

# Exploding the Continuum: The Utopia of Unbroken Tradition

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*'... only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past ...'*

Walter Benjamin: *Theses on the Philosophy of History (III)*

'FACED WITH a gap of centuries in Ireland's musical development, Ó Riada set about filling it himself.' These words were written a generation ago by Louis Marcus in a commemorative volume for Seán Ó Riada, subtitled 'Integrating Tradition'.<sup>1</sup> They echo Thomas Davis's 1845 assertion: 'There are great gaps in Irish song to be filled up'.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I wish to propose that a different historical perspective might lead us towards viewing these lacunae in a less fatalistic light than has tended to be the case.

## I

Marcus writes of Ó Riada's 'longing to touch the hand of the last Irishman for whom the Gaelic and European traditions of music were not irreconcilable', the eighteenth-century harpist and composer Turlough O'Carolan. The absence of such reconciliation in the intervening two centuries is equated with the absence of 'development'. Marcus wrote further:

Ideally, in an Ireland of unbroken musical development, any competent composer could have written a useful score for *Mise Éire* on the residue of our national contribution to the music of nineteenth-century Europe. But we made no such contribution; there was no Irish Smetana or Grieg to echo.<sup>3</sup>

If Marcus was claiming that there was no Irish classical music during this hiatus, then he was simply incorrect. Presumably, his point was that there were none of comparable status to the composers he mentioned. By implication, if the 'reconciliation' of Gaelic and European traditions had been pursued in Carolan's wake by equally gifted individuals, we might have had nineteenth-century composers of sufficient stature to inspire, by their influence, a national compositional 'school' in the twentieth century

and beyond. The unquestioned valorisation of continuity in the creation of a major canon is at the heart of this passage, which contains one or two further assumptions that, on another occasion, might warrant more detailed interrogation. Is it really self-evident that a film on the 1916 Rising should necessarily have ‘echoed’ the ‘residue’ of nineteenth-century music? Has the influence of Smetana and Grieg on subsequent musical developments in their respective countries truly been as decisive as is usually claimed?

‘Development’ comes into play when major figures influence subsequent major figures in an unbroken series; the word implies growth, maturation, progress. It defines each historical event as a transition between its predecessor and successor. Traditional music, on the other hand, is allegedly handed down in an unbroken chain from performer to performer. Indeed the image of the ‘chain’ is often avoided in favour of an aquatic imagery of flow—*Riverdance*, *Rivers of Sound*—implying that the transmission of this music is more of a continuum. Its ‘development’ consists in modifications of performance style that in no way affect the almost Platonic integrity of the music, which can thus stand as the ‘language’ of a people that has lost its language. Thus, music becomes a form of redemption. We know that Ó Riada saw his move to West Cork in precisely this light and how illusory this redemption ultimately proved. Subsequent Irish composers, for better or for worse, have been more content to acknowledge themselves beyond redemption.

## II

Let us take a closer look at the figure of Carolan and attempt to imagine a musical history that might take him as its starting point. Donal O’Sullivan, in his magisterial two-volume study of the harpist, judged that ‘Carolan’s blindness and his lack of formal musical education prevent us from regarding him as a composer in the accepted sense of the term.’<sup>4</sup> Some years later, the harpist Gráinne Yeats would write: ‘Though Carolan’s music is slight when viewed from the point of view of large scale composition, yet it is an amazing achievement ... that suggests that Turlough Carolan does indeed deserve the title of Ireland’s first national composer’.<sup>5</sup>

That the putative point of origin for a nation’s classical musical history should provoke such contradictory evaluations (even if both are ultimately favourable) may explain why someone like William Henry Grattan Flood, who early in the last century published the first ‘authoritative’ *History of Irish Music*, enthusiastically attributed spurious Irish origins to such English musical giants as John Dowland (1562–1626) and Henry Purcell

(1658–1695).<sup>6</sup> The urge to lay claim to these monuments is a parodistic mirror-image of the colonial master's well-known predilection for appropriating the finest flowers of the conquered nation's culture. It is also, as we shall see, the other side of the procedure whereby Irish commentators renounce those who might with some justice be tentatively claimed as our own.

Edward Bunting (commenting, in the introduction to his 1840 collection *Ancient Music of Ireland*, on Carolan's assimilation of Italian influences) stated that 'Carolan was the first who departed from the purely Irish style in Composition'. This seems to imply that others followed along this path; but Carolan was, of course, the last of the great harpist-composers, and thus without any obvious successor. Thomas Roseingrave (1688–1766), 'the curious chromatic eighteenth-century Irishman',<sup>7</sup> might well have heard some of Carolan's tunes and might even have met the older master (perhaps at Jonathan Swift's Deanery), but we have no documentary evidence either to substantiate or rebut such a pleasing fantasy. Neither can we assert or deny with confidence that Carolan's influence is traceable in Roseingrave's work, although a common Italian influence is indisputable.

Roseingrave went to Italy in 1709 and befriended the great composer and harpsichordist Domenico Scarlatti, whose music he edited and popularised. As opposed to Scarlatti's experimentalism, which seems to proceed directly from his virtuosity on the keyboard, the Irishman's deviations from the increasingly bland conventions of his time and place have their paradoxical origins in his loyalty to the more austere musical language of the Restoration. The great eighteenth-century English music historian Burney claimed Roseingrave's harmony was 'rendered intolerably harsh ... by a licentious and extravagant modulation', while Burney's rival Sir John Hawkins described his playing and composition as 'harsh and disgusting, manifesting great learning, but void of eloquence and variety'. A piece such as the keyboard *Voluntary in G Minor* (1728) goes some way towards explaining these reactions: it sets out from the very start on a vertiginous course of modulation that is potentially endless, being interrupted rather than rounded off by a cadence that is itself the cue for an almost equally chromatic fugue. Dissonances are frequent and frequently unresolved.<sup>8</sup>

Later in life, Roseingrave fell disastrously in love with one of his pupils, 'a lady of no dove-like constancy', in Burney's splendid phrase, and his mental equilibrium gradually disintegrated. Perhaps the belief that the most interesting aspects of his music stem from psychological alienation has contributed towards consigning his reputation to near oblivion. One

thinks of Carlo Gesualdo (c. 1561–1613), whose harmonic ‘eccentricities’ were until recently regarded as a product of his literally murderous mental imbalance. However, patient advocacy has overcome this prejudice, and Gesualdo has now taken his place in musical history as one of the most powerful musical voices of late Renaissance Italy. Roseingrave still awaits systematic advocacy, let alone rehabilitation, and such attempts as have been made in that direction have not come from Irish sources. Such an exclusion, as we shall see, is analogous to that of contemporary Irish music from the repertoires of most of our leading performing musicians and from serious musicological consideration worthy of the name.

### III

If the gap between Carolan and Roseingrave admits of a certain hesitant mediation, the century between Roseingrave and John Field (1782–1837) is empty indeed—or, more precisely, filled with musical emptiness. We may console ourselves that this vacuity was evenly spread throughout the British Isles, and that during a period when the German-speaking countries alone gave us Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the Dublin-born Field was the only Irish or British composer of any real stature.

David Branson writes that ‘Field’s overwhelming disadvantage, and one which led to the virtual obliteration of his larger works, was the lack of any sure sense of construction’.<sup>9</sup> His seven extant piano Concertos ‘bear the look of a large span and are accompanied by full and interestingly laid-out orchestral parts, but ... prove on the whole to be uncertain in their direction, unenterprising in modulation ... and sometimes so rambling and discursive as to be shapeless’.<sup>10</sup>

Revisionism, in one of its happier manifestations, has rescued Field’s Concertos from obliteration, and slowly but surely his reputation has rebounded. Nonetheless, Branson’s critique stands: Field was a miniaturist whose career as the finest concert pianist of his day required him to compose occasional large-scale works with orchestra. It was his real achievement in his solo works to find a pianistic correlative to Italian *bel canto* and, thus, to make the piano, which had evolved from the plangent harpsichord via the fortepiano, available for a romantic age less interested in form than in feeling. Furthermore, his aversion to form had its positive side: ‘Field’s creation of the *Nocturne* as a genre was undoubtedly his greatest contribution to music’ according to Charles K. Moss. ‘It must be remembered that the piano “piece” scarcely existed before his time. Apart from dances and technical studies, there were only sonatas, sonatinas, sets of variations, fantasias, rondos, and fugues. Field

created an entity that did not develop a given theme; neither did it follow a known form.’<sup>11</sup>

Field, then, was a modernist, an innovator who found forms to embody the absence of form—but was he an Irish composer? Professor Harry White is convinced that he was not, asserting apodictically that ‘in Field’s case the fact of his Irish birth and the potential of Irish culture were of no significance whatever to his English background and training’.<sup>12</sup>

The meaning of this sentence is somewhat unclear: how could Field’s birth and the ‘potential of Irish culture’ have any significance to his ‘background and training’ as opposed to his character and personality? A jester might claim that Field’s alcoholism proves that his Irish background was all too formative in the latter respects. Furthermore, his training was at least as Italian as it was English, since from the age of nine he studied with Tommaso Giordani and was subsequently apprenticed to the Svengali-like Muzio Clementi in London. His first works were a piano arrangement of the Irish tune ‘Go to the devil and shake yourself’, and two rondos on Italian songs by Giordani (1793), a juxtaposition that suggests intriguing if coincidental parallels to Carolan. In 1808, his *Air russe varié* was, according to Moss, ‘one of the earliest nationalistic piano pieces from the Romantic Era. Field showed the way for Glinka and others in his incorporation of Russian folk songs in his music’.<sup>13</sup> So, was Field as Russian as he was British or Irish? The option is not even considered by Professor White, although his emphatic distinction between Chopin’s *Polishness* (essential) and Field’s *Irishness* (irrelevant) is based in part on the assertion that ‘his life in Russia was not (in creative terms) an exile, but an immigration, complete and unabridged’.<sup>14</sup> The notion that an unabridged immigration cannot simultaneously be an exile, ‘in creative terms’ (whatever that means) or otherwise, is left undefended.

Professor White’s thesis—that ‘the preoccupation with “folksong” ... not as a resource but as a *substitute* for the art tradition, hindered the transformation from Gaelic to modern Irish modes of musical expression’—*requires* him to deny the pianist-composer Field any element of ‘Irishness’, just as it requires him to consider ‘the Carolan myth’ rather than the reality of Carolan’s work and to completely exclude the harpsichordist-organist-composer Roseingrave from consideration.<sup>15</sup>

#### IV

The lament that there exists a gap (or many gaps) in our musical history implies that other cultures are more fortunate in displaying a more seamless development. This thesis is difficult to defend. In Europe, only France—the oldest unified nation state on the continent—can boast an

‘uninterrupted’ tradition, loosely definable as classical and dating back at least to the early Middle Ages. Italy does not do too badly, but has to cope with the seeming disappearance of significant instrumental music during the nineteenth century. Germany, which in many ways defines our whole conception of what is or is not ‘classical’, only begins to enter standard musical-history books in the seventeenth century and hardly shone in the twentieth. The United States was a late starter, and Canada hardly features on concert programmes (outside Canada) to this day. If we move outside the Western world, its classical music has never been anything but an alien presence closely identified with colonialism. From this and many other points of view, Ireland has much in common with non-European recipients of the doubtful boon of British and other imperialism.

Britain itself presents a highly problematic picture. Having shone with exceptional effulgence during the period from John Dunstable (d. 1453) to Henry Purcell (d. 1695), Britain proverbially (and exaggeratedly) became ‘a land without music’ until the advent of the Dublin-born Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924), whose immense prestige and influence as teacher and composer gave him near patriarchal status. Even this over-simplifies the picture by failing to separate the constituent nations of our neighbouring island: the musical histories of Scotland and Wales are at least as porous as our own.

England’s ‘great gap’ of almost two centuries admits of a number of tentative explanations, including the baleful effect of Puritanism and the dubious influence of the Hanoverian monarchy and its imported but undigested (and sometimes indigestible) culture. It is only with Edward Elgar (1857–1934) that the ‘Anglo’ and the ‘Saxon’ amicably shake hands. As Elgar matured, the Teutonic afflatus diminished until a work like the Cello Concerto (1919) escapes almost completely from its grasp. With Benjamin Britten (1913–1976), the oppressive influence of the ‘Germanic centuries’ is overcome by a reaching back to Purcellian times and earlier—to the *Lachrimae* of John Dowland, for example. Here, and in the radical early works of Peter Maxwell Davies (b. 1934), the progressive impetus stems less from the recent past (although obviously Davies took the second Viennese School and the Darmstadt avant-garde on board) than from the Middle Ages and Renaissance: a ‘great gap’ proves to be productive rather than obstructive, and ‘continuity’ a red herring.

In the case of Stanford, the embrace of Germanic formal rectitude was a matter of principle. His seven Brahmsian symphonies—Bernard Shaw, himself an ardent Wagnerian, called Stanford ‘a kind of Anglo-Irish

Dvorák’—are full of good things that are not quite strong enough to merit the lengthy symphonic elaborations to which they are subjected with dutiful efficiency. Indeed, the very existence of this ultra-professional craftsman in the European mode might in itself seem to refute Louis Marcus’s assertion (quoted above) that ‘our national contribution to the music of nineteenth-century Europe’ was non-existent. However, the word ‘national’ provides the answer: Stanford’s avowed Unionism and opposition to Home Rule excluded him, according to nationalistic standards unquestioned until comparatively recently, from consideration as an ‘Irish’ composer, and, in his case at any rate, the dyad ‘Anglo-Irish’ was considered to be heavily weighted in favour of its first component.

Interestingly, this view of Stanford still prevails at a time when such narrow nationalistic standards have, in other areas of our social and cultural life, been displaced by a supposedly post-nationalist pluralism often associated with the likes of Fintan O’Toole. In other words, the notion that you can be simultaneously Irish and British has become axiomatic in all domains, save that of classical music. In general, I believe that advocates of civic republicanism should seek to reclaim this post-nationalist ground on their own terms within all disciplines. This is not the same thing as attempting to (re)appropriate our neighbour’s heritage in the manner of Grattan Flood. Rather, if we pluralise the concept of history by emphasising more fluid notions of cultural and civilisational admixture, then it becomes possible to see someone like Field as a part of Irish, or British, or even Russian musical history, and indeed an ethnic Englishman like Arnold Bax as part of both British and Irish musical history. The late Edward Said has frequently written of the importance of cultural admixture, even when one of the components of such a mix is identifiable as the colonial oppressor.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting that despite his earnest endeavours in the fields of opera and symphony, until quite recently it appeared as though Stanford would be remembered only as the composer of the perennially popular ‘The Bluebird’ (1910). Lasting just over three minutes, this haunting part-song is most notable for its ending: it has none. The final supertonic e-flat hanging in suspension is perhaps the sole concession to modernism in Stanford’s output, and the fate of ‘The Bluebird’, by comparison with Stanford’s would-be ‘major’ works, suggests that he might have had a more productive career as a miniaturist, eschewing the pretentious certainties of symphonic apotheosis for the ambiguities appropriate to a fractured Irish background and an honourably ‘minor’ tradition.

## V

A semi-illiterate blind bard, not ‘a composer in the accepted sense of the term’, whose music is ‘slight when viewed from the point of view of large scale composition’ (Carolan); a baroque keyboard virtuoso, whose music is ‘harsh and disgusting’, ‘licentious and extravagant’, and who was possibly insane (Roseingrave); an alcoholic concert pianist whose music ‘lack[ed] ... any sure sense of construction’ but who ‘created an entity that did not develop a given theme; neither did it follow a known form’ (Field): let us ponder some of the implications of such a hypothetical conjuncture.

Firstly, it is clear that neither the succession of these three figures nor the actual music they composed can be characterised by continuity or development. We might relate this to the well-known biological adage that ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’—i.e. the sequence of events involved in the development of an individual organism recapitulates the sequence involved in the evolution of a species—and suggest that the disintegrations characteristic of these composers are not unlinked to the fragmentation of Irish history under colonial oppression. Edward Said, in the context of his own disinherited people, has repeatedly spoken of ‘the difficulties of Palestinian narratives ... that is to say, we didn’t have and couldn’t formulate a linear narrative in the national sense ... There were too many obstacles, we were too divided over this and that, and the absence of a centre made our lives essentially fragmented’.<sup>17</sup> A history of Irish literature in English focusing on such narrative fragmentation might proceed from Swift and Sterne, through Maturin, Mangan, and Edgeworth (*Castle Rackrent*), to the labyrinthine modernism of Joyce, Beckett, and Flann O’Brien. From such a perspective, the subsequent contentment of Anglophone Irish fiction with the certainties of linear realism might fall in line with the attempt to insert Irish society into the developmental narrative of ‘major’ nations, e.g. by aligning ourselves willy-nilly with US-UK imperialism, rather than with the cause of nations still struggling against colonial subjection. From this perspective also, we might consider Stanford’s project as one of establishing a musical equivalent of the imperialism to which he offered allegiance, while a fragmentary piece like ‘The Bluebird’ suggests a ‘molestation’ of this project from within.<sup>18</sup>

We might then move through the twentieth century observing how Irish classical music failed to establish its independence as long as composers sought to ally themselves with continuities of one kind or another—whether those offered by the imperial neighbour or by an idealised version of the Irish tradition itself. Thus, Frederick May (1911–1985) sought



again and again to match himself with the English pastoral tradition, yet approached greatness in the one work—his extraordinary and extraordinarily flawed String Quartet (1936)—in which he dramatised the incompatibility between this tradition and the Viennese modernism that had briefly seized his attention. Seán Ó Riada similarly flirted with the twelve-note method before striving in his significantly unfinished *Nomos No. 2* (1963) to mimic in musical terms the breakdown of mainstream European tradition and subsequently attempting to redeem himself within the perceived continuity of Irish traditional music. Seoirse Bodley sought, in the 1960s, to align himself unambiguously with the central European avant-garde, an attempt culminating, and perhaps collapsing, with the austere total-serial *Configurations for Orchestra* (1967). Subsequently, in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* for 2 pianos (1972) and the orchestral *A Small White Cloud Drifts Over Ireland* (1976), Bodley juxtaposed avant-garde gestures with pastiches of Irish traditional music. It must be said that these brave attempts work neither as synthesis (the twain never meet) nor as antithesis (no spark is ignited by their failure to do so), and Bodley has subsequently moved in other directions. His unwillingness to stand still undoubtedly does him honour.

Composers born in the mid-twentieth century have generally been less tormented by these issues, yet it would be a mistake to suggest that they merely brush them under the carpet. Roger Doyle (b. 1949) has written of his response to Bob Quinn's *Atlantean* films and their claim that '[t]he thousand-year-old Irish *Sean-Nós* singing is the plainest evidence' of 'ancient and continuous influences [on Irish culture] from Morocco, Libya, Egypt, etc.': 'I found that I had a powerful link to the ideas the film was propounding and was very moved by Sarah Grealish's *sean-nós* singing ... included in the film. This music was like old weeds coming up through cracks in the tarmac that the Catholic Church and Tourist Board had covered Ireland with ... proof to me that something remains in our blood of other Irelands, uncharted'.<sup>19</sup> This remarkable imagery is streets away from the staple vocabulary of aquatic flow prevalent in discussions of traditional music.

Already in the 1973 *Ceol Sídh* ('*Fairy Music*') for three traditional Irish instruments, Doyle had been evoking those 'old weeds' rather than quoting any tunes or tropes from the repertoire.<sup>20</sup> The most dramatic illustration of his approach is *Under the Green Time* (1995), in which a live piper interacts with a tape part derived from Brian Ó hUiginn's recorded uilleann pipes.<sup>21</sup> 'An image of Ireland without the sweet Celtic wrapping,' writes Doyle of this powerful piece, in which those 'other Irelands, uncharted' assert themselves with a volcanic force that one

misses from the more commercially successful chart-toppers of Bill Whelan, Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin, or Michael McGlynn.<sup>22</sup> Doyle's huge *Babel* project (1990–99) uses 'many soloists around the world creating an ethnic musical language' in order to invent 'a large-scale musical structure ... with each piece of music being thought of as a "room" or place within an enormous tower city.'<sup>23</sup> This might seem to bring Doyle's efforts within the ambit of 'world music' or indeed Karlheinz Stockhausen's 'music of the whole world', but the divergences are far more significant. Whereas the former tends to impose a kind of western patina on a diversity of non-western traditions and hence often veers close to cultural imperialism, and the latter strives to mediate between all cultural traditions to attain a utopian but ultimately very Teutonic synthesis (e.g. in the 1967 tape piece *Hymnen*, which Doyle acknowledges as a major influence), Doyle is more concerned with the irreducibility of the differences between different cultures and between his own different 'styles'. His 'ethnic musical language' (perhaps an imprecise phrase) is a language of Babel after, rather than before, the fall. The same is true of his 'tower city', which is populated by the unredeemed speakers of a multiplicity of languages, something that is not seen as grounds for lamentation—rather the contrary.

In 1978, Gerald Barry (b. 1952) composed a piece for two pianos with the graphic title 'Ø'. Here, all the pitches are derived from the Irish folk song *Bonny Kate* by means of recondite procedures that leave the original unrecognisable, but part of the music's DNA nevertheless. Such an approach might seem to merge the kind of serialist principles he had imbibed as a student of Stockhausen at Cologne with his background in a County Clare environment saturated with traditional music. In the *Sextet* (1992–3), and above all in the first *Piano Quartet* (1992), the Irish elements have risen to the surface; this is avant-garde music that has taken the floor with a vengeance. Contemporaneously with these pieces, the orchestral *Hard D* (1992—the title refers to the lowest note on the uilleann pipes) matches the structure of Bach's late canonical variations *Vom Himmel hoch ...* with material derived from a dozen or so Irish ballads, including 'Take me up to Monto' and 'Finnegan's Wake'. The sheer sweep and cheek of the music renders questions of congruity or incongruity redundant.<sup>24</sup>

Donal O'Sullivan wrote of Carolan that 'the emotional strain is wholly absent from the great majority of his songs—not unnaturally, since they are Bacchanalian in character.' His closing encomium on the composer was: 'It is not for his ecstasies that we value Carolan's work ... In an age of pallid gloom for Ireland, this blind harper brought ... a kind of puckish

joyousness which before it had seemed to lack'.<sup>25</sup> These traits—bacchanalian, puckish joyousness—seem to me singularly apt to describe a good deal of Barry's music. Yet it is clear that there is no intention on his part to self-consciously 'touch the hand of the last Irishman for whom the Gaelic and European traditions of music were not irreconcilable.' Rather, Barry reaches for whatever materials come naturally, here an obscure sixteenth-century English song, there a venerable Bach chorale, elsewhere a rollicking Irish tune. From all of his music, I think, we derive the odd sensation of a very great gap indeed—the nineteenth century, that portentous age that has defined so many of our cultural attitudes, yet left Barry's musical thinking entirely untouched (although to the best of my knowledge he is without prejudice against the period).

Here is how official musicology, in the familiar shape of Professor White, sees this phenomenon: while Stockhausen enjoys continuity with the German music that precedes him, '[n]o such continuity is available to Barry.'<sup>26</sup> That such unavailability constitutes a disability is an assumption subjected to no critical analysis; that it might constitute a fruitful resource is unthinkable.

## VI

To anyone who has studied the outlines of Irish musical history, it will be immediately evident that there are holes in the above account. Where is Philip Cogan (1748–1833)? Where is Michael Balfe (1808–1870)? Where are Hamilton Harty (1879–1841), Ina Boyle (1889–1967), A. J. Potter (1918–1980), and Ian Wilson (b. 1964)? Furthermore, one would be hard put to define any of my chosen composers as constituting a transition between his predecessor and successor. Instead of charting the solar system, I have drawn up a constellation according to specific and explicit criteria and have 'censored' everything that does not fit into this pattern. However, there is no implication that my constellation excludes any of the other possible constellations making up the firmament of musical history, nor that individual stars need belong to one constellation alone. Traditional historiography insists that its exclusions are normative; in turn, this normativity tends to be self-fulfilling.

The reference to Walter Benjamin in the epigraph heading this essay is by no means fortuitous. For Benjamin, '[a] historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still'.<sup>27</sup> Such a historian has the courage 'to blast open the continuum of history'.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, historicism (or historical idealism) 'contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason

historical. It became historical posthumously ... A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one.'<sup>29</sup>

If those commentators who seek to establish a chain or a continuum are by definition historical idealists in quest of the national essence that grounds such continuities, historical materialists seek to establish the conditions of a discontinuity and to relate these conditions to the discordances within a composition or text, or the practice of an individual creator. The historical idealist sees causal historicism as 'the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate ... The spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment ... There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. Benjamin's conclusion: 'A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain'.<sup>30</sup>

Standard general histories of twentieth-century music will mention Schoenberg, Stravinsky, and Bartok among the seminal figures, while relegating Satie to the category of minor curiosity. This is because Satie deliberately and aggressively courted minority—the status of being minor, of not having attained one's majority—and, in so doing, exerted an influence at least as 'major' as that of the other three, in part through the sense of transatlantic affinity he inspired in John Cage. Traditional historians, however, are obsessed with notions of 'development', as outlined earlier, and with the concomitant implications of 'maturation' and 'progress', notions that are subverted by such 'marginal' figures, who always seem suspended somewhere between the archaic and the experimental. Satie's novelty or progressiveness, like Barry's, consists precisely in his dislocation from broadly defined historical trends. While his contemporaries struggled with the immediate implications of Wagner, Satie looked back to the Middle Ages. His music is stripped of even such traces of nineteenth-century developmentalism as survive in Debussy and Ravel. Within a mainstream musical culture such as that of France, a more permissive and promiscuous historical methodology—embracing 'histories' rather than 'History', affirming 'minority' equally with 'majority'—is necessary to do justice to such a figure.<sup>31</sup> It is, I believe, the *sole* means to do justice to Irish musical history without entailing the most blatant 'great gap' of all—that which marks the absence of contemporary classical music from the officially drawn maps of our cultural landscape.

## VII

Our cultural managers and image-formers would have us believe that Ireland today is celebrated worldwide for its literature and music.<sup>32</sup> Celebration of the former undoubtedly entails tourist-oriented lip service to Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett, but in the main focuses on more recent purveyors of the novel and short story in English, with one or two mainstream poets thrown in for good measure. It is as if, once the messy business of modernism had been put behind us, Irish literature proper began with Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain and culminated in Colm Tóibín and Roddy Doyle, with an honourable niche reserved for Seamus Heaney. With these writers, Irish literature at last grew up, merging with the Great Tradition of English realism and becoming eligible for British and Irish literary awards, and indeed the Nobel Prize itself. Such a perception involves ignoring literature in Irish and marginalising to the point of exclusion both the nineteenth-century figures mentioned earlier (Mangan, Maturin, Edgeworth) and modernists such as Thomas Kinsella or the poets included in Alex Davis's significantly entitled *A Broken Line* (e.g. the formidable Trevor Joyce).<sup>33</sup> As for prose, one gets the impression that 'experimental' fiction is either not being written or, more likely, not being published.

Celtic Tiger Ireland has become a developed country, as embarrassed by its tradition of opposition to colonialism as by the poverty and eccentricity of a Carolan or Mangan, exorbitantly proud of the wealth of a handful of millionaire tax-dodgers, and eager to be represented abroad by commercially successful authors and musicians. In this context, Ireland at last enters 'History', defined as the history of Western capitalism, and becomes part of 'an unbroken tradition' that breaks with the (anti-) tradition of Irish radicalism, which has always courted fragmentation. In this context, music is commercial or it is sidelined. Commercial music shuns discontinuity. In its appropriation of Irish elements, it often reverts to a Victorian or Edwardian mode of arrangement; in the absence of such appropriation, it embraces the canons of Anglo-Americanism. As against this, the best contemporary classical music seeks different ways of linking disparate musical events, including their radical non-linkage.

Although there are a great many classical<sup>34</sup> composers producing a great deal of extraordinary music today, it remains by and large undissemated, whether in published form or on CD.<sup>35</sup> The inability of our historians and musicologists to do justice to their work is inextricably linked with the unwillingness of such authorities to give living presence to composers of the past who cannot be subsumed within the parameters of continuity and majority.

## Coda

To sum up: the assumption that an unbroken tradition is a precondition of a healthy musical culture is unproven. The concomitant assumption that a broken tradition is a liability leads to efforts to ‘mend’ that tradition, paradoxically by omitting those figures whose work does not belong within a recognisable main stream. That main stream tends to be defined in deference to the major or victorious historical tendency, which in our culture is that of neo-liberal, developmental capitalism.

As against this, I recommend reading Irish history, musical and otherwise, ‘against the grain’, bearing in mind those sentences of Benjamin’s third ‘Thesis on the Philosophy of History’ that precede the epigraph to this essay: ‘A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.’ Such a chronicler is also less likely to exclude contemporary figures and events that do not fit into the official interpretation of the present age. A retrieval of the broken tradition of Irish civic republican and socialist thinking might well be of service in such an enterprise, as might an adaptation of the concept of ‘minor tradition’.<sup>36</sup> In his fifteenth ‘Thesis’, Benjamin tells us that: ‘The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action.’ It would be childish to imagine that a different way of imagining musical history might usher in the revolution. It is more plausible to suggest that a revolution is necessary before that history can do full justice to the range of composers this country has produced in the past and is continuing to produce today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Louis Marcus, in Bernard Harris and Grattan Freyer (eds.), *The Achievement of Seán Ó Riada* (Ballina/Chester Springs: Irish Humanities Centre & Keohanes/Dufour Editions 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Davis: ‘Irish Songs’, *The Nation*, 4 January 1845.

<sup>3</sup> Marcus, op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> Donal O’Sullivan: *Carolan, the Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper* (Cork 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Gráinne Yeats, liner notes for *The Belfast Harp Festival*, double CD, Gael-Linn 1992, CEFGD 156.

<sup>6</sup> William Henry Grattan Flood, *History of Irish Music* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan 1905).

<sup>7</sup> Humphrey Searle, *Quadrille with a Raven* (Riverrun 1895). This entertaining and delightfully named memoir is practically unobtainable, but may be read on the web: [www.musicweb.uk.net/searle](http://www.musicweb.uk.net/searle) (accessed December 18, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> This piece is included on Paul Nicholson’s excellent CD, *Keyboard Music by Thomas*

*Roseingrave*, Hyperion, CDA66564.

<sup>9</sup> David Branson, *John Field and Chopin* (London 1972), especially pp. 22–27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Charles K. Moss, *John Field: The Irish Romantic*, available online at <http://www.carolinaclassical.com/articles/field.html> (accessed December 18, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Harry White, *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970* (Cork: Cork University Press), p.73.

<sup>13</sup> Moss, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> White, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> White, op. cit. See the chapter ‘Carolan, Handel and the Dislocation of Music in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, pp. 13–35.

<sup>16</sup> See in particular, Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said in conversation with W. J. T. Mitchell, *Boundary 2*, Vol. 25, No. 2, (Summer 1998). See also: Edward Said, ‘Permission to Narrate’ in *The Politics of Dispossession* (New York: Pantheon Books 1994).

<sup>18</sup> On ‘molestation’, see Abdirahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London: Verso 2002), pp. 105–111.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Doyle, liner notes for *Budawanny* (CD), Silverdoor, SIDO 011 CD.

<sup>20</sup> *Oizzo No* (CD), Silverdoor, SIDO 012 CD.

<sup>21</sup> *Contemporary Music from Ireland*, Vol. 2 (CD), CMC CD02; also Netherlands Wind Ensemble, *Under the Green Time* (CD), NBECD 001.

<sup>22</sup> Doyle, liner notes for Netherlands Wind Ensemble, *Under the Green Time* (CD), NBECD 001.

<sup>23</sup> Roger Doyle, *Babel* (CD), Silverdoor, SIDO 003-007 CD.

<sup>24</sup> Except for the two-piano piece, the chamber works are on *Gerald Barry* (CD), NMC DO22. *Hard D* is on *Gerald Barry: Orchestral Works* (CD), Marco Polo, 8.225006.

<sup>25</sup> O’Sullivan, op. cit.

<sup>26</sup> Harry White, ‘The Divided Imagination’, in Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds.), *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 2003). See Benjamin Dwyer’s canny critique of this volume in *Journal of Music in Ireland*, vol. 3, no. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (trans. H. Zahn), (New York 1966). The Roman numerals refer to the individual ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, XVI.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, Thesis A.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.

<sup>31</sup> The classic exposition of the theory of minority is in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *KAFKA, pour une littérature mineure* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit 1975). I have been much influenced by David Lloyd’s application of the theory in his *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley & London: University of California Press 1987).

<sup>32</sup> Of course, a fuller exploration of these themes would require consideration of the visual arts, which suffer from a different set of exclusions and distortions. Broadly speaking, the temporal aspect of music and literature makes their linkage meaningful in the context of this essay.

<sup>33</sup> Alex Davis, *A Broken Line: Denis Devlin and Irish Poetic Modernism* (Dublin: UCD Press 2000).

<sup>34</sup> My retention of this admittedly dubious term will annoy some readers, who will, nevertheless, know exactly what I mean.

<sup>35</sup> Significantly, Gerald Barry had to be appropriated by the British before he could become the exception that proves the rule, and his advancement has owed little to his native country.

<sup>36</sup> The various issues of this journal offer many perspectives of relevance to such a project. See also David Lloyd, *op. cit.*