

waywardly adopted by him. . . . It is only the charlatans or the mountebanks that distort a work of art in order to set their personal stamp upon it; the real interpreters are aiming not at distortion but at a just proportion; at centrality not eccentricity. . . . Interpretation comes to mean nothing less than the art of making music intelligible to the universal mind. This art is a perfectly definite and to some extent communicable one, involving certain principles capable of formulation—though of course, it cannot be reduced entirely to rules any more than any other living art. . . .”

Marion Bauer

HIDDEN IRISH TREASURE

IN this age of great harmonic development, it may prove valuable to observe certain little known modes of melodic usage. A special style of unfamiliar conception, not to mention actual tunes, may offer the composer the basis of a new and individual music. This, it seems to me, after a visit I have just made to Ireland, is the opportunity its indigenous music holds out.

Irish folk-music has been heard the world over. Thousands of folk-tunes have been collected and written down—after a fashion—but here is the point of real interest. One finds, on actually going through the back country of the west of Ireland, and hearing the tunes sung in the old style, that the written form in which one has previously encountered them is the merest indication, a skeleton on which to hang the flesh and blood of the real melodies which can be realized only after many hearings. The notation recalls the frame of the tune to one who has already known it, but it can never represent the actual sounds to one who has not heard them. The singers call their music “traditional” because it has been taught by father to son, mother to daughter, distinguishing this authentic style from the so-called “modern” one adopted by Irish singers who learn tunes from notes and sing accordingly.

Those who have never attempted to set down the music of a people are surprised at the difficulties of notation, and wonder just what features baffle our sophisticated system of graphic representation. They are, of course, the very things which make the

style individual. Since the elements lost in the notation are the very soul of the music, the written form is devitalized. Most of the characteristics which differentiate authentic Irish music from any other are known only to "traditional" singers. For example, the flatted seventh and the omission of certain scale notes are often pointed out as significant. But these scale changes do not occur in all Irish music and they are common to the folk-music of other lands.

One of the really fundamental distinctions is in the pitch of the scale used. Rev. Henebery, who has made a profound study of ancient Irish music in his recently published *Handbook of Irish Music*, tells of recording some traditional songs, and having the records tested as to pitch by scientific instruments. It was discovered that, as a rule, the tones were arranged on no such set steps as constitute a scale. Those which seemed to be the nearest to resting points did not conform in vibration with the tones of recognized scales, either with or without a flatted seventh. Henebery seems justified in his contention that the music is based on phrases rather than scales. Each phrase, bound up with the meaning of the words, seems so much an entity that it is difficult to break it into still simpler units, particularly when steady scale pitches are almost lacking. Part of the charm and grace of this old music is due to a pitch in curves rather than in unyielding straight lines. It varies subtly and constantly, to suit the shade of meaning in the words. The Gaelic tongue, with its rolling rhythms, therefore becomes an important factor in this music, which suffers from translation into English. Some of the rhythmic delicacies that lie between the square-cut time-divisions of half, quarter and eighth notes, or even outside of irregular groupings of three, five, et cetera, are also lost in the translation from the Irish speech. These changes in pitch were found so necessary to express the words that the old instruments copied their subtleties; on the Irish pipes there are several different fingerings, all of which are used to produce tones that are almost, but not quite the same.

Many Irish localities have in their songs the peculiarity of a short note for a phrase end. The phrase comes to an end unexpectedly, a breath is taken and the subject resumed before the meaning becomes clear to the ear. In all written versions I have

seen, the ending notes were greatly prolonged, usually to meet the conventional conception of a four or eight measure length as a whole. The short endings are foreign to customary procedure, and it is amazing how they give an almost oriental character to the music. Similar features are to be found only, I believe, in the music of Egypt and Arabia. Many Irish scholars maintain that their traditional music is very ancient and has been taught in much its present form for centuries, from generation to generation. The words are no index of the antiquity of the music. A new verse is often adapted to an old tune and the tunes in nearly all cases are far older than their settings.

These characteristics of Irish traditional music: the curves of sound which run through delicate gradations as opposed to a fixed scale of set pitches; the peculiar resting-points; the rhythm closely following the rolling nuances of Gaelic, and the indigenous conception of phrase ending and length might well form the background for an art music. The schemes of melody extant today are few enough. Most of those that are entirely different from our present art music, like the oriental practices, are far removed from the feelings of occidentals, and correspondingly hard to understand. Irish music should have a much readier appeal.

Composers who make folk-songs the basis of their art music, are generally content to utilize the melody as a theme in a work built along more or less ordinary lines or at least harmonized in a way which has no especial regard for the contours of the folk-music in its original form. Bela Bartok has shown us how to convey the essence of a people's music by building up a type of harmonization which amalgamates the characteristic features and sets them off, a sort of harmony perhaps unsuited to any other purpose. He has done this very successfully for his native Hungarian music. Whoever approaches Irish material with as much insight will find a wealth of splendid material and unfathomed resources leading in unexplored directions.

Henry Cowell