

BERNARD GEARY

David C F Wright

Bernard Geary was born in Cork on 11 February 1934, one of two sons born to John Geary, a shopkeeper, and Ellen Dunlea. The other son, Michael, was born on 15 October 1924 and became a manager with an insurance company.

John Geary played the trombone, but his wife had no musical talent and neither family had any musical antecedents.

Bernard was taught by the strict Christian Brothers in Cork and went up to University College, Cork in 1952 obtaining a BMus in 1955. He came to music late, probably in his mid-teenage years, and it was the music of the Romantic composers that most interested him. He only took the piano up seriously when he was sixteen and this was with George Brady.



Bernard admits that any music composed before the 19th century did not appeal to him. He played both the piano and the organ and undertook musical arrangements. He has strong views, which include his likes and dislikes. He has always appreciated the works of George Bernard Shaw but none of the works of Charles Dickens has any appeal for him.

He graciously acknowledges the encouragement of Aloys Fleischmann, his professor at University College Cork, for the first performances of his work.

His first composition, which he recognises, is his String Quartet no. 1, which dates from 1960. It is set in three movements lasting about 19 minutes and was premiered by the RTE String Quartet on 6 December 1961 in a RTE broadcast.

Another work was premiered in 1960 at the City Hall, Cork, when he conducted the Cork Symphony Orchestra in his eight minute Provocation for string orchestra.

He married Leonora McCarthy, a secretary, at Cork University Church in 1962. She sang in an amateur choir in Cork which is how she met her husband-to-be. They have four children: Peter, born 4 April 1963, an executive with the multi-national company Hays, Karen, born 20 June 1964 who is a violin teacher, Hilaire, born 5 January 1966 who is a self-employed recruitment officer and Amanda, born 21 November 1969 who is a music inspector employed by the education department.

Geary's first orchestral work was a success. This is Variations on Amran Dochais (Song of Hope) of 1963 scored for a standard symphony orchestra and was first performed on 9 February 1964 at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin when the RTE Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Hans Waldemar Rosen (1904-1994) who developed Irish music for over 50 years and was a big and likeable man.

Bernard achieved second prize in Composition Competition in 1964 for Amran Dochais. This was the Carolan Prize sponsored by RTE. The winner was John Purser the Scottish composer and playwright born in 1942.

In 1970 Geary moved to Dublin. This was the year his father died. His mother died four years later.

Three ballet scores followed, The Needle Eater for small orchestra in 1970 and, the following year, Bitter Aloes for piano alone, followed by Il Casone also for solo piano. The choreography for this

second ballet, *Bitter Aloes*, was by Geoffrey Davidson and the first performance was given by the Irish Theatre Ballet at the Palace Theatre in Cork in 1971. Davidson was also the choreographer of *Il Casone*, first performed in 1971 at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin by the Irish Theatre Ballet.

Two orchestral pieces date from 1971 namely the *Carol for Orchestra* premiered in December 1971 by Colman Pearce and the RTE Chamber Orchestra at St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and *The Banks of the Esk*, the Scottish river, premiered by the same forces in a broadcast on 15 December 1971 and conducted by Eimear O Broin.

Four vocal and choral works were his next acknowledged works. *Songs of Wonder* of 1972 is scored for soprano and orchestra with texts translated from Old Irish. The songs are *Song of Maelduin*, *Little Star*, *The Wind among the Reeds* and *Fairy Song*. The premiere was a broadcast by Mary Sheridan with the composer conducting the RTE Chamber Orchestra. The *Yeats Cycle* is for baritone and piano consists of six songs namely *Summer and Spring*, *Those dancing days are done*, *What then? A boat*, *O do not love too long* and *The Ragged Wood* The first performance was at the Dunlaoire Arts Festival in October 1972 with the composer accompanying Joseph Dalton. *Triptych* for soprano and orchestra was written in 1973 to text by Robert O'Donohue premiered at Carrolls Theatre, Dublin by the Ulyssess Ensemble conducted by Colman Pearce The work was commissioned by P.J. Carroll and Co. Ltd., the tobacco company.

The nine-movement *Mass of St Finbar* for tenor, SATB chorus and organ dates from 1973 and was first performed in June of that year at St. Francis Church, Cork with the soloist Kevin Owens and the Cork Film Festival Choir, the Cork Film Festival having commissioned the work.

Three orchestral works ensued. *Remember the Glories of Brian the Brave* celebrates Brian Boru and is a four minute work, the first performance of which was a broadcast by RTE Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Colman Pearce on 25 April 1973. The *Courtmacsherry Overture* of 1976 had its premiere in a broadcast by the same orchestra under Proinnsias O'Duinn and was inspired by the beauty spot about 30 miles from Cork, and the same year, *An Saol Bocht (The Poor Life)* for orchestra was completed. The *Poor Life* is based on an old Irish folk song.

The writer, *Quasimodo*, has three texts set by Geary in *Rain and Iron* for SATB a capella, broadcast in November 1977 by the RTE Singers under Hans Waldemar Rosen.

In 1976, Geary became head of music at Cabinteely Community School where he stayed until 1998. In 1977 and 1978 five orchestral works were composed, the *Pastorale*, commissioned and broadcast by the RTE on 2 June 1978 by the RTE Chamber Orchestra under Eimear O'Broin, and there is the *Elegy* for orchestra (the orchestra being celesta, harp and string orchestra), was also given the same forces and conductor in a broadcast on 11 November 1977, the *Dunkellin Rhapsody* premiered by the same forces and conductor in a broadcast on 30 December 1977, *Reflections on an Irish Carving*, written in 1978, and also premiered in a broadcast, again by the same forces, on 20 April 1979. However, a different conductor, Proinnsias O'Duinn, broadcast the premiere of *Downpatrick Head* on 22 December 1978.

Two radio plays, *Sauce for the Goose* (1978) and *Julian* (1979), required incidental music from Geary. Between these plays, by George Feydean and Patrick Murray respectively, came a short piece for harp entitled *Awakening* premiered by Helen Davies at Dublin's Unitarian Church in October 1979 ; the *Four Campbell Songs* for SATB a cappella were premiered by the RTE singers under Proinnsias O'Duinn and the short *Divertissement* for Orchestra of 1979 broadcast on 10 August 1979 by the RTE Chamber Orchestra under Eimear O'Broin.

Two Cameos for piano were written in 1979 but the premiere was eighteen years later at the National Concert Hall in Dublin when Anthony Byrne was the pianist. Bernard's few piano works are succinct but very well written and admirable.

St. Patrick was a Gentleman was a television documentary for which Geary wrote a 40 minute score. It was broadcast in March 1979. St Patrick, incidentally, was a Welshman.

Neither the concerto or the symphony form held much interest for Geary. In fact, he expressed his view to me that the symphony was almost dead. However, a solo instrument appears in his ten-minute Rhapsody for trumpet and orchestra premiered in a broadcast by Mike Nolan and the RTE Chamber Orchestra under the composer on 13 April 1980.

Another work composed in 1979 was the short Festive Overture premiered in December 1979 with the RTE Chamber Orchestra under Proinnsias O'Duinn at Deans Grange Catholic Church. A curious work of four minutes, Stir the Bovril, was premiered by the same forces in June 1980.

RTE commissioned the next work, The Crosses of Annagh, a five minute orchestral piece premiered in a broadcast in November 1979 with the RTE Chamber Orchestra under Eimear O'Broin. It was a work recommended to me by a friend in Ireland.

Calendar is one of those fashionable works in which not only music is employed. In this case there are speakers, tapes and slides; the eleven movements and a text by Paul Murray take 40 minutes. It was first performed at the school where Geary taught, the Cabinteely Commercial School, with their choir and ad hoc orchestra. The composer's school from his childhood, the Christian Brothers of Cork, commissioned the Mass of St Nessan in 1980, in which the composer set the same nine movements as in his previous mass, but, this time, it is scored for soprano, ladies choir and organ and this was premiered at St. Finbarr's South Church in Cork by the Knockree Singers under the direction of the composer.

Paul Murray was the librettist for Geary's two act operetta The Plaisham premiered in May 1980 at his school. The school provided the ad hoc orchestra. This work may have lead the composer to write his one act opera, Sarah, which lasts about 48 minutes and the text is again by Paul Murray. Sarah is a fictional character who is a feisty woman. It was first performed at the Carrolls Theatre in Dublin in June 1981 by Anna Caleb, Patrick Ring and Patrick Sheridan. The Ulysses Ensemble was conducted by Colman Pearce and the work was commissioned by P.J. Carroll and Co., Ltd who had commissioned Triptych and the Three Love Poems of 1980 for soprano, flute, cello and harpsichord to texts by Pablo Neruda.

Paul Murray was a senior producer with RTE Drama department from 1969 to 1994. He is now retired and lives with his wife in County Wicklow.

Geary, being a teacher and having a lifelong passion to encourage young people to enjoy and appreciate real music and this is shown in his Canticle for Christmas of 1981 with ladies choir and orchestra in six traditional settings. It was premiered in December 1981 by the Young Dublin Singers and the RTE Chamber Orchestra conducted by the composer. The work was commissioned by RTE. Three short separate pieces for ladies' voices and piano followed namely Eist le Fuaim na hAbhann, Dochas and Sweep. Translated these titles are Listen to the sound of the river, Hope and Sweep.

The Franciscan Order commissioned a short mass, the Canticle Mass of St. Francis in 1982. An orchestral work, A Village Christmas, commissioned by RTE, appeared in 1982 as did the Divertimento for string orchestra premiered by the Hibernian Chamber orchestra under David Lillis on 6 November 1982.

Chamber music had not been a major feature in Geary's output but a Wind Quintet appeared in 1982. It was premiered by the Falun Wind Quintet in Sweden in October 1985.

An important work for solo voice, SATB chorus and orchestra is Time's Delight with texts by W.H. Davies, Robert Browning, George Barker, John Milton, Laurence Binyon, Seumas O'Sullivan, Quasimodo and Henry Twells. This eleven-movement work was commissioned by Third-day Chorale and the Arts Council.

Geary has no strong political or religious views and, although he describes himself as a moderate drinker, he says that this does not stimulate his work. He finds evenings the best time for composition. He is not a smoker and he enjoys golf and walking.

Of all the 200 "modern" composers that I have written about, Geary is the only one who has a good word to say about Benjamin Britten. Geary rates James MacMillan highly but finds aleatory and serial music to have little or no appeal. He finds minimalist music appealing.

The year 1984 saw two interesting works. Kindermusik is scored for SATB choir, clarinet, percussion and piano. It was commissioned by the Music Association of Ireland for the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music and was premiered in December 1984 at St. Stephen's Church, Mount Street Crescent, Dublin. It sets texts by Hoberman, Ward and Walter de la Mare. The thirty-first Cork International Choral and Folk Dance Festival of 1984 commissioned The Trumpet a setting of words by Edward Thomas for divided SATB which is a complex work with speech and whisperings. Calt Cooper conducted the Goethe Institute Choir who premiered the work at Cork City Hall in May 1984. Geary's school commissioned The Divine Image in 1985 for unison female voices and piano to a text to Paul Murray, a very beautiful, indeed sublime little work.

The cantata Malachy's Quest, from which The Divine image comes. commissioned by Cabinteely Commercial school was first performed at the Dublin's National Concert Hall in November 1985. It is scored for soprano, tenor, narrator, female choir and orchestra and the premiere was conducted by the composer.

The following year saw Four Songs for voice and piano given their first performance by Kathryn Smith and Anthony Byrne at Dublin's National Concert Hall in November 1997.

The orchestral work The Painted Wood, written in 1988, is highly regarded by its composer. The RTE Symphony Orchestra under Colman Pearce gave the first performance at the International Rostrum of Composers in Paris in August 1989. The year 1988 also saw the completion of Essay for string orchestra, commissioned by the Hibernian Chamber Orchestra and premiered in November 1989 at St. Stephen's Church, Mount Street Crescent, Dublin under Alan Smale.

Slieve na mon for massed choirs and orchestra appeared in 1991. It is based on a folk song. Many small scale works appeared around this time but Sankt Nik'laus Komm in unser Haus of 1993 is a more substantial work. It is scored for SATB choir, organ and orchestra. This was commissioned by the Goethe Institute and premiered in Dublin's National Concert Hall on 9 December 1998 with the Goethe Institute Choir and the Hiberian Orchestra conducted by John Finucane.

2006 saw two commissions. One from Cork, namely Plearacha an Ghaorthaigh for orchestra, jazz and traditional groups. Ghaorthaigh is the Old Irish for the name Geary and the first word in the title means revelry and, from RTE, the String Quartet no. 2 in one movement. Bernard is nor loquacious and does not appear to have much interest in his own music but this is probably due to his innate humility.

CDs of Bernard's music can be obtained from Contemporary Music Centre, Fishamble Street, Dublin, Ireland. He is still an examiner for the Royal Academy of Ireland.

Irish music does not 'travel well' and, perhaps, Ireland itself does not support it well enough, but the consequences are that the public are being denied any opportunity of hearing some first class music and have a limited diet of mainly the usual stuff.

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