

## **Séamas de Barra, Cork, composer commissioned in 1983 and 1989**

### *Aloys Fleischmann and the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music*

Eight years after the founding of the Cork International Choral Festival, Aloys Fleischmann expanded its scope and significance by introducing a highly imaginative new development. Although already very successful in promoting a greater interest in choral music here, he now felt that it should acquire a creative dimension as well and play a part in encouraging the development of modern choral composition. And so, in 1962, he established the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music, which has been run in conjunction with the Festival ever since.

Fleischmann's initial concept was a simple one. Every year, several prominent composers would be commissioned to write short unaccompanied choral works, preferably suitable for amateur choirs. These would then be analysed and discussed at a fairly informal seminar held on the campus of University College prior to their first public performance in the Festival programme. This innovation, he felt, would serve a number of very valuable purposes. As a composer himself, Fleischmann understood that events such as the Festival had a tendency to remain unconnected with living developments in the art, and that this impoverishing dissociation from current creative thinking usually resulted in a complacent and unimaginative conservatism in the reception of new music. The comfortable round of standard repertoire and old favourites was all very well, but it was far healthier for both audiences and choristers alike to become acquainted also with contemporary developments, and to have the opportunity to respond to often strangely unfamiliar modes of expression. This is not to say, of course, that new works had not been performed at the Festival before this. Fleischmann himself, for example, composed a number of pieces which were first heard during earlier festivals, of which *Na Trí Captaení Loinge* [The Three Sea Captains] of 1956, and *Bata na bPlanndála* [The Planting Stick] of 1957 are the most significant. But he realized that the chances of new choral compositions appearing spontaneously were rare indeed, and that such infrequent appearances, if any, would make little impact. What was necessary was to ensure that new works would be premiered each year, and the obvious way to guarantee this was to establish a commissioning scheme.

This decision to commission new choral works annually would give the Festival status, not only as an international platform for choral singing, but now also as an effective institution for the creation of new choral repertoire. Setting it apart from other similar events which had a competitive purpose only, it now acquired an intellectual distinction which drew it to international attention as a patron of modern music that, before long, could number very distinguished names among those who had responded to its request for new works. Naturally, Fleischmann hoped that the scheme would stimulate the creation of new

choral music of sufficient quality and attractiveness to enter the standard repertoire, or at least to be recognized as constituting a valuable addition to it. I do not think that it is an exaggeration to claim that many of the specially commissioned works are indeed of considerable merit and interest, a few outstandingly so, and Fleischmann always received

reports of their subsequent performance with the greatest of satisfaction. In a letter of 1974 about a forthcoming BBC broadcast of Fleischmann's own *Poet in the Suburbs*, Stephen Wilkinson, director of The BBC Northern Singers, wrote: "Incidentally we've much enjoyed doing another Cork commission recently, the Nicholas Maw songs, and I may even feel courageous enough to tackle the Humphrey Searle one day."<sup>1</sup> In his reply Fleischmann said that "it was splendid news", and he added, "this certainly makes us feel that our Seminar is worthwhile."<sup>2</sup>

Fleischmann immediately set about attracting sponsors and he succeeded in interesting several large businesses in the project. Between 1962 and 1975 most of the funding came from this source, together with very generous financial support from Lady Dorothy Mayer who, between 1963 and 1974, personally provided the funds to commission eight new works. In the late 1950s Lady Mayer had previously set up the Dorothy Mayer Foundation to assist in advancing the cause of music in this country, and in recognition of this practical commitment Fleischmann dedicated to her his *Song of the Provinces*, a work which was originally written to be performed at the Festival. The Ruth Draddy Memorial Trust, established in memory of his late wife by Mr. Vincent Draddy of New York, financed commissions between 1976 and 1979, and there has been ongoing support from the Governing Body of University College Cork and from the Arts Council of Ireland, as well as generous support from the Irish Music Rights Organisation and other bodies.<sup>3</sup>

There was no reason, of course, why the newly commissioned works could not simply have been included in the Festival programmes. This in itself would amply have fulfilled the Festival's ambition to stimulate the composition and performance of new choral music. Fleischmann's decision to introduce the commissioned works in a specially instituted Seminar, however, shows his keen awareness of the necessity for creating also a suitable context for the reception of new music. Furthermore, establishing the Seminar under the auspices of the Music Department of University College, as well as conducting the proceedings in the College itself, gave the entire enterprise an academic respectability, and indicated clearly its seriousness of purpose. The readiness of the College to become involved, it need hardly be said, was largely due to Fleischmann's dual position as Professor

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Stephen Wilkinson, 27 September 1974; Fleischmann Papers, Archive of University College Cork.

<sup>2</sup> Copy of letter by Aloys Fleischmann, 4 October 1974; Fleischmann Papers, Archive of University College Cork.

<sup>3</sup> For further details about the early funding of commissions see Geoffrey Spratt, "A Short History of the Seminars on Contemporary Choral Music", *Soundpost*, April / May 1981, p.13.

of Music and Director of the Festival. But it was a move, too, which was completely consistent with his desire to see the University establish as many connections as possible with the city, and enter as fully as possible into civic life. This was something which, as Professor of Music, he himself did everything in his power to further, and of which his own career was an ideal example. Fleischmann would undoubtedly have been saddened to see that this link has recently been weakened, and that the Seminar is now no longer presented under the auspices of the Department of Music.

This creation of a suitable context was clearly the primary function of the Seminar from the beginning, although the manner in which it was thought it could best be achieved changed over the years. The brochure for the first Seminar described the proceedings as

...a series of talks by the composers based primarily on their own works. The talks will be illustrated by the relevant choirs and followed by discussions in which the composers, visiting conductors, specialists and the students themselves will take part.

This suggests that, initially, it was envisaged that the new works would be placed in the context of each commissioned composer's own music, and that the impetus for each session would derive from an opening talk given by the composer himself. Some composers, however, are notoriously reluctant to talk about their own work and, while a particular commissioned piece might well be all one could desire, if its composer was of a reticent disposition the Seminar itself could well be something considerably less than that. From the outset, it seems, Fleischmann decided to modify this proposed procedure, and to present instead analyses of the newly commissioned works himself. Reporting on the very first Seminar for *The Musical Times*, Charles Acton wrote that

The annual competitive Cork International Choral Festival this year had an added, and more enduring interest in the form of four short unaccompanied choral works suitable for amateur choirs, commissioned from Rubbra, Milhaud, Henk Badings and Seán Ó Riada. The composers nominated choirs to sing the works; seminars were held in University College Cork at which the works were analysed by Professor Aloys Fleischmann...<sup>4</sup>

These analyses would then be the basis of ensuing discussions, which could range widely if necessary and encompass other relevant topics as they arose. Subsequent Festival literature refers specifically to the analysis of the commissioned works, and Fleischmann's

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<sup>4</sup>*The Musical Times*, July 1962, p.480.

presentations earned him a reputation as a formidably perceptive analyst from the very beginning. This pattern was followed until Fleischmann's retirement as Director of the Festival in 1987, at which time his involvement with the Seminar also came to an end. Since then a number of different approaches have been adopted, including a return to what was mistakenly imagined to be the original one as outlined in the brochure of 1962. If, at the outset, Fleischmann had suspected that it might be unwise to rely too heavily on composers' willingness to make extended presentations, or, in the case of those who spoke little or no English, impractical to do so, he was now largely justified. This was not conspicuously successful and was subsequently dropped, to be followed, after some other short-lived experiments, by a re-adoption of the analytical presentations. Recently this has, in turn, again been dropped. These fluctuations suggest some uncertainty on the part of subsequent Festival organisers about the exact function and purpose of the Seminar itself, as distinct from the commissioning of new music, which seems to be reflected in its variable quality in recent years. But while this variability, as it is only fair to say, may be due in no small measure to the simple fact that none of Fleischmann's successors have been able to bring a flair as brilliant or a personality as engaging as his to bear on the proceedings, it is also clear that the approach he devised has been the most successful and consistently workable to date.

For Fleischmann to commit himself to the preparation and presentation of analyses of three, sometimes four, commissioned works each year, having in advance only a vague idea of what he was going to receive, indicates a confidence in his abilities to determine the organizing principles of a wide range of music which potentially encompassed very divergent styles. Furthermore, he undertook to present these analyses before the composers themselves, and the measure of his success is the testimony of many of these distinguished figures who readily acknowledged the insight into their compositional procedures and intuitive processes that his analyses yielded.<sup>5</sup> From 1978 until his retirement as Director of the Festival, he shared the responsibility for preparing and presenting the analyses with Geoffrey Spratt who had joined the staff of the Music Department of the College shortly before. After Fleischmann's retirement from the Chair of Music in 1980, David Wulstan,

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<sup>5</sup> The present writer can personally recall hearing the composers of commissioned works express warm admiration of Fleischmann's analytical skills on several occasions. See also Brian Boydell, in Stanley Sadie (ed.) *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London 1980: "Under the auspices of the university [Fleischmann] instituted the notably successful public seminars. ... In this context his exceptional gift for critical analysis gained wide acclaim"; and Christopher Stenbridge, in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Aloys Fleischmann (1910-92): A Life for Music in Ireland Remembered by Contemporaries*, Cork 2000, p.241, where the view of Harald Genzmer, who was commissioned for the Festival in 1966, is quoted.

the new incumbent, also participated. Dr. Spratt presented detailed analyses in a manner very different to Fleischmann's, but very much in the spirit of the tradition that had been established. Professor Wulstan's contribution was undistinguished.

Thus the Seminar made it possible to avoid introducing *in vacuo* the works specially composed for the Festival. It provided a forum which allowed them to be examined analytically and discussed objectively as viable musical structures, and gave the composer the opportunity either to endorse these findings or not as he chose, and to comment or elaborate as he felt inclined. The members of the Seminar had the opportunity to consider the problems of writing music, and in particular choral music, in the twentieth century, and to judge the success of the individual composer's creative response to these problems. There was, in short, a real attempt in the instituting of the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music to address one of the most acute problems in the reception of modern composition, that of providing a context which would facilitate understanding and sympathetic listening.

Fleischmann recognized that the commissioning of new music had important educational aspects too. The significance of introducing the Festival audiences annually to new pieces has already been mentioned. Fleischmann would have remembered that it was not all that long before when the relative inexperience of audiences in Cork was a real stumbling block in introducing unfamiliar music of any stylistic complexity. His own music, never of the *avant garde*, did not always initially meet with comprehension, and, if one can judge from contemporary newspaper reports, the work of comparatively conservative composers such as E. J. Moeran could be heard as difficult in Cork. Fleischmann certainly never entertained the view that one should give the public what it wants, and, as far as the Choral Festival is concerned, this uncompromising attitude has undoubtedly resulted in a more educated and discriminating audience. Stylistic experiments, which might have caused repressed laughter even twenty years ago, are now heard with interest and without prejudice. Indeed, apart at all from newly commissioned music, there has been an ever increasing number of contemporary works in the Festival programmes, largely due to the revised entry requirements for some of the competitions. Far from occasioning a protest as almost certainly this would once have done, unfamiliar pieces are now closely attended to, and, in the present writer's experience, the response to technical skill and expressive sincerity, in the music itself no less than in the performance, is immediate and unaffected. It is to Fleischmann's lasting credit that the Festival audience is now surely one of the most open-minded audiences in the country.

Equally important, of course, was the educational aspect of the Seminar itself, principally for the students in the Department of Music but also for anyone else who cared to attend the proceedings. As long as Fleischmann was Professor of Music lectures were cancelled for the duration of the Festival each year, and undergraduates, it was assumed, would attend the Seminar. Most of them probably did, and some of them, like myself, found it of absorbing interest. The Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music gave one an unparalleled opportunity of learning how to focus one's critical faculties. Again and again we saw how an apparent solution to a compositional problem, which seemed fine on paper, did not always succeed in performance. We also saw how what appeared distinctly unpromising in notation could be transformed when translated into living sound. We were exposed at first hand to a wide variety of compositional styles, together with the composers who espoused them, and we developed a keen ear for discriminating between the pretentious and the sincere. We learned that all the talk in the world cannot turn a dull piece into an interesting one. And, above all, we learned the difference between effective and ineffective choral writing. As the aspiring young composers that we were, I am afraid we also acquired to some extent the intolerant habit of sitting in remorseless judgement on men far more experienced than ourselves. Our taste was unsophisticated, I dare say, and our appraisals tended to veer between the contemptuous to the wildly enthusiastic. But as we left each session of the Seminar warmly discussing the merits or demerits of what we had just heard, we were hardly aware, I believe, that we were acquiring an education.

Fleischmann succeeded in persuading some very distinguished figures to accept commissions from the Festival. We have already seen that in 1962, for the first Seminar, Rubbra, Milhaud, Badings and Ó Riada wrote new works. Zoltán Kodály had agreed to write a work but due to a bout of ill health the commission was deferred until 1963. The following year however, although still unable to come to Cork, Kodály composed *An Ode for Music* which was specially "Written as a greeting to the Tenth Cork International Choral Festival" and which was first performed in the Festival programme. Kodály's work was offered as a gesture of goodwill to Cork and did not feature in that year's Seminar. But three new works were commissioned – from Egon Wellesz, Flor Peeters and Seóirse Bodley. To date, over one hundred new works have been written for the Festival, and among subsequent composers one might mention in particular Herbert Howells, John Joubert, John McCabe, Vagn Holmboe the distinguished Danish symphonist who wrote a work in 1979, Rodion

Shchedrin the Soviet composer, and two of the most prominent Welsh composers of the twentieth century, Alun Hoddinott and William Mathias.<sup>6</sup>

In 1974 the Festival celebrated its twenty-first anniversary, and, in recognition of its significance as a national and international cultural event, the Senate of the National University of Ireland decided to confer honorary Doctorates in Music on the composers commissioned for that year's Seminar. As a further recognition of the role of University College in sponsoring the Seminar it was agreed to hold the conferring ceremony in the College itself, an unusual procedure at that time, and Éamonn de Valera, Chancellor of the National University, travelled to Cork to bestow the parchments. A particularly distinguished group of composers was commissioned, and the presence at the Festival of Roman Vlad, Boris Blacher and Sir William Walton attracted much attention.

The Irish composer honoured in 1974 was Brian Boydell, and one of the most important aspects of this scheme is that a new work has been commissioned from a native composer each year since the Seminar was initiated. In the 1960s, and for quite some time afterwards, the Cork International Choral Festival was one of the very few institutions regularly to commission new music here, and almost every Irish composer of note has written a work, occasionally two.<sup>7</sup> This desire to encourage native compositional talent at a time when there was very little else to encourage it, was typical of Fleischmann. On his return from Munich to Cork in 1934, for example, he immediately began to include works by Irish composers in the programmes of what was then the University Orchestra, later to become the Cork Symphony Orchestra. Recent compositions by Ina Boyle, Carl Hardebeck, E. J. Moeran, Frederick May and Brian Boydell, amongst others, as well as works of his own, were thus introduced to Cork audiences, and gradually the idea that there might actually exist composers who lived and worked in Ireland began to seem a little less strange. The Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music gave him the opportunity to continue this encouragement in another direction, and nothing gave him greater pleasure or satisfaction than the appearance of distinguished native work that could bear critical comparison with the best produced elsewhere. My personal experience serves only to corroborate this. In 1982 he heard a new piece of mine superbly sung at the Festival by the Cork chamber choir Madrigal '75 which had just returned after giving a prize-winning performance of it at the

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<sup>6</sup> New works have been commissioned for the Festival every year since 1962, with the exception of 1967 and 1968 when the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music was suspended.

<sup>7</sup> One composer, Gerard Victory, was commissioned three times, in 1966, 1978 and 1993.

Montreux International Choral Festival. Afterwards he commented flatteringly, if briefly, before dashing off to some other engagement. I was pleased, naturally, that he approved, but I was astonished when on the strength of this – I was after all a fairly inexperienced young composer at the time – he wrote and invited me to accept a commission for the following year's Festival. His flattering comments had been no empty formula, and the sincerity of his approval was expressed in this concrete endorsement of my work, the first significant commission I had received. I produced a setting of the *Magnificat*, and Madrigal '75 and its conductor Donal O'Callaghan undertook to present it at the Seminar and give the first performance at the Festival. The piece was very well received and Fleischmann once again expressed his approval, I am glad to say, and in terms even more encouraging than previously. But I have no doubt that his greatest satisfaction was derived from the fact the composer, the conductor and most, if not all, of this excellent choir's members had been his own students, and represented a flowering, scarcely imaginable forty or fifty years before, which was made possible largely by circumstances he himself had helped to create.

In 1976 the Seminar acquired a significant adjunct in the Seán Ó Riada Memorial Trophy Competition. After Ó Riada died in 1971 the Festival committee decided to create an award as a tribute and the Irish Federation of Musicians donated a very attractive trophy. This award was first made in 1973 for the best performance either of a part-song in the Irish language or of a folk-song arrangement by an Irish composer. Folk-song arrangements, of which there is an abundance, must have been too much in evidence because they were excluded the following year. It soon became apparent, however, that choirs were now faced with the task of choosing music from a virtually non-existent repertoire, and Fleischmann decided to redraft the terms of the competition and award the trophy instead for the composition of new part-songs to an Irish text. Initially, the text was set and the entries were judged from the manuscripts only. But this was felt to be of little benefit, and a scheme was subsequently devised whereby choirs (the first five to apply) could commission composers for the competition. The Festival provided a small fee for this purpose, and the choir that commissioned the winning piece received an additional prize. All the pieces were performed either at a special session of the Seminar or, later, in the Festival programmes. The adjudicators for the competition were the composers who had been commissioned for the Seminar that year, advised when necessary, in matters pertaining to the interpretation or treatment of the Irish language, by Roibeárd Ó hÚrdail of University College's Department of Irish. This competition was a highly imaginative response to the unsatisfactory circumstances that the creation of the award originally highlighted and there is no doubt but



that it was extremely successful. It prompted the creation of a considerable body of new part-songs in the Irish language, and gave many young composers their first important platform. As one who benefited by the existence of this competition, I find it a matter of great regret that it seems to have lost all impetus in recent years, and it is a source of puzzlement that its existence does not appear to be advertised or promoted by the Festival, or any attempt made to attract suitable entries.<sup>8</sup>

The initial success of the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music was due in no small measure to the way in which Fleischmann handled the actual proceedings. It was his personal manner – his charm and good humour – as well as his clear and tactful understanding of just what degree of complexity was feasible in an analysis presented under such circumstances that combined to make the event both absorbing and entertaining.

The members of the Seminar usually consisted of the commissioned composers, the conductors of the various choirs, the adjudicators who were engaged for the festival, themselves distinguished composers, choral conductors or academics, the choir which was to perform the new work, and a contingent of music students. Other interested choral singers and conductors, newspaper critics, and general music lovers swelled the numbers. It varied of course, but when I was a student there was usually a sizable attendance and often a large one.

The principle on which Fleischmann proceeded was, firstly, to discuss each composer's conception as it was embodied in the notated score, to examine each piece "as a theory", as he put it. He usually began by considering the text that the composer had chosen to set, and to what degree it had been allowed to determine the style and structure of the music. He then went on to identify the constituent elements of the work, to discover the principles by which they were made to cohere, drawing attention to characteristic compositional patterns, and how they were combined to create a structure. It could have been fatally easy for this approach to have become laboured, overburdened with more detail than even an initiated audience, such as he had, would have been able to bear in mind. But Fleischmann had a sound instinct for knowing how to do sufficient justice to the music, while at the same time keeping the Seminar audience's attention. Musical analysis has a dangerous tendency to be

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<sup>8</sup> For further details about the early years of the Seán Ó Riada Memorial Trophy Competition see Ian McDonagh, "An Expanding Market", *Soundpost*, August / September 1984, pp13-15. See also Michael Dawney in Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Aloys Fleischmann (1910-92): A Life for Music in Ireland Remembered by Contemporaries*, Cork 2000, p.188.

relentless in its pursuit of the relational detail perceived in a score, and while this might conceivably be indulged when presenting analyses in a written form, Fleischmann wisely avoided such intricacies here. He was also, of course, a very lively speaker, and careful to vary his presentation by alternating necessary technical detail with anecdotal material, which related to the poet perhaps, or to some allusion in the work, either verbal or musical, which he skillfully drew out.

He always conducted the Seminar from the piano, which he used extensively to illustrate the points he made, playing from his own heavily annotated copy of the score under discussion. He often drew the most interesting parallels with other music, and made telling comparisons to underline points of style or technique. Frequently there was a characteristic touch of mischievousness as he referred a point to the composer. On one particular occasion he was elucidating a difficult atonal work, I recall, which had been composed by an up-and-coming young German composer and in which, as he pointed out, every reference to traditional harmonic practice was sedulously avoided. He played through a series of astringent dissonances until he came to an unlikely looking pitch combination of something like – I cannot now remember exactly – A, D flat and D double sharp. He played it – the chord of A major! – turned to the composer and said in a tone of astonished discovery: “A triad!”, immediately adding, “I’d like to ask Herr X if it’s on purpose?”

Of course, it goes without saying that much depended on the nature and quality of the commissioned works too. These, naturally, could be somewhat variable, and now and again Fleischmann was hard pressed indeed to find something interesting to say. On such occasions, fortunately rare enough, he could do little more than give a guided tour of the piece, so to speak, and point out anything worth mentioning as he moved from bar to bar. But even here his ingenuity, not to mention his courtesy, never failed him, and I do not think he ever found himself reduced to a laborious exposition of what was already patently obvious to his audience. One of his more difficult moments must surely have been negotiating the work of the Dutch composer Ton de Leeuw who in 1976 arrived with the Ad Hoc Choir, as it was appropriately styled, which consisted of individuals picked up at random in the streets of Amsterdam who were asked if they would like a free trip to Cork. These were not choral singers, in fact they could hardly sing at all, but as de Leeuw had written a piece that, except for the very end, was entirely spoken, this hardly mattered. When eventually a short pentatonic passage did appear in the final pages of the work it was quite beyond their abilities to execute it. I do not think Fleischmann thought much of

gimmicks like these, even if he did appreciate their value to the Festival as added colour. But whatever he thought, he never publicly expressed any preferences, and it is worth remarking that he was always prepared to commission works from composers of very different styles and approaches.

After examining it “as a theory” there would, of course, be a performance to hear how the new piece worked in practice, and to judge how the compositional organization transferred from the page into living sound. When this was over a general discussion ensued. This was not infrequently the first occasion on which the composer had heard his work, and he was often quizzed as to how he thought his ideas had been realised; or, in the hope of sparking off a controversy, someone might ask him whether or not he agreed with various points in the analysis. While some composers were only too willing to talk round and about their work and respond to such questions, others, as already mentioned, could be very reluctant to say anything. As an example of the former I clearly remember that, after his virtuoso setting of *Trois chansons de Verlaine* had received an electric performance by Ethna Barror’s Lindsay Singers at the Seminar in 1978, Gerard Victory was quite willing to elaborate at length about the compositional techniques he had employed in the piece, although he had already paid tribute to Fleischmann as having presented a most exhaustive analysis and leaving him nothing to say. With composers, conductors and choirs who had little or no English the discussion, if it was to take place at all, had to do so largely through interpreters. Still, when there was a desire to participate these difficulties were usually overcome. The Seminar would sometimes be brought to a conclusion with a second performance of the new work, and Fleischmann would then wish the composer and the choir every success for the first public performance at the Festival that night. The only oblique indication of his own response to a particular work was when he would allow himself to predict a favourable reception by the Festival audience. From this we could usually gather that he approved.

One drawback to his position as Director of the Cork International Choral Festival was that, although Fleischmann himself was one of the most important of contemporary Irish composers, he believed it would not have been appropriate for him to accept a commission to write a work for the Seminar. In his view this would have been tantamount to commissioning himself. While many people were of the opinion that these scruples were misplaced, Fleischmann was clearly not prepared to risk incurring the charge of blatantly furthering his own interests and possibly damaging the enterprise. When, in 1974, he did

eventually write something it was in celebration of the twenty-first anniversary of the Festival and was emphatically not a commission. This new piece, *Poet in the Suburbs*, was performed by the BBC Northern Singers under Stephen Wilkinson who were in Cork to sing Walton's *Cantico del Sole*.<sup>9</sup> Charles Acton reporting in *The Irish Times* commented that "the Festival creator and director happens to be one of our own distinguished composers. It is absurd that his name should not appear on the list of works called forth by it. Unfortunately he adds to his many good qualities an obstinacy that could not be overcome. So this premier is the closest one can come to what we want."<sup>10</sup> It was not until after he had retired as Director that Fleischmann felt he could accept such a commission from the Festival, which he did for the Twenty-Seventh Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music in 1990, writing what was in fact to be his last work.

Over the years a number of other Fleischmann works had been heard at the Festival. He was always willing to write something to mark a special event, or which was tailored to special circumstances. I have already alluded to *Na Trí Captaení Loinge* [The Three Sea Captains] and *Bata na bPlanndála* [The Planting Stick] from the 1950s. These were dance scores specially designed, after folk dancing was introduced into the Festival programmes, to allow the combination of choral singing and Irish dancing. *Song of the Provinces* was initially composed "to secure an impressive finish on the final night of our Choral Festival", as he put it,<sup>11</sup> and is an original and engaging work involving the audience. Although he hoped to arrange for a performance of this at the 1964 Festival he failed to get the co-operation of local choirs and it did not in fact feature in the Festival programme until eight years later. He also marked the twenty-fifth anniversary by composing *Festival Song*, a short work for choir and orchestra, the first performance of which he conducted on the Festival's opening night in 1978. Frequently he had the chore of orchestrating a suitable chorus, usually from the standard oratorio repertoire, for a performance by Massed Festival Choirs and the Cork Symphony Orchestra with which he would customarily bring the Festival to a close, although he did sometimes hand this job over to one of his students. I remember being given a stack of vocal scores of the Handel oratorios, asked to choose something appropriately festive and arrange it for full symphony orchestra, including three trombones and a tuba. I

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<sup>9</sup>*Poet in the Suburbs* has erroneously been listed amongst the Festival commissions in recent Festival literature, while oddly there is no mention at all of Kodály's *Ode to Music*. The published score of *Poet in the Suburbs* (Oxford University Press, 1976) inaccurately states that it was "Composed for the Cork International Choral Festival 1975".

<sup>10</sup>*The Irish Times*, 26 April, 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to Gerard Victory, 8 November 1963; Fleischmann Papers, Archive of University College Cork.

was at something of a loss as what to do with the tuba, and managed to squeeze it in only for the final “Amen”. At the performance I was startled to hear that Fleischmann, evidently unwilling to face an irate tuba player who would have arrived only to discover that he had two notes to play, had modified my score so that all the lower brass doubled final entry of the basses *fortissimo*, obliterating them entirely!

Fleischmann celebrated his eightieth birthday in 1990, and the invitation to compose a piece for the Twenty-Seventh Seminar was partly in recognition of this. The Festival also took the opportunity to mark the occasion by giving the first performance of *Clonmacnoise*, which had been commissioned from the Choir, Choral Society and Orchestra of University College on the occasion of his retirement from the Chair of Music in 1980 and, although completed in 1986, was still unperformed. Like the earlier *Song of the Provinces*, it includes a part for the audience to sing and, while not quite as memorable a work, it was very warmly received at the concert. The piece he wrote for the Seminar was of a different order, however. Entitled *Games*, it is a choral cycle consisting of settings for mixed-voice chorus, harp and percussion of six poems translated from the Serbo-Croat of Vasco Popa. This work not only showed undiminished technical mastery, but for a man of eighty a fresh originality of approach that is astonishing. Like *Poet in the Suburbs*, it is very demanding on the singers, and in this respect, as indeed in every other respect, Fleischmann showed a cheerful indifference to the terms he originally set for the commissions in 1962 which requested short, unaccompanied choral works suitable for performance by amateurs. But the creative pressure informing the composition of *Games* took it far outside this orbit. Happily, the BBC Singers who, under their conductor Simon Joly, gave a memorable first performance were well equal to its demands and the work made a deep impression on all who heard it. It would have been regrettable indeed if Fleischmann had never written a work for the Seminar, if the composer who had done so much to encourage other composers by establishing it had himself escaped inclusion. And it was surely an appropriate rounding off of his involvement with the Festival and with the Seminar on Contemporary Choral Music that it was his last completed composition that was eventually included in the distinguished list of works he himself had first brought into existence.

Taken from  
*Cork International Choral Festival 1954-2004: A Celebration*,  
Ed. Ruth Fleischmann, Cork 2004, p. 284-96.