One was the first time that Britain had indulged in propaganda on a mass scale – and it had done so to great effect; but, while it was widely felt to have played a vital role in winning the war, its use had remained controversial.²⁰ Whereas before World War One propaganda had primarily been understood as ‘a process for the cultivation of ideas and beliefs’, by the end of the war this perspective had been marred by

16 Cited in the front matter of Ivor Thomas, *Warfare By Words* (Harmondsworth, 1942).

17 This quotation was taken from an 1842 text. ‘propaganda, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary (Being a Corrected Re-Issue with an Introduction, Supplement, and Bibliography)*, Vol.8 (Oxford, 1933), 1466.

18 Evidence of this is offered by the changes to the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of propaganda. In the 1933 edition, two definitions are offered: ‘1. (More fully, *Congregation* or *College of the Propaganda*.) A committee of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church having the care and oversight of foreign missions, founded in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV’; and ‘2. Any association, systematic scheme, or concerted movement for the propagation of a particular doctrine or practice’. *Ibid.*. The current edition includes a third definition: ‘3. The systematic dissemination of information, *esp. in a biased or misleading way*, in order to promote a political cause or point of view’. (The emphasis is mine). ‘propaganda, n.’, *Oxford English Dictionary* [online]. Available at www.oed.com [accessed 1 August 2012].

19 The term ‘propaganda’ has been dated back to a Papal bull of 1622. Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 2; Robert Jackall, *Propaganda* (Basingstoke, 1995), 1.

20 Philip M. Taylor explains that ‘before 1914, Britain’s prestige in the world was thought to have been so readily apparent that there was felt to be little, if any, need for a policy of self-glorification or national advertisement’. See Taylor, *The Projection of Britain: British Overseas Publicity and Propaganda, 1919-1939* (Cambridge, 1981), 125-8.

pejorative connotations.²¹ So much so that, although some in the government felt that propaganda was ‘a necessary response to the demands of the twentieth century’, the majority disagreed. In 1919, Lloyd George closed down the MoI (the organisation that had been responsible for British propaganda from 1918) and asked the Foreign Office to tie up the loose ends.²² At the same time, an embargo was placed on cultural propaganda: four years of war had left Britain’s economy in a bad way and, while the Foreign Office recognized the long-term importance of cultural propaganda, it struggled to convince a ‘more critical Treasury’ of its necessity. As historian Philip M. Taylor has explained, the Treasury prioritized commercial propaganda, which promised instant, tangible returns; the positive outcomes of cultural propaganda were comparatively hard to measure.²³ This is obviously not to say that cultural products were never used in a propagandistic way in Britain during this period, but rather that the authorities were unwilling to fund such projects.

While in the immediate aftermath of World War One the British government minimized its propaganda activities, the opposite approach was being taken elsewhere in Europe, where the success of British propaganda during World War One had made a profound impression. In Germany, for example, Hitler dedicated a chapter of *Mein Kampf* to the shortcomings of First World War German propaganda, which he described as ‘so inadequate and wrong-headed from the start as to be not of the slightest use – sometimes it did actual harm’, and to examining the lessons that could be learnt from the Allies’ comparative success.²⁴ By the time Hitler came to power, propaganda had a central role in his political agenda. This was by no means unique: it reflected a trend that became prevalent across the Continent, especially in countries dissatisfied with the lot they had been apportioned by the Treaty of Versailles.²⁵ By the mid-1930s, the growth in anti-British propaganda abroad had begun to create concern among certain influential figures, who felt that the traditional laissez-faire approach to promoting Britain urgently needed updating with a more proactive strategy. One response to this was the revocation of the ban on cultural propaganda in 1930, which paved the way for the foundation of the British Council – an organisation that began its life in 1934 under the auspices of the Foreign Office as the British Committee for Relations with

21 Indeed, contrary to what one might have expected, World War One actually helped consolidate the negative connotations of ‘propaganda’. One contributing factor was the increasingly widespread American belief that U.S. intervention in 1917 had been a mistake – and one for which British propagandists should be held accountable. Another was the public’s growing awareness in the aftermath of war of the widespread usage of atrocity propaganda: the practice of spreading malicious fabrications about enemy activity, with a view to inciting hatred. Literary scholar Marina MacKay comments on the long-term impact of the public’s awareness of such practices: ‘In a hauntingly awful legacy of the Great War, hostility towards violently affective appeals was so pervasive and profound that evidence of the real atrocities being perpetrated in Nazi Germany could be dismissed by many as the reflux of sensationalist propaganda from twenty-five years earlier’. MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge, 2007), 11. See also Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 225, 239; Taylor, *British Propaganda in the 20th Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh, 1999), 63-73.

22 The MoI was founded in 1918, replacing the Department of Information that had been created the previous year. In a review of the MoI carried out in 1918, concern was expressed over its direct accountability to the Prime Minister (rather than the government), which ministers feared might leave it open to abuse. The Foreign Office, more savvy than some governmental departments about the benefits of propaganda, decided to maintain a News Department to publicize Britain abroad. Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 63-73.

23 Taylor, *The Projection of Britain*, 86-7.

24 Adolf Hitler, *My Struggle*, trans. James Murphy (London, 1939), 80-5; 80.

25 Jowett and O’Donnell, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, 288-53; Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 88-9.

Other Countries, but that quickly gained operational, if not financial, independence and was incorporated by Royal Charter in 1940. Its aim, as its original title implies, was the promotion of Britain internationally. Another indicator of changing attitudes was the commissioning in July 1935 of a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, charged with making suggestions on how information might be disseminated should a second war begin.²⁶ When World War Two eventually began, the exigency for such initiatives only increased.

Continuing misgivings about propaganda were, however, reflected in how the word was used. As late as 1942 the phrase ‘German propaganda’ occurred around four times as frequently as ‘British propaganda’ in English-language texts.²⁷ Propaganda, in other words, was what Germany did; what happened in Britain was frequently classified as something else. On the most literal level, the distinction was achieved simply by avoiding the word altogether. Home propaganda was carried out by the Ministry of *Information* – a label that, as contemporary American author Elmer A. Belle pointed out in the *Times Literary Supplement*, contrasted with the Nazi’s ‘Ministry of *Propaganda*’.²⁸ Meanwhile, propaganda to Allied and enemy countries was the responsibility of the Political Warfare Department (PWD). The distinction between the MoI and PWD might have been motivated by practicalities, but it also underpinned a popular assumption: that what the two departments did was categorically different. One supposedly provided the British public with factual information about the war; the other engaged the enemy in warfare using, amongst other things, words. Moreover, although the word propaganda was used in relation to both the MoI’s and PWD’s activities during the war, a variety of other expressions, such as ‘cultural diplomacy’ and ‘cultural relations’, were also employed to ‘avoid the unpleasant associations of the word “propaganda”’.²⁹

Of course, not everyone distrusted propaganda. In particular, there was a growing body of influential business men, civil servicemen and politicians who were keen to promote in Britain an acceptance of it as an important weapon of war.³⁰ Their beliefs were promoted in the spate of pamphlet-length books published immediately before and during the war, which explained, for non-specialist readers, what propaganda was, its history and its roles in war. The challenge for those who advocated its use was to sanitize British propaganda, so that it appeared distinct from that of

26 Balfour, *Propaganda in War, 1939-1945* (London, 1975), 53-71; Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 63-87.

27 This is demonstrated by a simple text search using Google Ngram. The pattern of use is very similar for both ‘British English’ and ‘American’ texts.

28 The full title of the Nazi’s organisation was *Das Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda*, often translated as the ‘Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda’; Beller referred to it by its usual short title, ‘Ministry of Propaganda’. Elmer A. Belle, ‘Propaganda or Information’, *Times Literary Supplement* (28 December 1940), 655.

29 Diana Jane Eastment, *The Policies and Position of the British Council from the Outbreak of War to 1950* (DPhil Thesis, University of Leeds, 1982), 3-4.

30 A notable early example was the foundation of the Travel and Industrial Development Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in 1928, which, according to Taylor, ‘provided the first real recognition in peacetime of the need to conduct a national, permanently active publicity campaign abroad in an attempt to make Britain more widely known and understood’. Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 74-5. Stephen Tallents’ *The Projection of England* (London, 1932), which argued that ‘no country can to-day afford either to neglect the projection of its national personality or to resign its projection to others. Least of all countries can England afford that neglect or that resignation’, was also a significant stepping-stone; 11-2.

Germany. The most common premise for distinguishing between the two was truthfulness, a trend exemplified in the following excerpt from Ivor Thomas's *Warfare by Words*:

Hitler has certainly proved himself an expert liar, and, as the war has gone on for a long time, his utterances have long since ceased to be believed. ... British propaganda has never followed this policy of deliberate lying.³¹

That there was ample evidence to undermine such bold assertions was not beyond the author's ken: 'There are, of course,' he went on to clarify, 'some difficult things to explain, such as the currency given by the British Government to the story that the Germans were melting down human corpses to make glycerine for cartridges'; but, for Thomas, such 'occasional aberrations' did not 'detract from the general claim of British propaganda to have been truthful'. Indeed, one of the axioms of the MoI was that it should tell 'the truth, nothing but the truth and, as near as possible, the whole truth'.³² If this emphasis gave Britain the moral high ground, it also promised to redeem propaganda: no longer an undesirable but necessary response to an international crisis, it was transformed into the means by which Germany might realize the error of its ways. As Kingsley Martin explained in his pamphlet *Propaganda's Harvest*: 'Propaganda will then be a statement of purpose in which the world can believe, a hope for mankind as well as a weapon of war'.³³ By 'propaganda', he clearly meant 'British propaganda'. Both Thomas's and Martin's attempts to salvage propaganda's reputation played into a growing body of discourse that characterized Britain's and Germany's positions in World War Two as dualistic: the former was truthful, constructive, righteous, humane, liberating; the latter was deceitful, destructive, unrighteous, barbarous, enslaving.³⁴ But even with such lofty pretensions, propaganda remained highly contentious – particularly when it came to culture.

Propaganda had traditionally been valued as a political and commercial activity – spheres whose premises were, in many ways, antithetical to the idea of 'art' established in the nineteenth century. Writer and radio personality Desmond Hawkins summarized the dichotomy in a discussion with Orwell broadcast on 6 December 1940:

I believe that politicians and artists do not go well together. The goal of a politician is always limited, partial, short-term, over-simplified. It has to be, to have any hope of realisation. As a principle of action, it cannot afford to consider its own imperfections and the possible virtues of its opponents. It cannot afford to dwell on the pathos and the tragedy of all human endeavour. In short, it must exclude the very things that are

31 Thomas, *Warfare by Words*, 61.

32 Taylor, *British Propaganda*, 178.

33 Kingsley Martin, *Propaganda's Harvest* (London, 1941), 64.

34 Such dualisms continue to influence the way World War Two is understood today. For example, see Michael Burleigh, *Moral Combat: A History of World War II* (London, 2010), especially ix-x. Norman Davies is among those to have challenged such black-and-white characterisations of World War Two in *Europe at War, 1939-1945: No Simple Victory* (Basingstoke, 2006), 481-7. Angus Calder observes the prominence of this narrative in *The Myth of the Blitz* (London, 1991), 2.

valuable in art.³⁵

The question, then, as Hawkins saw it was: ‘how far can politics be introduced into art without spoiling the art?’. It was a question that had occupied British intellectuals and artists for some time, but which remained hotly contested. The resulting uncertainty left them ill-prepared for the demands that would be placed on them by the outbreak of war.

35 Desmond Hawkins cited in ‘The Proletarian Writer: A Discussion between George Orwell and Desmond Hawkins’, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Volume II: My Country Right or Left*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus, (London, 1968), 38-44.

Pandora's Box

It is the logic of our times,
No subject for immortal verse –
That we who lived by honest dreams
Defend the bad against the worse.
– Cecil Day Lewis, 1943.³⁶

Although the possibility of another war had been looming for some time, a passer-by in London on 1 September 1939 would have been forgiven for thinking it had come as a complete surprise. The German invasion of Poland initiated a flurry of hasty, largely ill-judged preparations for war. The country seemed to accelerate towards stand-still, as public spaces from theatres, cinemas and concert halls to markets were closed; beaches were covered with barbed wire; hospitals were emptied; and the relocation of nearly one and a half million people from the city to the country began.³⁷ Sunset marked the beginning of the blackout. It is easy to imagine the ominous hiatus from the summary of news published in *The Times* on 2 September listing nothing other than a series of closures (including Radiolympia, The Houses of Parliament and Smithfield Market), postponed events (including the Gravesend Regatta) and the suspension of the B.B.C. television service.³⁸ At 11.15am the following day, Chamberlain announced that Britain was at war. It was, however, only a matter of days before some of the drastic decisions made on 1 September began to be reversed: on 15 September, the BBC announced that cinemas would re-open; by January 1940, nearly seven hundred thousand evacuees had returned home.³⁹ While preparations continued over the following months, war itself was slow in coming. By early 1940, boredom had set in and, unsurprisingly, was accompanied by civil unrest.⁴⁰

From the outset, the government recognized that public support for a European conflict was by no means guaranteed – a problem only exacerbated by the months of phoney war. The British public thus became as crucial a propaganda target as Allied and enemy nations. The task of motivating public enthusiasm fell to the MoI, which had been hurriedly reinstated on 4 September 1939 and was charged, amongst other things, with ‘home publicity’. It was not long before a range of cultural products had been requisitioned to this end: a war artists scheme, modelled on that of World War One; the production of propagandistic films, which also drew on the services of

36 Cecil Day Lewis, ‘Where are the War Poets?’ [online]. Available at: <http://www.cday-lewis.co.uk/#/where-are/4525050888> [accessed 18 March 2013].

37 Calder, *The People's War* (London, 1969), 35-76.

38 ‘News in Brief’, *The Times* (2 September 1939), 7.

39 Calder, *The People's War*, 45.

40 During the first months of war, British fascists and communists continued their attempts to undermine the Conservative government, though they were increasingly unpopular with the public at large. Meanwhile, the Norwegian debacle only further destabilised Chamberlain's already precarious position. *Ibid.*, 77-81.

composers; and the employment of numerous established and emerging literary figures to help with written propaganda.⁴¹ Broadly speaking, such activities aimed to encourage the British public to identify with the conflict: to guarantee their support, they had to believe they were fighting the ‘People’s War’ – not the government’s.⁴² Encouraging art also furthered Britain’s image as a democratic and tolerant nation: from the early 1930s, art had become an ‘emblem of anti-fascist values’, primarily on account of its association with ‘creativity and freedom’.⁴³ As dance critic Arnold Haskell explained, ‘it is in a sense Art *versus* Totalitarianism, the artist against the brute, creation against destruction’.⁴⁴ On one level, the BBC’s decision to commission patriotic music might be seen as just another strand of this general push for cultural propaganda. However, a closer look at what happened to Britain’s artistic and literary life immediately following the outbreak of war suggests additional motives.

While the popular music world was quick to respond to the outbreak of war with a plethora of jingoistic songs, many of Britain’s literary and artistic elite greeted the event with silence.⁴⁵ There were a variety of explanations for this. For some, the prospect of another war was so terrible that artistic inspiration was instantly replaced by paralysis: Stephen Spender, for whom the war coincided with the departure of his wife, famously wrote on 3 September: ‘I feel as if I could not write again. Words seem to break in my mind like sticks when I put them down on paper’;⁴⁶ Arthur Bliss recounted that he was ‘too disturbed ... to write any music during these months’;⁴⁷ Lord Berners ‘came close to a breakdown in reaction to the war’ and composed nothing until it was over.⁴⁸ For others, a practical response – joining the forces, or employment in alternative war work – seemed most appropriate. William Walton, for example, promptly signed up to be an ambulance driver (an employment soon curtailed after he had driven his vehicle into several ditches); within

41 For the War Artists’ Scheme, see: Brian Foss, *War Paint: Art War State and Identity, 1939-1945* (London, 2007); Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists: British Official War Art of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1983); Stuart Sillars, *British Romantic Art and the Second World War* (Basingstoke, 1991). For British cinema and the war, see Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain can take it: British cinema in the Second World War* (London, 2007); Neil Rattigan, *This is England: British Film and the People’s War, 1939-1945* (Madison, 2001); Jan G. Swynnoe, *The Best Years of British Film Music, 1936-1958* (Woodbridge, 2002). For British writers and the war, see Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45* (London, 1988); MacKay, *Modernism*; R. Weight, ‘State, Intelligentsia and the Promotion of National Culture in Britain, 1939-45’, *Historical Research*, 69 (1996), 83-101.

42 Calder’s *The People’s War* and *The Myth of the Blitz* explore in detail how this ideology was constructed.

43 Foss, *War Paint*, 157-69. In its aftermath World War Two has often been described as ‘the Good War’, in which a noble Britain and her Allies put up a righteous and well-founded opposition to Nazi rule; but this Britain-good/Germany-bad dichotomy was not so clear-cut in the 1930s and 1940s, not least because Britain’s reputation was more that of a belligerent, imperial power, lacking in national culture. Presenting Britain as a cultured nation was a way of challenging this negative image – one that was drawn on frequently during the war. Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, 196.

44 Arnold Haskell, ‘War, Ballet and National Culture’, *Ballet – To Poland (in aid of the Polish Relief Fund)*, ed. Haskell, (London, 1940), 45-7; 45.

45 Calder, *The People’s War*, 62.

46 Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After* (Glasgow, 1978), 101.

47 Arthur Bliss, *As I Remember* (London, 1970), 130.

48 Peter Dickinson, *Lord Berners: Composer, Writer, Painter* (Woodbridge, 2008), 2.

days, Constant Lambert had agreed to a national tour with the Sadler's Wells Ballet that would bring ballet to the people. For those who felt able to keep working, the priority was the completion of current projects, rather than the initiation of new, war-related ones: Henry Moore carried on 'just going to work as usual', while Ireland focused on *Sarnia*, a piano piece about his beloved Channel Islands that was already 'well mapped out in his mind'.⁴⁹ But, whatever personal motivations inspired this collective silence, the popular press felt that the British public were being let down.

The most bitter expressions of disappointment, even betrayal, were directed at writers. The most popular target was poets – the group whose forbears had left the strongest precedent for how to respond to war: the prestigious canon of war poetry. The first public challenge came on 25 September 1939 when the *Daily Mirror* demanded: 'Britain's voice – where is it?'. This anonymous submission compared the past, when poets 'could express the will of the nation' and when statesmen produced 'oratory worth of the supreme crises of destiny', with modern times, when 'we hear only humdrum, bureaucratic prose'. Perhaps in an attempt to inspire contemporary writers, the *Mirror* reverted to the archaic tone that poets had used to explain the First World War, describing the current conflict as a 'chivalrous task', the 'bravest, noblest, albeit the most perilous adventure of her [Britain's] very soul'.⁵⁰ On the same page, a drawing of a young Polish child shaking her dead father, as German planes fly into the distance, emphasized both the urgency and virtue of the new cause. A month later, a more vociferous attack against 'modern poets' was launched by theatre critic James Agate in his Saturday *Daily Express* leader. His title emphasized not Britain, but the common man: 'Who will be the plain man's war poet? – or won't there be one?' he asked accusingly. If the *Mirror* article seemed to encourage a response, Agate held out less hope:

I charge them [modern poets] with having nothing whatever to say of value to the man in the street in time of warfare. I say that the modern poet, by writing either sheer nonsense or sense so highbrow that nobody outside Bloomsbury can understand him, is not doing the job that all English poets have deemed to be their moral duty since the Armada.⁵¹

Of the possible culprits, W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, Christopher Isherwood and Louis MacNeice were singled out for direct criticism – poets who had been plagued by the tension between their modernist writing styles and left-leaning politics for some time.⁵² The political circumstances,

49 Letter from Henry Moore to Kenneth Clark, cited in Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, *London's Burning: Life, Death and Art in the Second World War* (London, 1994), 15. Muriel V. Searle, *John Ireland: The Man and his Music* (Tunbridge Wells, 1979), 92.

50 'Britain's Voice – Where Is It?', *Daily Mirror* (25 September 1939), 7.

51 James Agate, 'Who will be the plain man's war poet? – or won't there be one?', *Daily Express* (28 October 1939), 4.

52 During the 1930s, these four poets had been among a diverse group of intellectuals who had become actively involved in Leftist politics, a trend that reached its apex when a number of them went to fight for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War. The fashion for political activism proved, however, to be short-lived: the defeat of the Spanish Republicans in April 1939 and the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Soviet Union signed in August of the same year were major blows to the holders of such ideals. Disillusionment quickly set in and whereas formerly young intellectuals had waved the flag of political involvement, they now began to retreat to the ivory tower, questioning art's capacity to change the world as they went. Their retreat, however, was ill-timed: it roughly coincided with the outbreak of world war – an event that increased the demand for politically-engaged art virtually overnight. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation* (London, 1976); Suzanne Robinson, 'From agitprop to

however, made this tension only more acute: while writers struggled to find an appropriate literary response to the new conflict, the legacy of the First World War poets hung over them, amplifying their own shortcoming.⁵³ In the cases of Auden and Isherwood, literary failure was also tinged with charges of desertion: they had emigrated to America in January 1939 – an act that was tantamount to their rejection of European culture.⁵⁴

If these two articles focused on British writers, the issues they raised resonated widely – across the political and aesthetic spectrum and, albeit less acutely, amongst others in Britain’s artistic elite. The likes of Berners, Walton and Moore may not have been overshadowed by composers or artists with cultural standing equivalent to that of the war poets; but this did not make finding a pertinent, artistic response to the war any easier. In part, the challenge was one of representation: some of the aesthetic modes that had become fashionable during the 1920s and 1930s did not immediately lend themselves to the representation of war.⁵⁵ Nor did artistic responses to the previous war offer an immediate solution: as the Day Lewis poem cited above shows, the fallout from World War One had changed the public’s attitude towards war, which could no longer be viewed as unassailably good.⁵⁶ Consequently, the ‘violently affective appeals’ that had characterised responses to the outbreak of the First World War no longer seemed appropriate.⁵⁷ There was also the problem of the general public, whose right to access the arts was increasingly a topic of political consideration. The war intensified a growing pressure on composers to write music that would reach a wide, uneducated audience – that is to say, that had popular appeal.⁵⁸

At the heart of such issues was the contentious relationship between art and society – hardly a new concern, but one that the war brought to the fore. In particular, as the government requisitioned more and more of the nation’s resources for the war effort, it seemed inevitable that the arts would also be conscripted. This proved an awkward prospect, especially for art music, which was often prized for its ability to transcend worldly concerns. Vaughan Williams was among the first to address this dilemma, in *The Listener* in May 1940:

I have up to now taken it for granted that music is not “useful”. How far is this true? It is certainly, to my mind, one of the glories of the art of music that it can be put to no

parable: a prolegomenon to *A Child of Our Time*, Michael Tippett: *Music and Literature*, ed. Robinson, (Aldershot, 2002), 78-121; 103-4; Weight, ‘State, Intelligentsia’, 83-101.

53 MacKay, *Modernism*, 5-6. The passing of time did little to assuage the lack of poetic inspiration. MacKay argues that the idea ‘this was “a war to which literature conscientiously objected”’ quickly became a commonplace – so much so, that by 1941 Cyril Connolly could open a *Horizon* editorial with the observation: ‘About this time of year articles appear called “Where are our war poets?” The answer (not usually given) is “under your nose”’. Ibid., 5.

54 Robert Hewison, *Under Siege: Literary Life in London 1939-45* (London, 1988), 8. Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears famously followed Auden and Isherwood to America in May 1939, but returned to England in April 1942, allegedly having been inspired to do so by an E.M. Forster article about Suffolk-born poet George Crabbe.

55 Some aesthetic modes were, of course, more readily adaptable: soon after the outbreak of war, Richard Addinsell agreed to compose music for Alexander Korda’s propaganda film *The Lion Has Wings* (1939), while Walter Leigh set to work on a score for *Squadron 922* (1940).

56 In the light of this, it is somewhat ironic that World War Two is often referred to as the ‘Good War’. Fn.36.

57 Mackay, *Modernism*, 11.

58 This demand also proved problematic in the light of the high / low dichotomy: ‘hostility to mass culture’ was one of the grounds on which art distinguished itself. Huyssen, *After The Great Divide*, vii.

practical use. Poets can be used for propaganda, painters for camouflage, architects for machine-gun posts, but music is purely of the spirit and seems to have no place in the world of alarms and excursions. Would it not indeed be better for music to keep out of the struggle and reserve for us a place where sanity can again find a home when she returns to her own?⁵⁹

The difficulty, however, was not just whether ‘keeping music out of the struggle’ was justified, when everyone and everything else was being dragged into it; for Vaughan Williams, there was also an implicit uncertainty as to whether the foundational premises of *art* music precluded its direct involvement in the war. The paradox was that, while Vaughan Williams viewed art music as a ‘thing of the spirit’ with no practical purpose, the idea that it could ‘keep out’ of the present circumstances became the very grounds on which he attempted to justify its importance to wartime Britain. If this sentiment seems contradictory, it was shared by numerous others: as Patrick Bade has suggested from a brief survey of wartime journals, many people reported being more profoundly moved by music during the war than they were in times of peace, finding in it a respite from the immediate trauma.⁶⁰ The horrors of war, it seems, inspired people to identify with music’s sublime qualities.

At the same time, Vaughan Williams acknowledged that not all composers (let alone the government) would be content with this justification of their art’s importance for the war. Some, he observed, would also ‘like to be able to serve the community directly through [their] craft if not through [their] art’. Moreover, as someone who had played an active role in the previous war, this was something Vaughan Williams was personally keen to encourage, noting especially the need for pieces of music that could easily be realized within a variety of amateur, wartime contexts: blacked-out homes, factories and hospitals. But while the distinction between craft and art initially seemed to promise a resolution to his dilemma, Vaughan Williams appeared unable to qualify the difference between the two: having implied that craft might be what a composer does in the service of his nation, he backtracks, stating that ‘art is a compromise between what we want to achieve and what circumstances allow us to achieve. It is out of these very compromises that the supreme art often springs’. Vaughan Williams’s article began by asking: ‘what is the composer to do in war time?’ – a question that led to a minefield of ideological contradictions and complexities. Once Pandora’s Box was open, one thing remained clear: war posed a threat, not only to the practical conditions art needed to exist, but also to its ontological status. If World War One had posed a similar threat, its legacy made finding a suitable response only more difficult. That Britain’s artistic elite largely responded in silence was symptomatic of the profound sense of crisis.

The silence, then, might also partially account for the MoI’s decision to instigate the commissioning of patriotic music: a notably more pro-active strategy than that taken during the First World War, when music had not featured in Britain’s official propaganda policy.⁶¹ Commissions were initially offered to four composers: the most eminent, Vaughan Williams, was approached first (in August 1940) for “‘a song or Lay hymn” with orchestral accompaniment on a patriotic (but not necessarily war-like) theme’; a few months later, two more choral works with orchestra were commissioned, one from Roger Quilter and another from George Dyson; Ireland

59 Ralph Vaughan Williams, ‘The Composer in Wartime’, *The Listener*, XIII (16 May 1940), 989.

60 Patrick Bade, *Music War: 1939-1945* (London, 2012), 4-11.

61 Fiona Richards, *The Music of John Ireland* (Aldershot, 2000), 177.

received his commission for a ‘patriotic march’ on 28 November 1940.⁶² The request for patriotic music was, for the most part, a service that the invited composers were keen to perform; but such a commission was not without its problems: if the boundary between ‘patriotic’ and ‘propaganda’ music was uncomfortably vague, neither category had an easy relationship with ‘art’. Of the four composers who received commissions, Ireland was the most clearly troubled by the nature of what he had been asked to do. A profuse letter writer, he left a detailed account of the anxieties he experienced during the genesis of *Epic March*, from its commissioning to first performance and subsequent broadcasts. This correspondence offers a window onto how Ireland worked out the ideological dilemmas raised by his commission on an aesthetic level and how this in turn contributed to the work’s reception.⁶³

Writing ‘Anti-fascist’ Music: The Politics of *Epic March*

Ireland was fifty when war broke out and was thus too old to be called up.⁶⁴ In July 1939, with war looming, he had decided to return to his beloved Guernsey with former student and long-time companion John Longmire. He spent the first months of war in relative bliss – a period he later described as ‘too wonderful to be true, & certainly far too wonderful to last’.⁶⁵ In June the following year the impending German invasion forced a hasty evacuation of the Channel Islands; Ireland escaped on one of the last boats before the Nazis arrived.⁶⁶ On his return to England, neither his flat in Deal nor his house in Chelsea were safe enough to inhabit, so he took up residence in Radlett, initially with former student Alan Bush and his wife Nancy, and then with Bush’s mother. At the

62 Letter from Adrian Boult to Vaughan Williams (2 September 1940), BBC WAC, RCONT 1: Composer: Williams, Ralph Vaughan, 1939-1941 File 2a. Vaughan Williams’s song, ‘England, My England’, was temporarily withdrawn by the composer in protest against the BBC’s decision to ban Alan Bush’s music on the grounds that he was communist. Dyson’s contribution, ‘Motherland’, was an adaptation of a William Watson poem and received a radio premiere on Empire Day (24 May) 1941. Quilter was the only person to opt for a collaborative project, which he undertook with poet Rodney Bennett. The result was ‘Song of Freedom’. The BBC also considered commissioning a ‘popular ballad’ from Frederick Keel, with Victory Hely-Hutchinson and Walter Leigh as reserves, and a ‘better ballad’ or ‘more serious song’ from Noel Coward. Perhaps unsurprisingly in the light of the political circumstances, none of the composers who had fled Nazi-occupied territories for the relative safety of Britain was considered. *Note on a Scheme for Commissioning of Patriotic Songs* (August, 1940), R27/58.

63 Archival materials consulted include: BBC Written Archives Centre [WAC] R27/55/2: Music-General: Commissioned Works, 1942-1946 (File II); BBC WAC, R27/58: Music – General: Commissioned Works: Patriotic Songs, 1940-1944; BBC WAC, R51/637 Talks: What’s The Point Of...?, 1945; BBC WAC, RCONT-1: Composer: John Ireland, 1939-1941 File 2a, 1942-1943 File 2b and 1945-1947 File 2c, [henceforth RCONT-1-2a, RCONT-1-2b and RCONT-1-2c]. John Ireland Papers, British Library: Add.60535 and Add.60536 [henceforth JIP]; Cecil Gray Papers, Vol.XII, British Library: Add.57785 [henceforth CGP]; the George and Ann Dannatt Archive, Cambridge University Library: Add.9473/A/22/32 [henceforth GADA]. Also, *The Correspondence of Alan Bush and John Ireland, 1927-1961*, ed. Rachel O’Higgins (Aldershot, 2006) also contains useful primary materials.

64 Incidentally, Ireland also avoided fighting in World War One because he failed the medical examination.

65 Letter from Ireland to Kenneth Thompson (26 June 1941), JIP.

66 Had he not left, he would almost certainly have been deported to a German prisoner of war camp. Ireland was accompanied by Longmire and another composer, Percy Turnbull, who had been visiting them. John Longmire, *John Ireland: Portrait of a Friend* (London, 1969), 62-3; Richards, ‘John Ireland’s Personal World’, *The John Ireland Companion*, 42-53; 50.

start of 1941, shortly after he had received his commission for a patriotic march, Ireland moved to Banbury for about eighteen months.⁶⁷ Despite the unpleasant living conditions he initially suffered here, Longmire described 1941 as a “‘peak year’ for composition, probably the last year of such industrious intensity’ .⁶⁸ It was during this period that Ireland began *Epic March*.

The idea of composing a patriotic march for orchestra was first put to Ireland in late November 1940 by Adrian Boult, then Director of Music at the BBC. From the outset, Ireland was given a clear sense of how the MoI anticipated that their political agenda might be translated into a piece of music:

We have been asked by the Ministry of Information to commission a patriotic march for full orchestra ... I know they have in mind something of the “Pomp and Circumstance” pattern with an attractive title which has a bearing on the present mood and general outlook today.⁶⁹

While the stylistic requirements were clearly laid out, the wording of the commission was typically euphemistic: the request was for a ‘patriotic’ march – not a piece of propaganda music. Within two days, Ireland had written to Boult, expressing his strong enthusiasm for ‘a patriotic march on the lines you suggest’, which he felt could be a worthy tribute to ‘the marvellous courage and even cheerfulness with which Londoners are standing up to their ordeal, – a spirit typical of the whole British nation’ (Londoners had taken the brunt of the Blitz, the most aggressive phase of which had begun on 7 September 1940).⁷⁰ But, if at first the explicit political agenda seemed to excite rather than to faze Ireland, this did not last. Within six months of the initial exchange, his opinion had switched to the other extreme. On 4 May 1941, he wrote to Kenneth Thompson explaining that he felt unable to undertake the commission:

I do not think I can do it. Recent events do not inspire cheerful music – “Dirge for Greece” would be more appropriate!! Besides, I feel any hours of composition I may possess ought to be used to express beautiful things, which I am spared – it is a waste of time to ruminate on anything connected with what you so rightly call this bloody war!⁷¹

What had prompted this *volte-face*? One possible factor was that Ireland’s living arrangements during the first months of 1941 were most unsatisfactory: a ‘mean street’, a basement room, a ‘dragon of a housekeeper’ and no piano.⁷² Eight months of the Blitz may also have taken a toll on his enthusiasm for the war, which had never been abundant.⁷³ Under such conditions, composition

67 From mid-1942 until the end of the war, Ireland lived in the Rectory in Little Sampford, a village in Essex, with his friends the Waldes.

68 Longmire, *John Ireland*, 82.

69 Draft of letter from Ireland to Boult (undated), RCONT-1-2a.

70 Letter from Ireland to Boult (30 November 1940), RCONT-1-2a.

71 At the end of April 1941, Greece was defeated by the Axis. Letter from Ireland to Thompson (4 May 1941), JIP.

72 Longmire, *John Ireland*, 82.

73 The Blitz continued until 10 May 1941. Longmire claims that Ireland ‘hated war and was born a pacifist’: *Ibid.*, 40.

offered Ireland a rare glimmer of better times – something that, in the circumstances, he was reluctant to forego. But if the practicalities of war were one hindrance, his indecisiveness about taking up the commission might also reveal an ambivalence about the task. In particular, Ireland was evidently concerned about the aesthetic requirements of his commission: ‘jolly & hearty’ music – like Elgar’s – seemed inappropriate given the present circumstances.

Ireland was to change his mind about the commission once more. This time, it appears to have been inspiration that provoked change. In a letter to Alan Bush, he explained that the opening melody had been bestowed on him by some supernatural force:

the first 20 bars or so arrived in my consciousness ready-made, when I was in bed during an air-raid here – and I was so struck with the idea that I got out of bed and scribbled down the passage – scoring and all. Very odd, and most unusual for me!⁷⁴

What was unusual was probably the unprecedented speed with which the music came to him (rather than the medium): Ireland frequently said that his music was not just his own and that he was only ‘an instrument’ when he was composing.⁷⁵ In the case of *Epic March*, however, he went on to declare to Bush, ‘I scarcely feel as if I, personally, have had much to do with its composition’.⁷⁶ This story, which was recounted to at least a handful of friends, could obviously be interpreted in a number of ways. Ireland was interested in mystic lore and could plausibly have felt this to be a genuine explanation of how the composition came about; he made similar claims of other works.⁷⁷ Such a narrative would also have fitted comfortably with the notion that art music was somehow above earthly political and social concerns – an idea rooted in late nineteenth-century German romantic thought, whose pre-eminence remained unsettling for many British composers of Ireland’s generation.⁷⁸ But, for obvious reasons, Ireland’s desire to position *Epic March* within this worldview was problematic. His claim to supernatural inspiration might, then, have been an attempt to persuade himself and those whose opinions he valued that this composition was not *just* an occasional work, to find a means to salvage *Epic March* from the dustbin of art’s Others.

Spurred on by this revelation, Ireland sent a draft of the first twenty-four bars to Boult on 26 June 1941, with an accompanying letter explaining that, since it had been ‘impossible to concoct

74 Letter from Ireland to Alan Bush (10 September 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O’Higgins, 137-9.

75 For example, see letter from Ireland to Margery Gray (13 October 1941), CGP; diary entry by Kenneth Thompson (25 November 1945), GADA.

76 Letter from Ireland to Bush (10 September 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O’Higgins, 137-9.

77 For example, he alleged that *A Legend* was inspired by a vision of dancing children from a past age that he had at Chanctonbury Ring, Sussex Downs. He also frequently claimed to experience a psychic sense. Longmire, *John Ireland*, 28. Such claims were not uncommon in this period: Tippet also claimed that his music sprang from ‘visions and dreams’, Robinson, ‘From Agitprop to Parable’, 79.

78 Ireland, for example, ‘began his composer’s career as a follower of Brahms’ at the Royal College of Music under Stanford, but subsequently ‘destroyed or withheld’ all his early works. Ralph Hill, ‘John Ireland’, *British Music of Our Time*, ed. A.L. Bacharach, (Middlesex, 1951), 97-110. For the place of Romanticism in contemporary British thought, see Joanna Bullivant, *Musical Modernism and Left-wing Politics in 1930s Britain* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oxford, 2009), especially 70-118.

anything of the Pomp and Circumstance type', he had instead come up with a theme that was 'stern and purposeful'.⁷⁹ Boult's approval sealed the deal. Given the value placed by the high art world on originality, it is small wonder that Ireland might have sought to distance himself from his forebear's shadow, just as he would later fervently deny *Epic March*'s resemblance to 'Brother William's' *Crown Imperial*.⁸⁰ But his professed rejection of the Elgarian model seems strange when one examines the music.⁸¹ If the score fits within a tradition of single-movement works loosely based on a sonata form structure – Brahms's *Akademische Festouvertüre* springs to mind – it is also in many ways manifestly Elgarian. Its structure, a simple *ABA*¹, with the *A* sections marked 'allegro energico', and the *B* section 'largamente', is typical both of the march genre in general and of the Elgarian model in particular. The *March*'s key scheme, which, incidentally, is identical to that of Elgar's third *Pomp and Circumstance*, is also highly conventional: the tonic C minor of the *A* section gives way to the relative major for the *B* section, then *A*¹ repeats the opening theme in the tonic minor, before the lyrical *B* section melody is finally recapitulated in the tonic major. Nor did Ireland stray far from melodic conventions. The *A* section theme, whose 'stern and purposeful'

79 The manuscript of this draft survives in the BBC WAC, RCONT-1-2a.

80 Letter from John Ireland to Julian Herbage (8 September 1941), RCONT-1-2a.

81 What's more, the critics unanimously disagreed. Eric Blom went so far as to thank Ireland for 'giving us the sixth Pomp and Circumstance' that Elgar never completed: Eric Blom, 'Some New Ireland Works', *Tempo*, 6 (February 1944), 2-3.

Example 1. Orchestral score of John Ireland's *Epic March*, 16-27. Boosey and Hawkes Pocket Score (London, 1942). © Copyright 1942 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

nature Ireland believed would distinguish this *March* from the Elgarian precedent, is hardly an atypical first subject. Strongly rhythmic and motivic (one contemporary critic even used the adjective ‘virile’ – a term whose historical association with first subjects is well known⁸²), this theme drew on established militaristic motifs and timbres. For example, the first four bars of the melody (bb.17-21) are accompanied in the bass by a bar-long crochets ostinato played in octaves, a technique that Fiona Richards has identified as characteristic of Ireland's ‘military’ compositions from the First World War.⁸³ This figure, combined with the simple, triad-based melody, C minor tonality, an absence of syncopation and the predominance of eight-bar phrases helps create a serious, march-like feeling to the music (Example 1). But even the opening fanfare (bb.1-13), which evokes a bellicose atmosphere with the repetition of open fifth tonic chords and the prominent use of the snare drum and timpani, nonetheless resembles the start of the first (and most famous) *Pomp and Circumstance*, in which a noisy introductory passage similarly blends into a percussive first theme (Example 2). Finally, if the musical heritage of the A section was in any doubt, the melodious second subject, with its long, legato lines, lyrical tune and largely diatonic harmony, could readily be mistaken for Elgar (Example 3).

82 R.E., [untitled], *Music & Letters*, 24 (July 1943), 187.

83 *Ibid.*, 175-203.

Ireland's commission proved to be a challenge on more than just aesthetic grounds. The demand for political music was an equal source of anxiety. On the one hand, Ireland believed that music could – and, on occasion, should – be political: like many of the British intelligentsia, he had

dabbled in left-wing politics during the late 1930s, an interest that had inspired several settings of

Example 2. Orchestral score of John Ireland's *Epic March*, 1–8. Boosey and Hawkes Pocket Score (London, 1942). © Copyright 1942 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

verses by Communist poet Randall Swingler.⁸⁴ On the other hand, he remained uncomfortable about the consequences of such politicisation for his composition, as his indecision about the music for the Trio section reveals. When Ireland was feeling enthusiastic about the political aspect of his commission, there was little doubt in his mind about the political perspective he would seek to promote: the *March* would be ‘a crystallisation of anti-Fascist feeling’, he explained to Bush in September 1941.⁸⁵ He intended that the music for the central ‘trio’ would play a particularly

84 Ireland's settings of Swingler's poetry included *Ways of Peace*, the product of a commission from the British National Committee of the International Peace Campaign, and some lines in *Ballad of Heroes*, which commemorated British people who had died in the Spanish Civil War. Philip Lancaster, ‘Songs of Innocence: The Part-Songs of John Ireland’, *The John Ireland Companion*, 285-303; Richards, *The Music of John Ireland*, 186-8.

85 Letter from Ireland to Bush (10 September 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 137-9.

Example 3. Orchestral score of John Ireland's *Epic March*, 95–106. Boosey and Hawkes Pocket Score (London, 1942). © Copyright 1942 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

he planned to convey this message by including a musical reference with well-known political connotations. To this end, he wrote to Bush on 15 July 1941, asking him to recommend 'some "slogan" tune ... associated with the U.S.S.R. or with liberal thought'.⁸⁷ Two months later, he wrote again, announcing that he had used the 'big tune' from his choral work *These Things Shall Be*, which the BBC had commissioned for the 1937 Coronation. The text of *These Things* – excerpts from John Addington Symonds's *Lyrics of Life and Art* – had Leftist overtones and its music was associated, at least for Ireland, with the 'New Order'.⁸⁸ In case the text of *These Things* had failed to put across Ireland's desired political message, he had chosen the moment when the choir sing 'paradise' to quote the *Internationale*, a melody he also planned to incorporate into his new work.⁸⁹ Borrowing musical material from elsewhere, however, was obviously not without artistic implications. At first, Ireland tried to persuade himself that 'the whole psychology of this March justifies what might, in other circumstances, seem an inartistic proceeding'. It was, he explained, 'not primarily an Art-work', but rather 'an important manifesto' whose 'purpose' was 'to focus anti-Fascist spiritual forces'.⁹⁰ After seeking advice from several people and much deliberation of his own, however, Ireland decided that even the circumstances did not justify such an 'unscrupulous and inartistic' procedure: he wrote a new melody for the Trio and removed the *Internationale* quote.⁹¹ The only remaining reference to *These Things* is the Trio's tonality, Eb major – a key that

87 Letter from Ireland to Bush (15 July 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 134.

88 At the outset, Boult had suggested to Ireland that something in the vein of *These Things* might be appropriate, an idea that seemed immediately to inspire Ireland. Letter from Ireland to Boult (30 November 1940), RCONT-1-2a.

89 Letter from Ireland to Bush (10 September 1941), in *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 137-9. The idea of including the *Internationale* may in part have been a response to recent political developments: in July 1941, Russia formed an alliance with Britain, after Germany violated the Soviet-Nazi non-aggression pact of August 1939 by invading Russia.

At some point during the immediate post-war years, a member of the musical public spotted the *Internationale* reference in *These Things* and denounced Ireland as a Communist – a label that was by that time less acceptable than it had been in the 1930s. In response to this episode, Ireland removed the reference. See Letter From Kenneth Thompson to The Rt. Hon. Mr. P. Morris M.P. (22 January 1951), JIP; Alan Bush, 'Appendix A: "These Things Shall Be"', Longmire, *John Ireland*, 149-51.

90 Letter from Ireland to Bush (10 September 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 137-9.

91 Letter from Ireland to Boult (31 March 1942), RCONT-1-2b. Richards explains that 'Herbert Brown advised against

Ireland associated with utopian sentiments. For string instruments, Eb major is a particularly sonorous key that resonates with the rich-sounding open G string – a fact that makes it an apt choice for the vision of a ‘New Order’ that Ireland sought to convey in both these works.⁹²

Ireland’s anxiety about prioritising political considerations over artistic ones was also reflected in his indecision over what the work should be called – a question to which he returned frequently during the composition period. In particular, he worried that the work’s political associations might have a negative impact on its durability. Not wanting ‘any label ... which will be an obstacle to its performance after the war’, Ireland lamented to the BBC’s Deputy Director of Music, R.S. Thatcher, the fact that the MoI did not consider ‘March in C Minor’ an ‘attractive’ enough title.⁹³ In the search for something suitable, Ireland put numerous ideas to the BBC for approval. The first, ‘grim and gay’, was taken from a Churchill speech and was put forward with the sketch of the opening section sent to Boult in June 1941; Ireland rejected it soon after on the grounds that it was ‘too topical’. Some sort of ‘reference to the “V” sign’ followed;⁹⁴ then ‘The Liberator’, which programme planner Julian Herbage suggested was too similar to Julius Fučík’s march *Entrance of the Gladiators*. In a moment of frustration, Ireland even made the tongue-in-cheek suggestions of ‘Calling All Shirkers’ and ‘Ussia v. Prussia’ (the former being a pun on Eric Coates’s *Calling All Workers*), before finally settling on *Epic March* in March 1942. ‘To guard against any misapprehension’ and to make clear his ‘intentions in the music’, Ireland included a dictionary definition of the word ‘Epic’ in the score: ‘concerning some heroic action or series of actions and events of deep and lasting significance in the history of a nation or the [sic] race’.⁹⁵ The definition, taken from *Nuttall’s Standard Dictionary*, was also included in the brief programme notes prepared for the premiere.

Although Ireland *did* admit that *Epic March* was, ‘in a sense, propaganda’, he evidently remained uncomfortable about the implications of such a label.⁹⁶ There were times during the composition period when he appeared genuinely excited about the potential of the

this, on the grounds that the sentiments of *These Things Shall Be* were not at all jingoistic, but rather “pacific and idealistic”, and suggested instead that Ireland might reuse one of his “last war tunes...”’: Richards, *The Music of John Ireland*, 197-8.

92 Eb major is also the key of his song ‘O happy land’, another politically explicit product of the war years. Richards, *The Music of John Ireland*, 197-9.

93 Letter from Ireland to Dr. Thatcher (19 July 1941), RCONT-1-2a. An ‘attractive title’ was one of the conditions set out in the commission (fn. 53).

94 The opening quaver triplet – dotted crochet motif of Ireland’s *March* was similar to the ‘three short taps followed by a long’ that famously begin Beethoven’s Symphony No.5. Long popularized as ‘fate knocking on the door’, this motif developed an alternative meaning among the Allies as a code for ‘victory’ after it was hijacked by the ‘V for Victory Campaign’ because the rhythm was the same as that of the letter ‘V’ in Morse code (●●●—). Ireland insisted that the rhythmic similarity was pure chance – a claim that seems likely given that the V for Victory Campaign was in its early stages at the time of *Epic March*’s composition. However, he also proved keen to exploit the potential of this happy coincidence, suggesting that ‘a short version of a few bars [of *Epic March*], as a sort of signature tune, could be prepared’. Letter from Ireland to Thatcher (14 July 1941), RCONT-1-2a. The campaign is discussed in Charles Roetter, *Psychological Warfare* (London, 1974), 110-6.

95 Letter from Ireland to Boult (31 March 1942), RCONT-1-2b.

96 Letter from Ireland to Margery Gray (13 October 1941), CGP.

musical-political platform he had been given; but, each time, enthusiasm gave way to unease, and so political considerations were ultimately subordinated to artistic ones. But could a piece of propaganda music be redeemed by Ireland's artistic pretensions? Or would his attempts to minimize the potential impact of the label 'propaganda' simply obscure the work's political message, leaving a seemingly apolitical piece of mediocre art music?

In September 1941, Ireland made what now appears to be a cryptic remark in a letter to Bush about *Epic March*:

I should like him [Prokofiev] and our comrades in U.S.S.R. to know about this March. *But for God's sake, not a word to the English papers.* NOTHING must leak out until this March is performed, and that cannot be for some time – but I am certain the B.B.C. will make a heavy splash with it.⁹⁷

What was Ireland concerned would 'leak out'? One might speculate that this comment was an attempt to discourage Bush from publicly claiming the *March* for the Communist Party without Ireland's consent; or perhaps Ireland feared that a 'leak' might undermine its potential political impact. He may also have been concerned that, if the BBC discovered its Leftist agenda, they might refuse to broadcast it altogether: after all, Bush's music had been banned from the airwaves in 1940 because of his Communist activities, and in January 1941, Communist papers *Daily Worker* and *The Week* were suppressed on the grounds that they were inciting public opposition to the war; even after the U.S.S.R. joined the Allies in July 1941, the British Government's attitude towards Communism remained reticent.⁹⁸ Whatever lay behind Ireland's comment, his fears proved to be unfounded: if he felt that *Epic March* conveyed a strong political message, its reception demonstrated that the work's politics were more abstruse than he thought. 'It is meant to be anti-fascist music', he explained to Nancy Bush just a few days before the premiere, 'but the public may not see this' – an observation that turned out to be astute.⁹⁹

Performing 'Anti-fascist' Music: The Reception of *Epic March*

Epic March was eventually premiered on 27 June 1942 on the opening night of the forty-eighth London Promenade Season.¹⁰⁰ Despite the early start-date (the series usually began in August), the

97 Letter from Ireland to Bush (10 September 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 137-9. The emphasis is Ireland's.

98 The latter was one of 'only four cases of extreme censorship or threats of censorship' during the war in Britain: Balfour, *Propaganda in War*, 66.

99 Letter from Ireland to Nancy Bush (20 June 1942), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 271-2.

100 The performance was recorded by the BBC and re-released as a cover-mounted CD on the *BBC Music Magazine* (July 2008). The BBC Music Magazine Collection, *Great Prom Premiers* (2008), BBC MM295. The brief introduction reproduced on this recording suggests that radio audiences were not told about the work's origin. The announcer simply said: 'And now the *Epic March* for full orchestra by John Ireland. Bartley Mason is at the

Times reporter was eager to emphasize the normality of the occasion: a warm summer's evening – 'correct form for the opening of the Proms' – set the scene for a programme 'framed on the lines of recent years'.¹⁰¹ Although war raged, most topically in Libya, where just a few days previously Tobruk had fallen to the Axis, London was no longer in the front line, as it had been a year ago. At times, the hostilities seemed positively remote: 'Struck by the normality of everything', George Orwell noted in his diary on 4 June, '– lack of hurry, fewness of uniforms, general unwarlike appearance of the crowds who drift slowly through the streets, pushing prams, or loitering in the squares to look at the hawthorn bushes'.¹⁰² But if the Prom audience hoped for an evening of escapist entertainment, to forget the war even for a few hours was impossible. Proms now began at the earlier time of 6.30pm to accommodate the black-out. The venue, new to the series in 1941, was a reminder that the Blitz had destroyed the Proms' former home, the Queen's Hall; and although the programme did not, for the most part, stray far from convention (an aria from *La traviata*, Elgar's *Enigma Variations*, Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.2 and Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*), Ireland's *Epic March*, in the prominent position of opening item, was a direct reminder of war. The decision to open the 1942 Prom series with Ireland's work was remarkable on two counts. While there was a long-standing tradition of including new works in the Proms, the series had featured only five premieres since the outbreak of war, and none at all in 1941.¹⁰³ Aside from the inspirational paralysis war initially induced among composers, the shortage of new works might also have been a product of the BBC's withdrawal from managing the series in 1940 and 1941: the BBC had more money and inclination to invest in new works than Henry Wood or Keith Douglas, who were responsible for these two seasons.¹⁰⁴ What's more, it was highly unusual for 'novelties' to be given such a prominent position.¹⁰⁵ That Ireland's *March* was thus favoured was not so much a reflection of its musical status as of its political one.

Despite being a special BBC commission, *Epic March* was permitted only a brief programme note (paper shortages prohibited extensive ones), which made only oblique reference to the work's politics. The first of two short paragraphs stated that the work had been commissioned by the BBC and then cited the dictionary definition of 'epic' that prefaced the score (quoted above); the second briefly outlined the structure of the work. Beyond this, the music was left to speak for itself. Given the unpopular nature of the word, it is unsurprising that neither the BBC nor critics described the *March* as 'propaganda'. Recognition of its political element was, in a typically British way, shrouded in euphemisms: Ralph Hill praised it for 'admirably reflecting the spirit of the time', while the *Times* reviewer observed that 'it is national in sentiment'.¹⁰⁶ Analogies with Elgar's music

organ and the work is now to be heard for the first time'.

101 'The Promenade Concerts', *The Times* (29 June 1942), 6.

102 George Orwell, 'War-time Diary: 14 March 1942 – 15 November 1942', *The Collected Essays*, 411-50; 428.

103 This included two first performances in England in 1939 and three world premiers in 1940. David Cox, *The Henry Wood Proms* (London, 1980), 276-8.

104 The fate of the Proms during the war years is described in Jenny Doctor, 'A New Dimension: The BBC Takes on the Proms, 1920-44', *The Proms: A New History*, eds. Doctor and David Wright (London, 2007), 116-129.

105 A quick glance over first night programmes from the 1930s and 1940s reveals that this was the only premiere to open the season. The favourite opening pieces were Berlioz's *Le Carnaval Romain*, which was used on six occasions, and Elgar's overture *Cockaigne (In London Town)*, which appeared on five.

106 Ralph Hill, 'The Proms are Forty-Eight!', *Radio Times*, 75 (19 June

– *pace* Ireland – also affirmed the work’s nationalism: as one critic explained, ‘the native strength of our composers tends to turn, for the middle section, to Elgarian phraseology ... We think it is because Elgar tells of some of our [i.e., Britain’s] best qualities’.¹⁰⁷ While critics openly acknowledged this aspect of the *March*, however, they paradoxically seemed eager to distance the work from the potentially negative connotations of its nationalist aesthetic. References to the work’s nationalism were usually qualified by assertions that the music was nonetheless ‘original and compelling’, ‘not derivative’ or ‘not machine-made’.¹⁰⁸ One critic even went so far as to liken the *March* to an expensive carpet: ‘the whole atmosphere of this march is that of idealism, and is as far removed from jingoism as a Persian carpet is from a piece of cheap linoleum’.¹⁰⁹ If this critic felt that the work’s politics did not limit its value as art, his elaborately-worded justification reflects an anxiety about the ‘cheapness’ of propaganda music – an anxiety that he attempted to assuage by redeeming the very aspect of the work that threatened to cheapen it: its political nature. In none of the reviews, however, does Ireland’s grand political vision of an anti-fascist ‘New Order’ explicitly appear. But this is unsurprising: musical meaning is notoriously slippery and so, without having been enlightened as to the precise political agenda, critics were unlikely to discern it from the music alone. The more intriguing question – though one that the surviving archival evidence cannot answer – is why this agenda, about which Ireland was clearly passionate, was not shared with the public. One can only speculate that someone, whether Ireland or BBC employees, felt that to do so would be counter-productive or socially inappropriate.

The British public’s tendency to cringe at the slightest hint of blatant propaganda is well known. By 1942, as Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards explain, British film makers, responding to the public’s growing dissatisfaction with war movies, were requesting permission from the MoI to make more non-war-themed films.¹¹⁰ At the same time, what was an acceptable aesthetic for propaganda music remained a contentious subject that plagued popular music as much as it did art music. As Christina Baade has shown, 1942 also was the year in which a debate about the suitability of sentimental ballads for wartime Britain came to a head: a genre popular with many soldiers, but one that the authorities (not least the BBC’s newly appointed Director of Music Arthur Bliss), encouraged by vociferous members of an older generation of servicemen, feared was fostering effeminacy.¹¹¹ The waning interest in virile war songs might also be indicative of a shift that Alison Light detects from literature of the period – one ‘away from masculine bombast and toward an inward-turning embrace of domestic, middle-class values’.¹¹² Through its belligerent

1942), 4; ‘Promenade Concerts’, *The Times* (29 June 1942), 6.

107 W.R.A., [untitled], *The Gramophone* (February 1943), 4.

108 Hill, ‘The Proms are Forty-Eight!’; *The Times*, ‘Promenade Concerts’; ‘New Music’, *The Musical Times*, 84 (June 1943), 179-181; 179.

109 ‘New Publications, July 1941-December 1943’, *Tempo*, 6 (February 1944), 16-24.

110 Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 11-12.

111 Christina Baade, *Victory Through Harmony* (Oxford, 2012). Bliss’s strong opinions about popular music are well known: viewing it as ‘at best diverting and at worst morally suspect’, he worked hard throughout his time as Director of Music to bring listeners what he considered to be the best in music. *Ibid.*, 134. An unequivocal statement from Bliss of his opinions on broadcasting is reproduced in Lewis Foreman, ‘In Search of a Progressive Policy: Arthur Bliss at the BBC’, *Arthur Bliss: Music and Literature*, ed. Stewart R. Craggs (Aldershot, 2002), 227-65; 250-2.

112 Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London, 1991).

opening, Ireland's *March* aligned itself with an aesthetic that was increasingly unfashionable: ideas about gender and war were changing and the modern soldier could at once be combative and sentimental. If it was an aesthetic that critics easily recognised as nationalistic, it also smacked of the sort of propaganda that the authorities felt was necessary, but which the British public disliked.¹¹³ Small wonder, then, that the details of the commission – to write 'patriotic' music – were never spelled out. Only one critic hinted at the work's aesthetic limitations: 'Ireland celebrates new glories; but nobody, I suppose, will sing of the war as it really is'.¹¹⁴

A further source of discomfort for critics was the music's accessible style. Several of the reviews, if positive, tempered their praise with comments that criticized the work's popular idiom, for example, calling it 'somewhat blatant', a 'mere march', or saying that 'the tunes are not inspirations'.¹¹⁵ While references to this aspect of the *March* cannot quite be classed as euphemisms for propaganda, they nonetheless reflected the music's political element – albeit more implicitly. The war had cultivated a new emphasis on social equality which, although unable to neutralise the popular / art music dichotomy, partially ameliorated 'popularity' through its positive associations with the war effort. Indeed, many reviewers did not see this aspect of the work's style in a purely negative light. The *Sunday Times* critic observed that: 'That it was well received is, for once, not against it, for although it is written in a straightforward manner, it is a sincere and deeply felt piece of music'.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Eric Blom praised in particular the lyrical largamente melody as 'a tune to be whistled by tradesmen's boys, hummed by bathroom baritones and community-sung in holiday camps'.¹¹⁷ Once again, however, this progressive attitude clearly demanded justification. Having admitted that *Epic March* 'courted popularity ... quite frankly', Blom went on to explain:

but it is so well done, so admirably put together and so magnificently scored (except perhaps for a little brassy blatancy) that it arouses no suspicion of any sort of stooping to conquer. Ireland here conquers the public quite naturally in his own way and, one may perhaps say, himself at the same time by overcoming a sort of reticence that can be, after all, too squeamish in a composer who has already made a good name for himself

See also Foss, *War Paint*, 64. German authorities exhibited a similar anxiety about soldiers' penchant for sentimental songs, not least 'Lili Marlene'. John Bush Jones, *The Songs That Fought the War: Popular Music and the Home Front, 1939-45* (Lebanon, 2006) 78-9.

113 Conversely, music like *Epic March* was considered unsuitable as international propaganda. When Britain wanted to project a positive image of its culture to its enemies and Allies, it chose to do so using 'non-political' art music. Indeed, in 1942 Ireland bemoaned the fact that the British Council had contributed £1000 towards recording Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* for propaganda – a role that he felt would have been better filled by *These Things*. Letter from Ireland to Bush (4 August 1942), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 144-5. Furthermore, *Epic March* was not even included in the BBC's *Special Music Recordings Catalogue* of the era, in which Ireland was represented by thirteen wartime recordings: ten solo songs, his second Sonata for Violin and Piano, *Sea Fever* and *Comedy: Overture*. BBC, *Special Music Recordings Catalogue* (1947), 144.

114 W.R.A., [untitled], *The Gramophone* (February 1943), 4.

115 H.R., 'A Fine Ireland March', *The Sunday Times* (28 June 1942), 6; R.E., [untitled]; Anon., 'London Concerts', *The Musical Times*, 83 (July 1942), 222-3.

116 H.R., 'A Fine Ireland March'.

117 Blom, 'Some New Ireland Works', 3.

by work which, for all he could tell, might have satisfied nobody but himself. The *Epic March* satisfies any audience, not excluding a specifically musical one.¹¹⁸

Blom's praise of *Epic March*'s style is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, he freely admits the work's popular idiom and is openly critical of the 'aesthetic prigs', who, favouring music that appeals only to the minority, will 'deplore' the *March* on this account. On the other, however, he is keen to emphasise that Ireland achieved this idiom without lowering the tone of his music: if *Epic March* appealed to a general audience, it could also appeal to an elite one.

Although Ireland initially seemed pleased with the work's reception, as was often the case with the hard-to-please composer, satisfaction soon turned to disappointment: little more than a year after its premiere, Ireland began to feel that *Epic March* had been unduly neglected. He was quick to point the finger at the BBC for their failure to promote the work sufficiently.¹¹⁹ In an attempt to rectify the situation, Ireland proposed a series of cuts that reduced the piece from nine minutes to fewer than six – a process he carried out with some reluctance, because he felt that 'any and/or all of these cuts destroy the form and balance of the piece'.¹²⁰ If this helped encourage performances of the work during the remaining years of the war, it ultimately made little difference to its durability: once war was over, its popularity waned; and although it was revived for the 1953 Coronation, its presence at the occasion went almost wholly unremarked.¹²¹ It was not long before Ireland started attributing the *March*'s failure to the circumstances that brought about its composition. In February 1945, he wrote to Bush stating that:

The mere fact of feeling one *ought* to be writing music ... completely destroys in me the impulse or even the possibility of generating any but mechanical ideas. I can safely say that all works of mine which you know were written because they *had* to be written – except "Epic March" which was for an occasion, and has turned out a complete failure in consequence'.¹²²

118 Ibid..

119 In one of his most bitter letters to the BBC on the subject, Ireland exclaimed: 'This work was commissioned by the B.B.C. at the request of the Ministry of Information, and at the time I accepted the commission I was led to infer that it was for the purpose of stimulating the war effort. Otherwise, i.e. if the only object was to give a British composer a small job, there was not much point in the idea, and I did not undertake the work to earn the small fee I was paid but in order to produce something in music that would really assist the national war effort, by stirring up people's feelings. It is therefore not unnatural that I feel disappointed that my efforts have been in vain. I quite realize that 5 or 6 broadcasts of any ordinary work in 18 months is considerably more than one could reasonably expect, but in this case the circumstances are different, as the work was written for propaganda purposes'. Letter from Ireland to Ronald Biggs (3 November 1943), RCONT-1-2b. See also Letter from Ireland to Boulton (21 July 1943), RCONT-1-2b.

120 Letter from Ireland to Boulton (13 August 1945), RCONT-1-2c.

121 *Epic March* was one of fifteen pieces by British composers played before the service in Westminster Abbey. To my knowledge, in all the reviews and newspaper coverage, it appeared only once in 'Music for the Coronation', *The Musical Times*, 95 (July 1953), 305-307. In addition to its premier, the *March* was performed in three Prom seasons: 1943, 1945 and 1946; it has not been revived since.

122 Letter from Ireland to Bush (20 February 1945), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 167-9.

Ireland's argument sits comfortably within the art music / political music paradigm: *Epic March's* 'occasional' status made its failure inevitable. But this is all too easy an explanation. For one thing, the *March's* accessible idiom could have stood it in good stead at a time when an unprecedented market for middlebrow music was emerging; Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* surely benefited from this trend. What's more, the simple fact that *Epic March* was an 'occasional work' does not necessarily explain its quick decline in popularity: numerous such pieces, not least Ireland's own *These Things*, did not suffer a similar fate.¹²³ Indeed, in the same letter Ireland distinguished the *March* from *These Things*, arguing that 'though it was [also] a commission it turned out right because it was written from the heart and with conviction' – a claim that he had previously also made about *Epic March*.¹²⁴ One can only speculate that, had *Epic March* proved as popular as Ireland had initially hoped, he might not have changed his story.

In any case, the question of why *Epic March's* success was limited to the war years is not the most interesting one. Ireland's eventual admission that his aspirations for this composition had not been realized is more significant, particularly because it highlights the fact that he had, just three years before, believed otherwise: that it would be possible to write a piece of music whose political message would not undermine its artistic status. The heightened political atmosphere of wartime Britain had demanded that a space be made for art to be understood as political in a way that seemed less conceivable in times of peace – a process that had invited composers' and critics' to take their attempts to narrow the void between art and propaganda to a new extreme. In part, this was a survival mechanism. The demands of total war were such that art, like everything else, had to justify its existence in terms of contribution to the war effort. As theatre critic Herbert Farjeon explained: 'If humanity must fight for its life when the guns get going, so, no less tenaciously, must art'.¹²⁵ While composers and musicians argued that high culture mattered because it embodied 'the things for which we and our cultured allies are fighting', such abstract reasoning struggled in the acutely utilitarian-minded context of wartime Britain.¹²⁶ Putting music in the service of politics gave it a more obvious purpose; but the long-standing ideological tension between art and politics also meant that, despite war, the idea of political art remained problematic.

This was particularly the case when it came to propaganda: a word that composers and

123 Although none of the BBC's wartime commissions achieved much notoriety, there are examples of propaganda music that proved more successful. In particular, there were a number of widely acclaimed contemporary film scores, whose popularity was enhanced when they were adapted for concert performance. For example, William Walton produced the *Spitfire Prelude and Fugue* from his score for *First of the Few* (1942) and a Suite from his music for *Henry V* (1944). Walton also had more luck in getting such music recorded: the Hallé recorded the *Spitfire* in 1943 (HMV C3359), while in 1946 EMI released *Scenes from Henry V*, which presented music from the film with Laurence Olivier speaking lines from the play over the top (EMI 5 65007 2). In contrast, *Epic March* remained unrecorded until after the war, when Boosey and Hawkes eventually recorded it on their own label in an unsuccessful attempt to increase its distribution.

124 Ireland had previously assured Bush that the *March* would be a 'sincere work' and that he was not doing it for the 'paltry fee'. Letter from Ireland to Bush (15 July 1941), *The Correspondence*, ed. O'Higgins, 134. *These Things* eventually fell out of Ireland's favour as well: Longmire reports that the last time he discussed this work with Ireland, the latter said that 'he had positively grown to hate it and that it no longer had any meaning for him': Longmire, *John Ireland*, 92-3.

125 Herbert Farjeon, 'The Theatre: Sadler's Wells Ballet (New Theatre)', *The Tatler and Bystander*, 2083 (28 May 1941), 308.

126 Haskell, 'War', 45.

critics frequently associated with the uncomfortable sound of music that had sold out to overt political agendas and crude populism. The strength of this association is such that there is a temptation to dismiss *Epic March* on the same grounds that musicologists have traditionally dismissed music commissioned during World War Two: as second-rate occasional music that necessarily but regretfully distracted composers from the production of art and that consequently merits little attention. At least superficially, this perspective seems plausible: although Ireland evidently prioritized artistic concerns over political ones, his *March* was nonetheless an act of patriotism inspired by a desire to ‘really assist the national war effort’, driven by his vision of the ‘New Order’.¹²⁷ At the same time, the composer was committed to an aesthetic that audiences would have found familiar, even comfortable. If he hoped that *Epic March* would inspire a critical engagement with the world, it would do so from a point of cultural conventionality.

But this reading overlooks both Ireland’s aspirations for his *March* and, perhaps more importantly, its reception. As we have seen, rather than simply writing off *Epic March* as tawdry propaganda music, many of the work’s critics displayed a more complicated response: one that acknowledged but also sought to redeem the popular and political aspects of the work. Critics initially claimed that, although the *March*’s idiom was undeniably accessible, it also exhibited the necessary originality and skill to appeal to an elite audience; although its nationalist aesthetic was blatant, it maintained an artistic sincerity. In stating this, my point is not that *Epic March* has a claim to a place in the canon of great art music; on the contrary, my concern is how pieces like *Epic March* might, in their particular wartime context, have undermined the rigid distinctions between high and low that scholarship has often asserted. Put another way, perhaps *Epic March* might best be understood as an example of ‘middlebrow’ culture – a product of the unstable category ‘betwixt and between’ the two poles of the ‘Great Divide’.¹²⁸ If, as Huyssen has suggested, this ‘Great Divide’ was unstable from its moment of creation, the political climate of World War Two Britain added force to the threat – or possibility – of implosion. Indeed, although ‘middlebrow’ has come to have pejorative connotations, in mid-century Britain it was also, as Christopher Chowrimootoo has shown, taken up by ‘self-conscious middlebrows’, not least among them J.B. Priestly, as a means of critiquing the narrow-mindedness of both low and high.¹²⁹ Ireland worried the *March* would be ‘too topical’, but its topicality turned out to be of the moment: in the spirit of the era, critics were able to invoke the work’s political sentiment and accessible style in its favour, even if, in the long run, it has subsequently been denigrated on these same grounds. At the height of war, then, when politics was necessarily foregrounded and social welfare was a growing concern, the cultural middleground was empowered by a momentary significance. It became a site of new ideological possibility – one through which propaganda music cultivated an uncertain status as both music of the people and art of its time.

127 Letter from Ireland to Ronald Biggs (3 November 1943), RCONT-1-2b.

128 Virginia Woolf, ‘Middlebrow’, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York, 1942), 180.

129 Chowrimootoo, ‘The Timely Traditions’, 409-11.