

Irish Heritage: The Music of Ireland - Songs and harp from early times to the present
Wednesday 9th November 2011 at St Patrick's Church, Soho Square, London W1D 4NR

St Patrick's church in Soho Square W1, recently reopened after extensive renovation and refurbishment, was the venue for the major Irish Heritage music event of the autumn season. St Pats, as it is informally known, has since its consecration in 1792 played a pivotal role in providing vital cultural as well as spiritual links for Irish emigrants in London.

The large beautifully restored interior, marvellously spacious and airy and now brightly decorated, hosted an extensive and varied musical programme. Chosen by Ethna Kennedy, together with the artists, the repertoire was devoted entirely to Irish music of all ages and genres, from O'Caloran through to Aloys Fleischmann, and encompassing classical forms, traditional ballads and folk tunes in Irish and in English. Performers for the evening were Nicola Mulligan, (soprano) and Gavin Ring (baritone) accompanied throughout by Jean Kelly (Irish and concert harps).

Turlough O'Carolan, perhaps the last great Irish harpist/composer, brought together the three vital musical influences of his time, art music, folk music and the harper tradition. His famous *Concerto*, beautifully played by Jean Kelly on the Irish harp was therefore an appropriate introduction to the evening's entertainment. This was followed by *Criost Liom*, or *St Patrick's Breastplate*, the ancient Christian hymn whose original Old Irish lyrics were traditionally attributed to St Patrick himself, very impressively sung in Irish by Gavin Ring. More renderings as Gaeilge were to follow later, including the well known *Tabhair Dom do Lamh, Maidin I mBeara*, and Sean O'Riada's *Ag Criost an Siol*.

Thomas Moore, another huge influence on 19th and 20th century Irish music, was to feature prominently, with no fewer than ten of his *Melodies* played and sung in a variety of most interesting contexts. The harp is of course the perfect instrument to compliment the *Melodies* and Jean Kelly delivered a delightful trio of them in the masterful settings of TC Kelly. Notable too for their technical dexterity and expertly sung were *Erin! The Tear* and Frank Lambert's arrangement of *She is far from the Land*.

In Ireland, folk song or folk music is really a generic term for a wide variety of musical styles, allowing for many individual themes or subjects, and this repertoire included some classic examples of the genre. The poignant political lament *The Croppy Boy* was followed by those two very fine 'songs of exile', George Barker's *The Irish Emigrant* and the traditional air *The Old Bog Road*. A little group of touching but energetic love songs included *The Salley Gardens*, *She Moved through the Fair* and *My Lagan Love*, each exquisitely and sensitively rendered.

The Irish traditional ballad is a musical form whose popularity will never fade, in part perhaps because of its direct appeal to the emotions. Sigerson Clifford's *The Boys of Barr na Sraide*, Percy French's *The Mountains of Mourne* and JJ Molloy's *The Kerry Dance*, are all wonderful examples, and were sung with appropriate verve and character.

The classical strain in Irish music could be said to be represented by Michael Balfe's exquisite *I Dreamt that I Dwelt* from his opera *The Bohemian Girl*, and by Cork man Aloys Fleischmann's charming little piece *An Piobaire*. A pleasant surprise too was to hear Nicola Mulligan singing two of Rabindranath Tagore's *Love Songs* to settings by the young Irish composer David Wallace.

St Patrick's church was a magnificent and highly appropriate setting for this Irish Heritage gathering and the evening proved a tremendous success. The event was well publicised in the local media and attracted a large and very appreciative audience. We have no doubt that everybody present on the night looks forward very much to similar such events at St Pat's in the near future.

Michael O'Sullivan