

## **Patrick Zuk, Cork, composer commissioned in 1998**

### *The Composer and the Problem of Modern Choral Music*

The composition of choral music, and in particular, of unaccompanied choral music, has always been considered one of the more severe tests of a composer's craftsmanship. Whatever challenges it presented to composers in the past, however, it seems undeniable that writing for choirs is a much more problematic business nowadays than it once was. This has a great deal to do, of course, with the nature of many modern compositional idioms, some of which seem rather ill suited to the medium, particularly if they are completely atonal and if the composer has also dispensed with anything reminiscent of conventional melodic, textural and rhythmic organisation. Much choral music written in this manner is so difficult to perform that it is hopelessly beyond the reach of all but a small number of specialist ensembles consisting of trained professional singers.

This development represents a rather radical break with the past. Choral singing, even at the higher artistic levels, has, for the most part, always been the province of the amateur musician and much of the core traditional repertoire, whether sacred or secular, was specifically conceived with amateurs rather than professionals in mind. Much of this music may have been relatively undemanding from a technical point of view, but this does not mean that composers were necessarily forced to make artistic compromises or experienced undue constraints in writing for performing groups such as these: many of the more prominent nineteenth century German and English choral societies, for example, were highly accomplished, and more than equal, by all accounts, to giving fine performances of difficult new scores. However, the challenges presented by even the most taxing new choral compositions in the nineteenth century were of a very different order indeed to those presented by much modern music, because during the twentieth century, the level of technical difficulty in new choral music began to escalate dramatically. To appreciate the full justice of this observation, one only has to compare the choral writing of Brahms or Elgar with that of even such a comparatively conservative composer as Michael Tippett. Choirs capable of performing Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius* – which is by no means easy – would probably be defeated by Tippett's cantata *The Vision of St Augustine* (1963-65), and one should add that this work, though very taxing indeed, seems almost modest in its demands compared with some of what else has been written since the Second World War.

The technical difficulty of modern choral music raises a number of rather thorny questions. In the first place, from an aesthetic point of view, one sometimes wonders whether these extreme demands are necessary or sufficiently justified. In the second place, the tendency of modern composers to write in this way has meant that even the very best amateur choirs are now largely excluded from active participation in the performance of new music. Many of them, in fact, will hardly attempt to perform contemporary music at all and will largely confine themselves to more traditional repertoire. One can hardly blame them for doing this, but it seems a great pity, as it results in the loss of a living contact between the modern composer and the wider musical community. It also means that new choral music will continue to occupy a decidedly marginal place in our general musical life, since professional choirs are rather few and far between. This is a situation that any composer will surely view with concern.

For the modern composer of choral music, the questions of practicality and of human limitation thus arise with a particular insistency, probably to a greater extent than in any other medium. What is the composer to do? Should he persist in the untrammelled expression of his ideas and continue to make these extreme technical demands anyway if he feels he must, resigning himself philosophically to the fact that comparatively few choirs will be able to perform his work? Or will he be led to question how much of this technical difficulty is ultimately necessary for his expressive purposes and seek instead to communicate his ideas in a simpler fashion, one which places the performers under less strain and makes his music more feasible for amateurs to sing?

A survey of the works commissioned for the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music provides an interesting opportunity to study the ways in which a large number of modern composers working in a very diverse range of idioms have responded to this situation over the last forty years. In the very early years of the Seminar, composers were specifically requested to compose a short unaccompanied part song suitable for performance by an amateur choir of reasonable proficiency. After a few years, matters were arranged so that composers wrote a work for a suitable choir from their native country that could travel to Ireland for the Festival, or else for an ensemble in residence which would be placed at their disposal. These choirs were sometimes very fine indeed and, more often than not, the commissioned composers were free to write as they wished, without having to worry unduly about the possible limitations of their performers.

Composers availed of this creative freedom in very different ways. Broadly speaking, the commissioned works fall into two principal categories. The first consists of works written in a variety of *avant-garde* idioms that repudiate many features of traditionally conceived choral and vocal writing to a greater or lesser extent. Interestingly, this category is by far the smaller of the two. Most of the commissioned composers were content to write for the medium in a very different manner. This second category of works evinced a very considerable measure of continuity with the past, not only in the technical resources employed but also in choice of genre, traditional forms such as the part song or the motet, for example, being very strongly represented. Many of these pieces are written in a variety of tonal idioms and make use of conventional vocal writing and means of word setting. Some composers make use of more dissonant harmonic idioms and perhaps of modernist techniques to some extent, but are still careful to bear in mind practical considerations of vocal technique or difficulties in pitching.

The rationales underlying these two very different approaches to the medium are worth exploring in some detail. In part, the choice of one or the other of them by any particular composer is determined in part by practical considerations whose nature we have already described. However, the choice of approach is determined at a more fundamental level by the nature of what the composer wishes to communicate. For some composers, more traditional means are amply adequate for this task; for others, they will seem inherently unsatisfactory and excessively limiting.

The composer who continues to find inspiration in the choral music of the past will undoubtedly have a radically different understanding of the expressive resources of the medium, conscious as he is of working in a rich tradition of vocal writing originating in medieval and renaissance polyphony. For a start, he will probably be interested in the cultivation of beautiful choral sound for its own sake, a consideration which is largely irrelevant in some contemporary choral music. About the nature of this sound ideal there was, until the last century, a very considerable measure of consensus, arising largely from the hegemony of the Italianate method of vocal training known as *bel canto*. This venerable method of voice production sought first and foremost to enhance the innate capacities of the human voice to express emotional states. To this end, under the influence of ancient Greek and Roman conceptions of rhetoric, composers and performers during the Renaissance developed a rich vocabulary of vocal gestures comparable to the stylised expressive gestures of classical ballet, which could serve to portray feelings in a direct

and affecting manner. The tradition of composition and performance established by these pioneering figures exerted a profound influence and, though it subsequently went through inevitable periods of decadence, it still continues to form the basis for modern singing.

Within this tradition, there was a very clear conception of the kind of vocal writing that was held to be grateful and effective. This arose largely from a common sense, practical understanding of the limitations of the human voice, which requires sympathetic treatment on the part of the composer if it is to sound well. The compass of most voices is a mere two octaves or less – much smaller than that of most instruments. In practice, the available working compass is considerably smaller, since the composer must exercise restraint in the employment of high notes, both on account of their particularly intense sonority and also because their excessive use will result in fatigue. Choral writing, unlike instrumental writing, must also be fairly simple in nature for the most part. While the human voice is capable of considerable facility in executing rapid passagework, this is a rather specialised skill and is not really feasible or effective in most choral contexts. Hence, the composer cannot really draw on effects reliant on technical virtuosity of a very obvious kind.

Because the composer is working within such comparatively narrow parameters, many of the expressive effects of traditional choral writing are achieved in rather subtle ways, such as through contrasts in rhythmic organisation and the control of conjunct and disjunct motion in the melodic lines. Other effects were obtained through the use of dissonance or in the management of texture, sensitivity to spacing and tessitura being particularly important. Above all, the composer had to develop a sense for what to hold in reserve in order to achieve a satisfactory climax: the abrupt introduction of wide intervallic leaps in the context of lines moving mostly by step or of a series of plangent dissonances after a passage of simple diatonic harmonies could make a very powerful expressive point if they had not been previously heard in the piece.

In the twentieth century, however, with the emergence of modernist styles of composition, many composers found it increasingly difficult to accommodate themselves to this approach to the medium. Some of them strove in a very self-conscious way to break radically with the music of the past, feeling that traditional compositional resources no longer afforded viable means of musical expression. Tonal harmony was increasingly abandoned after the First World War and was widely replaced by densely chromatic atonal idioms. In addition, a pronounced reaction against the styles of

romanticism began to make itself felt around the same time. One of the most prominent composers to evince both of these tendencies was, of course, Arnold Schoenberg. In his later atonal and serial music, Schoenberg cultivated a type of vocal writing that frequently violated conventional conceptions of what was grateful or natural. His melodic lines range over an extremely wide compass and feature frequent large intervallic leaps. In order to avoid any suggestion of traditional tonal harmonies, dissonant intervals such as the major seventh, the minor ninth and the tritone were conspicuously emphasised. In addition, Schoenberg often requested his performers to speak instead of sing, or to declaim their lines in what he described as *Sprechstimme*, a mode of voice production halfway between speaking and singing. Much of this music is extremely taxing to perform accurately, but was widely adopted by composers as a model notwithstanding.

After the Second World War, prominent figures in the emerging central European *avant-garde* went even further than Schoenberg in their efforts to expunge from their work anything that was reminiscent of the music of the past. By the early 1950s, they had, in a very deliberate and self-conscious fashion, abandoned traditional modes of organising musical sound altogether. Conventional rhythmic structures were rejected, as was obvious melodic writing of any kind. Some of these composers were led to reject conventional methods of voice production, which they deemed too uncomfortably reminiscent of nineteenth century music. In particular, singing in the *bel canto* tradition was widely regarded with suspicion and was often only employed for the purposes of parody, if at all.

To replace it, a new style of vocal composition came into being, featuring so-called “extended techniques”, which required the singer to produce sounds by a whole variety of other unconventional methods, none of which could necessarily be described as “singing” in the generally understood sense of the word. Instead, the performer might have to speak, whisper, shriek, hum, click their tongue, or produce a pronounced nasal tone, for example. Composers also had recourse to highly idiosyncratic methods of word setting, such as fragmenting texts into their constituent phonemes, for example, and using these in an arbitrary and deliberately disconnected fashion. The adequate realisation in performance of scores written in this way is often a rather daunting task. Apart from presenting difficulties of pitching, they may also be rhythmically and texturally very complicated. If extensive use is made of new vocal techniques, the performers may have to spend time becoming familiar with several dense pages of symbols and diagrams explaining how the various effects are to be obtained and describing how they are notated.

Choral works in modernist idioms of this kind were almost certainly guaranteed to generate very lively discussions at the Seminars, with conductors, choristers and members of the audience engaged in heated debate on questions of practicality. Certainly, a few of these commissions seem to stretch the capacities of the singers to the very outermost limits of what is possible. Roman Vlad's *Lettura di Michelangelo*, commissioned in 1966, occasioned particularly intense controversy at the time on account of its relentless technical difficulty. This piece features dense chromatic clusters throughout, the very first chord comprising all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Vlad also writes jagged melodic lines for some of the parts, which contain vast, ungainly leaps between different registers and sometimes span almost two octaves in a few notes.

Humphrey Searle's *The canticle of the rose*, commissioned in the same year, although very different in style, is almost as taxing, because apart from its freely dissonant idiom, this piece makes considerable use of textures which seem almost more suited to instruments than voices. At one point, the lower voices are assigned an ostinato moving continuously in parallel minor seconds; at another juncture, an alto melody is accompanied by a swift, wide- ranging triplet figuration in the sopranos. Some movements of Henk Badings' *Cinq poèmes chinois* (1973) also make considerable use of chromatic clusters and one might mention, amongst other technical challenges, a passage of *Klangfarbenmelodie* in the last movement, where the constituent notes of a highly dissonant melodic contour are distributed between all the voices in a manner that seems almost impossible to perform tidily at the required tempo. Demanding as these works are, however, *The Four Madrigals* (1986) of Hans- Jürgen von Bose or *Scél lem duíb* (1981) by John Buckley present more even formidable challenges on account of their still greater rhythmic and textural complexity.

The number of commissioned works which make extensive use of so-called "extended techniques" is comparatively small. A few composers made use of unpitched speech, sometimes indicating a precise rhythm, sometimes not. On occasion, this is used in conjunction with aleatoric techniques to create special effects of various kinds; at other times, it seems to be used in a self-conscious way to establish a clear sense of distance from traditional vocal writing. Raymond Deane's Leopardi setting *...e mi sovvien l'eterno* (1988) provides a good illustration of the latter tendency, where rhythmic speech is used throughout the piece to accompany highly fragmentary vocal lines. Odaline de la Martinez uses rhythmic speech throughout in a setting of a poem by Emily Dickinson, the first of her *Two American madrigals* (1978). An even more striking instance is provided

by Ton de Leeuw's *The birth of music* (1976). The text of this work is based on an Indian myth of the Nahua people, which tells of the creation of music by the god Tezcatlipoca. It opens with rhythmic speech in all four voices but gradually employs precise pitches and culminates in the freely heterophonic employment of motifs based on the pentatonic scale, depicting the culminating event of the myth.

A few composers made more extensive use of alternative methods of vocal production. Sometimes, as in Frank Corcoran's *Symphonies for voices* (1975), they are used simply as sonority. More often, though, they are used in a less abstract manner, to create atmospheric effects of various kinds or for illustrative purposes. The Hungarian composer Miklós Kocsár in his *Six choruses* for female voices (1982) evokes natural phenomena such as fog and tidal movement by employing aleatoric passages of free chromatic undulation around given pitches, which creates a mysterious effect of slowly shifting clusters. In his *Dona nobis pacem* (1985), Peter Michael Hamel makes use of overtone sonorities similar to those found in Karlheinz Stockhausen's *Stimmung*, which derive from methods of vocal production employed by Tibetan monks. In order to make the overtones clearly audible, the singers are directed to alter vowel sounds rather slowly on long sustained notes which are produced with an exaggeratedly nasal tone.

Wilfred Mellers' *Cloud Canticle* (1971) provides a good example of a score making elaborate use of extended techniques for more directly illustrative purposes. This is a particularly complex score for double chorus with divisions and must be one of the most demanding ever commissioned for the Seminar. The text, from Ronald Johnson's *The Book of the Green Man*, describes a moment of rapt epiphany in which the narrator is suddenly overwhelmed by the beauty of the natural world, as birds, trees, hills, clouds, animals all seem to unite in an ecstatic canticle celebrating the splendour of creation. In order to recreate this music of nature, the composer has recourse to a wide variety of unconventional means. At one point, in a passage surely inspired by the "creature choruses" of Ravel's *L'enfant et les sortilèges*, Mellers directs the singers to imitate blackbirds, thrushes, rooks, cuckoos, owls, doves, grasshoppers, crickets, frogs, toads, foxes, wildcats and snakes, amongst other forms of wildlife. The passage in question is a freely aleatoric combination of various consonant and vowel effects imitative of barks, hoots, hisses, grunts and moans. At another point, one of the choruses accompanies the other with an imitation of bird song created by free improvisation around certain given pitches which are directed to be sung *staccato*. In other places, Mellers employs speaking effects, glissandi and highly florid writing of various kinds.

It is interesting to speculate why comparatively few composers chose to write for the medium in ways like these. Several reasons readily suggest themselves. In the first place, it is difficult not to view some of these approaches to the medium without significant reservations. Principally, one wonders whether these extravagant technical demands are sufficiently justified in every case by the intrinsic interest of the artistic conception. I raised this question one year with a prominent continental conductor of new choral music, who was of the opinion that some of these works were simply badly written and ineffective. In his experience, choirs mostly found them frustrating to rehearse and unrewarding to perform. Some composers might simply not feel it worthwhile to place the performers under such duress for no particularly compelling artistic reason. As far as the use of extended techniques is concerned, it is sometimes difficult not to feel that they have by now become something of a cliché. It is one thing to employ them when they are justified by the context and can be integrated into the overall conception in a satisfactory way. Used as sound effects for their own sake their novelty quickly palls, however, and the unthinking recourse to them in certain contexts – setting simple and uncomplicated lyric poems, for example – simply in order to avoid conventional vocal writing, can produce an effect of bizarre incongruity.

By discussing these reservations, I do not mean to suggest for a moment that all attempts to write in this way for the medium are unsuccessful. However, a consideration of the other types of commission written for the Seminar suggests that most composers found that it was not necessary to have recourse to styles of choral writing which abjured more traditional approaches in such an extreme way. Quite a few of the commissioned works are very straightforward and unpretentious, making comparatively modest demands on the performers. In one or two cases, they are of such an extreme simplicity as to represent a *ne plus ultra* of another kind. John Tavener's *Eonia* (1990) consists of a mere three chords – triads of C major and minor and an incomplete ninth chord on G – interspersed with passages of slow moving recitative. At the furthest possible distance imaginable from the ethereal and unworldly atmosphere of this work is Gerald Barry's *The Coming of Winter* (1997), which, like much of Barry's recent music, seems like a parodic comment on the chaotic state of contemporary composition in its deliberately provocative use of pointedly banal material, extremes of repetition and eccentric word-setting. For much of this piece, the choir sings in unison, intoning the interval of a third over and over again.

While much choral music has traditionally been serious in nature, especially when



conceived as an adjunct to religious worship, the medium has, of course, also accommodated itself to much more relaxed modes of expression, sometimes of a decidedly worldly or even frivolous kind. Many composers contributed works in the tradition of the madrigal or its later derivative, the part-song. Milhaud, who was commissioned in the very first year of the Seminar, contributed a rather charming example called *Traversée* (1962). A few of the commissions in this vein have been particularly distinguished and have been performed to a considerable extent subsequently. Amongst these, one might mention John Gardiner's delightful *Five Philanders* (1975) and John Joubert's *Three Portraits* (1983), both of which are expertly and deftly written, as well as a very fine piece by Herbert Howells, *The summer is coming* (1965), which has recently been recorded for commercial release.

Some composers, such as Andrzej Koszewski and Alexander Taney, who were commissioned for the Seminar in 1975 and 1978 respectively, wrote part songs reminiscent of stylised folk-song settings. Interestingly, both of their compositions, *Pastorale* and *Guslar mi gusli* feature ingenious accompaniments that evoke traditional musical instruments in a most witty manner. A few composers, with varying degrees of success, attempted humorous pieces. One of the most noteworthy of these must surely be *Ten Epigrams* (1979) by A. J. Potter, in which the characteristic sly whimsy of this most irrepressibly mischievous of composers is abundantly in evidence throughout. The *Concertino for Mixed Voice Chorus a cappella* by the Russian Rodion Shchedrin is worth mentioning as an example of a piece written expressly as a vehicle for virtuoso display. The outer movements require a huge variety of tonal contrasts; the second confronts the performers with some very tricky challenges in intonation while the third is a study in extremely rapid enunciation.

Many of the texts chosen for these works were very simple poems, but, on occasion, composers were more ambitious in their choices. John McCabe contributed a setting of James Clarence Mangan's *Siberia*, for example, for the 1980 Seminar, while, in 1995, Bryan Kelly chose to set Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. Many composers have commented ruefully on the difficulty of setting poems of this kind. Apart from the rather daunting task of coming up with music which can bear comparison with the poetry, the composer is also confronted with a number of technical difficulties. Creating suitable textures in choral music almost always requires the composer to introduce a considerable amount of verbal repetition. Certain types of text – such as the traditional texts of the Latin Mass – can bear this very well. In other cases, the

repetition jars, and will strike the listener as trivialising the poem. The danger, of course, is that, in order to avoid this kind of repetition, the composer will simply resort to through-composition of the text, especially if it is long, in a rather improvised way that has little overall structural coherence.

These difficulties notwithstanding, a few composers did contribute memorable and wholly convincing settings of very fine poetry. Louis MacNeice's *Prayer Before Birth* might have seemed a rather unlikely, even intractable choice of text, but Elizabeth Maconchy's highly imaginative setting of 1972 quickly dispels any doubts one might have about its suitability. This work, like the *Trois Chansons de Verlaine* by Gerard Victory (1978), was given a splendid performance by the Lindsay Singers, one of the finest Irish choirs of modern times. Both works, although firmly on traditional lines, are quite uncompromising in their technical difficulty, but at no time does the listener's confidence waver that their demands are justified and subordinate always to a precisely imagined expressive purpose.

The founder of the Seminar, Aloys Fleischmann, wrote two excellent works also notable for unusual choices of poetry, which are completely vindicated by the vivid inventiveness of the composer's imaginative responses. The sardonic irony of Thomas Kinsella's *Poet in the Suburbs* finds a perfect embodiment in Fleischmann's flamboyant, but hard-edged setting of

1974, which was specially written to celebrate the twenty-first anniversary of the Festival, rather than for the Seminar itself. *Games*, a cycle of settings of Vasco Popa for mixed voice chorus, harp and percussion, which was written for 1990 Seminar, proved to be his last completed composition. This work is one of his finest achievements, alternating moods of smoldering lyricism with passionate outbursts of a furious and explosive vehemence.

Not surprisingly, a considerable number of the commissioned composers set religious texts of various kinds, continuing another venerable strand of the choral tradition. Here, the composer is faced with a very different creative challenge, that of finding a suitably dignified musical embodiment for texts conveying emotional experiences of an elevated kind, which avoids sounding a false note of sentimentality or mawkishness. Anton Tučapsky, commissioned in 1986, and Petr Eben, commissioned in 1991 and again in 1996, both furnish good examples of composers who have accomplished this with no small measure of success.

Several composers evidently found rich imaginative stimulus in medieval and renaissance polyphony and attempted to capture something of its splendour in a more modern idiom. Of particular interest in this connection are Edmund Rubbra's *Tenebrae: Third Nocturne* (1962), a fine contribution to modern English church music in the tradition established by Vaughan Williams' *Mass in G minor*, and the *Magnificat* by the Irish composer Séamas de Barra, commissioned for the 1983 Seminar. This last work defines a completely individual sound world, at once austere and remote, yet also of a passionate and searing intensity. The soaring cantilena of the haunting opening melody is progressively elaborated into a luxuriant design of intricate, sinuous polyphony, rising to a fiercely incandescent climax before subsiding at last into the hushed and mysterious final cadences. This piece made a very deep impression on its first performance and provides an excellent example of how a composer working largely with traditional means can derive from them fresh and wholly unexpected modes of expression.

Taken from  
***Cork International Choral Festival 1954-2004: A Celebration,***  
Ed. Ruth Fleischmann, Cork 2004, p. 320-29.