



Ollscoil na hÉireann
National University of Ireland

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

**TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:
PROFESSOR LORRAINE BODLEY DMUS, PHD, MRIA**

on 19 October 2023 in 49 Merrion Square,
on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Literature honoris causa
on **SEÓIRSE BODLEY**

Chancellor, members of the university, distinguished guests: it is an honour, a source of great pride and deep joy to introduce to you this afternoon Professor Seóirse Bodley, and to present him for the Higher degree of Doctor of Letters honoris causa, at this gathering of the National University of Ireland.

Widely acknowledged as one of the most important composers of 20th Century art music in Ireland, Seóirse Bodley is Ireland's oldest living composer and one of Ireland's most distinguished musicians with a long compositional career of over 70 years. In order to survey for you his sustained life in music and superior accomplishment in the Arts, I will present you in brief outline (i) firstly, his outstanding artistic and civic contribution to music in Ireland; (ii) secondly his lifelong production of original composition of the highest calibre (iii) thirdly I will highlight his lifelong musical response to Irish and European literature in acknowledgement of today's honorary Doctorate in Literature

1. Life and Legacy

Born on 4 April 1933, 'between the two canals' – which according to Seóirse made him a true Dubliner – Seóirse Pascal Lauri Bodley grew up in 90 Phibsborough Road, a quiet neighbourhood in Dublin 7, about 4 kilometres north of where we are. He was the youngest of two children born to Mary and George James Bodley. His father (born in 1879) taught him to play the mandolin; his mother (born in 1891) was his first piano teacher. From the age of seven, he went to school at Coláiste Mhuire on the north-western corner of Parnell Square; his fluency in – and great love of – the Irish language remained with him all his life

Early Education

Seóirse's professional music education began in the Royal Irish Academy of Music, where he studied piano with Dina Copeman. In his teens he took private composition lessons with Hans Waldemar-Rosen. During these 'apprenticeship years', he composed many orchestral and choral arrangements for professional performance.

His Milton male-voice settings, for example, were broadcast by the Radio Éireann Men's Octet on Christmas Day 1950 when Seóirse was in fifth year in school. His most widely heard work for television, an orchestral arrangement of 'The Palatine's Daughter' (1956/57)– which became the signature tune of RTÉ drama series, *The Riordans* – dates from this early period.

His first orchestral work *Music for Strings composed at the age of 19* – and premiered on 10 December 1952 by the Dublin Orchestral Players conducted by Brian Boydell – launched him nationally as a composer. When this work was premiered, Seóirse was a first year B Mus student at University College Dublin. Throughout his degree there were many landmark performances: when he was in third year, for example, he and Tomás Ó Súilleabháin gave a full recital of his songs in Trinity College Dublin, which was very favourably reviewed in *The Irish Times* (27.11.1954): 'From his music it is clear that he has learnt from Hindemith and Bartók, but what he has learned has served merely to feed and cultivate his own musical thinking. There was a fluency, coherence and sense of purpose in most of the pieces which were offered, which suggest that we now have a young musical talent which has something original to say'. After graduating with a First Class Honours B. Mus in 1955, Seóirse moved to Stuttgart in 1957 funded by a travelling fellowship from the National University of Ireland which enabled him to study at the Stuttgart Conservatory, where his composition teachers were Johann Nepomuk David; his conducting teachers Hans Müller-Kray and Karl Maria Zwißler, and he continued piano with Alfred Kreutz.

Teaching and Broadcasting

He made a high-profile return to Dublin in 1959, when he was appointed Lecturer at University College Dublin. In 1960 he was awarded by the National University of Ireland the degree of D Mus by examination, for which he submitted his First Symphony. The work was premiered at the Gaiety Theatre by the Radio Éireann Orchestra, guest conducted by Hans Müller-Kray, who flew to Dublin to conduct his former student's first symphony. The significance of this occasion in Irish cultural life was recognized by Brian Boydell who wrote, 'there are very few symphonies by Irish composers, and none of such proportions and seriousness of intent as this new work by Seóirse Bodley'. The success led to a permanent lecturing appointment at University College Dublin where he made an enormous contribution to Irish musical life through a teaching career of 45 years. His quiet courtesy, and commitment to the education of young musicians is artistically symbolized by his *Sinfonietta* commissioned by the National Youth Orchestra of Ireland for the Millennium celebrations, and which he dedicated to 'the many who, no longer my students, have become my friends'.

In addition to being a composer and university professor, Seóirse was a seasoned broadcaster. He was, for example, the youngest composer to contribute to the Radio Éireann 'Composers at Work' series for which he recorded a short statement on what it meant to be an Irish composer living in Germany. Later in his career, he composed incidental music for numerous films and TV documentaries most famously *W.B. Yeats. Cast a Cold Eye* (1988) and *James Joyce: Is there one who understands me* which received an Emmy award in New York in November 1982.

To give you some idea of the range of his activities: he has performed professionally as an orchestral and choral conductor, soloist and accompanist, adjudicator, and collector of Irish folksong. He was a patron of many music organizations including Na

Píobairí Uilleann (1968–), The Folk Music Society of Ireland (1971–2003) and Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music (1969–1986), of which he was Chair until 1980. When the Irish Government set up Aosdana Ireland’s Academy of Artists (1981), he was selected as one of its founding members.

To offer examples in just two of these areas: Conducting and Accompanying

- (i) On his return from Germany, Seóirse’s obvious distinction as a musician was recognized in his appointment in the 1960s as Conductor of the Culwick Choral Society, a position which gave him practice in conducting other people’s music with performers of variable ability with whom he explored unconventional repertoire. His 10 year appointment was crowned in 1970 by performances of Brahms *Songs of Mary*, Tallis *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, Stravinsky’s *Cantata on Anonymous 15–16th Century English Lyrics*, Carl Orff’s *Catulli Carmina*, Couperin’s *Messe pour le Couvents* and Scarlatti’s *St Cecilia Mass*, all of which testify to the quality of his direction.
- (ii) Throughout his lifetime, he worked extensively as an accompanist to the best professional Irish singers. In his early period he enjoyed working with Veronica Dunne, who premiered his orchestral cycle of W.B. Yeats settings, *Never to have lived is best*, commissioned to mark the Yeats centenary in 1965.

In the 1980s and 1990s he gave numerous international recitals with the American mezzo soprano, Aylish Kerrigan. During their cultural visit to China in August 1987, funded by the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs they performed Bodley’s *A Girl* and piano work, *Aislingí* at the Dong Feng Theatre in Changsha in south-central China and in the Beilei Theatre Guangzhou (Canton) to audiences of 1,500 people.

In his middle years he performed with and composed three cycles for the contralto Bernadette Greevy: *A Girl* (1978), *The Naked Flame* (1987) and *Earlsfort Suite* (2000) which will hear at the end of the ceremony.

By his 75th year he had formed a new artistic partnership with Sylvia O’Brien, marked by their performance and publication of Bodley’s O’Siadhail settings in the Hugh Lane Gallery. Further cycles premiered by Bodley and O’Brien include his Heaney cycle *The Hiding Places of Love* (2011). The premiere of his *Gretchen songs* with Sylvia in 2012 received a standing ovation at an international gathering of Goethe scholars at Maynooth University. This was to be his last public performance.

2. To turn to his compositional life

Bodley has been described as a chameleon composer because of his eclecticism and evolution of contrasting styles across a long compositional career of almost 70 years. He belongs to an extraordinary generation of European composers who emerged in the postwar years while still in their 20s. Right from the beginning his lyricism, structural intelligence and ‘contrapuntal ingenuity’ is celebrated in his earliest orchestral works with Acton singling him out as composing ‘as clearly, acceptably and attractively as the best of Shostakovich, Hindemith or Prokofiev’ in 1964 (*Irish Times*,

6.3.1964). But he was also capable of ferocious abstraction, as in the case of his first string quartet (1968), a test case in applying serial principles to rhythm, volume and colour.

International and Public Life

By the 1960s, Bodley's international reputation had grown and "he was widely recognised as the principal exponent of post-serial compositional procedures' (I'm quoting here from the biography written by Gareth Cox). As the recipient of an Arts Council Martin Tondor Award and Macauley Fellowship, he travelled extensively, giving performances of his own music. In 1964, for example, he conducted a performance of his Chamber Symphony no. 1 recorded for the UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers in Paris and in 1968 he was invited to attend the International Music Congress in New York.

Three summers spent in Darmstadt (1963–65) had brought Bodley into contact with other European inquiring musical minds such as Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, but he also stood apart from their outright rejection of nationalist idioms and for a while artistically trod a lonely path. The courage my husband shows in old age, he already showed in his lifetime by continuing the great adventure of musical modernism in Ireland – because part of this journey in carrying the main musical institutions and widest possible audience with him, meant shouldering audience (and sometimes performers') misapprehension. In the programme note for the first performance, Gerard Gillen recognized *Configurations* (1967) "as a milestone in the history of Irish art music" which is widely recognized today. At the Gaiety premiere, however, the audience felt differently. For political as much as musical reasons, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, premiered at the height of 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland produced an equally strong audience reaction, no doubt provoked by the music's commentary on the political situation: for example the notion of conflict between Irish traditional airs and its dissonant bedrock, most especially the lack of resolution (or unity) between music and texture, and deeply symbolic single note statement at the very heart of the work. If ever art commented on politics in Seóirse's work it is here.

The 1970s were characterized by a highly imaginative dialogue between the idioms of Irish traditional music and the European avant garde, during which he rethought some of his own preconceptions, and again initially shouldered a good deal of criticism. His uncontested masterpiece, *A Girl*, dates from this period. *A Small White Cloud Drifts over Ireland* (1975) has become one of his most popularly performed orchestral compositions.

On home ground Bodley became an increasingly public figure and was frequently commissioned for major state occasions such as the visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979 at which he heard his *Mass of Peace* sung by over one million people in the Phoenix Park. Other highly distinguished commissions in Ireland include his mythic Symphony no. 2, *I have Loved the Lands of Ireland* commissioned by the Irish Government in commemoration of Pádraig Pearse (1980) and his Choral Symphony no.3 *Ceol*, composed for the opening of the National Concert Hall in the same year.

As his musical outlook broadened, a fourth phase in the 80s and 90s embraced Irish and European influences, as is evident in Seóirse's fourth symphony commissioned by

the Arturo Toscanini Symphony Orchestra of Parma, Italy. Other international distinguished commissions include his *Missa Brevis* for Westminster Cathedral in 2009.

This final phase from the Millennium has been recognized by Gareth Cox and Axel Klein as a period of remarkable energy and intensity of expression heralded by a seven movement piano work *An Exchange of Letters* (2002) and unmistakably evident in his Piano Trio *Dancing in Daylight* (2014), which is a musical counterpart to Patrick Kavanagh's Canal Bank poems. This Song of Thanksgiving, composed after a period in hospital, combines contemporary idioms with the composer's characteristically lyrical lines and deep love of Irish traditional music. The third movement, for example, opens with a poignant slow air, composed by Seóirse's freely ornamented by Darragh Morgan, violinist and fiddler of the Fidelio Trio for whom this chamber work was written.

3. Thirdly and finally to highlight Seóirse's Engagement with Literature and the Arts, in relation to this great honour of Doctor of Letters

Seóirse never ceased to think about subjects in relation to each other. He made painting, poetry, architecture, music and film communicate with each other, always in the service of a more artistic society. Examples are *Chiaroscuro* (1999) commissioned for the AXA Piano Competition, inspired by the rediscovery of Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* (c1602) in Dublin and bequeathed to the National Gallery in the early 1990s. The humility of Christ's acceptance at the moment of betrayal is what ignited the composer's imagination. An earlier example is *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (for two pianos, 1972, solo piano version 1977), the above-mentioned musical commentary on the political violence in the north was barely disguised by his growing interest in Zen Buddhism and a particular travel diary of haiku poems by the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho, which bears the same title. Both poems and music of *Earlsfort Suite* were commissioned by Dúchas to commemorate in song significant buildings and heritage sites in Ireland in this case the National Concert Hall.

Bodley's wide-ranging reading across many languages is reflected across his life from his early Irish language Artsongs composed for the baritone, Tomás O' Suilleabháin. He set High German texts by Martin Luther and Johann Walter in *Fraw Musika* and in his final period made a unique contribution to Irish Art song through his embrace of German literature, reading Goethe in the original. Bodley's song set *Carta Irlandesa* was another double commission: four songs to commissioned texts by the Spanish poet, Antonio González-Guerrero to mark the 400th anniversary of the disastrous expedition sent by King Philip II of Spain to invade England in 1588, during which time numerous Spanish wrecks were washed up along the west coast of Ireland. Bodley's knowledge of Latin allowed him entrée to the text as he felt passionately about not setting texts he did not understand. A linguist to the end, he mastered Italian in his 80s with the intention of setting Dante in the Italian vernacular. While he set many English and American poets from Shakespeare, Milton and Wilfred Owen to Emily Dickenson and Walt Whitman, the majority of his solo and choral settings were to texts by major Irish poets: W.B. Yeats, George Russell (AE), Patrick Kavanagh, Thomas MacGreevy and Seamus Heaney. He actively collaborated with poets and enjoyed their individual ways of working. With Brendan Kennelly, they typically discussed at length the central idea of the work and after a few weeks Brendan would return with a garland of poems he had specially written, from which Seóirse would make the final selection. There was an obvious kinship with the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail, with whom he

loved to work, typically requesting a variety of moods in the one poem. Their collaboration resulted in two song cycles *The Naked Flame* (1987) and *Earlsfort Suite* (2000). The settings by Seamus Heaney, pre-published in *The Spirit Level*, were discussed in person and by correspondence.

His last major composition – which is also his first duet song cycle, *Songs from the Reservoir* (2018) composed for Sylvia O’Brien (soprano) and Imelda Drumm (mezzo) – was performed for his 85th birthday in the Royal Irish Academy of Music. At this premiere his musical journey came full circle – just as it has again today – and the RIAM honoured his lifelong contribution to music by making him a Fellow. Bodley’s last song cycle was inspired by a chance re-encounter with the poet on Nassau Street in December 2011 which led to a private poetry reading in a nearby café, where Brendan retraced for us the origins of his collection, *Reservoir Voices* (2009), and read a number of his favourites. The inward looking nature of the poems immediately spoke to Seóirse’s natural reserve and the reflective nature of the poems drew him back to the collection continually. He and a poet with whom he had collaborated were growing older and each translated those challenges into art.

This 90th birthday year has been the focus of enormous activity. In April 2023 his Heaney cycle, *The Hiding Places of Love* (2011) was performed for the composer by Sylvia O’Brien and Isabelle O’Connell in the Hugh Lane Gallery Dublin, where Seóirse and Sylvia had premiered it in the presence of the poet in 2011. New Music Dublin honoured Bodley’s birthday and artistic collaboration with Micheal O’Siadhail with performances of their *Earlsfort Suite*, also his much performed, *A Small White Cloud Drifts over Ireland*. Dublin, Frankfurt and Berlin were among the centres to mark his 90th birthday with performances of his Goethe settings, most notably in Goethe’s childhood home in Frankfurt, and the Mendelssohn’s family home in Berlin. Another poignant tribute was performed and recorded by Aylish Kerrigan in Stuttgart, sixty-six years after Seóirse moved there, thanks to his NUI travelling fellowship. Last month, his very first orchestral work, *Music for Strings* was given a very lively rendering by Luminosa, conducted by Sinead Hayes in St Nicholas’ Church in Galway, in honour of his 90th year.

To conclude with honours:

From the outset, Seóirse’s outstanding musical gifts have met with acclaim and won many awards. Early prizes include a State Scholarship for Secondary Education; the Travelling Studentship of the National University of Ireland, the Macaulay Fellowship in Music Composition and the Marten Toonder Award for a distinguished career in music. He is a Fellow of the Royal Irish Academy of Music and the first composer to be made a Saoi of Aosdana, Ireland’s state-sponsored academy of creative artists. When President Mary McAleese conferred the distinction in November 2008, she acknowledged ‘that Seóirse Bodley has helped us to recast what it means to be an artist in Ireland’. In a recent correspondence with Michael D Higgins, our President warmly how “Seóirse’s distinguished career has left a profound mark on our nation’s cultural and artistic landscape’ and of his wish for this honorary doctorate he wrote, ‘may this recognition serve as a testament to his enduring legacy in the world of music’

It is my profound privilege to commend to you on this occasion Seóirse Bodley’s extraordinary lifetime of excellence in composition and his outstanding artistic and civic contribution to music in Ireland.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum coniugem, quem scio tam moribus, quam doctrina habilem, et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Litteris, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.