

## EDITORIAL: (INTER)NATIONAL MUSIC

Christopher Fox

Ralph Vaughan Williams was born 150 years ago and, as 2022 comes to an end, his is an anniversary that has been much celebrated and not just in Britain. These celebrations have revealed again the richness and ambition of his output and have also been a reminder of the central position he occupies within British musical life, something that *TEMPO* has reflected since the journal first appeared in 1939. In a review of music by Bartók published in 1941 in *TEMPO*'s fifth issue, for example, Eric Blom suggested that the composer had progressed from his earlier 'ardent preoccupation with a national idiom', going on to compare him with Vaughan Williams and arguing that Bartók 'has undergone much the same evolution as Vaughan Williams'.<sup>1</sup> The dangerous political corollaries of an 'ardent preoccupation' with national identity are as clear and present today as they were in 1941, but the contents of the current *TEMPO* demonstrate that the relationship between music's identity and where it is made continues to be significant.

In the autumn of 1932 Vaughan Williams gave a series of six lectures at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, later published as *National Music*, and in the first lecture, 'Should music be national?', he suggested that 'many young composers make the mistake of imagining they can be universal without at first having been local'.<sup>2</sup> The *National Music* lectures are full of avuncular assertions like this, their apparent chauvinism more than a little disconcerting to a modern reader. Underpinning them, however, are aesthetic questions that are still worth considering; above all, the relationship between the 'local' and the 'universal' is something that continues to preoccupy musicians and the organisations that fund their activities.

In 1946 when a music summer school was launched in Darmstadt it described its activities as 'Ferienkurse für Internationale Neue Musik', the adjective 'international' emphatically indicating that the era of 'national' music, promoted under Nazism from 1933 to 1945, was now at an end. Thirty years later, Walter Zimmermann's epic cycle of orchestral and chamber works, *LOKALE MUSIK* (1977–81),<sup>3</sup> explored ways in which the solidly 'local' – folk melodies from southern Germany – might become transcendently 'universal'. Zimmermann subjected recognisable tunes to a range of abstract formal processes that progressively dissolve their identity, until all that was left is what John Cage would have described as a music which lets 'sounds be themselves'.<sup>4</sup> Since 2015 Jennifer Walshe's *Aisteach* project has slowly assembled 'Historical Documents of the Irish Avant-Garde'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Eric Blom, 'Bartók's Third Period', *TEMPO*, no. 5 (1941), pp. 61–62.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> A remastered edition of the original recordings of *LOKALE MUSIK* was released on Mode (307/09) in 2019.

<sup>4</sup> John Cage, *Silence* (1960), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Walshe, *Aisteach: The Avant Garde Archive of Ireland*, [www.aisteach.org](http://www.aisteach.org) (accessed 22 August 2022).

These include accounts of the work of the Guinness Dadaists and the Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers Collective alongside recordings of the music they produced and biographies of the artists involved. But all of them are the invention of Walshe and her collaborators, their creation of an alternative history in which international art movements were part of the Irish cultural landscape, rather than forbidden alien tendencies, a riposte to the parochialism imposed by decades of theocracy.

This issue of *TEMPO* ranges across the space between the local and the universal, the national and the international. The two older composers featured, Jonathan Harvey (1939–2012) and Justin Connolly (1933–2020), occupied very different, but perhaps peculiarly British, positions on the continuum. Connolly's musical language was 'international' in the sense that it embraced the freely chromatic, rhythmically flexible, intervallically disjunct vocabulary of the modernist mainstream, but his work was 'national' in its fastidious craftsmanship and expressive restraint. Harvey managed, as he himself acknowledged and as Ed Hughes reminds us in his article, to wear 'two hats': with one he wrote music that could be used within the liturgy of the Anglican church, with the other he produced work in response to a consistently impressive series of commissions from new-music festivals, soloists, ensembles, orchestras and opera houses across Europe and North America.

One of the hallmarks of this latter part of Harvey's output was its bold utilisation of electronic sound generation and transformation, and many composers who work with music technology enjoy the thought that their arrays of hardware and software, and the music that they enable, know no boundaries. Craig Vear, Carla Rees and Adam Stephenson's DigiScore project is an example of this, and their article about the project describes work that is avowedly international, funded by a grant from the European Union to 'build a scientific study of inclusive digital musicianship',<sup>6</sup> and using machine-learning software and an 'engine' developed for computer games.

Music history is full of these transnational tendencies, from *ars nova* to the *bossa nova*, new ways of making music that sweep across borders. Sometimes, as with DigiScore, they are based on new technologies; sometimes they involve the introduction of new ideas that quickly achieve an international currency, becoming embedded in the *lingua franca* of an emerging generation of musicians and promoters. The articles on the work of Tyshawyn Sorey and Jessie Marino, by Victoria Aschheim and Thomas R. Moore respectively, explore examples of this phenomenon, discussing how these very different artists nonetheless share an interest in reconfiguring the ways in which the ideological relationships between composers, performers and audiences are defined, mediated and understood.

But sometimes music is carried across borders by no more than a happy alignment of the stars. Hans Abrahamsen's *let me tell you* has been one of the most widely heard pieces of new classical music of the last ten years, and Sebastian Black discusses how the music is constructed. But how did *let me tell you* become quite so successful? Perhaps because it brought together a beautiful text (by Paul Griffiths), a composer at the height of his powers and an astonishingly gifted lyric soprano (Barbara Hannigan), their work disseminated through the established networks of the classical-music industry.

<sup>6</sup> ERC Fact Sheet, 'Digital Scores – Investigating the Technological Transformation of the Music Score', <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101002086> (accessed 24 August 2022).

What would Vaughan Williams have made of all these musical activities? Generous spirit that he was, I suspect he would have tried to find the best in each but might have worried that some were insufficiently rooted in their own particular terroir. Perhaps, even today in our supposedly globalised societies, that remains a valid concern; at the very least it's important that we continue to recognise that some musicians still want to emulate W. H. Auden and 'be, like some valley cheese, local, but prized elsewhere'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Auden, 'Shorts II', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 853.