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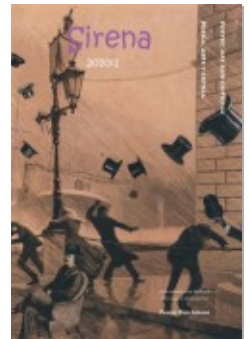
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Eva Bourke

Sirena: poesia, arte y critica, 2010:1, pp. 156-162 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sir.0.0258>



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The vindicated music soaring out - Music as Metaphor in Pearse Hutchinson's Poetry

by Eva Bourke

The place Pearse Hutchinson inhabits in his poems is frequently that of discrete observance. The poet's aesthetic is informed by sympathetic attention; his unprejudiced gaze takes in the whole world; his vision is panoptic, his ears are all-hearing, panacoustic, his judgement is never less than gracious and inclusive. Occasionally it happens that observed and overheard scenes and events combine in a dazzling moment of synaesthetic illumination, as in the last stanza of the poem *A Findrum Blackbird*:

Perched acrest a lilac bush
just inside the front gate
black-and-yellow music
turns a garden into a glade-scriptorium,
brings back those pagan monks,
and fills my deaf harmonious kitchen-window
with yellow-and-black music.

Pearse listening to a blackbird's song from his kitchen window engages in musings and associations which meander back and forth in Irish history from St Patrick to the present and geographically from Dublin across the sea to Flanders, to the 'unearthly flute-music' of the blind 16th century composer Johann Jacob van Eyck, from early Christian Ireland before the Synod of Whitby to 20th century Rathmines where the unlikely party of pagan monks, a lilac bush and a blackbird singing team up to transform deafness into harmony and an ordinary front garden into a glade scriptorium. This lovely metaphor captures the visionary Utopian quality of the last few lines of the poem with the precision of an illustration from an illuminated manuscript. *A Findrum Blackbird* manifests many of the characteristics of Pearse Hutchinson's poems: they are anachronistic, paying little attention to historical time; they are generously syncretist, panoramic in their openness towards other worlds and circuitous, even nomadic, unwrapping on their wanderings countless precious samples of erudition and wit.

Take the earlier poem *Fleadh Cheoil*, for example, from the 1969 collection *Expansions*. If Nietzsche had been able to read this poem he probably would have found full confirmation and an echo of his own exploration of the liberating and sheer physical, physiological and holistic impact of music on the body: What is it that my whole body really expects of music? I believe, its own ease: as if all animal functions should be



quickened by easy, bold, exuberant, self-assured rhythms; as if iron, leaden life should lose its gravity through golden, tender, oil-smooth melodies. My melancholy wants to rest in the hiding places and abysses of perfection: that is why I need music.

Would Nietzsche have found a hiding place or an abyss of perfection in one of the pubs of Ennis during the 1969 Fleadh Cheoil? There would certainly have been plenty of easy, bold, exuberant and self-assured rhythms and golden, tender melodies to cure his melancholy performed by masters and mistresses of virtuoso playing and singing, gathered together from places as far distant as Mayo and Kerry, Scotland and London:

from Easter Snow and Scartaglin
the men with nimble fingers came
in dowdy Sunday suits,
from Kirkintullough and Ladbroke Grove came back
in flashy ties and frumpish hats,
to play an ancient music, make it new.

I imagine Pearse Hutchinson, at leisure and gently observant, seated in a corner of the pub in a 'mean, twisting main street' in the 'shabby county town' of Ennis, as he describes it in the poem, with his panoptic glasses and all-hearing ears, recording a transformation of everything around him through music that is so profound and joyful that only the description of another synaesthetic miracle in the final lines of the stanza can do it justice. The poet, as a professional expert in language, experiences music as both more and less than language, a problematic much disputed by musicologists, in the past as well as today, and a subject to which I will return later:

A stranger manner of telling than words can do,
a strange manner, both less and more than words or Bach,
but like, that Whitsuntide, stained-glass in summer,
high noon, rose window, Benediktbeuren pleasure,
and Séan O'Neachtain's loving singing wood,
an Nollaig to tSamhradh.

If ever words can replicate the airy light-filled architecture of Benediktbeuren, its playful Bavarian Baroque, that most theatrical, pagan folk art or the kaleidoscopic colours of a rose window scattered around by a midday sun, then it is in those lines. Typically, Pearse sees correspondences between the delicately wrought flourishes and ornaments of the stucco masters of Bavaria and the refinements of Irish folk tunes – one of them being that both subtle and refined art forms come from below, from the people of lowly or rural origin, rather than the educated middles classes or the aristocracy. This is the



generous spirit of ‘Christmas all year round’, paradise regained through music. Its redemptive qualities release musicians and publicans, the motley crew of listeners alike, all those assembled in the mean shabby streets and pubs of Ennis from a catalogue of sins: vanity, boastfulness, lust, greed, aggression, bigotry and so on, and by their sheer magic they ‘set the town on fire with peace’. This is Vanity Fair in reverse full of Utopian possibilities.

If this might sound a little high-faluting, the free flowing easy verse of *Fleadh Cheoil*, however, does not contain a trace of pomp or high rhetoric. The long elastic lines of the poem are discursive, direct and sparkling with wit. Although Hutchinson celebrates three days and nights of traditional music making in a small town, he nevertheless casts his net further in time and space, going beyond the confines of rural Ireland and the year 1969. Readers of his poems need to have their wits about them to tease out all the hidden references before they unfold in all their cultural and socio-historical ramifications.

He and a handful of other Dublin poets, Macdara Woods for instance or Leland Bardwell, are members of what could be called the Dublin Bay Renaissance. In their refusal to conform to a more formalist aesthetic they share some characteristics in style and outlook with cross-Atlantic poetic movements, the New York School for instance or some of the Beat poets: openness, spontaneity, subjectivity, formal freedom and frankness about sexuality and emotion; they are frequently straight-talking and employ the vernacular of the city in an urban setting.

One of the trademarks of Pearse Hutchinson’s personal poetic style is that it is all-inclusive. The long lines and stanzas are open structures capable of admitting much of the world, the ‘high’ and the ‘low’, art and music as well as the stench of garbage, the quotidian as well as surrealist flights of fancy, but more often than not the poet is a collector of epiphanic moments amidst the debris of messy life, a butterfly observed from an untidy kitchen for instance, or even more acutely the memory of hearing in the hot stony landscape of Catalonia

a small goatherd singing
in a high, thin, clear voice,
half-Gregorian but more blithe,
on the opposite hill across a dry
riverbed, his black goats meandering.
He’d be in his thirties now, let’s hope.
Let’s hope.



Thirty years later Hutchinson's sympathy is still with the goatherd. The repetition of 'let's hope' is an incantation, an entreaty for this child (as for all humanity) to have been allowed to fulfil his mysterious and unique potential.

Polyglot and erudite, well-travelled, occasionally down-at-heel flâneur on the boulevards of European cities, yet the poet never loses sight of the preciousness and frailty of a single human life. It is his profound humanity which makes him take sides with those who have been pushed to the margins and silenced, the neglected, the dispossessed, the outcasts, against the 'black-and-white contortionists' of control. According to Pearse Hutchinson these binaries, the grand black-and-white narratives of power can easily be dissolved and swept away by one well-played tune on a tenora or a cheap tin whistle.

Fleadh Cheoil was written at a time in the sixties when Irish music, which had almost died due to the efforts of a disapproving clergy and a newly-established political caste alike, experienced a resounding revival. The initial impulses had come from the diasporic overseas communities and were quickly taken up by musical geniuses like Seán O'Riada, the Chieftains, the Dubliners etc. and by 69 the renaissance was in full swing all over the country. In a post-colonial situation of painfully uncertain and diffuse notions of cultural identity this revival contained more than an element of hope for a retrieval of a shared culture, since music as well as the Irish language were seen to constitute a link to a hitherto lost pre-colonial richness.

The discoveries following the passionate and systematic archaeological sifting through the traces and fragments were electrifying and revealed a musical treasure of tunes, songs and stories that had been passed down orally for generations.

How desperately the dispossessed had clung to their musical traditions everywhere in Europe is referred to again and again in Pearse's work in poems like *Pibroch*, and the wonderfully concise *Miracle of Bread and Fiddles*, where the first stanza is set in typical non-provincial style in Finland, the second in Denmark, giving evidence of a past Europe united in poverty and music- making ingenuity:

We were so hungry
we turned bark into bread.

But still we were hungry
so we turned clogs into fiddles.

Music is essential for the spirit's survival even in the direst times of deprivation.



‘There’s heart in that’, says a listener in stanza five of *Fleadh Cheoil* to the poet, pointing to a tin whistle player playing his heart out. Someone once said to me ‘the devil is in the music’; a compliment, and understood as such. Since both the heart and the devil are notoriously difficult to control, it is perhaps not surprising that a colonizing power and later on a puritanical clergy and state tried to suppress the music.

But now the battle has been won and in the poet’s words ‘the vindicated music’ is again free to soar out. This line contains an undertone of revolutionary victoriousness, a hard won triumph, albeit without guillotine. Here are the colonized in the process of regaining autonomy, having defended the right of their music to be performed and listened to, and this, as I understand it, is the metaphorical core of the poem.

Music signifies freedom from puritanism and secular as well as religious authority, a physical and a spiritual unshackling. It stands for free artistic expression and a celebration of indigenous culture versus the crushing weight of colonial history. All this is contained in the metaphor of the soaring ‘vindicated music’. Music in this context carries a powerful extra-musical semantic charge going far beyond its purely musical or – in the case of song – textual meaning.

If we cut to *A True Story Ending in False Hope*, published over two decades later, it becomes evident that this is still clearly understood by and still goes up the nose of those who represent authority and control. The barman banishing listeners and musicians from the Edenic musical tables – not unlike a present-day archangel Michael – represents an Ireland which is modern, brash, consumerist and has little use for what is seen as old-fashioned and potentially anarchical. Luckily, the group of listeners find another pub where they can ‘board a chopper for heaven’ and play and drink till early morning. The flight image features as a comical, self-ironic echo of the soaring music in *Fleadh Cheoil*. The retrieval of a lost culture is not without its hitches and burlesque moments.

In the poem *Mozarabic Wine* from *The Frost is All Over* of 1975 music is again invested with a multiplicity of metaphorical meanings, but this time the charge is actually explosive. It is a cautionary tale of cultural theft and violent retribution. An elite coterie languish in ‘gardens planted by black slaves’ far beyond the ‘porchless ghettos’. They drink the wine their gardeners have toiled to grow and steal the slaves’ instruments they were too proud and clean to make:

but once the wood was polished and vibrant
we played the instruments and called them ours.



In an excess of shamelessness they even appropriate Buraku music, the musical self-expression of the pariahs of Japan. Both, slaves and gardeners, have been deprived of the fruits of their labour on pain of death. During a violent uprising erupting from the slums the music is burned and the wine spilled for ever. It is a bleak parable about a hedonistic, acquisitive society which excludes its underclass of ghetto and slum dwellers from the enjoyment of their own cultural achievements:

so crudely had our true elegance
burned their hungry stumps, their forebears' pride.
In the sober silence we forced them to make,
we cannot even atone.

The plundering of the people's cultural tradition by a spoilt and arrogant upper class is tantamount to the death of this tradition. It results in a *tabula rasa*, a wiping out of all links to a pre-colonial condition and makes any historical self-definition on the part of slaves and gardeners impossible. Here, as in other poems, the important role music plays as a central metaphor is undeniable. However, the question remains whether it is really possible to ascribe such a meaning to music, to present it as charged with social, historical and psychological intent. The poems leave no doubt about the specific significance a certain type of music – traditional Irish, Catalan, Buraku, Flamenco – has for Pearse Hutchinson. But one wonders if it is a matter of over-interpretation to regard it as a metaphor for the artistic affirmation of a dispossessed people? After all this is – in true poetic fashion – not stated anywhere directly.

Since the experience of music is entirely subjective, will all readers understand this metaphor? Music is a particularly complex issue, a non-physical, emotional experience as well as a physically transmitted sound structure, which places it close to language. Both are embodied systems in the sense that they are produced and received by the body, both consist of sequences of sound through and within a certain time and both are able to address and express emotions. Theodor Adorno attributes language-character to music. But according to him it contains a message which is both open as well as concealed and without which it would be meaningless, 'like an acoustic kaleidoscope'.

Nevertheless we are able to comprehend the open and concealed message the poet refers to because we are aware of the social and historical complex alluded to. Since metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action, as the cognitive psychologists Lakoff and Turner have stated, and since our ordinary conceptual systems are fundamentally metaphorical in nature, we are uncannily adept at crossing from the concrete to the abstract, the material to the immaterial, or at blending both domains with breath-taking swiftness.



The ingenuity of our conceptual mappings and blendings, the way metaphors inform our everyday discourse through which we arrive at and constantly create new meanings in a bewildering confusion of concepts is really astonishing. This is what enables us to ‘understand’ the emotions intrinsic to music as well as its extrinsic socio-historical implications. But only when we remember the specific, socio-historical situations which convey a particular semantic charge on certain types of music, Irish traditional for example or Catalan tenora playing, Blues, Flamenco, Buraku or Scottish pipe music, can we properly comprehend what the poet is expressing to us through metaphor.

His finely-tuned ears hear the incarcerated gypsies of Spain rattling their chains and hammering on the bars of their cells in the rhythms of the Flamenco, they understand the mortal grief of the African slave in the descending melodies of the Blues, the challenge to authority and the inherent rebelliousness in an Irish hornpipe as asserted by the loose-limbed free-style movements of sean-nós dancing.

It is characteristic that Hutchinson champions the music of those who have been dealt with harshly by history. But it is also the undeniable wonder and genius of their music - on a par with that of the great classical masters - a music which is not of the concert stage, but the streets and the dingy bars, not of the flautist but the flute player, not of the violinist but the fiddler, which affects and delights him and which he pays tribute to in his poetry.

The answer to the question whether there is musical meaning in this context is a clear yes, it is there for those who can hear, those who understand and cherish it and know what Pearse Hutchinson means when - speaking metaphorically - he celebrates ‘the vindicated music soaring out’.

