

RHONA CLARKE

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Among the younger Irish composers of today Rhona Clarke is one who certainly shows great potential.

She is one of seven children born into the Dublin home, 35 Charlemont Road, Clontarf, to customs officer Patrick and his wife Theodora, née Flanagan. Rhona's birth occurred on 21 January 1958 at the now-demolished Evelyn Nursing Home in Eccles Street. Her father played the violin and her mother the piano and violin, the latter for the Westport Musical Society. Rhona, despite having no musical forbears of note, showed early, almost precocious ability; apparently, at the age of two she could sing perfectly in tune, entertaining neighbours and friends. She began piano lessons in 1964 with one Nancy Buckley and when this teacher died Rhona went to a Mrs Kelly to continue learning the piano. At the age of eighteen she continued such studies at the College of Music, Chatham Row, Dublin with Miss Elisabeth Costello who counted Michael O'Rourke among her many gifted pupils.



Rhona's schools were Scoil Mhure National School, Marlborough Street from 1962 to 1970 and, thereafter, Maryfield College of the Cross and Passion Convent until 1975. Music was not taught at school and Rhona's academic strengths were languages (she did, at one time consider a language degree or, failing that, a career in horticulture). Fortunately, as I believe time will show, she made the correct choice and the first step of her career could probably be traced back to when she was fourteen and joined the Lindsay Singers, a female voice choir under the conductorship of Ethna Barror, where Rhona sang mezzo-soprano. Already in her formative years she had valued much music including the Beethoven symphonies particularly numbers 5, 7 and 9, as well as some of the piano sonatas. Chopin had also won her over, notably the first and third Ballades, the Nocturnes and the popular third study from Opus 10. Her awakening to present-day music was as a result of being a member of the Lindsay Singers and performing such pieces as Prayer Before Birth by Elisabeth Maconchy which she hated at first. Hearing many choirs at festivals such as those at Cork and Llangollen impressed her deeply and provided invaluable grounding in choral writing which was later to be successfully reflected in her own works for this medium.

Clearly Rhona matured early musically; as a teenager in the 1970s she was not drawn to the pop music, fashions and trends of those days. It was evident that serious music was to be an essential part of her life. Her mother, having been widowed in 1974, would, no doubt, have preferred her daughter to pursue a more lucrative career but mother's voice was a lonely one. In fact Rhona has always been decisive, ambitious and possessed of insatiable curiosity. Perhaps, now, Mrs Clarke, sharing her daughter's many successes, has changed her mind.

She entered University College, Dublin in 1975 and became a member of its choir. She remembers singing Haydn Masses, Christmas Carols and works by Seoirse Bodley. In 1976 her friend, Joe Ryan, who was the conductor of the Gaudite Chamber Choir invited her to join. They sang mainly sixteenth-century material although they ranged from Gregorian Chant to Bruckner Motets. She was with this choir for about four years. At University she obtained her Diploma in Music Teaching and in that same year, 1978, won the Viennese Solo Award with a silver medal and a scholarship which was for a year's free tuition at the College of Music, This award was for the playing of a Beethoven sonata.

In 1980 she graduated from UCD with a Bachelor of Music degree. She was twenty two. She became music teacher and choir mistress at St Dominic's Convent, Cabra for just over a year when she secured a similar post this time at St Paul's Secondary School in the Greenhills district of Dublin where she had sole responsibility for teaching music throughout the school, comprising twelve to eighteen-year olds, and conducting its various choirs.

Rhona Clarke entered the composition competition for the Feis Ceoil Award in 1982 with her Six Short Piano Pieces for children. There were eight other entrants and she did not expect to win, but win she did and for a composer to win a prize for their very first work is some achievement. This encouragement led her to undertake cello lessons with Margaret Fitzgerald between the years 1983 and 1985. Rhona Clarke was trying to stimulate pupils at school to take up the cello as there was one available at the school. Financial restrictions may be the reason why no-one took her advice; so she studied the instrument herself,

At the beginning of this two-year period of study she composed her hauntingly beautiful lullaby Suantraí Ghrainne for female voices commissioned by the Lindsay Singers and first performed by them under Ethna Barror at the Cork International Choral Festival in 1984. It is a setting of a poem by Maire Macant Saoi and the music, which has a conscious modal Irishness, deservedly won the Sean O'Riada Memorial Trophy. It was very well received; indeed it not only ranks as the composer's first public success but it has an enduring quality. She told me that it was written "almost entirely intuitively". Its telling simplicity of expression is appealing; it is tenderly evocative; touching, but not sentimental; unashamedly tonal and possessing that rich nostalgic Celtic quality that communicates immediately. The piece, albeit short, is well-conceived having a very human and gently emotive quality recalling a remark the composer made to the present writer when she said of the music of Mozart, "What impresses me most is how little he used to such great effect and intensity". One could say that of Suantraí Ghrainne.

Up to 1985 Miss Clarke had worked in isolation; then she attended the Ennis Summer School where she heard music by Berio, Lutoslawski and other continental composers which generated an enthusiastic response in her. This annual school has as its directors James Wilson and John Buckley. Wilson was born in London in 1922 but has lived in Dublin for the last forty years. His opus numbers exceed 120 and include symphonic works, concertante and choral works as well as many song-cycles. He has also written for the theatre and his opera Grinning at the Devil which deals with the life of Karen Blixen received twenty sold-out performances in Copenhagen in 1989. In 1990 he said of Rhona Clarke that "she is one of the most interesting and original composers working in Ireland. All her work shows integrity, individuality and a capacity for hard work".

John Buckley was born in Templeglantine, County Limerick in 1951 and studied the flute with Doris Keogh and composition with James Wilson and Alun Hoddinott. He received the Varming Prize and a Macaulay Fellowship in 1978 and has represented Ireland at the International Rostrum of Composers on four occasions. His impressive Symphony No 1 was first performed by the RTE Symphony Orchestra under Albert Rosen in June 1988. Buckley says of Rhona Clarke, "I am struck by the originality of her imagination; she has a great attention to detail and increasing technical assurance. She is an extremely dedicated and serious composer; this, allied to her fertile imagination and technical facility will, no doubt, bring her into greater prominence in years to come".

The first year at the Ennis Summer School saw the completion of Rhona Clarke's Trio for clarinet, cello and piano which she has subsequently withdrawn it being "too experimental" and her "not liking it that much". This tells us a great deal about the composer who is concerned about the integrity and quality of her music.

Ash Wednesday, to words by T S Eliot, scored for voice and piano, dates from 1985. Due to copyright reasons and the inability to secure performing rights the work has yet to be heard. The following year a short work for solo flute, Yellow and Blue appeared; a work in which the composer shows excellent judgement. As with Suantraí Ghrainne it benefits from its brevity which enhances the work. The piece is not labourious; it does not employ shrillness or disturbing effects; it states its material with the minimum of fuss and, therefore, the greatest result. It was first performed in April 1987 at the Douglas Hyde Gallery of Trinity College, Dublin by Caran O'Connell. Sisyphus for flute, clarinet and string trio, a work which the composer believes may have done the most to establish her, appeared in 1986. The work is named after the character who, according to Greek legend, was punished by Zeus who condemned him to push a boulder up a cliff eternally, each time it reached the top it would roll back again. The motif of the last movement suggests this. Sisyphus won the Varming prize which is awarded every four years to a composer under thirty years of age. Varming is a Dutch businessman and one of the founders of an engineering concern whose presence in Ireland is with the firm Mulcahy and Reilly. The piece is the composer's usual economic style, contains some

brief aleatoric moments but it does not hinder its neat formal structure and deft instrumentation. Of the three movements the first is the most convincing; the middle movement maintains the same basic pace whereas a contrast would perhaps have been structurally more satisfying; the finale moves with more urgency and has a hint of wry mischievous behaviour if that is how the edict of Zeus could be conceived. There is a tautness in the music; a freshness particularly in the opening pages with its judicious blend of woodwind and strings. It is an accomplished work, despite its being reserved in content, receiving its first performance by Concorde in March 1987 at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin.

Another work for solo voice, this time accompanied by a solo flute, entitled *Surprise* was completed in July 1986. It is a setting of a poem by Anna de Noailles; musically it is well-conceived and benefits from a good sense of contrast. Its first performance by Virginia Kerr and Deirdre Brady was a RTE broadcast.

Exactly a year later *Purple Dust* for flute, violin and piano was finished. The use of the flute again shows Miss Clarke's affinity with this instrument. It has been said that of all instruments the flute is most akin to the human voice and consequently, the most personal of instruments and it always seems to have happy associations with female performers. The instrument has been given both a spiritual connotation needing breath to give it life, The cello has also the reputation of being a "human" and personal instrument no doubt due to its being held closest to the body. One can only conjecture what Rhona Clarke would make of these opinions!

Purple Dust, named after a title of a play by Sean O'Casey, won the New Music for Sligo Award from six finalists in a concert at St.Mary's Cathedral, Sligo in October 1987. It may, in many ways, be very similar to *Sisyphus* of two years earlier, but the latter work has a greater variety of writing for the piano some of which is inside the instrument producing some telling effects. There is no doubt that it was a worthy winner although one wonders whether it needs a greater contrast in material and rhythm.

Liadain for voice and Irish harp was commissioned by Ailish Kerrigan and first performed by her and Ann Marie Farrell in Dublin in April 1990 in a performance which, in my view, did not fully realise the composer's intentions. *Liadain* was a Munster poetess who loved Cuirithir, himself a poet, and the poem is concerned with God-fearing guilt and torments of aborted love. The piece is beautifully Celtic but its appeal may be restricted. The writing for the harp is superlative.

The BBC Singers were entrusted with the first reading of Psalm 148 at the Cork International Festival of 1989. The work is anchored in the tonality of D and is for unaccompanied chorus with optional piano or organ. Its directness of expression, buoyant rhythms and mature restraint reveal the composer's discerning mind. Although Rhona Clarke claims not to be religious her Roman Catholic upbringing surely lies behind this work which demonstrates a successful union of words and music something some experienced composers are not always able to realise.

Dunsandle for piano trio dates from 1989. While it is impressive it breaks no new ground aurally or stylistically. Perhaps the composer is confident with this tried manner of composition but originality, is, of necessity, a progressive attribute. Expert craftsmanship is not always enough. *Dunsandle* is an estate outside Athenry in County Galway now in ruins. A friend of the composer has a house nearby and the work was inspired by a visit there.

The Tallaght Choral Society, with funds from the arts council of Ireland, commissioned what was to be Rhona Clarke's first setting of the Gloria in 1988, a work in which she uses the orchestra for the first time. Its premiere was at the National Concert Hall in Dublin in April 1989. It is both her most adventurous and best work to date. Juxtaposed with the Gloria is a translation of a meditative poem by Teresa de Avila sung by a solo soprano with some soaring and spine-tingling effects. There is use of modal styles referring, consciously or otherwise, to religious music of the past and reflecting the composer's interest in Renaissance music engendered by her days in the Gaudete Chamber Choir. The piece employs some lovely rhythms; has moments while the orchestration is beautifully balanced and at moments, is unforgettable. The choral writing is flawless.

The second Gloria also dates from 1989 and is for unaccompanied double choir; it was first heard at a 'workshop' at the Cork International Choral Festival with the BBC Singers. It continues in the style of Psalm 148 and hovers between the tonalities of G and D. It is I think reminiscent of the slow movement of Bartok's second piano concerto via the Kyrie in Britten's War Requiem. As with the psalm setting, the off-beat rhythms give this 'second' Gloria a vital character; as in Suantraí Ghrainne the closeness of the harmonies give the work a warm sound and a marvellous unity. There is also that magical Clarke ingredient of humanity. In fact the composer perhaps even reveals more of herself, to a discerning ear at least, than she would wish to. Such a perception would conclude that she is usually of a calm and patient disposition, optimistic and friendly, though capable of occasional outbursts of anger. She can be outgoing or dreamy. This explains one of her favourite pastimes which is walking by the sea. Her closeness to natural elements is part of her temperament. She also enjoys gardening which provides a welcome contrast for her active mind, insatiable curiosity and ambitious drive. She will always want to go forward although she will wisely take one step at a time. For further relaxation. When time permits, she enjoys reading such authors as Virginia Woolf, Kazuo Ishiguro, the poetry of Brendan Kennelly, Herman Hesse and Collette, among others. She derives pleasure from the acting of Daniel Day Lewis, Liv Ullman, Dustin Hoffman and Glenda Jackson.

Since a visit to New York in 1987 Miss Clarke has developed an interest in modern art which she believes assists her to compose and to value form, texture, colour and subject matter. She is certainly a woman of our time. Although she has not experienced discrimination against her because of her sex she remains grateful to the pioneers of the Women's Liberation Movement for a freedom which is now taken for granted. Rhona Clarke's opinions are both precise and concise and always delivered with courtesy. She strongly believes in the right of every individual to live as they please provided that no-one is harmed in the process; she abhors the consequences of harmful actions, particularly crimes against the defenceless,

Musically she values Bach and Mozart; recognises the highly individual greatness of Beethoven; acknowledges Brahms' emotional quality; regards Wagner as the composer who made the greatest strides in harmonic language although she is troubled at his unbearable personality; she also admires the personal harmonic idiom of Debussy; responds to Fauré particularly the Piano Quartets: she applauds the great energy in Bartok; finds some difficulty coping with the strict serial works of Schonberg; admires the tautness of Webern's style but does not derive any pleasure from listening to the work of this consummate composer. She prefers Berio, Lutoslawski and George Crumb. Of British music she is indifferent to Elgar; finds Britten's choral music appealing whereas Tippett has yet to be discovered; her first encounter with the music of Humphrey Searle led her spontaneously to use the superlative "greatness". Among Irish composers she enjoys the great energy of John Buckley; the solemnity and depth of Raymond Deane and the clarity of Brian Boydell. Indeed her musical taste is wide.

She believes that if Mozart were alive today he would explore the electronic medium although Rhona Clarke prefers this form when combined with acoustic elements or used for film and dance.

The year 1989 saw the production of two further works. The Two Songs for voice, violin and percussion to words by the Irish poet Louise Hermana and the Triptych for choir, saxophone, piano and string quartet commissioned by the Clare County Council to celebrate the 750th anniversary of the town of Ennis where the Summer School has been held since 1982. The meaning of Ennis is river meadow and these words are constantly repeated in the second movement, alternating between English and Irish. The finale wonderfully captures the mood of a country dance.

She attended a weekend course in computer music technology at Queen's University, Belfast in 1989 and the following year embarked on a two-year Masters course in composition. She has also been the public relations officer for the Association of Irish composers.

Her String Quartet dates from 1990 and is entitled Magnificat because fragments of a Magnificat chant are used throughout the piece. It has three main contrasting sections, the first and second of which alternate several times. The first section is based on major and minor scales and uses two as thematic material namely two fragments of plainchant, a Magnificat and a Salve Regina. The Magnificat theme is stated in full at the end by the cello.

A Great Rooted Tree is an orchestral work. The title is from the words of Vita Sackville-West:

There is nothing more lovely in life
Than the union of two people whose
Love for one another has grown through
The years from a small acorn of passion to
A great rooted tree.

While at Queens, Belfast Rhona had the composer Michael Alcorn as her supervisor. When he was away Professor Adrian Thomas undertook this role. Following a viva voce at the end of June... Rhona's examiners, Nicola Lefanu, Eibhlis Farrell and Michael Alcorn recommended her work for a PhD and she graduated that December. Her interest in music for tape developed. Such compositions are the same in intent as writing for acoustic instruments or synthesised sounds she claims although the process can be different. Composing a piece for tape gives the composer total control. City with No Name is for tape and Pied Piper written two years later in 1994 is for flute and tape.

The work that probably gives her the most satisfaction is Gleann Dá Loch for piano of 1995. The timbre and resonances of the piano are exploited mainly by contrasting registers and textures... from stark unison octaves at the extremes of the instrument to monodic lines played mostly in the middle register, to chordal sequences.

Rhona's music has sensual and spiritual qualities. It has come in for criticism as being somewhat inactive but it has not prevented her from being established in Ireland as a leading composer.

Rhona Clarke is a delightful person. She is completely natural and wholly free of guile or bellicosity. She is determined but not ruthless; She is already strikingly mature and above all has a monastic dedication to her art. With these attributes she can only succeed and hers is a career that I shall watch with interest and great expectancy.

List of works:

Suantraí Ghráinne	1983
Sisyphus	1985
Surprise	1986
Purple Dust	1987
Dunsandle	1988
Gloria Deo	1988
Liadáin	1988
Psalm 148	1988
Psalm 148	1988
Gloria	1989
Magnificat	1990
Cantate Domino	1990 rev. 2007
Triptych	1990
A Great Rooted Tree	1990 - 1991
Whaling Afloat and Ashore	1991
A Song for St Cecilia's Day 1687	1991
The Mouse's Petition	1991
City with No Name	1992
Nightsong	1993
Pied Piper	1994
SoundWorks Suite No. 1 for Young Players	1994
Rorate Caeli	1994
Rorate Caeli	1994
Gleann Dá Loch	1995 rev. 1996
Inside Out	1995

SoundWorks Suite No. 2 for Young Players	1995
The Waterford Suite: Jealous Pursuit	1997
The Waterford Suite: Prelude and Labyrinth	1997
The Waterford Suite: Resolution and Carousel	1997
The Waterford Suite: Then / Now	1997
Everything Passes	1997
Five Songs	1998
Géibheann	1998
There are also musicians	1998
For Íde	1999 rev. 2002
Monsieur Marceau	1999
Five Short Piano Solos	1999
Missa	1999
Missa	1999
Jagged Edge	2000
In Umbra	2000
Jubilate Domino	2000
Sympathy	2000
Thugamar Féin an Samhradh Linn	2000
Piano Trio No. 2	2001 rev. 2007
Fanfare	2001
Reflection on the Sixth Station of the Cross	2001
Undercurrent	2001
Béal Dearg	2001
Piano Trio No. 3	2002
Drift - Knot	2002
Mo Pháistín Fionn	2002
Hidden	2003
Where the clouds go	2005
Tread Softly	2005
Eight Improvisations	2006
Four Pieces for Solo Flute	2006
From an upper window	2006
Do not stand by my grave and weep	2006
Two Marian Anthems	2007
Cnámh	2008
Síofra Sí	2008
The Kiss	2008
Pas de Quatre	2009

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This article is due for updating and this will be done as soon as time permits