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## Traditional Irish Musical Elements in the Solo-Piano Music of Ryan Molloy

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TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSICAL ELEMENTS IN THE  
SOLO-PIANO MUSIC OF RYAN MOLLOY

by

Brian Thomas Murphy

A Dissertation  
Submitted to the Graduate School,  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
and the School of Music  
at The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Music in Ireland has become increasingly popular in recent decades. There is no shortage of Irish musical groups, recordings, and live performances featuring Irish music both in Ireland and abroad. Contemporary art music in Ireland has also seen an increase in support and notoriety. Irish composers face a decision of how, if at all, to engage with traditional folk music that is so prominent in their culture. Ryan Molloy (b. 1983 in Pomeroy, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland) is a composer and performer who incorporates elements of traditional Irish music in the context and in the language of modern art music.

Molloy received a childhood education in both traditional Irish music and in classical piano. He is fluent with both of these musical languages, which gives him a unique perspective and cultural context. This dissertation explores the way in which Ryan Molloy uses traditional musical elements and recontextualizes them in his solo-piano works. Chapter One provides background information about the recent history of Irish art music. Chapter Two provides a brief biography of Molloy and presents some of his chief compositional goals and purposes. Chapter Three introduces basic concepts of traditional Irish music. Chapter Four presents Molloy's solo-piano works and discusses how he uses the music of his traditional heritage. The appendices include a chronological list of Molloy's compositions as well as transcripts of interviews of Molloy by the author.

Molloy's music continues to grow in prominence both in Ireland and abroad. His perspective generates a music language that is fresh and innovative. His music, which draws upon two seemingly opposing worlds, deserves increased performance and research.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my doctoral committee members, Dr. Edward Hafer, Dr. Joseph Brumeloe, Dr. Ellen Elder, and Dr. Michael Bunchman, all of whom have been a constant system of support, feedback, and encouragement. I would especially like to extend my sincerest thanks and appreciation to my committee chair, advisor, and mentor, Dr. Elizabeth Moak. Dr. Moak has been steadfast in her role as advisor and mentor throughout my doctoral candidacy process. It has been my great privilege to learn under her tutelage.

I would like to extend a special statement of gratitude to Dr. Ryan Molloy, whose insight, availability, and willingness to communicate have been immeasurably helpful over the course of this research process. It has been my highest honor to work with Dr. Molloy and become acquainted with his music.

Finally, I would like to say a special thanks to William Carey University, Dr. Wes Dykes, the late Dr. Don Odom, and all of the university administration for affording me the time and support to work on this degree.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, LeAnn, and to my son, Patrick. None of this would have been possible without their constant support, encouragement, and patience. No one has sacrificed more or believed in me more in this process than my family. I express my deepest love to my life partner and to my best buddy for allowing me the space to progress through this degree. You both have kept me oriented to reality and have provided an untold amount of emotional stability in this process. I am thankful to God for you.

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## INTRODUCTION

This project evolved out of an initial interest in my own Irish ancestry and a desire to become better acquainted with Irish composers. I discovered a lecture online about Irish composers of piano music given by Dr. Ryan Molloy (b. 1983), who is himself an Irish composer and performer of traditional Irish and contemporary art music.<sup>1</sup> Eager to explore this music, I contacted Molloy, who directed me to the Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland (CMC), an organization and publishing company in Dublin that has also created an online database of contemporary Irish composers and their works.<sup>2</sup> After ordering scores and becoming further acquainted with various works by Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933), Bill Whelan (b. 1950), Ryan Molloy, and others from the CMC, I became increasingly intrigued by Molloy's compositions, many of which engage traditional Irish folk music in the context of modern compositional practices. A review of literature reveals that no dissertations, theses, or scholarly articles have been written about Ryan Molloy or his piano works.

Ryan Molloy has a versatile background as a classical pianist, a traditional Irish musician, and as a composer. Molloy's sound world is a vast intersection of these varying styles, cultures, and ideals into which his own musical identity is injected.<sup>3</sup> This identity affords him a rare place among modern composers in Ireland and in the world today.

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1. Ryan Molloy, "Irish Composer on Irish Music: Ryan Molloy on the 'Irish' in Irish Piano Music" (video of lecture, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, April 1, 2015), accessed July 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HPoG17W3vml>.

2. Ryan Molloy, e-mail message to author, July 7, 2015. The Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland's website is <http://www.cmc.ie>.

3. Ryan Molloy, Interview Two by author, Maynooth, Ireland, June 8, 2018.

## CHAPTER ONE – CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY ART MUSIC IN IRELAND

For most people outside of Ireland, the association of music and Ireland is solely based on Irish folk music, to which the Irish refer as traditional or “trad” music. Indeed, the relationship of traditional and classical music in Ireland has a difficult history. As nationalism and the desire for an Irish Republic grew during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Irish regarded Western classical music as an irrelevant expression of colonial values.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the Irish language was in decline, while English, the language of their occupiers, had taken its place as the common language in Ireland.<sup>5</sup>

Musicologist Harry White notes the role of music in relation to language in Ireland:

It is not too much to say that during the nineteenth century, when Irish [language] lapsed into near silence, music became a conduit for this growing sense of identity, to the extent that ideologues of Irish culture, eager to join the gap between cultural and political autonomy, fastened upon the music not only as a source of cultural regeneration but as a means of nourishing that impulse towards autonomy, which is the distinctive feature of any nation oppressed by long centuries of colonial mismanagement.<sup>6</sup>

White also states, “Music assumed many of the burdens which language would otherwise have more easily absorbed.”<sup>7</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, music itself in Ireland became increasingly limited in its expressive and experimental capabilities by its use as the absolute icon of

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4. Harry White, “Music, Politics and the Irish Imagination,” in *Music in Ireland: 1848-1998*. Thomas Davis Lectures, ed. Richard Pine (Boulder: Irish American Book Company, 1998), 30.

5. *Údarás na Gaeltachta*, “Background on the Irish Language,” accessed August 23, 2018, available from <http://www.udaras.ie/en/an-ghaeilge-an-ghaeltacht/stair-na-gaeilge/>.

6. Harry White, “The Divided Imagination: Music in Ireland after Ó Riada,” *Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (2003): 12.

7. Ibid.

nationalism in Ireland. The desire for political autonomy from Great Britain only increased the use of music as a cultural and political symbol.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Great Famine in the 1840s only heightened the desire to preserve Irish culture. Ireland's population reached eight million inhabitants in the early 1840s. The Great Famine began in 1845, and within five years, the country's population was reduced by half because of emigration and death. It took decades for Ireland to begin to recover.<sup>9</sup> According to Harry White, "It was the Famine more than any other event in Irish history which determined the meaning of musical recovery in the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>10</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, music had cemented itself as an expression of cultural identity and a desire for home rule.<sup>11</sup>

As the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries continued, the gap between traditional music and modern Irish composition seemed ever-present despite efforts to narrow the gap. The year 1897 saw the formation of two annual festivals—the *Feis Ceoil*, largely devoted to classical music, and the *Oireachtas*, a festival of traditional Irish music and culture.<sup>12</sup> White states that the foundation of these two festivals illustrates the divide that defined music in Ireland of this period. The founding of the *Feis Ceoil* was motivated by Irish nationalism as represented in classical music. In addition, it sought to nurture

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8. Ibid.

9. Harry White and Nicholas Carolan, 2001 "Ireland," *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 16, 2018, <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.13901>.

10. White, "Music, Politics and the Irish Imagination," 31.

11. White and Carolan, "Ireland."

12. Ibid.

Irish folk music. Despite these efforts, it quickly became apparent that two types of music necessitated two kinds of festivals, thus the founding of the *Oireachtas* shortly thereafter.<sup>13</sup> White continues, “Efforts to merge the resources of European art music and the indigenous repertory faltered, despite the prominence of Irish folk music as a symbol of the Celtic Revival.”<sup>14</sup> White observes the difficult relationship between traditional Irish music and classical composers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries:

It seemed for a time as if the very concept of an Irish art music was inexorably wedded to representations and arrangements of traditional Irish melody. But however widespread this understanding, the consequence was that Irish composers acknowledged the cultural pressure of an authentic mode of Irish music by devising two voices, two virtually discrete models of musical discourse, one of which projected the native repertory in a musical language that scarcely transcended the vocabulary of the collections themselves, and another, more complex idiom, which aspired to European pastiche and in the process avoided the ethnic resource in its entirety. Those who attempted to blend the two quite frequently arrived at a different kind of pastiche, embarrassing in its uneasy apprehension of a music which resisted assimilation.<sup>15</sup>

This dynamic continued until the appearance of the Irish composer Seán Ó Riada (1930-1971) in the mid-twentieth century. Throughout his life, Ó Riada explored nearly every medium of musical possibility in Ireland.<sup>16</sup> He began his career in the 1950s as a classically-trained avant-garde composer with strong European associations. Ó Riada

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13. Ibid.

14. Ibid. Regarding the “Celtic Revival,” musicologist Sean Williams identifies the 40 years surrounding the turn of the twentieth century in Ireland as the Celtic Revival or Celtic Twilight. Ireland experienced an important cultural revival during this time as well as their War of Independence. The Celtic Revival is rich in music, poetry, and literature. Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 68-69.

15. White, “Music Politics, and the Irish Imagination,” 32.

16. Harry White, 2001 “Ó Riada, Seán,” *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 16, 2018. <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.20462>.

experimented with finding compositional unity between traditional Irish music and modern art music of his day.<sup>17</sup> Musicologist John O’Flynn remarks about the work of Ó Riada:

Seán Ó Riada [was] an avant-garde classical composer who in his experimentation with musical style had strived for meaningful artistic links between the folk music traditions of Ireland and those of European art music.<sup>18</sup>

Ó Riada enjoyed a successful beginning to his career as a composer of art music. Following his studies with composer Aloys Fleischmann, Ó Riada was appointed to the position of Music Director at the Abbey Theatre (the national theater of Ireland) and Assistant Director of Music at Radio Éireann [Radio Ireland].<sup>19</sup> Despite these successes, Ó Riada concluded that Irish traditional music and classical music were artistically incompatible, and thus he abandoned his efforts in composing at the end of the 1950s. Instead, he endeavored to resurrect and repurpose traditional music and bring it to the concert stage.<sup>20</sup> In 1960, Ó Riada created and directed *Ceoltóirí Chualann*, a musical ensemble of virtuoso traditional players. Ó Riada arranged traditional music for the ensemble and remained completely committed to the traditional repertory throughout the 1960s.<sup>21</sup> Even now, the renaissance and worldwide popularity of traditional Irish music

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17. John O’Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 27.

18. Ibid.

19. White, “The Divided Imagination,” 13.

20. O’Flynn, *The Irishness of Irish Music*, 27.

21. White, “Seán Ó Riada,” *Grove Music Online*.

and the decisions Irish composers face today about how, if at all, to interact with traditional Irish music can be traced back to Ó Riada.<sup>22</sup>

The international success and notoriety of Seán Ó Riada and his *Ceoltóirí Chualann*, however, did not seem to avert his growing conflicted feelings regarding traditional music on the concert stage. He abruptly announced in 1970 that he was disbanding the ensemble. At this point though, “It was too late for everyone except Ó Riada himself. He had released into the Irish cultural stratosphere an arresting and persuasive model of musical discourse which survived his own steep descent into silence.”<sup>23</sup> Seán Ó Riada brought traditional Irish music out of the pubs and onto the concert stage. Without the undertakings of Ó Riada, there would have been no precedent for groups such as Riverdance (founded in 1994) or The Chieftains (whose origins go back to 1963).<sup>24</sup>

Following Ó Riada’s death in 1971, some Irish composers chose to use elements of traditional Irish music in their works while others did not.<sup>25</sup> Harry White notes two traditions of Irish composers post-Ó Riada:

We have, in the main, two traditions of art music in the wake of Ó Riada’s achievements. One of these has been widely understood at a multiplicity of levels as an authentic voice for music in Ireland [the tradition that uses traditional Irish music]. The other, for all its enterprise and plurality of technique, has not [the tradition that does not use traditional music].<sup>26</sup>

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22. Ibid.

23. White, “The Divided Imagination,” 14.

24. Ibid., 15.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

The first tradition, with composers such as Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (1950-2018) and Shaun Davey (b. 1948), engages directly with traditional Irish music in ways in which the musical language of these works remains similar to that of traditional music.<sup>27</sup> The second tradition, with composers such as John Buckley (b. 1951) and Gerald Barry (b. 1952), do not draw upon traditional Irish music, but rather, look towards European modernism as a model.<sup>28</sup> White discusses this latter tradition of composers:

The other tradition is much more numerous and fantastically more plural in its espousal of European modes of musical modernism. And herein lies the prevailing irony of contemporary music in Ireland. We are arrived, insofar as I can tell, at a moment in our cultural history when the sheer plentitude of those who participate in the traditions of European modernism—a glance at the Contemporary Music Centre’s catalogue of composers would confirm this—is out of all proportion to the silence in which this second tradition has been received by the cultural mileau [sic] which is (post)modern Ireland.<sup>29</sup>

The legacy, as well as the cloud, of Seán Ó Riada continues into the twenty-first century in his notion that contemporary art music and Irish traditional music are incompatible. It is here that Ryan Molloy (b. 1983) arrives on the scene of Irish composition.

On the notion of the division between classical music traditional music in Ireland, Ryan Molloy comments:

Art music, at the same time through developments in mainstream art music throughout Europe, was starting to diverge into questions about what music was itself. We had had atonality and serialism and on into experimental sound worlds, whereas the kind of theatrical fusion of traditional music with art music in Ireland wasn’t interesting to people at that time. There was a lot of work to do in order to get those two musical languages to sit together. They became quite divergent. Ó Riada died quite

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27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 16.

29. Ibid.

young as an alcoholic and never got to see to completion of what he started. He may have lived on to do some really quite interesting things, but didn't. It was really not until a couple of decades later that we saw a kind of renewed effort to do something with traditional music in a classical music setting.<sup>30</sup>

Molloy discusses White's division of Irish composers into two traditions in his doctoral thesis in a section entitled "The Traditional-Contemporary Dichotomy."<sup>31</sup> While acknowledging the two traditions, he further divides White's first group of composers (the tradition that draws upon traditional Irish music) into two subgroups:

Art music in Ireland can be split into two main categories – music which acknowledges the concept of being Irish ((e.g. Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933) and, subconsciously, Brian Boydell (1917-2000)) and music which turns its back on this identity and looks to Europe ((e.g. Gerald Barry (b. 1952)). That music which accepts the Irish identity has found itself not completely reconciled with it. A further split within this branch has occurred between the use of traditional music in retrospective frameworks, from composers such as Norman Hay (1889-1943) and more recently Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin (b. 1950 [d. 2018]) to more popular traditional crossovers, for example, Bill Whelan (b. 1950), Michael McGlynn (b. 1964) and Shawn Davey (b. 1948) amongst many others.

Norman Hay was one of the first composers to implement some aspects of Irish traditional music in his composition, using chromatic harmonies to decontextualize the traditional material.... More recently, Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933) has presented the most provoking use of traditional music in a contemporary context. His music does not try to fuse the two traditions but rather openly examines the conflict between traditional melodies and dissonant harmonies.<sup>32</sup>

The tradition of composers Molloy discusses in his second paragraph above actively seeks to find ways in which modern compositional techniques can interact with

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30. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

31. Molloy, "The Traditional-Contemporary Dichotomy in Irish Art Music: A New Compositional Approach," PhD thesis, (Queen's University Belfast, 2013), 3.

32. Ibid.

traditional Irish music. Notably, these composers are attempting the very thing that Ó Riada deemed impossible decades before.<sup>33</sup>

Molloy, joining this tradition, further articulates his understanding of this division of Irish composers and his own place in this context:

Within the strand of composers that do decide to use Irish music, I believe there are two strands. There are those that use Irish music conservatively, and it ends up sounding deferential to the traditional material. The overall musical style can seem quite retrospective. It doesn't try to engage with modern music of the time. Secondly, there are a small number of composers that were doing precisely that. They attempt to take traditional music out of its mold and to use the material as a kind of foreign sound of sorts. That kind of strand has continued. There has been more interest in this in the late 90s and 2000s. There are more composers now that may "apple" in and out of traditional music in that way—some consciously and some subconsciously. Some do this with seemingly little engagement of the language in a *sean-nós* [old style]<sup>34</sup> sort of way. I still think that the overall musical question remains. I don't even think in my own work there has been a satisfactory answer, but I like to think that I have made some progress in answering these questions about how we can use traditional music.<sup>35</sup>

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33. White, "The Divided Imagination," 15-16.

34. *Sean-nós* will be discussed in Chapter Three.

35. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

## CHAPTER TWO – RYAN MOLLOY

### Biography

In addition to being a composer in his own right and an advocate of Irish music, Ryan Molloy (born August 24, 1983, in Pomeroy, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland) is a pianist and lecturer in composition at Maynooth University in Maynooth, Ireland. During childhood, he received a rich music education in traditional Irish music and in classical music. His upbringing and education in both the classical and traditional musical spheres provides him an uncommon place among composers, performers, and other musicians. Though neither of his parents received a formal music education, they provided opportunities for the young Molloy to experiment with instruments in the home and to hear local musicians play. After beginning primary school in 1987, Molloy began to learn music on the tin whistle along with the other children.<sup>36</sup> Molloy recalls:

One day, we were told that the one who worked the hardest [on the tin whistle] would be awarded a prize. After I performed, I was selected and introduced to violinist Bríd Harper, who would become my fiddle teacher for the next ten years. That was the start of my formal traditional music education.<sup>37</sup>

From his primary school days, Molloy was keenly interested in the sound possibilities of the piano. Between traditional music lessons on the fiddle and classes at school, he was constantly seeking opportunities to experiment on the piano housed in his school.<sup>38</sup> He states, “I know now in hindsight that I am very harmonically driven, so the

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36. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

draw to the piano was very natural.”<sup>39</sup> Molloy also began classical instruction on the piano at the age of 11.<sup>40</sup> After primary school, in the United Kingdom and Ireland, one normally chooses three or four subjects, referred to as A-levels, on which to focus at the end of secondary education (ages 17-18). Molloy selected music as one of his A-level subjects and concentrated on the study of composition. Molloy’s A-level examination in music culminated in the performance of the first movement of a piano concerto which he wrote for himself to perform as the pianist accompanied by an orchestra comprised of his classmates.<sup>41</sup>

Despite his early affinity and achievements in music, Molloy chose to pursue an undergraduate degree in chemistry from Oxford University in Oxford, England, after his primary and secondary schooling. Molloy briefly recollects on these undergraduate days:

A very interesting connection came with my chemistry professor. I don’t even know how we got on the subject, but he actually introduced me to a lot of these [contemporary] works [by Messiaen, Lutoslowski, and others] while I was in university for the first time.<sup>42</sup>

Following completion of the chemistry degree in 2006, Molloy found his way back to music and ultimately to composition. In 2007, he entered Queen’s University (Belfast, Northern Ireland) where he would go on to receive a Master of Art in composition (2009), and subsequent Ph.D. in composition (2013).<sup>43</sup> Molloy’s primary studies in

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39. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ryan Molloy, e-mail message to author, January 14, 2019. Molloy never completed additional movements of this piano concerto.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

composition at Queen's University were under Dr. Simon Mawhinney with secondary studies under Professor Piers Hellawell.<sup>44</sup>

Since 2013, Ryan Molloy has taught composition at Maynooth University, as mentioned previously, and remains active as a performer and as a composer. As a pianist, Molloy is best known for his performances and recordings with traditional Irish musicians. Even so, he continues in his study of concert piano literature.<sup>45</sup> As a composer, Molloy's works have been performed worldwide in major concert venues such as Lucerne Hall (Switzerland), Kölner Philharmonie (Germany), National Concert Hall (Ireland), Holywell Music Room (England), and Ulster Hall (Northern Ireland).<sup>46</sup> Recent commissioned works in 2018 include: *Dúchann*, for piano and tape commissioned by the IMBOLC International Music Festival;<sup>47</sup> *Ogham*, commissioned by the Ulster Youth Orchestra to celebrate their 25th Anniversary;<sup>48</sup> and a fanfare commissioned by the Vatican and performed for Pope Francis's August 2018 visit to Ireland.<sup>49</sup> Molloy's compositions have also been broadcasted on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio 3, Radio Ulster, RTÉ Lyric FM (*Raidió Teilifís Éireann* [radio television Ireland]),

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44. Molloy, e-mail message to author, January 9, 2019.

45. Ibid.

46. Ryan Molloy, "About," Ryan Molloy website, accessed August 6, 2018.  
<https://www.ryanmolloy.ie/about>.

47. For more information on this festival, visit [www.imbolcfestival.com](http://www.imbolcfestival.com). The Imbolc is an ancient Celtic festival associated with the goddess Brigit, held on Feb 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> to mark the beginning of spring.

48. Ryan Molloy, "About," <https://www.ryanmolloy.ie/about>.

49. Maynooth University, "MU Faculty to feature prominently at Papal Mass," *Maynooth University Department of Music*, August 17, 2018, accessed August 28, 2018,  
<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/music/news/mu-music-staff-feature-prominently-papal-mass>.

Radio 1, and *Ráidió na Gaeltachta* [radio in the Irish language]. Additionally, Molloy's compositions were chosen to represent Ireland in events hosted by the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) in Hong Kong in 2015, and again in Vancouver in 2017.<sup>50</sup> Molloy continues to receive regular commissions in Ireland and abroad.<sup>51</sup> A chronological list of his compositional output to date is found in Appendix A.

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50. Molloy, "About," <https://www.ryanmolloy.ie/about>.

51. Ibid.

## Molloy's Compositional Philosophy and Influences

Ryan Molloy's compositional philosophy and musical dialect evolve from a variety of personal and musical influences. His overarching goal revolves around the theme of transcending life's day-to-day state of being. Chief among his influences, as expressed by Molloy himself, is his own background as a traditional Irish musician. Other influences are composers, both from recent times and from antiquity, and experiences related to spirituality and his upbringing in the Catholic Church.<sup>52</sup> While the Irish influence is the focus of this research document, the other influences are referenced here for those interested in pursuing a different research angle.

Upon first hearing Molloy's works, one of the aspects of his music which is most apparent is the vast extremes in musical moods. A section of music that is contemplative with a nearly-static tempo is often contrasted with a section that is chaotic, frenzied, or overtly joyous. If one considers an energetic spectrum, Molloy frequently explores the extremes. When asked about his aims as a composer, Molloy responded:

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52. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

I would say my main goal as a composer is transcendence in some form or another. Generally speaking, and this might sound rather grandiose, though I don't mean for it to be thus, I hope that my music helps translate our experience of temporal reality into the language of atemporality—freezing time, flitting fabulously with the edges of eternity, heightening our perception of color, breath, and life. For me, this can happen in extreme stillness, or in extremely active, rhythmic music; and my own works tend to vacillate between the two, sometimes inhabiting one of these spaces for the duration of the piece, other times moving erratically between them. For me also, this 'other' realm, music's 'otherness,' or whatever it is these sounds (or our experience of them) try to do, is indelibly linked with my sense of place, the momentary fixedness of our being here and now, a feeling of belonging to a familial history, a particular patch of earth. I think this latter reason is why my musical instincts are drawn to my upbringing with traditional music. It helps me make these connections that I want to bring out in my music since they are one pathway for me to experience that transcendence....<sup>53</sup>

The sound world of Irish traditional music is a mainstay in Molloy's musical consciousness. When asked about his deliberate decision to use traditional figures, Molloy responded, "It felt like the most natural thing for me to want to use my traditional music background in a new and exciting way. I don't remember ever making a conscious decision to do this, it just always was there."<sup>54</sup> Molloy cites the beginning of his graduate studies in composition as the place and time when he knowingly embraced his traditional musical heritage as a means of exploring his voice in composition. He also highlighted the fact that exploration itself is a natural part of the musical character in traditional Irish music.<sup>55</sup>

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53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

Traditional Irish music was the first topic to emerge out of a conversation with Molloy about his influences.<sup>56</sup> When asked to speak about his main compositional influences, Molloy responded:

Old cap-wearing men in a pub playing a fiddle, weaving around a tune in their own way, laughing at me for my youthful innocence—just playing through the tune as fast as possible, and not really getting to the soul behind the tune that only really becomes apparent after many years of playing it. The conviviality of playing with other people in this context, and the sound world that you have no control over. It is a social and communal sound world. It is a frenzied thing. There's a drive to it. You just get caught up in it. Your contribution to this sound world is both futile and critical. You can drop out at any time, and the set will keep going. If you are leading the set, you can take it anywhere you want to. You can decide if this tune is going to be played in another time or if you're going to a different tune, or maybe you decide to change the key which suddenly increases the energy of the whole thing. That communal aspect of music making is almost a spiritual thing for me.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the central place that traditional Irish music occupies in Molloy's life, he states that his music does not obviously suggest the sound of traditional music:

I think it is important ... that you will never get the "Irishy" sound when listening to my music. I think that's important. I have always stressed that, because the goal was never to write Irish traditional music.<sup>58</sup>

Molloy also comments on his desire that his music not be limited to only individuals with some prior experience in traditional Irish music:

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56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid.

I also don't want to come across as exclusive. It should not be that someone has to spend years trying to understand traditional music in order to get my music. This is really where my responsibility as a composer kicks in. I must give you enough material to actually play what I mean for you to play. If my musical text isn't doing that, then I have failed to a certain degree. That's the modernist in me speaking. The post-modernist says, "Well, I don't care. I am going to borrow all these things and use them in the now." It's a constant sort of dilemma.<sup>59</sup>

Molloy situates his own place in the contemporary community of Irish composers.

When asked about the notion of compositional predecessors, Molloy responded:

Yes, I do have colleagues that do similar things. They could be considered predecessors by virtue of the fact that they are a bit older than me, but I wouldn't consider it a direct lineage at all. As for me in general as a composer, I have many predecessors. I mean, everyone we listen to is a predecessor.<sup>60</sup>

Many of Molloy's works published by the Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland (CMC) include a brief biographical section that lists Molloy's compositional influences. These influences include the composers Messiaen, Bartók, Ravel, and Pérotin. Also listed are complex traditional ornamental frameworks and *sean-nós* singing.<sup>61</sup> (See Chapter Three for details on *sean-nós*.) In one of my 2018 interviews with Molloy, he confirmed the above influences but particularly highlighted French composers of the twentieth century and Pérotin.<sup>62</sup>

Pérotin's name certainly stands out among the rest of composers listed. While the others mentioned are from the twentieth century, Pérotin lived and worked during the

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59. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

60. Ibid.

61. Ryan Molloy, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, for Piano, (Dublin, Ireland: Contemporary Music Centre, 2012), back cover.

62. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

twelfth century at Notre Dame in Paris. Pérotin is one of the last great medieval composers of organum, which is the first polyphony that originated earlier in the medieval era.<sup>63</sup> For Molloy, his love of Pérotin's music centers around the aesthetic notion of freedom. Molloy states:

The thing that is striking to me about him is the freedom there. Yet, it's a freedom that isn't a freedom. There is a whole pile of rules governing what's going on in his music. There are rules that don't really make a whole lot of sense in contemporary compositional practice, but there's an extraordinary freedom that comes out of it.... The vertical relationships in the harmonies do matter, but they also don't at the same time. All those clashes are all equally beautiful, acceptable, and part of that constellation. That resounds quite a lot with me and with my traditional background.... In short, I think I am more modal than tonal as a composer. I used to shy away from anything tertian that came up in my music, but I have become more accepting of that now. Much like the harmonies that line up in Pérotin, I am more willing to allow it to happen if the music goes that way.<sup>64</sup>

In an interview with the author, Molloy himself cited Ravel and Messiaen as being influential.<sup>65</sup> Molloy also commented on the intersection of traditional Irish music and Messiaen in his sphere of influences:

That [traditional Irish] person in me is equally a fan of Messiaen and Frankie Gaven (the fiddle player)—it has always been a way to rationalize those two sound worlds to me. The complexities of the fabric that exist in contemporary music enthralled me, and I find them to be such important musical forces for me. However, at the bottom of the whole thing I find that traditional music is the expressive force in me. A lot of where I am placing any musical thought, even though it may be entirely embedded in some sort of polymodal construction I am currently working out using a series of Messiaen's modes, it is all informed by traditional music—subconsciously or very consciously.<sup>66</sup>

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63. Edward H. Roesner, 2001 "Perotinus" Grove Music Online, accessed October 10, 2018, <https://doi-org.lynx.lib.usm.edu/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40465>.

64. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

65. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

66. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

Additionally important among acting compositional influences are elements of Molloy's Catholic upbringing. These factors have less to do with creed and religiosity and more to do with approaching the divine in time and space. Molloy cites specifics such as the smell of incense and hearing chants such as the *Pange Lingua*, sung during the Holy Thursday Mass. Molloy states that these aspects leave a massive imprint on his personal and compositional soul. This upbringing also gave him a strong sense of identity and belonging in his community and in Ireland.<sup>67</sup> Molloy recalls:

You belong, for me at least, first and foremost to a family—not the church family, but my family—this is a ritual for us. You also belong to a community, to a place, to the grounds. These notions are all very strong compositional influences for me. That sense of belonging to the land and being of the people. I suppose all this is wrapped up in folk music anyways because it is of the people and a land and an area.<sup>68</sup>

For Ryan Molloy, all of his influences and aims as a composer seem to revolve around the sphere of helping his listeners transcend the time and space of daily life. The relationship between Pérotin, Messiaen, traditional Irish music, and the Catholic Church may seem a bit obscure, but for Molloy, they all hold keys to his compositional ideals. These efforts made in exploring the esoteric create a communal and personal approach in the context of classical music. At the conclusion of his reflections on his own music, Molloy states, "... nowhere here do I suggest that I have actually been successful in all these efforts!! ... There is much more practicing to do!"<sup>69</sup>

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67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

## CHAPTER THREE – TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSICAL ELEMENTS

### Introduction

This chapter provides a reference for traditional Irish musical figures related to Molloy's solo-piano works that will be discussed in Chapter Four. Traditional musicians in Ireland apply the term "traditional music" to several categories of music and dance. These categories include songs in the Irish language, songs in English, slow instrumental airs, lively dance music, and solo and group step dances.<sup>70</sup> Ethnomusicologists Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott articulate the difference between the terms "Irish traditional music" and "folk music":

Technically, Irish traditional music is what folklorists call folk music, meaning a body of orally transmitted, usually rural-based, nonprofessional, noncommercial repertory created by and for "the folk" (i.e. not the aristocracy). "Folk denotes music that has a long history within a specific community, often functions in rituals of all kinds, and serves as a reminder of shared cultural history and values. Because of the process of oral transmission from generation to generation, the names of original composers are often forgotten, and tunes and songs undergo a gradual process of change, becoming products of a community over time rather than a single individual.

The American (and international) folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s blurred the meaning of "folk music," broadening its popular definition to include virtually any song accompanied by acoustic guitar. Irish musicians use the term "traditional" to distinguish the older repertory and styles from the more contemporary and commercial productions....

Defining "traditional music" is an increasingly complex task in our global economy. While it is tempting to classify traditional music as something old, passed down from generation to generation in an unchanged way, music cultures are dynamic. In the case of Ireland, traditional music and dance forms have remained distinct genres over time, but have also changed in response to both internal and external cultural influences....<sup>71</sup>

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70. Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott, *Music in Ireland: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15.

71. Ibid., 16-17.

Irish music collector Breandán Breathnach provides additional insights:

Folk music is a heritage which is passed on from one age to the next—hence the term ‘traditional,’ which is usually applied to it in Ireland. Irish folk music includes not only the older songs and melodies of the Gael, which are undoubtedly our most precious heritage, but also the Anglo-Irish and English ballads of the countryside and the extraordinarily rich vein of dance music which belongs exclusively neither to Gaeltacht [Irish-speaking regions in Ireland] nor Galltacht [English-speaking regions in Ireland].<sup>72</sup>

This understanding provides a lens through which to view traditional Irish music as well as contemporary Irish composers that choose to engage with it in an art-music context. The components of traditional Irish music to be discussed in this chapter are *sean-nós*; style, ornamentation, and improvisatory elements; and dance figures. These elements may then be observed in Molloy’s music.

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72. Ibid., 2.

## *Sean-nós*

The first and most complex traditional Irish element of discussion is *sean-nós*.

*Sean-nós*, again, literally translates as “old style.” It refers to a highly ornamented, highly personal, and usually unaccompanied form of singing in the Irish language.<sup>73</sup> Though this art form exists throughout Ireland, different areas disagree about which part possesses the most authentic form of *sean-nós*. Ethnomusicology professor Sean Williams states:

The term *sean-nós* also carries with it a highly contested and intractable politics of authenticity. Arguments develop about which singers and which regions possess the true or best *sean-nós*, and singers who depart from the norms of this art form may be severely criticized.<sup>74</sup>

Without surprise, there is a great variety of definitions of *sean-nós*.<sup>75</sup> According to Sean Williams, “Some are contradictory or represent an idealized form of singing that may never have existed in Ireland.”<sup>76</sup> Still, the direct translation from Irish is “old way, manner, style, or custom.”<sup>77</sup> Williams adds, “Musically it may represent a kind of pristine, pre-modern Irishness, a connection to an idealized precolonial past.”<sup>78</sup> Molloy provides the following description of the concept of *sean-nós*:

It literally means “old-style” and it refers to an older method for performing songs, usually in Irish and unaccompanied. Works in this style are frequently ametrical but also metered. They are highly ornate and highly individual to each singer in tone, delivery, and method of ornamentation....

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73. Hast and Scott, 84.

74. Sean Williams and Lillis Ó Laoire, *Bright Star of the West: Joe Heaney, Irish Song-man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid.

78. Ibid.

*Sean-nós* specifically relates to the Irish language tradition because they are the older texts and songs and what has been handed down orally throughout the years. They differ from other English songs, which might be more “balladish” or transcriptions of songs that have been placed into a meter. Ametrical and highly ornate would be my two biggest descriptive words.<sup>79</sup>

The most conservative definitions of *sean-nós* limit the art form to unaccompanied singing, exclusively in Irish Gaelic, passed down aurally.<sup>80</sup> Tomás Ó

Cainn, a traditional Irish musician and researcher, defines *sean-nós*:

What is *sean-nós* singing? It is a highly personal vocal art form which has been passed from generation to generation of traditional Irish singers. The art is nowadays confined to a number of areas in the west of the country where Irish is still spoken, but even in these areas it is already losing many of its most characteristic features.

It must be emphasized that *sean-nós* singing is a solo art in which words and music are equally vital. The language is, of course, Irish and the *sean-nós* is only completely at ease, as it were, in an Irish-speaking situation where the singer and his listener are in real communication. In many instances, the performer is singing of people and places known to the listener in the locality.<sup>81</sup>

The modern-day understanding of *sean-nós* singing in Irish Gaelic is not the only criterion thereof. Sean Williams notes that there are many songs in the Irish language that do not belong to the genre proper of *sean-nós*.<sup>82</sup> Freedom is the hallmark characteristic of *sean-nós*, ensured by a lack of emphasis on the meter. In addition to feeling ametrical, these songs are performed unaccompanied. This lack of accompaniment gives the individual singer the license to take time, ornament, and add his or her particular nuances.

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79. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

80. Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 49.

81. Ibid.

82. Sean Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 164.

It is rare to find a *sean-nós* singer with a repertoire of hundreds of songs. Instead, the majority of singers focus on developing a smaller repertoire of songs that characterize them as singers within the community and region of the country.<sup>83</sup> Williams writes:

What constitutes *sean-nós* is inherently regional. Beyond regionalism, of course, is individual performance practice, in which a singer represents not so much a regional style but his or her own interpretation of, and intimate relationship to, a song.<sup>84</sup>

Still, other musicians function more broadly with their engagement of *sean-nós*. Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott observe that the Góilín Singers Club in Dublin, which presents regular traditional music performance sessions, often pairs songs in Irish with songs in English, thereby acknowledging both languages as important parts of the Irish *sean-nós* tradition.<sup>85</sup> Since the 1960s, singers have experimented with adding accompanying instruments and even vocal harmonies to these songs. Technically, this would fall outside the traditional definition of what is *sean-nós*, but Irish musicians continue to experiment.<sup>86</sup> Clearly, the battle for authenticity and for what is Irish is not limited to composers of classical music such as Ó Súilleabháin and Davey, mentioned in the Introduction. This battle is equally present among traditional musicians as well. Hast and Scott close their writings about *sean-nós*:

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83. Ibid., 165.

84. Ibid.

85. Hast and Scott, 84.

86. Ibid., 100.

If we take the term *sean-nós* broadly, to mean the old styles of Irish unaccompanied singing in both Irish and English, how is the *sean-nós* managing to survive in twenty-first century Ireland? In singing clubs like the Góilín ... the answer is that the old styles survive by being brought into new musical contexts.<sup>87</sup>

As will be demonstrated in Molloy's music, the world of classical music is also a new context in which elements of *sean-nós* may be explored.

In an article about *sean-nós* singing, contemporary composer Seóirse Bodley states that the *sean-nós* is one of the greatest achievements of the Irish people in traditional music. He states that this music is extremely complex in its own right and that "Using the simplest of means, voice alone, it can demand of the singer the greatest artistry."<sup>88</sup> Bodley seeks to describe some of the ways in which singers ornament and personalize these songs. The following example of the traditional tune *Dónall Óg* [young Donall] is included in Bodley's article.

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87. Ibid., 119.

88. Seóirse Bodley, "Technique and Structure in 'sean-nós' Singing," *Éigse Ceol Tíre* 1 (1973): 44.



How different this becomes when clothed in the full flow of ornamentation :

slow air

'(A) Dhón - aill Óig, (a)má théighir thar far - rai - ge, Tabhair mé  
féin leat's(a), ná déan do dhear-mad, (a) Beidh ag - at (a)  
féi - rín lá aon - aigh 'gus mar - (a) - gaidh Ag - us  
in - íon(a) rí Gréi - ge mar chéi - le leab-tha 'gat.

Example 1. *Dónall Óg* with *sean-nós* ornamentation.<sup>89</sup>

89. Ibid., 44

The first four lines are the basic melody of *Dónall Óg*. The second four lines correspond to a performance by Irish singer Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha (1919-1991) of Connemara as recorded in 1970.<sup>90</sup> Here, Bodley presents an approximated notated version of the ornaments Ní Dhonnchadha uses, even though she would have learned them aurally. Above all, the tradition of *sean-nós* singing is a very personal art form that lies at the heart of traditional Irish musical identity.<sup>91</sup>

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90. Máire Áine Ní Dhonnchadha, *Déora aille: Irish Songs from Connemara*, Claddagh Records, Dublin, Ireland, CC6 Ceirníní Cladaig, 1970, LP.

91. Bodley, 53.

## Style, Ornamentation, and Improvisatory Elements

In traditional Irish music, style is a term that summarizes regional and personal characteristics in music performance. These characteristics may refer to an individual performer or to commonly shared characteristics by the majority of performers in a region.<sup>92</sup> As is the case with *sean-nós*, each traditional musician's approach is deeply personal. The traditional musician is constantly balancing learned musical traits with his or her own spontaneous developments in performance.<sup>93</sup> Ethnomusicologist Lawrence E. McCullough identifies four distinctive features that comprise the style of an individual's performance. These features are: ornamentation, variation in melodic and rhythmic patterns, phrasing, and articulation.<sup>94</sup> Variation and ornamentation will be explored immediately below in order to better understand their uses in Ryan Molloy's music to be discussed in Chapter Four.

The way in which each traditional musician takes a melody and adds his or her own improvisatory material is central in the performance of traditional Irish music. Traditional performers often speak of tunes as "skeletons," referring to the basic melodic shape that gives each tune its identity.<sup>95</sup> Traditional Irish music performers never play the bare tune. Instead, they add their own ornaments as well as melodic and rhythmic variations. It is spontaneous—making every performance of the same tune by the same

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92. Ó Canainn, 40.

93. Ibid., 5.

94. Lawrence E. McCullough, "Style in Traditional Irish Music," *Ethnomusicology* 21, no. 1 (January 1977): 85.

95. Hast and Scott, 61.

performer unique.<sup>96</sup> This idea of variation is central to the psychology of how traditional players perform. When speaking of their performance art, they discuss the goal and the aesthetic of never playing a tune the exact same way twice through the introduction of subtle variations in each performance.<sup>97</sup> Tomás Ó Canainn further states the following about the role of the traditional performer and its relation to variation (and ornamentation):

The very idea of a traditional style depends on such a view of the traditional performer's role, for in measuring himself against his predecessors he is, of course, being affected by them and in the process ensuring that his performance is in some general way comparable with theirs. This is the basis of traditional style....

Style implies a selection by the performer of certain traditional patterns or clichés of the tradition in his improvisation. His ability to select will obviously depend on what material he has at his command: a poor performer without much experience will have a small store of such material, while a top-class performer, having a wide choice, will be able to make his performance more interesting, varying his treatment of the tune in its successive repetitions. The very best performance will require a high degree of imagination as well as experience. The performer is clearly part composer as well.<sup>98</sup>

An example from Lawrence McCullough's article "Style in Traditional Irish Music" demonstrates possibilities of creating variations on the popular tune, "The Sligo Maid." For comparison, the original version of "The Sligo Maid" without variations is first included (Ex. 2). Then, in Example 3, one sees that the first line is an excerpt (only mm. 1-2) from the original tune with a few added grace notes and ornamental figures. The remaining systems of Example 3 are additional possible variations (on the first two

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96. Ibid., 64.

97. Ibid.

98. Ó Canainn, 41.

measures) created by McCullough. McCullough adds, “Each of the variations is acceptable in terms of the idiom’s norms regarding variation, and many more could be added to the eight examples given here.”<sup>99</sup>



Example 2. “The Sligo Maid,” traditional tune.<sup>100</sup>

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99. McCullough, 87.

100. “The Sligo Maid,” traditional tune as notated at [www.abcnotation.com](http://www.abcnotation.com), accessed January 24, 2019, <http://abcnotation.com/tunePage?a=thesession.org/tunes/399.no-ext/0008>.



Example 3. "The Sligo Maid," mm. 1 and 2 with possible variations.<sup>101</sup>

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101. Ibid.

The necessity as well as the practicality of these practices stem from the fact that traditional Irish music is almost exclusively melodic. Traditional Irish music makes no use of harmonic accompaniment or modulation and therefore relies on ornamentation to create different affects in a melody.<sup>102</sup> Breathnach identifies three main forms of ornamentation that are employed in traditional Irish music: embellishment, variation, and rhythm.<sup>103</sup> Each form may be observed in Example 3. Ornamentation by variation and rhythm refers to different treatments of the melodic and rhythmic material respectively. A direct comparison of measure two in the original version (Ex. 2) and in Example 3's second variation (line two, m. 2) presents subtle melodic variation in the latter. Similarly, in measure one of the original (Ex. 2) and Example 3's fourth line (m. 1), one sees rhythmic variation (and by necessity some melodic variation). Embellishment refers to the specific ornaments used in traditional music.<sup>104</sup>

Traditional Irish ornaments include cuts, rolls, crans, and triplets.<sup>105</sup> Triplets in this instance are the embellishing of a normal duple rhythm by transforming it into a triplet. (Compare the first beat of m. 2 in the original, Example 2, to the corresponding place in Example 3, line 3.) Cuts, rolls, and crans on the other hand are all grace note figures. The cut is executed by separating two notes of the same pitch by inserting a higher pitch between them. (See below Fig. 1: "cut.") Rolls may be either short rolls or

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102. Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1971), 98.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid., 99.

105. Hast and Scott, 64.

long rolls. A short roll lasts the length of one quarter note and embellishes two eighth notes of the same pitch. Additionally, one grace note is placed above the first principal note, and a second grace note is placed below the second principal note. (See Fig. 1: “short roll.”) The long roll features three eighth notes of the same pitch while embellishing the last two eighths with a higher and lower grace note, similar to the short roll. (See Fig. 1: “long roll.”) A cran occurs by inserting grace notes of different pitch levels in between principal notes of the same pitch. (See Fig. 1: “cran.”)<sup>106</sup>

For reference and comparison purposes with Figure 1, the traditional tunes “The Kid on the Mountain” (Ex. 4) and “Off to California (Ex. 5) are included further below.

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106. Ibid.

1. cut



2. short roll



3. long roll



Beginning of "The Kid on the Mountain"  
with long rolls and a cut.

4. triplet



Beginning of the hornpipe "Off to California."

4. cran



Figure 1. Traditional Irish ornaments.<sup>107</sup>

107. Ibid., 65. The source gives the number "4" both to the triplet and to the cran examples.



Example 4. “The Kid on the Mountain.”<sup>108</sup>



Example 5. “Off to California.”<sup>109</sup>

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108. “The Kid on the Mountain,” traditional tune as notated at [www.abcnotation.com](http://www.abcnotation.com), accessed January 24, 2019, <http://abcnotation.com/tunePage?a=www.andyhornby.net/Music/slip%20jigs/0032>.

109. “Off to California,” traditional tune as notated at [www.abcnotation.com](http://www.abcnotation.com), accessed January 24, 2019, <http://abcnotation.com/tunePage?a=thesession.org/tunes/30.no-ext/0001>.

Related to ornamentation and within the realm of style, Seóirse Bodley outlines two large basic types of musical material—quick and slow.<sup>110</sup> The pieces that are set in a quick tempo are relatively simple in terms of ornamentation and variation. Bodley states:

This distinction is more important here than in the case of classical music. Basically, the quick style is not problematic. The basic rhythm is simple, though one often finds that pauses are extended by a specific length so that a two-beat rhythm could become a three-beat one. In essence, however, the basic rhythm is quite clear and unconfused, and the accentuation is definite. The ornaments are not so frequent and are mostly readily analyzable as simple triplet decorations, etc.<sup>111</sup>

Slower tunes, comprised of airs that may be played or sung, are far more complex. The basic rhythm and basic pitch, as well as the ornamentation of these airs, are prone to change from region to region and from singer to singer.<sup>112</sup> As previously stated, musicians pride themselves on never performing the same tune the same way twice. A slow air may vary tremendously from performance to performance, from region to region, and even from verse to verse.<sup>113</sup>

Understanding these distinctions provides a foundation for understanding Ryan Molloy's music. These large archetypes of energetic, quick, frenzied tunes and slow, deeply personal, ametrical airs are often juxtaposed in traditional music performances. In a traditional music session, it is quite common that players will vacillate between fast tunes and slow airs, often fluctuating in and out of different energies, as well as feeding

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110. Bodley, 49.

111. Ibid.

112. Ibid., 50.

113. Ibid., 50-51.

off the energies of the room.<sup>114</sup> Ethnomusicologists Hugh Shields and Paulette Gershen note: “At sessions, the boundary between performers and the audience is subtle and shifting; moreover, the socializing within the session can be as important as the music itself.”<sup>115</sup> Molloy also works with these juxtapositions, as will be demonstrated in the following chapter. This traditional Irish music environment is the musical arena into which Ryan Molloy was born and which finds an identity in his music.

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114. Hast and Scott, Chapter 1 “Invitation to a Session.” For a complete understanding of what takes place in a traditional Irish music session, refer to this resource. Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott describe in detail what takes place from their initial invitation to attend a session all the way through the evening of the session.

115. Hugh Shields and Paulette Gershen, “Ireland,” in *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, vol. 8, *Europe*, edited by Timothy Rice, James Porter, and Chris Goertzen (New York: Garland, 2000), 390.

## Dance Figures

The final element of traditional Irish music pertinent to the understanding of Ryan Molloy's works is dance. Whereas the slow *sean-nós* airs are sung and are for the sole purpose of listening, Irish dances are mostly performed by instrumentalists and may be for listening or for the purpose of live dance.<sup>116</sup> The Irish dance tune is comprised of a single melodic line. Whether played by a soloist or a group of musicians, everyone plays the same melody.<sup>117</sup> Most dances are binary in form and consist of an eight-measure A section and an eight-measure B section. Each section is usually repeated, yielding 32 bars in total with the form of AABB.<sup>118</sup>

All Irish dances are to be played quickly, as Hugh Shields and Paulette Gershen observe: "Dance-music is played fast, with ornamentation, and today's technically skilled young players often take tempos as fast as possible." Among dance types found in traditional Irish music are reels, jigs, hornpipes, marches, polkas, and waltzes.<sup>119</sup> Shields and Gershen note that these dance types combine native musical material with dance forms adopted from abroad.<sup>120</sup> Ethnomusicologists Dorothea Hast and Stanley Scott describe the experience of a traditional Irish dance music session:

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116. Shields and Gershen, "Ireland," 382.

117. Hast and Scott, 59.

118. Ibid.

119. Ibid.

120. Shields and Gershen, "Ireland," 382.

Although no drum set hammers out a beat, the music has an inescapable drive that rocks the room. Occasionally a step dancer might stamp out a spontaneous percussion pattern on the floor or a group of set dancers might gather to move through a sequence of figures, but whether danced to or not, the music is obviously dance music.<sup>121</sup>

The two most common dances are the reel and the jig.<sup>122</sup> These are also the two dance types found in Molloy's piano works. The reel is the most popular dance, and some traditional musicians play nothing else.<sup>123</sup> Hast and Scott define the reel:

Reels are the most popular tune type in the Irish traditional repertory today. The term also describes solo step and group dances using this tune type as musical accompaniment.... Reels are in duple time, usually written in 4/4 (common time), but felt in two (2/2 or cut time), with an accent on the first and third quarter notes in each measure. They are usually in binary form, with the same overall structure as the jig [AABB].<sup>124</sup>

Below is an example of a reel entitled "Moran's Fancy":



Example 6. "Moran's Fancy" – reel.<sup>125</sup>

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121. Hast and Scott, 59.

122. Ibid.

123. Shields and Gershen, "Ireland," 382.

124. Hast and Scott, 67.

125. Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 164.

The other Irish dance to be discussed is the jig. Also fast in tempo, the jig occurs in a triple meter as opposed to the duple meter found in reels. The jig is defined as follows by Hast and Scott:

The jig has been part of Irish music since at least the seventeenth century. Four variants of the jig currently exist in Irish music and dance repertory: the double jig, single jig, slip jig, and slide. All are defined by their rhythms in compound meters in which each beat consists of a subgroup of three pulses.

The double jig is in 6/8 and is characterized by two groups of three eighth notes per measure. If you say the mnemonic phrase “rashers and sausages” you can feel the equal duration of each syllable. Unless specified, the double jig is the tune type implied when a jig is called for. The single jig is also in 6/8, but its predominant rhythmic pattern consists of a quarter note followed by an eighth note. The slip jig or hop jig is in 9/8, and also has a corresponding dance form that is performed today by female dancers in soft shoes.

The single jig rhythmic pattern (quarter note-eighth note) is also characteristic of the slide. Slides are typically in 12/8 and performed faster than single jigs.<sup>126</sup>

Below is an example of a typical double jig entitled “The Hag’s Purse”:



Example 7. “The Hag’s Purse” – double jig.<sup>127</sup>

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126. Hast and Scott, 66.

127. Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music*, 161.

The elements of dance figures, style and ornamentation, and *sean-nós* all form technical components of an aural tradition. The traditional musician learns them by ear and through natural immersion in the environment. This world of folk music, aural learning, and pub sessions may seem quite foreign in the context of modern art music, but it is in these places where Molloy's music seems to find an aesthetic wellspring.

Molloy's desire is not that one would have to be an expert in traditional music in order to understand his compositions.<sup>128</sup> When asked how he wants his music to be understood, he stated:

I would definitely want it to be considered Irish "art" music, if you will. I don't see how it could be considered anything else really. But I also wouldn't want to suggest that someone from outside of Ireland couldn't listen to my music and get something from it. It's not exclusive. It is Irish in that I am drawing from certain traditional markers and flavors, and it is my take and experience as a performer of traditional music. I would like to think that it has an Irish accent.<sup>129</sup>

While it is not necessary to become an expert traditional musician, the fact remains that having an understanding of traditional Irish music provides an irreplaceable perspective and lens with which to view Molloy's sound world. It is with this lens that one can gain a deeper appreciation for Molloy's music.

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128. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

129. Ibid.

## CHAPTER FOUR – OVERVIEW OF RYAN MOLLOY’S SOLO-PIANO WORKS AND HIS USE OF TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSICAL ELEMENTS

To date, Molloy has completed and published four works for solo piano.<sup>130</sup> These compositions (in chronological order) are *Sætre Brygge*, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, *Innisfail*, and *for Morton O’Leary*.<sup>131</sup> Each of these works is an entity unto itself, yet collectively they demonstrate the many varieties of color and sound possibilities found in the compositional output of Molloy for piano. These works vary drastically in length. The shortest, *for Morton O’Leary*, spans less than five minutes and consists of only two pages, and the longest, *Innisfail*, lasts over half an hour.

Prior to these aforementioned published works, Molloy recalls experimenting with composition yielding juvenilia that according to Molloy, are “quite Chopinesque, highly Rachmaninoff-influenced showy bits and bobs.”<sup>132</sup> Notable among these early, unpublished works, as stated in Chapter Two, is the first movement of a piano concerto completed during Molloy’s secondary education. Molloy describes this work as sounding “Prokofievian.”<sup>133</sup>

Because of his early training as a classical pianist, an exploration of Molloy’s piano works is a natural place to begin becoming acquainted with his sound world. When discussing his largest piano work, *Innisfail*, Molloy noted that he is technically unable to

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130. In addition to the four solo-piano (two-hand) works, Molloy also has a piano 4-hand arrangement of *Sliabh Geal gCua* and a work entitled *Carthage Harbour* for two pianos.

131. Molloy is currently finishing the score of a work for piano and tape entitled *Duchánn* [melody]. The work has been performed by the composer, but the score is still in progress.

132. Molloy, E-mail message to author, January 9, 2019.

133. Ibid.

produce these sounds on his own as a pianist, yet it is this sound ideal that inspires him to compose.<sup>134</sup> Molloy remarks about his work with *Innisfail*:

What I am trying to do is to do something that I can't do. All my piano pieces are explorations of my own failure as a pianist really. This is a sound I wish I could play. Perhaps this is all composition really, but part of my writing for the piano is writing things that I know I will never be able to play....<sup>135</sup>

Despite Molloy's own assessment of himself as a pianist, these works are highly pianistic and are also the place where the classical pianist, the traditional Irish musician, and the composer converge. This chapter will now explore each piano work individually, discussing each piece's origin, distinct qualities, and engagement with traditional Irish music.

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134. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

135. Ibid.

### *Sætre Brygge*

Molloy wrote *Sætre Brygge* in 2008, at the age of 25. It is his first published work for solo piano and was also his first composition completed during his graduate work at Queen's University in Belfast.<sup>136</sup> Though it does not directly engage with traditional Irish musical elements, it is pertinent in the discussion of his works because it introduces the beginnings of his own approach to writing for the instrument and his subconscious identification with traditional Irish music. Molloy recalls:

My first composition for the MA, *Sætre Brygge*, doesn't really use traditional music (it only has a tenuous connection via the prevalence of minor sevenths in my opinion); it was started before *Mise Éire*, which is my first real effort at using trad [traditional music] in contemporary music, but finished afterwards.... In passing I should note also that the sketches I submitted for my application to the MA also showed some trad influence (one in a very overt way, almost an arrangement, the other less so), so the desire to combine the two languages was always there I think, subconsciously.<sup>137</sup>

When asked when he made the decision to use traditional music, Molloy stated:

It felt like the most natural thing for me was to want to use my traditional music background in a new and exciting way! I don't remember ever making a conscious decision to do this, it just always was.... I feel that exploration [of traditional music] was a natural part of my character as a traditional performer, and this seamlessly (and perhaps logically) made its way into my approach to writing music.<sup>138</sup>

From this statement made by Molloy, as well as his concurrent admission that traditional Irish elements naturally made their way into his music from a part of his experience and upbringing, some indirect relationships may be observed in *Sætre Brygge*.

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136. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

137. Ibid.

138. Ibid.

*Sætre Brygge* is a near-ten-minute work consisting of seven short movements:

- I. Tentatively
- II. Dull but internally colourful(!); cautiously
- III. Unintrusive
- IV. In limbo
- V. Tergiversatory
- VI. Deeply; quietly turbulent

These movements form a musical memory of and a reflection on, the frozen, icy landscape Molloy saw on a trip to Scandinavia.<sup>139</sup> The title is named for the town of Sætre, Norway. *Brygge* is the Norwegian word for “pier.”<sup>140</sup> It is Molloy’s view from the pier in the town of Sætre whence this piece has its origin.<sup>141</sup> In his forward to the piece, Molloy writes:

It was once said to me that a composition is a postcard. Not merely a pictorial postcard, but also an emotional one—here, a description of the emotions that I encountered on an entirely random trip through what seemed to be an untouched landscape at the end of Scandinavian winter.

When I choose a postcard, I often find that it’s not representative of the place. I chose it [Molloy’s composition *Sætre Brygge*] because of how I felt there and then and what it meant to me there and then, much to the bewilderment of the recipients! Still, windless, soft, solid, enveloping, comforting, penetrating, discomforting, caressing, silent...

The atemporal icescape is empty, yet it fills you. With what exactly it is hard to say, but it slowly pulls you away, freezing your conscious thought, leading you to that subconscious flow which we fleetingly access from time to time.

My words never explain fully enough what I mean to write, which is why I write.<sup>142</sup>

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139. Ryan Molloy, *Sætre Brygge*, for Piano, (Dublin, Ireland: Contemporary Music Centre), 2008, preface.

140. Molloy, e-mail message to author, September 17, 2018.

141. Molloy, *Sætre Brygge*, preface.

142. Ibid.

The aims expressed by Molloy in this forward to *Sætre Brygge* align with his expressed values as a composer. As stated in Chapter Two, Molloy seeks to manipulate time with music and somehow transcend the normal state of being. He states:

I think this reason is why my musical instincts are drawn to my upbringing with traditional music. It helps me make these connections that I want to bring out in my music since they are one pathway for me to experience that transcendence.”<sup>143</sup>

In *Sætre Brygge*, Molloy seeks to notate a transcendental event from his life that occurred in Norway. The experience of transcendence is one which originates for Molloy not only in the liturgy of the Catholic Mass, but also in the traditional music of his youth. Molloy comments on traditional music sessions, “A traditional music session is very physical. You get caught up in a sound world, and it takes control over you.”<sup>144</sup> This suspension of regular time and space governs the writing and performing of *Sætre Brygge*.

The fourth movement (In limbo) of *Sætre Brygge* is positioned as the apex of the work. It is an anti-drama. The entire movement unfolds very slowly and is comprised solely of sevenths. The movement explores the extreme ranges of the piano. Molloy gives instructions that the damper pedal is to remain depressed throughout the movement, which creates a wash of color and sound. This movement is dramatically contrasted by the more rapidly unfolding and quick rhythms present in movements three and five. Additionally, in contrast to the slow unfolding of movement four, movement five is but three measures in length. The example below is the opening of the fourth movement:

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143. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

144. Ibid.

# IV

**In limbo** (♩ = ca. 42)

*mp* *p* *poco f* *mf* *p*

*mp* *mf* *p* *pp*

\* accidentals in this movement apply only to the notes they precede

Example 8. *Sætre Brygge*, movement IV, mm. 1-7.

Molloy comments further about his conception of the fourth movement (shown in Ex. 8 above):

It is all a journey to movement four. That moment when time stands still, and for a split second you have some sort of concept of forever. That sounds very grand, but that's what this gets at. But there is not any traditional music here, but I am really experimenting with sevenths and a journey to stillness. I am using drones and trills, but the thing is about the journey there [to movement four] and breaking out of it again, which is why movement five is so short.<sup>145</sup>

145. Ibid.

Molloy admits that he has a personal preference for the interval of the seventh in that they generate a certain aural space for him.<sup>146</sup> Molloy states:

There are two reasons why I love them [sevenths] so much. Partly it is spectral in origin, but also traditional. The minor seventh is a very strong interval in a lot of traditional music. For example, anything in Dorian, which is a common mode in traditional music, has a natural lean to the minor seventh. That relationship is quite strong.<sup>147</sup>

Here, there are also ties to his compositional psyche and to traditional music.<sup>148</sup>

For the sake of demonstrating the contrast between the fourth movement and its surrounding movements in *Sætre Brygge*, below are examples of the third and fifth movements, respectively:

III

Unintrusive ( $\text{♩}$  = ca. 100) Wide ( $\text{♩}$  = ca. 176)

rall. accel. *molto* *f*

*mf* *mp* *p* *poco* *pf* *f*

r.h. l.h.

*mf* *f*

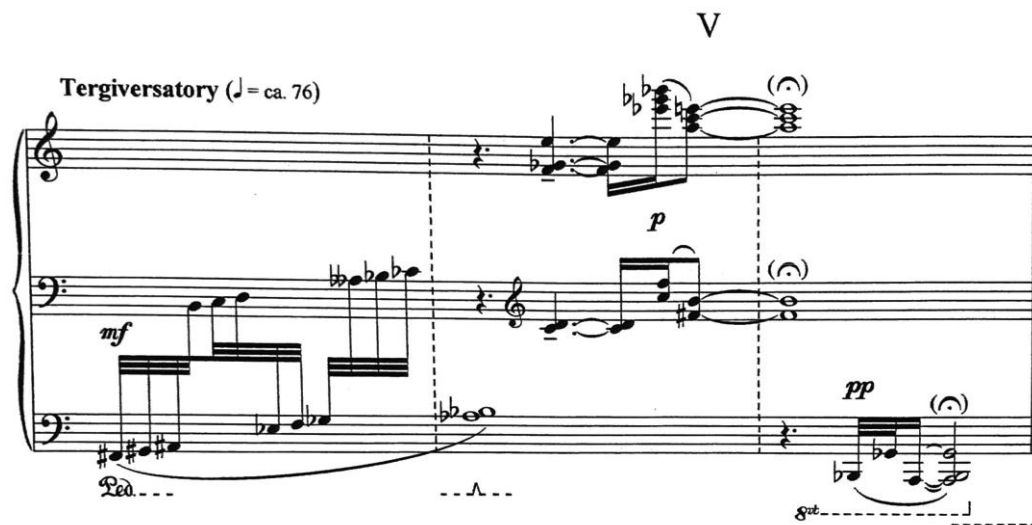
(sim.)

Example 9. *Sætre Brygge*, movement III, mm. 1-4.

146. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

147. Ibid.

148. Ibid.



Example 10. *Sætre Brygge*, movement V.

While *Sætre Brygge* does not directly interact with traditional Irish musical elements, Molloy indirectly strives for many of the same goals that traditional musicians experience in the performance of traditional music. Chief among these is the aim at personally and communally transcending the sphere that is ordinary life. Thus, Molloy's fundamental relationship with traditional music is subconsciously present in this early work. In addition to this indirect engagement with traditional music, Molloy also displays some of his compositional characteristics, such as the use of sevenths (as was seen in Example 8), experimenting with the piano's resonance, and utilizing the extreme ranges of the piano (these latter two characteristics seen in Examples 9 and 10). These traits will continue to be developed in Molloy's later writings for the piano.

### *Sliabh Geal gCua*

The first solo-piano work written by Molloy that directly interacts with traditional Irish musical elements is *Sliabh Geal gCua* [bright mountain of Cua]. (*Cua* is a region in County Waterford.<sup>149</sup>) *Sliabh Geal gCua*, composed in 2012, is a ten-minute work that is based on the traditional Irish air also entitled “*Sliabh Geal gCua*.” Though Molloy never quotes the traditional air note-for-note, he stated that “This is all quite unique for me to quote a piece so close to the bone.”<sup>150</sup> While there are other instances in Molloy’s overall output where he states that he has “fleetingly ‘borrowed’ or badgered other source material,” *Sliabh Geal gCua* remains the only instance among his solo-piano works of using pre-existing material.<sup>151</sup> “Below is Molloy’s preface to the work:

Based on the Irish air ‘*Sliabh Geal gCua*’ (Pádraig Ó Miléadha, [poet]), this piece explores the melodic contours of the air and how the piece has been transmitted aurally in this tradition, requiring the pianist to learn certain passages by ear and to respond to written stimuli. While the music follows loosely the sentiments of the poem and mimics its two-verse structure, there is a considerable element of improvisation (both compositionally, i.e. written out, and actual improvisation) reminiscent of how different traditional performers can make the same air sound worlds apart. Slow for the most part, there is a highly virtuosic section leading to the climax of the piece—a brief reel and jig section—afterwards returning to the air from whence the piece drifts to a close.<sup>152</sup>

Standing out at the onset is the way in which Molloy has the performer experiment with aural learning and improvisation. These aspects, touched upon further below, invite the performer to participate in a similar learning process that traditional

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149. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

150. Ibid.

151. Molloy, e-mail message to author, January 9, 2019.

152. Molloy, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, for Piano, preface.

players undertake. As discussed in Chapter Three, one's own style of playing and singing as well as one's choice in ornamentation and improvisation is central in the performance of traditional Irish music. Molloy admits the difficulty in affording the classical player the best opportunity of understanding the world of traditional Irish music. He suggests:

About how to learn it, the main thing to get is the phrasing and the points of repose in the tune. Most people tend to stick to the ornamentation in the recording, but that doesn't mean you can't do your own thing with the improvised ornamentation....<sup>153</sup>

In an earlier conversation about how to grasp the concept of Irish jig rhythm, Molloy provides the following advice that may apply similarly to the learning process of *Sliabh Geal gCua*: "Rather than practice for ages, go and spend two weeks in a pub!"<sup>154</sup>

Still, Molloy attempts to create for the pianist a microcosmic environment of aural learning and improvisation in his *Sliabh Geal gCua*. The score to this work has an accompanying CD recording of three tracks. Each track is to be studied aurally and reproduced as best as possible according to the player's own interpretation in the designated places in the score. (The original air of "Sliabh Geal gCua" is not included in Molloy's score whether as a notated version or an aural track.) This aural learning process is quite a new experience for most classical performers. In so doing, Molloy has created a paradigm whereby a classical player can experience the process in which traditional musicians engage, but in the framework of contemporary art music. Molloy's own performance instructions are as follows:

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153. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

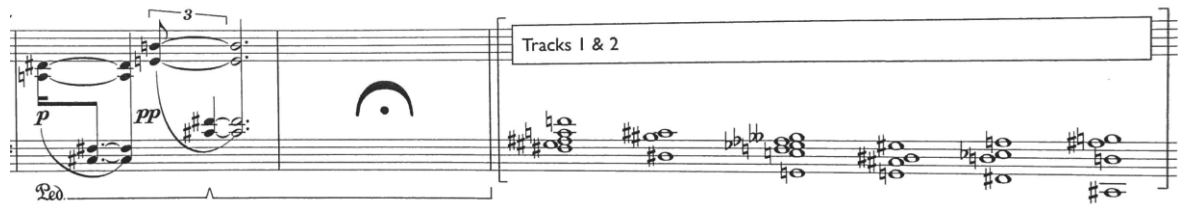
154. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

One of the aims of this composition was to incorporate an element of aural transmission, such as is found in Irish traditional music and in particular with slow airs. To this end, the score is accompanied by a CD. The three tracks on the CD are required to be learnt by ear (as though the performer were learning a slow air) and then, when indicated by a box and track number in the score, the performer should give their interpretation of the track.<sup>155</sup>

For assistance, Molloy includes an appendix to the score with a notated version of the recorded tracks. The pitches are given in the order they occur in the tracks, but the rhythm is only available on the recording. Below (Ex. 11) is the notated version of the first two tracks with their only usage in the score (see Ex. 12):



Example 11. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, Tracks 1 and 2.

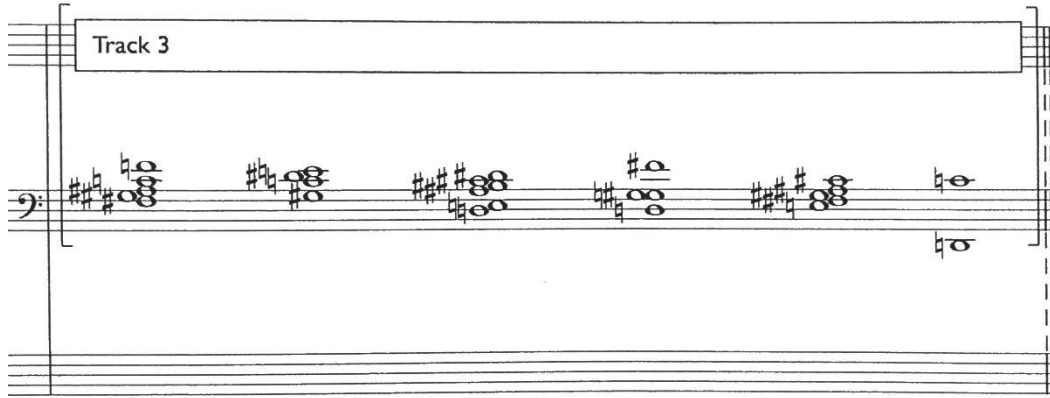


Example 12. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, mm. 4-6.

155. Molloy, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, preface.

The timing of the left hand chords in measure 6 (Ex. 12) are to be played at the performer's discretion as the melody proceeds. Molloy also leaves the choice of dynamics and improvised ornamentation to the performer.<sup>156</sup>

The ending (see Ex. 13) of *Sliabh Geal gCua* is noteworthy and involves the third track (see Ex. 14), again required to be learned by ear.



Example 13. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, m. 98.



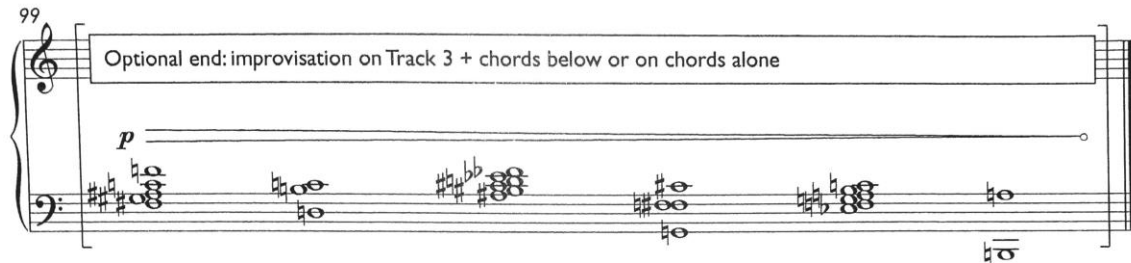
Example 14. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, Track 3.

With this final aural section, Molloy gives the performer another chance to freely improvise on and around this “tune.” One also has the option to end the piece with

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156. Ibid.

measure 98 (see Ex. 13) or to continue to improvise (Ex. 15, m. 99) whether on the given harmonies alone or in combination with materials from the third track.



Example 15. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, m. 99.

For this optional improvisatory ending, Molloy indicates that one must decrease in dynamic slightly to the very end, so that the final notes are barely audible. The remaining choices (ornaments, melodic and rhythmic variations on the tune, as well as timing of the left hand chords) are left to the pianist.<sup>157</sup> This paradigm of improvisation invites the performer to a heightened active engagement within the context of Molloy's melodic and harmonic ideas. One's own musical background would also consciously or subconsciously figure into this section of improvisation. Molloy remarks on being quite satisfied by the outcome of this improvisatory ending:

I have heard this performed by four or five people, and all of them have chosen to end with this section of improvisation. They have all been different but [have also] all been satisfying. Each performer's improvisation, to me, reflected how much energy and what type of energy they have put into the piece. They always seem to know what to do. It is a great confluence of personalities. They have taken the time to learn my music, so they are becoming familiar with my sound world. They then interpret my sound world, which is directly their sound world. With this improvisational ending they can make all this come together in a way that only they know best.<sup>158</sup>

157. Ibid.

158. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

The previous examples are part of the large intersection where Molloy taps into the experience of the traditional Irish musician. This requires classical performers to take different risks and engage with musical practices with which they may be unfamiliar. Here, the composer acts as a teacher, stretching the boundaries of today's typical classical performer. Compositionally, Molloy brings the didactic worlds of the traditional player and the classical player together in his own contemporary context.

In addition to this large-scale interaction with improvisation and aural learning, Molloy reinvents the melody itself. Molloy's rhapsodic *Sliabh Geal gCua* re-contextualizes the original air but sounds nothing like it. From the original air, he draws the melodic shape, the rhythmic structure, and in some cases, the notes themselves. For reference, a notated example of the entire "Sliabh Geal gCua" air is provided below:

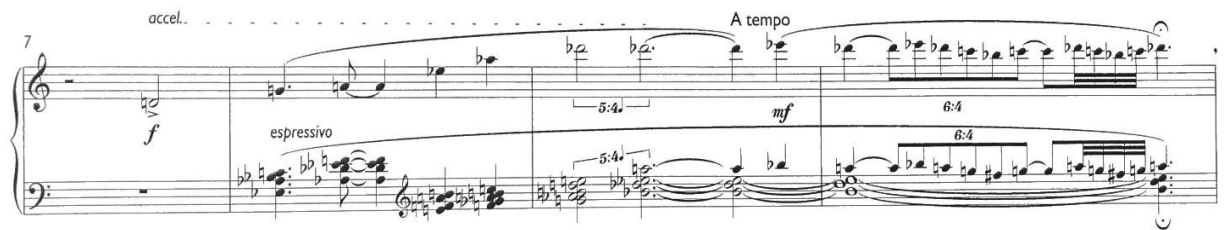


Example 16. "Sliabh Geal gCua" original air.<sup>159</sup>

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159. "Sliabh Geal gCua." traditional tune as notated at [www.abcnotation.com](http://www.abcnotation.com), accessed July 14, 2018. <http://abcnotation.com/tunePage?a=thesession.org/tunes/6628.no-ext/0003>.

In the below examples, Example 17 is excerpted from Molloy's *Sliabh Geal gCua* and shows the first written-out melodic reinterpretation of the original air. Example 18 is the corresponding section in the original air. Compare Molloy's version (Ex. 17) to that of the original air (Ex. 18).



Example 17. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, mm. 7-10.



Example 18. "Sliabh Geal gCua" original air, mm. 10-12.

Molloy's melody is a different aural entity entirely. The original air implies G Major, but Molloy's *Sliabh Geal gCua* makes no such tonal implication as it quickly makes use of pitches that are incompatible with any major or minor tonality. The melodic range also far exceeds that of the original air. In addition to the melody, a series of clusters create colors of sound underneath the melodic line, bringing the listener a world away from the G Major of the original air and into the context of Molloy's modern compositional sound world. Still, the structural shape of the line and its melodic contour are similar to that of the original air. Additionally, the opening three pitches, D G A, are identical.

The “Sliabh Gea gCua” original air also relates to Track 1 and another type of aural learning. Compare the opening two measures of the original air (excerpted for convenience in Ex. 19) with the corresponding melodic structure of Molloy’s rhythm-free notation of Track 1 (Ex. 20).



Despite these similarities, it would still be difficult for an audience to discern the melodic connection between the two versions. The tune “*Sliabh Geal gCua*” would be difficult for the average listener to clearly perceive even if one were familiar with the original air. Molloy himself says that his intent is not that the listeners would hear a traditional air from the composition. He would actually be surprised if they did.<sup>160</sup> He states:

For me, when I hear my *Sliabh Geal gCua* or play it, I hear the original air. For me the original air is there, even though it doesn’t sound even slightly like the original air in its pitch content. For some people who are familiar with the original air, they might pick out a contour, but that possibility and that ambiguity of the material is useful because it dislocates them a little bit. It shifts them into this slightly different mode of listening. It doesn’t place them in the sound world of a traditional air, but it is also not just listening to a piece of contemporary piano music. There is an effort in communication of trying to play with those senses of time and place. But also to someone who listens to it and thinks that it’s just a rip-off of “*Sliabh Geal gCua*,” it would still recontextualize the air.<sup>161</sup>

In addition to these specific connections to the original air, Molloy uses other traditional Irish musical elements as well. In *Sliabh Geal gCua*, Molloy makes use of both the rhythmic figures of the reel and the jig. Towards the end of the piece, as the melodic figures become increasingly complex, the work transforms into an energetic reel. Example 21 below shows this transition followed by the beginning of the reel, measure 55.

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160. Molloy, Interview Two, June 9, 2018.

161. Ibid.

Example 21. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, mm. 53-59.

Molloy's reel initially takes the rhythmic pattern (two groups of four eighth notes) and duple-time of the traditional reel (as discussed in Chapter Three). With this mold of the traditional reel, he adds accents on weak beats as well as triplet figures. Note the accented notes in the left hand beginning in measure 55, in Example 21. As soon as the traditional reel is established, Molloy confuses it, beginning at the end of measure 55, with the unexpectedly-placed accented left hand notes.

As the reel progresses (Ex. 22 below) Molloy changes the meter from 2/2 to 3/2 in measure 70. Thus begins the transition to yet another dance figure—the jig. When the jig proper is reached (Ex. 22, m. 75), the rhythmic structure of the traditional double jig (two groups of three eighth notes per measure) in 6/8 is maintained. As with the reel section, Molloy uses similar unexpected accents in the jig section to momentarily manipulate and confuse the traditional jig rhythm.

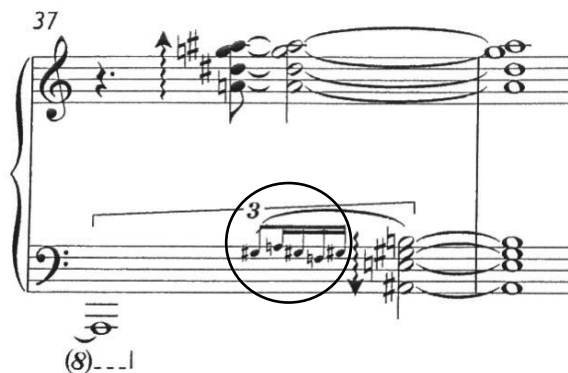


Example 22. *Sliabh Geal gCua* mm. 70-77.

In addition to these large-scale elements of aural learning, improvisation, and the direct engagement with a traditional air, the use of selected traditional Irish ornaments (see Ch. 3) may also be observed in Molloy's *Sliabh Geal gCua*. The occurrence of these ornaments gives a sudden melodic and rhythmic nod to traditional music in melodic lines which otherwise avoid such references altogether. Molloy's smattering of traditional ornaments throughout acts as a sudden momentary direct reference to traditional Irish music. He gives instructions in the preface that all ornaments and grace notes should be performed short, as in traditional music.<sup>162</sup> First, in Example 23, Molloy uses a written-out long roll (beginning and ending with the G-sharp in the left hand). This particular example is specifically referenced in his "Programme note" as an example of a roll among his descriptions of various ornaments present in *Sliabh Geal gCua*.<sup>163</sup>

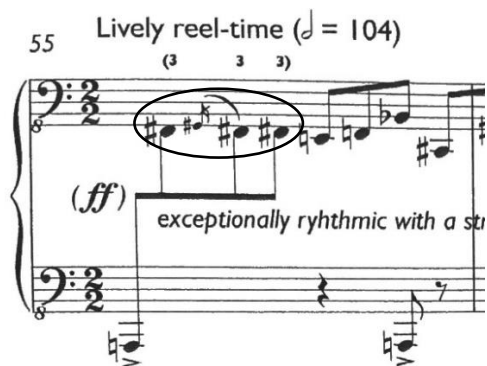
162. Molloy, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, preface. See also Figure 3 grace-note information presented in the Chapter Four *Innisfail* section regarding grace-note values apart from cuts and rolls.

163. Ibid.



Example 23. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, m. 37 (long roll).

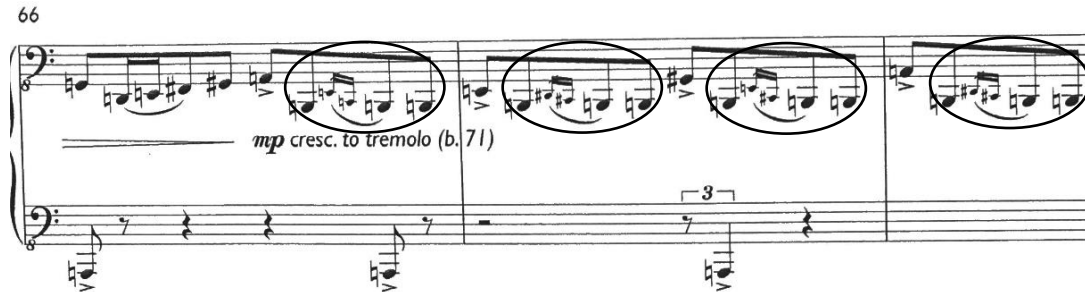
Second, an example of a cut is found in measure 55 (Ex. 24), taken from the first measure of the reel section, also notated as a grace note:



Example 24. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua* m. 55 (cut).

Finally, there is an example of a two-note ornamental figure that Molloy uses similarly to a cut (Ex. 25). Instead of using one ornamental note (as employed in a cut, seen in Example 24), Molloy uses two grace notes. This two-note figure ornaments repeated

pitches the same way the traditional single-note cut does (compare Examples 24 and 25). Here, Molloy further develops the figure of the single-note cut commonly heard in traditional Irish music.



Example 25. Molloy *Sliabh Geal gCua*, mm. 66-68.

Ryan Molloy's *Sliabh Geal gCua* stands out in his compositional output for a number of reasons. It is his first conscious exploration in the engagement of traditional Irish music for the piano. Among his piano works, *Sliabh Geal gCua* is the only composition that interacts with a pre-existing Irish tune. Molloy states the following about his use of the traditional air:

I don't usually use sources. *Sliabh Geal gCua* is quite exceptional in this regard. I don't quote from other tunes. I write stuff that is in the style of traditional music that is coming from a traditional well within me. It's constantly there. It's just my base line. It's that mix of everything I have heard and how I want to express it.<sup>164</sup>

Additionally, there is an interesting interaction between the performer's freedom and the detailed performance instructions provided by Molloy. The lab experience for the performer in aural learning, while seemingly providing some freedom, still comes from specific notation and performance directions. The air itself is the unifying element in this

164. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

dichotomy, as Molloy discusses:

With *Sliabh Geal gCua*, the thing is the air [the tune]. The air is the overarching thing that is always there. Essentially what happens is that this is a journey from complete freedom, which is in the air [initially, the Track 1 improvisation at m. 6 with its loose connection to the original air—Ex. 20 and 12], to an entirely written-out improvisation [beginning m. 7, Ex. 17]. This is as detailed as it gets, with no freedom necessarily in that notation [of the entirely written-out “improvisation at m. 7 and onward]. It is as it is. But where does it go? Frequently what happens in traditional music when you are playing a slow air is that often you will go into a reel or a jig—some dance tune—afterwards for contrast, and without a break. That is precisely what happens here. I am playing this air [Ex. 12, m. 6], and improvising around this air [beginning m. 7, Ex. 17], and eventually the improvisation becomes so involved that it becomes a jig [Ex. 22, m. 75].<sup>165</sup>

With this, Molloy uses a sense of perceived freedom to achieve what he wants the performer to communicate.

Understanding all of this information provides the opportunity for the pianist to knowingly and directly interact with music from two vastly different paradigms. Molloy, a traditional player and classical composer, has written out what is essentially a detailed improvisation. He then gives the player the opportunity to reflect on this by way of his or her own improvisation (albeit still one that is guided in ways) at the end of the work (see Ex. 15). This meeting place of thoughtful score study and having an open mind to experiment with aural learning and improvisation forms an orbit around the whole of Molloy’s *Sliabh Geal gCua*.

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165. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

## *Innisfail*

*Innisfail*, composed in 2015, is by far the longest work for solo piano by Molloy. Spanning a full half hour, this work is an extended fantasy on a previous work, also entitled *Innisfail*, written in 2012 for voice and piano. The 2012 version is a setting of an 1834 poem, “Song of Innisfail,” by Thomas Moore (1779-1852).<sup>166</sup> Molloy includes the following “Programme note” in the preface to the score of the solo-piano version of *Innisfail*:

*Innisfail* (2015) is an extended rhapsody on an earlier work of mine of the same name for baritone and piano (2012). This earlier work formed something of a modern response to some of the typical ‘classical’ piano accompaniments found in parlour ballads of the late-nineteenth century as exemplified by Thomas Moore, whose text was set therein. The piano accompaniment to my earlier setting exploits a jaunty traditional jig-rhythm from the outset (with stylistic ornamentation), the overtly traditional approach of which is contrasted by the polymodal treatment of the harmony. After composition, I knew I would return to the short, energetic treatment of this song feeling that there was more in the piano accompaniment than in the song itself! So it is that *Innisfail* (2015) began.<sup>167</sup>

In Molloy’s original 2012 version of *Innisfail* for voice and piano, he cites the figure of Thomas Moore as well as traditional Irish music as influences in the genesis of the original voice-piano composition. He identifies with Moore’s goal from over a century earlier to cultivate and promote art and music from his native Ireland.<sup>168</sup> This

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166. Ryan Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Voice and Piano (Dublin, Ireland: Contemporary Music Centre, 2012), preface, i.

167. Ryan Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Piano (Dublin, Ireland: Contemporary Music Centre, 2015), preface, i.

168. Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Voice and Piano, preface, i.

love and admiration of Ireland is contained in the imagery of the poem itself. In his preface to the voice-piano version, Molloy writes about the poem:

*Innisfail* comes from the Irish *Inis Fáil*, meaning, 'Island of Destiny.' Moore's poem is heavy with romantic imagery of the search for and arrival of the ancient Milesian people from A Coruña in Spain around 1700 B.C. This kind of imagery and the portrayal of Ireland as the 'Island of Destiny' is prevalent in Moore's writing and signaled the Celtic Revival which was to continue for a century to come.<sup>169</sup>

Below is the poem, "Song of Innisfail" by Thomas Moore:

They came from a land beyond the sea,  
And now o'er the western main  
Set sail, in their good ships, gallantly,  
From the sunny land of Spain.  
"Oh, where's the isle we've seen in dreams,  
Our destined home or grave?"  
Thus sung they as, by the morning's beams,  
They swept the Atlantic wave.

And lo, where afar o'er ocean shines  
A sparkle of radiant green,  
As though in that deep lay emerald mines,  
Whose light through the wave was seen.  
"'Tis Innisfail – 'tis Innisfail!"  
Rings o'er the echoing sea;  
While, bending to heaven, the warriors hail  
That home of the brave and free.

Then turn'd they unto the Eastern wave,  
Where now their Day-God's eye  
A look of such sunny omen gave  
As lighted up sea and sky.  
Nor frown was seen through sky or sea,  
Nor tear o'er leaf or sod,  
When first on their Isle of Destiny  
Our great forefathers trod.<sup>170</sup>

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169. Ibid.

170. Ibid., preface, iii.

Moore's poem even forms an aesthetic binder of sorts within the solo-piano version of *Innisfail*. Molloy's work for solo piano is not a narrative of this journey across the sea but rather is a reflection on the time and space that surround such a journey as implied in the poetry.<sup>171</sup> Molloy discusses the relationship of Moore's poem in regards to his own goals as a composer in his 2015 piano version of *Innisfail*:

The poem is definitely in the music, but in a very indirect way. Actually the cover of the CD *Innisfail* [solo-piano CD] is a photograph that for me sums up the piece. [See Figure 2 below; the photograph is entitled *Sea Fever (Blue Rocks)* by David Baker.] The thing that initially stuck out in the poem to me was the notion of traveling at sea. There are so many sea references throughout the poem. The other thing that comes through the poem is this sense of mythological voyage—this sense of going to discover foreign, even mystical lands. The people on this ship are all the same nationality, so they carry this sense of identity, and this identity travels across the vast sea. I try to portray this sense in *Innisfail*. In a way no questions are answered by my music, but many are asked. The poem itself is about the journey. It plays with time, which is the ultimate goal of my setting. It plays with time, with temporal awareness. This is really important to me. Have you ever looked at a bright and starry sky, and for a split second, grasped, or tried to grasp, what eternity is? It is mind-blowing. You can think about the distance between yourself and a specific star, but rarely, and suddenly, you become keenly aware of how big infinity is. This awareness, this trap door into another world, is what I love about music and what I want to bring people into with my music.<sup>172</sup>

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171. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

172. Ibid.



Figure 2. *Sea Fever (Blue Rocks)*, photograph by David Baker.<sup>173</sup>

Molloy captures this imagery from the onset of the work, which begins with a long series of bell-like sevenths in the low register of the piano. These bell tones progress very slowly, inviting the listener into a sense of suspended time through the resonance of the piano.<sup>174</sup> As in *Sætre Brygge*, Molloy uses the interval of the seventh to capture this aesthetic. Molloy states, “For me, these sevenths really open up a certain space. I love the sound of this interval on the piano. The resonance that flows through you as a pianist when you really hammer out these dyads truly does flow through you like energy.”<sup>175</sup>

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173. David Baker, *Sea Fever (Blue Rocks)*, photograph, Scotland, July 2013.  
<http://www.milouvision.com/sea-fever-blue-rocks/>.

174. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

175. Ibid.

This suspension of time also captures the imagery of being at sea to which Thomas Moore refers in his poem. The slow progression of these sevenths along with the developing figures in the treble register of the piano (Ex. 26) place the listener in a similar space to that of being surrounded by open water. One's ability to perceive distance is obscured by the seeming perpetuity of the sea. There may be slight changes in the clouds (Ex. 26, upper treble interjections) or in the waves (Ex. 26, the bass grace-note figurations), but the foundation of the water is constant (Ex. 26, the drone and its resonance). This imagery is evoked in the opening of *Innisfail* as shown in Example 26 below.

R. Molloy

Slow and freely, but with fervent intensity ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 30$ )

*pppp* (under the resonance) *pppp*

*sfz* *sfz* *fff* *veloce*

6 *sim.* *fff* *ppp*

10 *5:4*

Example 26. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 1-12.

Molloy also uses the low-register bell tones as well as the chorale-like figure in the upper register that emerges in measure 9 as organizing features in the overall structure of the work. This material returns three times throughout the evolution of *Innisfail*. As previously stated, Molloy frequently vacillates between contrasting energies in his

works.<sup>176</sup> In *Innisfail*, this bell-like figure functions both structurally and aesthetically as a large and spacious evocation that recurs after contrasting sections of music. The example below shows the first of these returns (m. 109). The return occurs after a swift descending run (the end of m. 108). In contrast to the beginning, this statement is much more declamatory with both the bell tones and the treble chorale marked to be played fortissimo.

108

(tr) tr

5:4

5:4

ff

fff

As the opening but slightly faster ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 40$ )

Example 27. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 108 (in part)-111.

The second of these returns (see Ex. 28) occurs before the coda. (The beginning of the coda, measure 379, is seen in Example 36.) This second return is also different

176. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

than the preceding bell-tone sections (Ex. 26 and Ex. 27) in that the bass bell tones and the treble interjections are all now marked to be played softly (*piu p possibile*).<sup>177</sup> This rendering gives a feeling of acceptance and peace before the work concludes with fiery and energetic music in the coda. This second return serves as a faint musical memory of the dramatic beginning of the work, from whence everything else that has unfolded began.

Example 28. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 361-366.

The third and final return (Ex. 29) occurs in the coda just before the close of the piece. Here, with the instructions to play “with rapturous joy,” the bell tones and the seventh figures reach their apex. A passage of ringing B octaves in the treble followed by clangorous descending sevenths (beginning in m. 389) is repeated five times, with the low bell tones not appearing until the third time (Ex. 29, m. 391). This section whose reliance on sevenths harkens back to the fourth movement of *Sætre Brygge* (as seen in Ex. 5).

177. Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Piano, 18.

22

With rapturous joy (a tempo) ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 36$ )

389 *fff*

390

391

392

Example 29. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 389-394.

23

Example 29 (continued).

The moment of arrival at these B octaves is significant in Molloy's compositional psyche. For Molloy, the tone B is often a point of either arrival or departure.<sup>178</sup> The importance of B originates from one of Molloy's first experiences of hearing a live orchestra:

There was a concert in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, and the pianist was performing Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. I begged my father to take me. Despite having listened to a lot [of music in my younger years], I hadn't been to many live performances. I went, of course, for the *Rhapsody*. The orchestra started out with this piece that I really wasn't concerned about at all called *Tintagel* by Arnold Bax. I ... I was just blown away. I could get emotional thinking about it now. The piece uses much in B Major, which is another fixation for me. B is always

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<sup>178</sup> Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

somewhere I am going to or coming from—my ultimate place of repose. This moment was the first time I had heard an orchestra live.<sup>179</sup>

The culmination of Molloy's largest piano work with a convergence around the pitch center of B is thus no accident. In another conversation when Molloy was discussing how he organizes musical material, Molloy stated that the pitch B often holds an important place.<sup>180</sup> He said, "I will frequently have locally contrasting things that are held together by perhaps a drone underpinning or some divergence away or convergence to B." The pitch center of B that is established in measure 391 (Ex. 29 above) continues to the close of the piece (seen in Ex. 43). These aspects of compositional organization thus serve both to communicate the mood of Thomas Moore's poetry, as mentioned previously, in addition to giving the work a formal directional structure.

Similar to *Sliabh Geal gCua* with its direct engagement of traditional Irish musical elements, there are two places in *Innisfail* where Molloy draws on the sounds of *sean-nós*. Unlike *Sliabh Geal gCua* where Molloy makes use of a pre-existing air for a *sean-nós* underpinning, in *Innisfail* Molloy uses a free melodic line, ornamentation, and the lack of a strict meter to imitate language of *sean-nós*. The first of these instances (Ex. 30) occurs near the beginning, after the first large section of bell-tones. The time signature here is 2/2, but the rhythmically-shifting accompanying figure and the floating melody yield no obvious feeling of a duple meter. The only sense of direction present is in the written-out improvisatory melodic line, an air of sorts.

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179. Ibid.

180. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

4 Floating, with some rubato but less than before ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 54$ )

55 *mp cantabile*

*molto pedale*

*p*

62

68

73

(Ped.)

Example 30. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 55-78.

The material seen in Example 30 is further developed as the piece unfolds. In measures 272-286 (Ex. 31), Molloy repeats the air-like melody with added quartal harmonies. Compare the treble in measures 57-71 (Ex. 30) with the treble in measures 272-286 (Ex. 31). In Example 31, the air-like melody (the lowest note of the right hand chords) is now heard as parallel fourths.

Gently flowing (♩ = ca 74)

270

*p cantabile* 3:2

*pp molto pedale*

274

4:3

(*ppp*) 3

5:4

(*ppp*) 3

14

278

3

(*ppp*) 3

3:2 (l.h.) 3

3:2 3

3:2 3

283

3

3

3

7:4

3

*accel.*

Example 31. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 270-286

The second instance of drawing upon the language of *sean-nós* in *Innisfail* (2015) occurs in measures 348 to 357 (Ex. 32). These measures are near the end and just before the second return of the bell-tone theme (Ex. 28). In Example 32, one can see a new slow, constantly-moving, drone-like figure placed in the bass. This slow bass material is juxtaposed by its own free, air-like treble melody, which is doubled at the interval of a seventh and displaced by two octaves. The bass pulsations keep a constant rhythm, but the treble “air” obscures the presence of any strong beats. The resulting effect is striking

and also creates a minimalistic-like presentation of *sean-nós* through its repetitive nature which unfolds slowly, nearly stagnantly.

← ♩. = ♩ → (♩ = ca 42)

*mp*  
(depress cluster silently and catch with sos. ped\*\*)

*(ppp)*

*p*

355  
(release Ped. 3)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system shows a piano introduction with a tempo marking of ca 42. It includes a dynamic marking of *mp* and a performance instruction: "(depress cluster silently and catch with sos. ped\*\*)". The second system continues the texture with a dynamic marking of *(ppp)*. The third system, starting at measure 355, features a dynamic marking of *p* and a performance instruction: "(release Ped. 3)". The score is written for piano and features a complex, repetitive texture.

Example 32. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 348-357.

Compare this same melodic material of Example 32 from Molloy's *Innisfail* with Example 33 below, the traditional tune "The Banks of the Bann," as notated by Hast and Scott.<sup>181</sup> The ornaments, fermatas, and pauses are all one interpretive possibility of performing this air. Molloy accomplishes the same in his written-out, improvisatory-like rhythm and rubato found in Example 32 (and similarly in the "air" in Example 30).

**Rubato**

When first to this a coun - try I came as a

stra - ger I placed my at - fec - tion on a maid that was

young. She be-in' young and ten - der her waist small and

slen - der kind af - fec - tion has made her to be

my o - ver - throw.

Example 33. "The Banks of the Bann."<sup>182</sup>

181. Hast and Scott, 113.

182. Ibid. "The Banks of the Bann" as sung by Len Graham, recorded in Dublin by Hast and Scott.

Ornamentation is another traditional Irish element that is found throughout *Innisfail*. The ornamental figures present in *Innisfail* occur both as traditional Irish ornaments such as cuts and rolls (see Ch. 3, Fig. 1) as well as written-out *sean-nós* style interpretation of air-like melodic lines reflecting traditional performances such as the one notated in Example 1 (Ch. 3) and the above Example 33. Molloy includes the following performance directions for ornamentation in his preface to *Innisfail*:

### Ornamentation

Two forms of traditional ornamentation are prevalent throughout this work:



- 
 Cuts – these are to be played as quickly before the beat.
- 
 Rolls (although actually only 'half rolls' as the lower note is omitted) – these are to be played *veloce* with a very strong rhythmic swing (cf. the jig swing above). The articulation marked is a guide as to how it should be executed.
- Other grace notes may be notated using quavers or semiquavers. The latter should be played generally very fast (regardless of the tempo) whereas the former should be played slightly slower than this. Occasionally, grace notes have been 'written into' the rhythm, e.g. b. 82; these are marked by cue-sized noteheads.

Figure 3. Ornamentation in Molloy's *Innisfail* for Piano.<sup>183</sup>

183. Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Piano, preface, i-ii. Measure 82 to which Molloy refers when speaking of grace notes and cue-sized (smaller noteheads) can be found in Example 35.

Example 34 (below) is from the beginning of *Innisfail* and contains many ornaments marked by sixteenth-note grace-note figures. The tempo here is slow and “MOLTO rubato.”<sup>184</sup> Still, according to Molloy’s performance directions (see above Fig. 3), the ornamental figures are to be played quickly as in traditional Irish music, although the eighth-note grace notes can be “slightly slower.” To an ear familiar with Irish ornamentation, these figures give an otherwise modern melody a traditional Irish flair. (All grace notes in Example 34 are sixteenth-note figures.)

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184. Ibid., 3.

Gently undulating, **MOLTO rubato** ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 36$ ) rall. . . .

*mp* molto legato e espressivo, con molto pedale

*p*

33 **A tempo (rubato)** rall. . . .

(avoid spread)

(Ped.)

37 **A tempo (rubato)**

*ppp*

(Ped.)

poco rall. . . . . **A tempo (rubato)**

41

Example 34. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 29-45.

In *Innisfail*, Molloy takes his use of ornamentation to a new and more highly-developed sphere. While in measures 55-78 (Ex. 30 and Ex. 35) Molloy ornamented a melodic line, instead of continuing with this idea, the melodic air itself then vanishes (Ex. 35, m. 80) and is replaced by repeated ornamental fragments. These fragments continue to increase in length and in scope until a wild cadenza breaks forth in measure 108 (Ex. 35). (The latter part of measure 108 was previously seen, in Example 27, ushering in the

first return of the opening material.) The ornamental figures, which began as fragments, essentially take over the melody and become the subject itself. This evolution can be seen over three pages—4, 5, 6—of the score (Ex. 35).

4 Floating, with some rubato but less than before ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 54$ )

*mp cantabile*

55 *molto pedale* *p*

62

68

73

79

85

*mf*

*(molto pedale)*

*(Ped.)*

*r.h. over*

Example 35. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 55-111.

91 *mf* 3 7:6

(Play where possible, i.e. between rests in RH; dynamics and speed *ad lib.* but always *beneath* the RH.)

93 *mf* 3 7:4 9:6

*p* tr

95 3 13:8 7:4 7:4

98 3 3 19:16 tr

100 11:7 11:7 11:7 *sf* *p* tr

Example 35 (continued).

104 15:9

*sfpp*

*f* 19:11

3:2

107 accel. 8:8

*sf*

*ff* (all trills semitonal)

3:2

veloce

5:4

5:4

*ff*

4:5

4:5

4:5

4:5

As the opening but slightly faster ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 40$ )

*ff*

*fff*

Example 35 (continued).

The left hand in Example 35 (above) also undergoes a similar transformation. The notes A and B are presented in measure 56 and continue throughout this section. By measure 76, the rhythmic figure associated with these two notes increases in speed until a trill is reached at measure 85. This trill figure continues alongside the increasing development of the right-hand ornamental gesture.

The final culmination of this ornamental evolution is reserved for the coda (mm. 379-388), the beginning of which is provided in Example 36 below. Molloy brings the devices of complex, written-out ornamentation, the interval of the seventh, and the presence of bell-like figures together to converge in a climax. One can see the apex of this climax in measure 389 (Excerpted in Ex. 37 below and also shown in Ex. 29 as the third and final return of the opening material).

**Snow-like, rubato but with momentum** ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 36$ )  
 (Lean on the downbeats and push gently through the bar)

379 *sf* (i.h. over)

380 *sf* poco a poco cresc. with each bar *sf* legato sim.

381

Example 36. *Innisfail*, mm. 379-382, beginning of coda.

22 **With rapturous joy (a tempo)** ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 36$ )

389 *fff*

Example 37. *Innisfail*, m. 389, climax of coda.

The final traditional element Molloy implements in *Innisfail*, and perhaps the clearest to hear and see, is dance rhythms. Molloy uses the jig rhythm (traditional jig and its rhythm is discussed in Ch. 3) throughout this work as explosions of musical energy. The 2012 version of *Innisfail* for voice and piano also uses the jig as a musical source. Example 38 below, the vocal entrance from the 2012 version of *Innisfail*, shows an initial use of the single-jig rhythm (quarter note followed by an eighth note) in measures 10-12, then the double-jig rhythm (dependence on two groups of three eighth notes) in the voice part in measures 13-18.

10 A tempo *f* boldly

*morendo* They

*sim.* *pp*

8<sup>vb</sup>

13

came from a la - nd be - yond the sea, And now o'er the wes - tern main Set

*flitting*

17

sail, in their go - od ships, gal - lant - ly, From the sun - ny land of

Example 38. *Innisfail* (2012), mm. 10-20.

As mentioned previously, Molloy states in his preface to the solo version of *Innisfail* that it was this jig figure in the piano accompaniment of the voice-piano version that interested him the most for further future exploration. The voice-piano jig thus led to the initial birth of the 2015 version for solo piano.<sup>185</sup> While the voice-piano version utilizes this “jaunty” traditional jig rhythm from the outset, in his large piano fantasy it is not until measure 228 that this overt jig is finally revealed.



Example 39. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 228-238.

Measure 230 to the downbeat of measure 233 (Ex. 39) is the exact replication of the piano accompaniment from Molloy’s 2012 version of *Innisfail* (Ex. 38, m. 13 to the downbeat of m. 16). The jig rhythm and 6/8 time signature first appear in the piano work in measure 144 (seen in Ex. 40 below) in a more subdued form:

185. Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Piano, preface, i.

144 Subdued jig-time (♩♩ = ♩♩♩; ♩. = ca 108) (sim.)

sub. *p* with a gentle wash of pedal throughout

gradually cresc. to b. 231

*pp* più legato possibile

*ffz*

Example 40. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 144-148.

The authentic execution of the traditional jig rhythm is challenging to depict in notation. Molloy gives the indication of  $\text{♩♩} = \text{♩♩♩}$  in the piano version of *Innisfail* (Ex. 40 above) along with tenuto marks on the first and fourth eighth notes. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Hast and Scott suggest the mnemonic phrase “rashers and sausages” to assist with “feeling” the jig rhythm. In spoken language, the first syllable of “rashers” as well as the first syllable of “sausages” both receive a slight emphasis in these words all while each syllable remains basically equal in length. Molloy provides the following suggestion about the comprehension of the jig rhythm:

Even my notation is not exactly what the jig rhythm is. This part took a bit of time to get right for Alex [Bernstein].<sup>186</sup> It just wasn’t quite in his fingers’ nature to do those kinds of things. There should be a natural swing in it, but it should not be dotted. As we were taught when we were young, “apples and oranges apples and oranges apples and oranges ...” This is how we were taught this rhythm. I should probably put this in the score! This is something that is actually problematic. When I inject that kind of flavor in my music, it does kind of demand a certain familiarity with the

186. Alexander Bernstein is an American pianist to whom *Innisfail* is dedicated. He has recorded Molloy’s *Innisfail*, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, and *Sætre Brygge*. Bernstein completed his Master of Music at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin and is currently completing an Artist Diploma at Shenandoah Conservatory. Additional information about Bernstein is available at <http://www.alexanderbernsteinpiano.com>.

medium, with traditional music, and ideally having spent time with it, so that you instantly know what a jig sounds like.<sup>187</sup>

As Molloy states above, the simplest way of understanding the jig rhythm lies outside of notation. Similar to Hast and Scott's recommendation of speaking "rashers and sausages," Molloy suggests that saying "apples and oranges apples and oranges apples and oranges ..." can help achieve the correct jig rhythm. "Apples and" would be the first group of three eighth notes in 6/8 time, with "oranges" being the second group of three eighth notes. In spoken language, the first syllables of "apples" and "oranges" receive a slight emphasis while the implied rhythms of the pronunciation of each syllable remain even. When speaking, one would not give equal emphasis to or place an unnatural accent on each syllable of "apples and oranges" or "rashers and sausages." Rather, one would give a gentle lean on the appropriate syllables. According to Molloy, the jig rhythm occurs similarly.

A fascinating feature is that before making use of the actual traditional jig rhythm, Molloy hints at it through manipulation and distortion. The eleven measures (mm. 133-143) that precede the jig (itself seen in Ex. 40, m. 144) are cast in 11/8 time. As seen beginning in measure 133 (Ex. 41 below), dotted eighth notes occur at the start of macro-beats one and two creating a "limp-like" feeling in this distorted dance.

An *accelerando* occurs beginning in measure 134 (Ex. 41) until the jig rhythm is ultimately revealed. The listener is unaware of the fact that an outright jig is forthcoming. Molloy works this unusual, jig-derived rhythm into the minds of the listener. The

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187. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

133 *mp* *cresc. to b. 139* *mf* *accel.* *(sim.)*

135

137 *Whirling, hypnotic* ( $\text{♩} = \text{ca } 54$ ) *f*

139

92

141 *accel.* *cresc.*

142

143 *ff*

144 *Subdued jig-time* (♩♩ = ♩♩♩; ♩ = ca 108) (sim.)  
*sub. p with a gentle wash of pedal throughout* *gradually cresc. to b. 231*  
*pp più legato possibile*

Example 41 (continued).

This “subdued jig-time” (Ex. 41, m. 144) persists until the final evolution occurs—the “jaunty jig time” (m. 230, as previously seen in Example 39). This long evolutionary process of the jig is a deconstructed one of sorts. Instead of infusing the

music with the strong jig rhythm at first, as he does in the 2012 version of *Innisfail*, Molloy does the opposite in the solo-piano version.

In addition to these traditional Irish elements, two noteworthy pianistic features also occur in *Innisfail*. Molloy makes use of the sostenuto pedal in an extraordinary way (Ex. 32 and Ex. 42, m. 351).

Example 42. *Innisfail* (2015), m. 351.

The uppermost treble clef with its two-octave displacement is high enough in the piano that there are no dampers for these strings. These notes will thus resonate freely with or without the use of the damper pedal. In the inner treble clef, with its normal range, Molloy instructs the pianist to silently depress the given cluster and catch it with the sostenuto pedal. As long as the sostenuto pedal is held, these notes will resonate freely, along with the melody from the damperless upper treble clef region. The aural effect is one that is not normally produced on the piano. Molloy remarks about this section of music:

I suppose what interests me most about this particular passage ... is that the sound does something that the piano doesn't normally do.... but what it is doing is very much what the piano does. The pedaling there is challenging. You have to get all this placed but make it sound like the piano isn't there at all. You've prepared the sostenuto, so you have some resonance there. Your ears are telling you that there is something happening that normally doesn't happen on the piano. "How can that resonance be there if there's so much in the bass?" This is what I love about this section. Also, the way the melody is voiced adds to this. The melody is displaced over several octaves. They [the two treble lines] are in sevenths as well. For me, this is kind of a spectral technique. That sound is not what you typically hear on the piano.<sup>188</sup>

A second interesting pianistic element unrelated to traditional figures takes place at the end of the work. Below are the final measures of *Innisfail*:

395 As the opening but slower (♩ = ca 20)

sub. *ppp*

(no Ped. lift!!)

5:4  
(7th partial, loco)

*ppp*

rall.

400

(Ped.)

Example 43. *Innisfail* (2015), mm. 395-404.

188. Molloy, Interview One, June 8, 2018.

All the collective energy and motion from the piece have been condensed to the note B set as an octave (m. 395). In measure 398, Molloy instructs the pianist to play the lowest B on the piano while touching the string inside the piano at the seventh node.<sup>189</sup> In the performance instructions in the preface, Molloy writes:

Harmonics are required at the end of the work on B0. The string should be stopped lightly inside the piano at the 7<sup>th</sup> node such that a slightly flat A3 is produced. It is recommended that this be positioned beforehand and marked with chalk.<sup>190</sup>

The seventh, heard repeatedly throughout the entire work, returns in a spectral form. This low B, with an artificially-produced A3, is heard against the octave B3 and B4. The massive work ends in an aural memory of a seventh.

*Innisfail*, by far Molloy's longest and most expansive work for piano, displays a vast array of his ideals in harmony, melody, contrast, and pianism. The sheer space and length of this work affords Molloy the setting in which to engage with his desire of expressing transcendence (as referenced in Chapter Two). If any of Molloy's works for piano achieves this goal, it is most certainly *Innisfail*.

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189. Molloy, *Innisfail*, for Piano, 23.

190. Ibid., preface, ii. Note: A committee of the Piano Technicians Guild along with various pianists and composers advocate to never use chalk on the wound bass strings. "Protocol for Extended Techniques Piano Performance," accessed March 21, 2019, <https://my.ptg.org/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=4cc070fc-8421-4a18-b447-775664923a90>. Yarn lightly tied to the string is a good substitute.

*for Morton O'Leary*

In contrast to *Innisfail*, *for Morton O'Leary* is Molloy's shortest work for piano, spanning less than two pages and lasting just over five minutes. *for Morton O'Leary* was composed in 2016 for Molloy's colleague at Maynooth University, Dr. Martin O'Leary.<sup>191</sup> Martin O'Leary is a Lecturer in Composition on the music faculty of Maynooth University in Maynooth, Ireland. Molloy's "Programme note" serves as an introduction to *for Morton O'Leary*:

*for Morton O'Leary* (2016), is a reflection of Morton Feldman's *Durations* through the prism of traditional Irish music. The music is driven by a very free melody, loosely based on the notation of a traditional slow air with long ametrical phrases and subtle ornamentation. As per Feldman's work, there is a series of chords that process at the discretion of the performer. This piece is dedicated to my colleague Dr. Martin O'Leary whose love of Feldman and Dublin gave this piece both its inspiration and title.<sup>192</sup>

When asked about the initial conception of *for Morton O'Leary*, Molloy said:

*for Morton O'Leary* is thus titled for two main reasons: one, it draws on Feldman's approach to rhythm/freedom/notation as explored in his *Durations* pieces; two, it was written for Martin O'Leary who is a big Feldman fan and, in certain parts of Dublin, Martin is pronounced 'Morton'—it's a bit of an in-joke really! I had played some of the *Durations* pieces not long before this ... within a year or so previously I think—and I absolutely loved the effect they produced. It's a stasis-inducing technique that I wanted to bring into my own writing....<sup>193</sup>

*For Morton O'Leary* consists of two layers of sound within a "very slow, soft" framework (Ex. 44). First, there are chords which are notated in the lower two staves that

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191. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

192. Ryan Molloy, *for Morton O'Leary*, for Piano (Dublin, Ireland: Contemporary Music Centre, 2016), preface.

193. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

progress at the performer's discretion and create a special atmosphere. Second, there is a *sean-nós*-like melody (in the uppermost staff) that floats above the chords. Molloy uses specific rhythmic notation for the melody, but it should still progress in relation to the freedom of the chords below. The ambience produced is one that is calm and nearly static.<sup>194</sup> Molloy states, "This piece was written at the end of a very hectic term and is deliberately designed to be a low-energy piece, a kind of end-of-term release."<sup>195</sup> Below is the opening of *for Morton O'Leary*:

Very slow, soft; durations are free for the chords and relative for the melody. Ornaments are always quick.

Ryan Molloy

Piano

2 Ped. ....

Example 44. *for Morton O'Leary*, opening two lines.

194. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

195. Ibid.

As with *Innisfail*, the *sean-nós*-like melody in *for Morton O'Leary* emulates aspects of traditional Irish music but does not directly quote pre-existing material.<sup>196</sup> The melody is set in B Dorian and maintains this pitch center throughout.<sup>197</sup> This use of B Dorian is contrasted by the accompanying chords which, according to Molloy, “aim to distort temporal perception by their distance from this pitch center.”<sup>198</sup> The work begins (Ex. 44) and ends (Ex. 45) with the accompanying chords. The chords at the end further prolong the atemporal effect.

The musical score is for the ending of a piece titled 'for Morton O'Leary'. It is written in B Dorian, indicated by a single sharp (F#) in the key signature. The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble staff with a melody and two lower staves (likely for piano accompaniment) with chords. A circled section of the melody is marked 'rall.' (ritardando). The second system continues the accompaniment and ends with a long roll in the upper treble. The score is dated 14.vi.2016.

Example 45. *for Morton O'Leary*, ending.

As seen in Examples 44 and 45, Molloy employs traditional Irish ornamentation here as he does in his other piano works. A long roll may be observed in the upper-treble

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196. Ibid.

197. Ibid.

198. Ibid.

melodic line at its onset (Ex. 44, upper-treble entrance beginning with the B). Similar long rolls also occur in Example 44 (bottom system, beginning with the E in the upper-treble staff) and in Example 45 (top system, beginning with the E).

Compared to Molloy's earlier works, *for Morton O'Leary's* ornamented-melodic line is more consonant as it maintains a B Dorian tonality throughout (as seen in Ex. 44 and Ex. 45). The Dorian melody provides a more direct reference to traditional Irish music than the previous air-like melodies found in *Innisfail* and *Sliabh Geal gCua*, which are not in a tonality of an ancient mode. Breandán Breathnach confirms that Ionian (Major), Mixolydian, Aeolian (Minor), and Dorian are the most commonly-used modes in Irish traditional music.<sup>199</sup> While discussing his preference for the interval of the seventh, Molloy notes a relationship between the seventh, the Dorian mode, and his traditional Irish musical background (as mentioned in Chapter Two):

The minor seventh is a very strong interval in a lot of traditional music. For example, anything in Dorian has a natural lean to the minor seventh. The relationship is quite strong.<sup>200</sup>

A striking effect is created when the Dorian melody in *for Morton O'Leary* is juxtaposed by the distantly-related chord clusters found in the lower two staves.

Unlike Molloy's earlier piano works, *for Morton O'Leary* only makes use of one musical mood. As cited in more detail in Chapter Two, Molloy often uses "extreme stillness" and "extremely active, rhythmic music" to achieve his compositional goal of

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199. Breathnach, 9-10.

200. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

transcendence, “sometimes inhabiting one of these spaces for the duration of the piece.”<sup>201</sup> *for Morton O’Leary* exhibits the latter.

*for Morton O’Leary* also stands in contrast to Molloy’s other piano works by its sheer brevity and fewer technical challenges. For a pianist, this work serves as a practical introduction to Molloy’s works. It is concise, technically accessible, and provides a glimpse into Molloy’s musical language and the larger-scale writing found in *Sætre Brygge*, *Sliabh Geal gCua*, and *Innisfail*.

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201. Ibid.

## CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSION

Twenty-first-century Ireland is a fruitful era for composers. While the dichotomy still exists between the genres of traditional Irish music and art music, composers such as Molloy and his contemporaries make daily strides in the coexistence of the two art forms. The Contemporary Music Centre of Ireland actively promotes these composers and makes their music available. Ryan Molloy, with his expertise in traditional music and with his rising prominence as a composer, falls at the epicenter. As he continues to gain notoriety in Ireland and abroad, further research about his music is needed.

Molloy explores possibilities in the implementation of traditional Irish musical elements in other genres as well. His work entitled *Seisiún* [session], written for clarinet, violin, and cello, is a theatrical presentation of being caught up in the physicality of a traditional music session. Molloy says the following about this work:

It is quite theatrical. I spoke earlier about the physicality of a [traditional Irish music] session, about being caught up in a sound world and the fact that it has control over you. This piece is a reflection of that being lost, perhaps even too overtly. There are at times these violent gestures that are almost zoomed in on, such as a bit of ornamentation a fiddle player might be doing. In these boxes there are tunes that the performers play. You get this mass of tunes. You get oriented in one tune, get “zoned in,” and then another will catch your attention. This kind of multi-layered aspect is only highlighted by the fact that these tunes just suddenly take off. The players are also all tapping their foot, which happens in a session, in their own tempo. Suddenly it all stops, and they are all “miming the tune.” It is meant to be comical, but suddenly, you are just focused on the foot tapping. This actually happens in a session! It does the opposite thing of pieces that begin with airs and then go through dance tunes to get back to an air. This starts with a dance tune and then goes to an air, then it goes back to the dance tune. The violin has this very mournful tune, but the clarinet players have enough with it, and they keep trying to interrupt with this dance tune. As I have written, “look very happy.” It is a theatrical thing that I was going for.<sup>202</sup>

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202. Molloy, Interview Three, June 9, 2018.

Molloy's *For A Lone Piper*, written for organ, provides an example of how Molloy combines traditional elements with idiomatic writing for the instrument. The piece imitates the uilleann pipes, an instrument that is similar to the Scottish bagpipes. The uilleann pipes are smaller than Scottish pipes, and the performer plays while seated. A hallmark feature of all bagpipes are the constant drone. Molloy makes use of the organ's ability to sustain by way of mimicking these drone figures. The treble part of the organ plays an air with similar figuration to that of a melody played on a set of uilleann pipes.<sup>203</sup>

Additionally, Molloy also continues to experiment in his writing for piano. His newest work *Dúchann*, which literally translates as "melody," incorporates the use of an electronic recording with live performance.<sup>204</sup> *Dúchann* was performed once by Molloy himself at the IMBOLC International Music Festival in 2018. Molloy notes the irony of the title:

It's ironic because it doesn't have a lot of melody built into it. But what it does have is my experience with melody, particularly traditional melodies as a young trad [traditional] performer growing up and learning tunes.<sup>205</sup>

Molloy also makes use of a pre-recorded track as part of the performance of this work.

The track is a recording of a group of traditional music students.<sup>206</sup> Molloy explains:

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203. Ibid.

204. Cultúrlann Uí Chanáin, "Ryan Molloy performs his piece *Dúchann* at IMBOLC 2018," (video of interview, 2018 IMBOLC International Arts Festival, February 1, 2018), accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nmrWzdJ7SYk>.

205. Ibid.

206. Ibid.

There is an electronic part that plays alongside my score, that uses the young musicians. And they get transformed and disappear into the sound of the piano. The piano is quite a full, rich part that moves from more timbral, fabric, wallpaper kinds-of-sounds to more rhythmic and punchy stuff that might be more akin to what I would do as a trad performer.<sup>207</sup>

Though the score of *Dúchann* is still in progress, it signals further development in Molloy's exploration of compositional style. The use of a pre-recorded track of traditional Irish musicians is perhaps his most overt use of traditional music within his piano works. He also expresses a greater openness to the use of modal and tonal material.<sup>208</sup> Molloy speaks of *Dúchann*:

... I am using more modal and tonal material than ever before. I do this with *Dúchann*, my new work for piano and tape. There are parts of *Dúchann* I am really happy with. I feel that the sound world I reached is actually the ideal combination of my experiential approach to traditional music with a dusting of me as a performer in there and also a more complex harmonic context. The score itself is reflective of the struggle in me as a composer and a performer. One side is very text-based and specific. The other side is very improvisatory. The ideal place is somewhere in between.<sup>209</sup>

With Molloy, as with his predecessors, the challenge of how best—if at all—to engage with traditional Irish music persists. Seán Ó Riada's statement that art music and traditional Irish music were fundamentally incompatible, as discussed in Chapter One, still form a shadow over composers today. Ryan Molloy, by virtue of his early educational years spent studying both traditional music and classical music, forms a natural bridge between the worlds. In 2019, at only 35 years of age, his career as a composer is one worth continuing to follow. His compositional output in quantity and in

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207. Ibid.

208. Molloy, Interview Two, June 8, 2018.

209. Ibid.

variety, as demonstrated in Appendix A, is prolific. Still, he continues to grapple with possibilities in which traditional music can be engaged in a classical-music sense:

Maybe the two worlds cannot meet, and maybe I am getting to the point where I am comfortable with that now. I still want to work it out and get it right, but part of me thinks I'll never quite get there. However, I have learned a lot about how to incorporate traditional elements in my music and how to communicate that.<sup>210</sup>

In whatever ways the worlds of traditional Irish music and contemporary art music may orbit one another, Ryan Molloy's solo-piano music is gravitational in its pull to both worlds.

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210. Ibid.

## APPENDIX A – Chronological List of Ryan Molloy’s Compositions

Abbreviations used in the chart below:

CMC – Contemporary Music Centre  
 DIT – Dublin Institute of Technology  
 ICA – International Clarinet Association  
 ICC – Irish Composers Collective  
 ISCM – International Society for Contemporary Music  
 MAC – Metropolitan Arts Centre  
 NCH – National Concert Hall  
 RHA – Royal Hibernian Academy  
 QUB – Queen’s University (Belfast, Northern Ireland)  
 SARC – Sonic Arts Research Centre

TITLE	INSTRUMENTATION	DURATION	COMPLETED	FIRST PERFORMED
<b>Mise Éire</b>	8 vv-solo SSAATTBB	ca 5’	07-05-2008	EXAUDI, King’s Place, London, UK, 03-10-2011
<b>Sætre Brygge</b>	Piano	ca 10’	07-27-2008	Simon Mawhinney, Harty Room, QUB, Belfast, UK, 03-25-2010
<b>Αναμονή</b>	Cl., Hn., Vib., Vln., Vla., & Vc.	ca 3’30’’	05-15-2009	-
<b>There’s a Great Stretch in The Evenings</b>	Fl., Vln., Vla., & Vc.	ca 12’30’’	08-12-2009	-
<b>Carthage Harbour</b>	2 Pianos	ca 7’	08-22-2009	-

<b>An Seilgeoir</b>	Mezzo Soprano & Piano	ca 5'30"	10-09-2009	Elizabeth Hilliard (Sop.) + David Bremner (Pf), NCH, Dublin, 06-22-2011
<b>Séamsur I</b>	B. Cl.	ca 6'	01-14-2010	Paul Roe, NCH, Dublin, 05-17-2013
<b>Third Epistle to Timothy</b>	2 Vln., Vla., & Vc.	ca 6'	02-16-2010	Dublin String Quartet, St. Brendan's Hall, Bantry, Co. Cork, 07-02- 2010
<b>Third Epistle to Timothy</b>	Orchestra	ca 6'	03-21-2010	Ulster Orchestra, Whitla Hall, QUB, Sonorities Festival, Belfast, UK, 04-26-2013
<b>Aisling Airt Mhic Cumhaigh</b>	8 vv–solo SSSSAAAA & stereo fixed media	5'45"	05-12-2010	Blue Bulb Vocal Ensemble, NCH, Dublin, 07-28-2010
<b>Séamsur II</b>	¼-tone flute	ca 7'	09-16-2011	Carla Rees, Shoreditch Church, London, UK, 11-23-2011
<b>Séamsur III</b>	Vln. & Vc.	ca 8'30"	01-26-2011	-
<b>Séamsur IV</b>	S. Sax. & stereo fixed media	10'20"	03-09-2011	Franziska Schroeder, SARC, QUB, Belfast, UK,

				03-23-2011
<b>Gortnagarn</b>	Cl., Piano, Gtr., Vln., & Vc.	ca 13'	07-27-2011	Konvergence Ensemble, Casino Baumgarten, Vienna, 08-11-2011
<b>Sliabh Geal gCua</b>	Piano	ca 9'	01-04-2012	Simon Mawhinney, NCH, Dublin, CMC New Music Salon, 03-28-2012
<b>Sliabh Geal gCua</b>	Piano four hands	ca 9'	01-04-2012	-
<b>'Fiddle Piece'</b>	Stereo fixed media	10'34"	03-17-2012	SARC, QUB, Belfast, UK 08-06-2012
<b>Between The Tunes</b>	Open ensemble of 8+ players	≥ 3'	04-17-2012	NOW Ensemble, ISCM World New Music Days 2017, The Annex, Vancouver, Canada, 04-11-2017
<b>Innisfail</b>	Baritone & Piano	ca 3'30"	04-30-2012	Michael Kelly, baritone, Kathleen Kelly, piano, Marc A. Scora Hall, National Opera Center, New York, USA, 3-11-2018
<b>For A Lone Piper</b>	Organ	ca 6'	11-02-2012	David Bremner,

				Christchurch Cathedral, Dublin, 11-28-2012
<b>Concertino</b>	Fl., Cl., Piano, & Vc.	ca 8'	08-19-2013	Composers' Ensemble (dir. Peter Wiegold), Dartington Hall, UK, 08-23-2013
<b>Gealach Chríoch Lochlann</b>	2 Vln., Vla., & Vc.	ca 7'	11-06-2013	Danish String Quartet, Strule Arts Centre, Omagh, UK, 11-27-2013
<b>Salve Regina</b>	SATB Choir	ca 4'	01-03-2014	New Dublin Voices, St Ann's Church, Dublin, 07-12-2014
<b>Cantaireacht</b>	Cl. & stereo fixed media	ca 6'	01-10-2014	Carol McGonnell (Cl.), MAC Theatre, Belfast, UK, 03-05-2014
<b>Seisiún</b>	Cl., Vln., & Vc.	ca 9½'	02-01-2014	Concorde, RHA Gallery, Dublin, 02-23-2014
<b>Clearances (III)</b>	Soprano & Piano	ca 7½'	01-10-2014	Elizabeth Hilliard (Sop.) & David Bremner (Pf.), Project Arts Centre, Dublin, 11-19-2014

<b>Bodhrán v.1.0</b>	Db.	ca 5'	11-15-2014	Malachy Robinson (Db.), ICC Concert, Kevin Barry Room, NCH, Dublin, 12-18-2014
<b>Irish Suite</b>	Solo fiddle	ca 9'	01-12-2015	Zoë Conway (fiddle), ICC The Strung Series, The Teacher's Club, Dublin, 05-19-2015
<b>Good Boy (music for the film)</b>	Fixed media	15'	01-19-2015	Queen's Film Theatre, Belfast, 07-02-2015
<b>Meithealated Spirits</b>	Mixed traditional ensemble	ca 14'	06-30-2015	The Meitheal Orchestra, Lime Tree Theatre, Limerick, 07-24-2015
<b>Innisfail</b>	Piano	ca 31'	07-27-2015	Recorded by Alexander Bernstein, Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen's University Belfast, 9/10-09-2015. Premiered by the same at Hugh Lane Gallery, 01-15-2017

<b>Be Thou My Vision</b>	SATB choir	ca 5'	02-23-2016	Workshopped by Rostrevor Choral Festival (cond. Michael Dawson), Rostrevor, NI, 03-06-2016
<b>for Morton O'Leary</b>	Piano	ca 5½'	06-14-2016	Martin O'Leary, DIT Rathmines, Dublin, 05-07-2016
<b>Gortnagarn (II)</b>	A. Fl., B. Cl., Piano, Vln., & Vc.	ca 12'	07-30-2016	Hard Rain Soloist Ensemble, Crescent Arts Centre, Belfast, 03-11-2016
<b>Violin Concerto</b>	Vln. & Orchestra	ca 20'	09-20-2016	Darragh Morgan & Ulster Orchestra (cond. David Brophy), Ulster Hall, Belfast, 11-01-2016
<b>Death and the Post Office</b>	Soprano & Piano	ca 9'	12-19-2016	Virginia Kerr & Antonio Cascelli, Riverstown Hall, Maynooth University, Kildare, Ireland, 02-23-2017
<b>Amhrán Fheilimidh</b>	B. Cl.	ca 5'	07-08-2017	Sarah Watts, ICA ClarinetFest

				2017, Hilton Double Tree, Orlando, Florida, USA, 07-27-17
<b>Dúchann</b>	Piano & stereo fixed media	ca 15'	01-31-2018	Ryan Molloy (pf.), Culturlann Uí Chanainn, IMBOLC International Arts Festival, Derry, N. Ireland, 01-31-2018
<b>Loinnir Laoise</b>	Mixed traditional ensemble	ca 10'	02-28-2018	Music Generation Laois Traditional Orchestra, The Malt House, Stradbally, 04-14-2018
<b>Ogham</b>	Symphony Orchestra	ca 8'30"	03-28-2018	Ulster Youth Orchestra (cond. Courtney Lewis), Museums-quartier, Vienna, Austria, 08-21-2018
<b>The Mountains of Pomeroy</b>	Symphony Orchestra	ca 5'30"	05-01-2018	Ulster Orchestra, Ulster Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland, 06-19-2018

<b>Buaine na Gaoithe</b>	Soprano, A. fl., & harp	ca 25'	06-29-2018	The Damselfly Trio (Liz Pearse, sop.); Chelsea Czuchra, flute; Lindsay Buffington, harp), Harty Room, Queen's University Belfast, N. Ireland, 04-10-2018
<b>Béal</b>	Brass dectet (3 Tpt., 3 Hn., 2 Trb., 1 B. Trb., & Tuba)	ca 2'	12-31-2018	Ulster Orchestra brass, ICC Belfast Waterfront Hall, Belfast, N. Ireland, 01-22-2019
<b>Gealán</b>	Irish harp & orchestra	ca 14'	01-31-2019	Máire Ní Chathasaigh (harp) and National Symphony Orchestra (cond. Gavin Maloney), NCH, Dublin, IE, 05-01-2019
<b>Trí Amhrán</b>	Mezzo-Soprano & Piano	ca 10'	03-31-2019	To be confirmed

This information is current as of March, 2019. Scores and other media are available from the Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin ([www.cmc.ie](http://www.cmc.ie)).

## APPENDIX B – Transcripts of Ryan Molloy Interviews

Interview One with Dr. Ryan Molloy, Maynooth University – June 8, 2018

**Murphy:** When you choose to write for an instrument or group of instruments, what determines your choice of instrumentation?

**Molloy:** Often there is a practical solution to this. I do what I am told! If I am commissioned to write a piece, for example, I am happy to just do it.

I am actually not very picky in this regard. I find all combinations of instruments really interesting. If you said, “I need a piece for harp, kazoo, and trumpet,” I immediately think of a sound world, of a sonic space that I can jump into. It’s like a candy shop really. I just jump in and I can start to pick and choose and gorge myself on all these sound possibilities.

In terms of choosing a medium, I think to some extent actually *Innisfail* was the last time I put my foot down and said, “I am writing this piece for piano.” It wasn’t properly commissioned. I just had in my mind the desire to write a large piano work. Alex Bernstein had played *Sliabh Geal gCua* at a concert, and I remember meeting him for the first time after that. I essentially was a student composer at the time doing my Ph.D. I was writing music for music, but I had some very specific things I was wanting to accomplish in my writing at that time. I was approaching music from that point of view. This performance by Alex Bernstein was part of the Irish Composers Collective Workshop. Normally these things are quite ghastly. The performers aren’t bad musicians, but usually they haven’t spent much time with your music. Sometimes the performers just get sketches or have very little time to work on the music. I had sent Alex a pretty final draft of the piece. I had no real contact with him until we both got to the Collective. I went to the rehearsal and met him. He was rather unassuming and sat down to play *Sliabh Geal gCua*. I was blown away. Nothing needed to change. We got to chatting after, and he expressed a desire to do more of my music. This was my push to really do a bigger piano work. For me, sitting down to write a half-hour piece was a big thing. I usually don’t write pieces that span near that amount of time. But this is why I chose piano, and why I felt it was time to start working on it.

I generally approach pieces with a kind of research question in mind or a specific performer in mind. An example of this is an upcoming project I want to explore. I plan to write a double concerto for flute and alto saxophone. I have chosen these instruments because I am interested in exploring the colors these wind instruments can create but also because of two specific players I know, and I know what they can do.

**Murphy:** When you write for the piano, are you writing with the sound of the piano in mind, or are you thinking of imitating other instruments and colors that somehow transcend the piano? Or is the sound of the piano itself the ideal?

**Molloy:** I think because I am a pianist, I probably am thinking in terms of the piano ... actually quite a typical piano sound. But invariably one starts to explore sounds. Thinking through *Innisfail*, there are definitely places where it is bigger than the piano. There are definitely lots of bell sounds. I love bells and their spectral content. They have a vaguely discernable fundamental pitch, but they don't function that way to me. In terms of other instruments ... I don't think in this case I am trying to imitate other instruments. What I am trying to do is to do something that I can't do. All my piano pieces are explorations of my own failure as a pianist really. This is a sound I wish I could play. Perhaps this is all composition really, but part of my writing for the piano is writing things that I know I will never be able to play. I suppose when I was writing *Innisfail* I was thinking of Alex and what I knew he could do. He is great with contemporary music, but he really is a romantic player—a big sound with a strong melody. I would constantly push him without meaning to push him. I would send him excerpts and say, "Here, Alex, it's not going to get any harder. All the difficult stuff is here, so don't worry." And then, I produced the last four pages, which are probably the hardest. I said, "I am sorry! I didn't mean for it to happen, but it happened." It is where the material wanted to go.

I am meandering here ... not in an effort to avoid the question but in an effort to find an answer. I think perhaps there is an effort in me to emulate other instruments. One could look through the score and say, "Oh, that is very organ-like. Those are bells. The way this melody is voiced is very woodwind-like." Yeah ... it's a subconscious emulation.

May I ask a question back? Do you think there are parts of the piece that are deliberately emulating other instruments? Are there places that say to you that this sounds like something else.

**Murphy:** In a non-specific way, yes. I have spent time with the score, listened to the CD of Alex you sent me, and also watched the video on YouTube of Alex performing in Limerick. There are certain moments in the piece, particularly towards the end, where the piano seems to transcend itself. As if it becomes something that it wasn't before, and then out of this comes the coda.

**Molloy:** Great! I am really glad you picked up on that. I suppose what interests me most about this particular passage [pages 17-18] the most is that the sound does something that the piano doesn't normally do. It does something that the piano does not normally do, but what it is doing is very much what the piano does. The pedaling there is challenging. You have to get all this placed but make it sound like the piano isn't there at all. You've prepared the sostenuto, so you have some resonance there. Your ears are telling you that there is something happening that normally doesn't happen on the piano. "How can that resonance be there if there's so much in the bass?" This is what I love about this section. Also, the way the melody is voiced adds to this. The melody is displaced over several octaves. They [the two treble lines] are in sevenths as well. For me, this is kind of a spectral technique. That sound is not what you typically hear on the piano.

**Murphy:** In your scores there seem to be a marriage of very specific markings and choices left to the performer. What balance do you wish from the player?

**Molloy:** Thank you for this. I am actually quite anal-retentive about how things look on the page and what that should communicate to a performer. Notation is one of my big things, especially with students, which they probably hate me for! In terms of the freedom ... I suppose the control freak in me wants to say that actually it's all a trick, and the freedom that you think is there is actually not there, but it's to get you to do exactly what I want you to do.

Certainly, as you know, there are scores where there is a lot of freedom written in, such as *Sliabh Geal gCua* where there are huge sections. For me one of the most satisfying bits is the end, where the performer has the option to improvise the end based on chords I have given along with the bit of aural learning you would have already done. When you order the score, there is supposed to be a CD that comes with it. Here there are three tracks, which the performer is supposed to listen to and learn by ear. The performer should reproduce these as best as possible at the appointed places in the score. To quote from my instructions:

The rhythm and ornamentation have not been included: these are required to be learnt! It is important that there is a degree of freedom in the performer's interpretation (especially with regard to what is un-notated: rhythm, dynamics, ornamentation, etc.) but it is equally important that the melodic shape and phrases of the recording be discernible. Indeed, should the performer wish to learn the tracks 'verbatim' and reproduce these precisely, then this is also acceptable.

This gives you a hint of my control-freakishness, because the ideal for me is when someone just plays exactly what I meant them to play. Although, freedom is equally welcome. If you go to the last page, there is this optional ending with improvisation over given chords. This has actually been a really satisfactory way for me to end the score. I have heard this performed by four or five people, and all of them have chosen to end with this section of improvisation. They have all been different but [have also] all been satisfying. Each performer's improvisation, to me, reflected how much energy and what type of energy they have put into the piece. They always seem to know what to do. It is a great confluence of personalities. They have taken the time to learn my music, so they are becoming familiar with my sound world. They then interpret my sound world, which is directly their sound world. With this improvisational ending they can make all this come together in a way that only they know best. This is a great example of quite a dollop of freedom.

In terms of other pieces, thinking of *Innisfail* [pages 7-8], it's actually not very free if you look at the right hand. The rhythmic content of this melody is rather precise. The trill/tremolo here really is just a noise. My note about approximation is really just to encourage relaxation, as the music is not about this trill here. For the notes in the middle staff I say, "These notes are to be played in this approximate position either by the right

hand or left hand.” What do I mean by approximate position? Do I mean that they just have to be in that bar? Would I be annoyed if they came four or five notes earlier? The answer is “probably yes.” Where the E-flat is written in bar 127, this is deliberate, for example. If I’m to be completely honest, it’s probably a laziness on my part. I didn’t spend the time trying to work out exactly what the rhythm was meant to be in terms of the placement of that E-flat. Or, to put that more artistically ... If I were to notate it that precisely, it wouldn’t produce the right result. You would be too busy counting exactly where that E-flat should come in. Actually, it’s not that it’s not connected to what’s around it, but this middle voice is its own thing, and it doesn’t really matter if it’s a millisecond on either side of that. It’s a freer thing than trying to notate precisely what the rhythm should be. Also, there is a lot of pedal involved here, so the precise duration of these notes will vary. There is freedom there. When I read the score, it’s marked “floating, rubato.” What I mean is that this middle voice has its own identity, but it does exist as a part of the whole and not outside of it. It does have its rhythmic freedom, but it is just a battle of balance, really! Isn’t it? The E-flat and the D (bars 127 and 128) are probably going to come exactly where they are written. But the next page, in bar 130 you would probably take the B with the left hand. It might come with the G, or slightly before or after, and this is okay. I am being very imprecise, which is annoying me as much as it must be annoying you!

**Murphy:** In the sections marked “jig-time,” you have marked the precise figure, but the recordings almost sound like straight eighth notes. Could you explain what you want here?

**Molloy:** Even my notation is not exactly what the jig rhythm is. This part took a bit of time to get right for Alex. It just wasn’t quite in his fingers’ nature to do those kinds of things. There should be a natural swing in it, but it should not be dotted. As we were taught when we were young, “apples and oranges apples and oranges apples and oranges ...” This is how we were taught this rhythm. I should probably put this in the score! This is something that is actually problematic. When I inject that kind of flavor in my music, it does kind of demand a certain familiarity with the medium, with traditional music, and ideally having spent time with it, so that you instantly know what a jig sounds like.

**Murphy:** In the interview you did recently about your string quartet, you said that you’ve always been intrigued with the complexity of traditional music. For example, if one tried to notate it precisely, it would be nearly impossible to do this and still capture the character. A person must experience it. Is this similar to what you are saying with this section?

**Molloy:** It is similar. Notating every ornamental figure precisely, for example, doesn’t produce the result that I want. That’s not where the music I am writing is coming from. It comes from something that is instinctively very simple but produces complex results. I’ve played around with the extent to which I notate these things, and I finally gave up after a while. It wasn’t yielding the results I wanted. It’s much easier to write simply and

give [written and spoken] verbal instructions [as opposed to trying to notate all details of a figure]. Rather than practice for ages, go and spend two weeks in a pub! But yes, this is compositionally problematic, and I still don't quite know how I feel about it. Part of me doesn't like the fact that I have to rely on external allusions, but then another part of me is reconciled to the fact that that is how it is going to be because I am using these materials. Sometimes, quite honestly, I egotistically forget that I don't own these traditional materials. These rhythms, these melodic frameworks, these things I am tapping into—yes, they are all part of how I have been brought up as a musician. I have assimilated them, and now they are part of my automatic musical language, but I don't own them. They are more commonly owned, and they go back a lot further than me or any of my forebears. From that perspective, the lack of ownership compositionally is annoying, and how that is represented in notation is a hang up for me. It comes and goes, of course. Tomorrow I'll be too busy trying to write something, and I won't have time to care about it! I need to get my message and my intention across.

I also don't want to come across as exclusive. It should not be that someone has to spend years trying to understand traditional music in order to get my music. This is really where my responsibility as a composer kicks in. I must give you enough material to actually play what I mean for you to play. If my musical text isn't doing that, then I have failed to a certain degree. That's the modernist in me speaking. The post-modernist says, "Well, I don't care. I am going to borrow all these things and use them in the now." It's a constant sort of dilemma. This also relates to what you asked me before about freedom in the score and my tongue-in-cheek response, "Yeah, you think there's freedom, but there's not really freedom."

**Murphy:** Could you speak about what other composers have influenced you? I am especially intrigued by your mention of Pérotin.

**Molloy:** Pérotin ... The first thing is I really love Pérotin. The thing that is striking to me about him is the freedom there. Yet, it's a freedom that isn't a freedom. There is a whole pile of rules governing what's going on in his music. There are rules that don't really make a whole lot of sense in contemporary compositional practice, but there's an extraordinary freedom that comes out of it. I actually used this in my very first compositional lectures here at Maynooth. I play lots of different composers as examples, and the very last thing I play for the students is Pérotin. Half of them who know this period of music history will guess and get close to correct. The other half will guess that it is something from the 1980s. They are genuinely confused because they are not sure what is contemporary anymore. The barriers have been broken down. The freedom there is really appealing. The different levels of time that operate in Pérotin's music really interest me. The way he uses a *cantus firmus* as a really, really slow chant, and the way it is decorated—it is like the opening letter of monastic scripts that is highly adorned. Now that I think about it, I do that quite a bit. Then also the strongly modal nature of his music is important. The vertical relationships in the harmonies do matter, but they also don't at the same time. All those clashes are all equally beautiful, acceptable, and part of that constellation. That resounds quite a lot with me and with my traditional background.

Drones are very prevalent in traditional Irish music. The primes of modes are very strong. We don't have that many modes, but when one is there, it is very present. These things really interest me about Pérotin. Then, this is slightly less musical, but there is this connection with the divine. For me, this sort of sound is a very spiritual, even holy, or divine kind of sound. In short, I think I am more modal than tonal as a composer. I used to shy away from anything tertian that came up in my music, but I have become more accepting of that now. Much like the harmonies that line up in Pérotin, I am more willing to allow it to happen if the music goes that way.

Forgive the rambling. I am a bit inarticulate at the best of times, especially when talking about my own music. I get excited about my music—normally! It is what I have written, and talking about it brings the memory of writing back to my mind. I am a hideous rambler, as you see! But this is all why I write music. I do better expressing myself through music than either the written or spoken word.

**Murphy:** How much in mind did you have Thomas Moore's *Song of Innisfail* when composing your piano work?

**Molloy:** The poem is definitely in the music, but in a very indirect way. Actually the cover of the CD *Innisfail* [solo-piano CD] is a photograph that for me sums up the piece. The thing that initially stuck out in the poem to me was the notion of traveling at sea. There are so many sea references throughout the poem. The other thing that comes through the poem is this sense of mythological voyage—this sense of going to discover foreign, even mystical lands. The people on this ship are all the same nationality, so they carry this sense of identity, and this identity travels across the vast sea. I try to portray this sense in *Innisfail*. In a way no questions are answered by my music, but many are asked. The poem itself is about the journey. It plays with time, which is the ultimate goal of my setting. It plays with time, with temporal awareness. This is really important to me. Have you ever looked at a bright and starry sky, and for a split second, grasped, or tried to grasp, what eternity is? It is mind-blowing. You can think about the distance between yourself and a specific star, but rarely, and suddenly, you become keenly aware of how big infinity is. This awareness, this trap door into another world, is what I love about music and what I want to bring people into with my music. I am generally happy with *Innisfail*, and there are parts of it that get close to this. I still keep in touch with my mentor from my Ph.D., and he has said some very encouraging things about *Innisfail* related to this. This means a great deal to me. There are other parts to me, however, that don't quite get there. I should fix them, but I probably will not! The bells at the start—this section goes on for quite a bit. An early draft had only about half of this material, but I felt that there had to be more of that space. If this was going to be a half-hour piece, there needs to be space to really invite the listener into that place. For me, these sevenths really open up a certain space. I love the sound of this interval on the piano. The resonance that flows through you as a pianist when you really hammer out these dyads truly does flow through you like energy.

**Murphy:** Could you speak about your childhood and teenage years? Did you have training both as a traditional player and as a classical player? Which instruments did you study?

**Molloy:** I was born in Pomeroy, County Tyrone in Northern Ireland. I don't come from a very musical family. My mum is not musical at all, and my father dabbles a bit in a few instruments. Because of my dad's dabblings, there were instruments in the house, and music to some extent. I remember videos of me when I was young in sheer delight pressing keys on an old Casio keyboard. I started primary school in 1987. After a few years in school we all learn the tin whistle. One day, we were told that the one who worked the hardest would be awarded a prize. After I performed, I was selected and introduced to violinist Bríd Harper, who would become my fiddle teacher for the next ten years. That was the start of my formal traditional music education. There was also always a piano in school, and I have been told by teachers in hindsight that at break time I was always picking out tunes on the piano. I remember nagging my parents to get a real piano. I know now in hindsight that I am very harmonically driven, so the draw to the piano was very natural. I remember once being at a fiddle workshop working on improvising. We were supposed to be ornamenting a melody, but all I wanted to do was create harmonies and colors—I remember the instructors being quite irritated! I took piano from a local woman that was rather slow in her instruction. I probably didn't learn as much as I could if I had had a different teacher. I think if I had had a different teacher, I probably would have specialized in being a concert pianist or would have followed a path that reinforced pianistic abilities that I had. But this also gave me the space to just explore. I could have the practice done in ten minutes and then just play and explore colors and sounds. I bought books and books of piano scores and just "thrashed" through them. (Nothing has changed, I am still doing that! I could play the start of everything and the end of nothing!) But as a composer this was so formative for me. I had this mass of information and sounds from playing through so much music from so many different styles.

I never had a traditional teacher on the piano. Most of what I am known for as a pianist is accompanying instrumental tunes, but I never received instruction on this from a pianist. I just evolved out of experience. I remember being asked to play for a *Céilí* [Irish social gathering, usually with music], which was basically a bunch of old guys getting together in a pub playing. All they wanted me to play was the same boring chords, but I slowly started exploring on my own. I incorporated chords I learned from thrashing through concert repertoire. From this I began to get more and more gigs.

To cut a long story short, I ended up going to England in 2002 to do a degree in chemistry, naturally.

**Murphy:** When did Ryan, the composer, begin to emerge?

**Molloy:** I think it's only normal if you are musical to have a desire to explore your instrument. That was always there, so I don't know if I can pinpoint a "day 1" in the composing life of me. In my third and fourth year in school, we had to start doing more formal projects in music, such as in an analysis class and such—more than just messing around. I suppose this was my first real attempt in composition. Then I took music for my "A-Level" [completed at the end of secondary education], which is one's final examination projects in school. Composition was a big part of that for me. I submitted the first movement of a piano concerto ... things like that. I was always interested in traditional music by the social context of music making, rather than as being a solo pianist. I also came across pieces like the Brahms clarinet sonatas. At the end of my secondary education, I had a lot of contact with people that encouraged me to go and do a "proper degree" and then come back to music whenever you like. This steered me towards pursuing chemistry. I was lucky enough to get a place in Oxford to study chemistry, so I thought I couldn't refuse. I remember as soon as I finished the degree in chemistry—it was like an elastic band being stretched over four years. As soon as I finished I knew I had to get back into music. At Oxford I did very little composition. This break helped me to realize that composition was something I really wanted to do. I still did "gigging" work with traditional bands and such, so that kept my music going. I was then fortunate enough to do a Masters (began 2007) and Ph.D. (began 2009) in composition at Queen's University in Belfast. Nine months after I finished this, I was lucky enough to be hired at Maynooth University in 2013.

**Murphy:** Are there any other significant musical figures or experiences in your life that formed you as a musician and as a composer?

**Molloy:** As a composer, certain sounds are triggers for me. In my later teens, I listened to a lot of classical music on the radio. I was, still am, a massive Rachmaninoff fan—the breadth of his music and its lyricism is enormously appealing to me. There was a concert in the Ulster Hall in Belfast, and the pianist was performing Rachmaninoff's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. I begged my father to take me. Despite having listened to a lot [of music in my younger years], I hadn't been to many live performances. I went, of course, for the Rhapsody. The orchestra started out with this piece that I really wasn't concerned about at all called *Tintagel* by Arnold Bax. I ... I was just blown away. I could get emotional thinking about it now. The piece uses much in B Major, which is another fixation for me. B is always somewhere I am going to or coming from—my ultimate place of repose. B Major just gets me! This moment was the first time I had heard an orchestra live.

I also remember being on a bus in Slovenia. It was my first time being out of the country. It was very warm and felt very free. I had just finished my A-Levels, so there was a freedom associated with that. I distinctly remember traveling down a road going through a forest, and a friend of mine, a flute player, Kieran Munnely, put on this French Canadian band called La Bottine Souriante. Their sound world absolutely captivates me.

They have this fantastic blaring of a traditional tune with very funky riffs and big sounds—everything I really want in sound. [plays recording of “Reel du Forgeron” from La Bottine Souriante’s album entitled *Rock & Reel*]

The study of Irish was also important to me. It was one of my A-Level subjects. My father really fostered this in me. In secondary school, around 11 or 12, I started to do more study in Irish. There was a branch of the “Gaelic League” in Pomeroy, and my family began to be involved in their classes. I became pretty fluent I would say, until I moved to England. I used it less and less.

**Murphy:** What is your perspective of the division between “concert music” and traditional music in Ireland? Can one be a “classical” musician and also embrace traditional music in Ireland?

**Molloy:** Traditional music was always considered to be music of the underclass—peasant music. It didn’t have any of the structural or musical intricacies of the music of the Common Practice Era. Given our social history, there has usually been an aristocratic ruling class that was Protestant and British, or of British descent. They ruled over a predominantly Catholic and socially less-well-off population. For a long time their music was looked down on. That changed as the twentieth century progressed. With the Gaelic Revival there was a new fascination with Irish mythology, culture, language, and music. Composers like Bax used quite a bit of it in their works. In music history in general, composers of the twentieth century were looking for this exotic “otherness” to use in their music. Many sought to use traditional repertory in concert music. The styles of writing at that time and the means by which traditional music descended at that time compounded the overall presentation of traditional music in an art music setting. There were printed collections made of traditional music. Composers and researchers went out to transcribe traditional music. They transcribed the only way they knew how, which was basically with skeleton scores. For example, they would hear a jig with all its variations and ornamentation, and it would be distilled into a bare 68-quaver [68-eighth note] formation that was written down. That was what was passed down to educated musicians who wanted to use that in their music. [Plays recording of “The Irish Washerwoman.”] Those problems were there for a while, and after the Gaelic Revival there was less of an interest of using Irish traditional music in a classical setting. It wasn’t until Seán Ó Riada came along in the middle part of the twentieth century. He was an interesting guy with a lot of large ideas. He was largely responsible for the rebirth of traditional music in an ensemble setting and that traditional music could be presented on stage for what it was. Traditional music was always functional, but he brought it to the stage. That really changed the path of traditional music and gave birth to the notion that one could have an Irish traditional group that wasn’t a *Céilí* band. That led to a bit more of an involved engagement with the structures of traditional music.

But art music, at the same time through developments in mainstream art music throughout Europe, was starting to diverge into questions about what music was itself. We had had atonality and serialism and on into experimental sound worlds, whereas the

kind of theatrical fusion of traditional music with art music in Ireland wasn't interesting to people at that time. There was a lot of work to do in order to get those two musical languages to sit together. They became quite divergent. Ó Riada died quite young as an alcoholic and never got to see to completion what he started. He may have lived on to do some really quite interesting things, but didn't. It was really not until a couple of decades later that we saw a kind of renewed effort to do something with traditional music in a classical music setting. Part of my thesis, which draws on an article by Harry White, states that there are two strands of composers post-Ó Riada—those that decide to use Irish music and those that decide not to use Irish music. Within the strand of composers that do decide to use Irish music, I believe there are two strands. There are those that use Irish music conservatively, and it ends up sounding deferential to the traditional material. The overall musical style can seem quite retrospective. It doesn't try to engage with modern music of the time. Secondly, there are a small number of composers that were doing precisely that. They attempt to take traditional music out of its mold and to use the material as a kind of foreign sound of sorts. That kind of strand has continued. There has been more interest in this in the late-90s and 2000s. There are more composers now that may “apple” in and out of traditional music in that way—some consciously and some subconsciously. Some do this with seemingly little engagement of the language in a *sean-nós* sort of way. I still think that the overall musical question remains. I don't even think in my own work there has been a satisfactory answer. I like to think that I have made some progress in answering these questions about how we can use traditional music. I am becoming increasingly less bothered by the question. Sometimes it is a useful creative force for me if I am using a piece to address a specific device or ornamental fragment. I used to be really hung up with the whole thing, but now it seems a bit more natural. Since then I have come to know the music of Messiaen, Lutoslawski, and others. A very interesting connection came with my chemistry professor. I don't even know how we got on the subject, but he actually introduced me to a lot of these works while I was in university for the first time. When I arrived at Queen's for my Ph.D., I suppose I was really still writing music that was rather conservative. I was little aware of what happened between 1920 and 1960, let alone after 1960. For that reason, my writing was going through all the stages of grief of questioning, “Am I, or am I not a modernist?”. I don't know what it's like in America, but modernism is still quite embedded in institutions here. I am rambling now!

**Murphy:** Do you have any specific hopes for the future of music in Ireland? What would you like your place in it to be?

**Molloy:** Contemporary music in Ireland is actually quite vibrant. There are a lot of composers and a lot of new music being written, but it has a very undersupported position in the cultural life of the country. We have a lot of poets, dramatists, writers, and they tend to be more supported and approached by the public than our contemporary composers. Much of this seems to be due to the accessibility of the material and the lack of education in our audiences, so I would like to see that improve. There needs to be more of an introduction of music in the primary and secondary school levels. I think once that happens there will be changes. Traditional music enjoys a very healthy position in

the country, and it's quite successful internationally as well. There is a support for innovative traditional performances. I would like to see a bit more really or support for people who are trying to break out of the molds. We need more professional musicians in the country. The orchestral situation is quite grim really in its support of new music. We have two professional orchestras in the country, and if you look at the upcoming seasons, I believe there is a total of 40 minutes given to new music in Ireland. I would like to see more attention to women composers in Ireland. Personally, I would like to see more people engage with traditional music in an art-music context. The stylistic shackles of what people conceive traditional music to be and how it can be integrated with classical music are still there.

**Murphy:** Is there any pushback from traditional musicians against composers using traditional figures in art-music compositions? For example, are there individuals that complain about what you do in your own music?

**Molloy:** Totally so. I can see where they are coming from. But, to quote Kevin O'Connell, another composer, "if you don't like what I've done with the tune, it's still there." It hasn't gone away. So yes, there is resistance in some corners, but most of the time I find that traditional musicians are quite open. They are open to engaging with new material. There are many world-class, fine traditional musicians today. I would love to get a group of them together and throw a notated score at them. They would have the fluency of traditional music in order to execute some music better than many classically-trained musicians could pull off. You also couldn't do it with a run-of-the-mill pub band, as they wouldn't have the technical chops. It's purely selfish on my part. I have ideas and sounds in my head that I can't realize on my own, which is why I compose I suppose. I can give these ideas to other people to realize.

**Murphy:** As someone who grew up around the *sean-nós* style, how would you explain *sean-nós* to an outsider?

**Molloy:** This is quite interesting. *Sean-nós* is particularly associated with certain areas of the country, and I didn't come from one of those areas. But we all would have been familiar with that sound world from music broadcasts and such. It literally means "old-style" and it refers to an older method of performing songs, usually in Irish and unaccompanied. Works in this style are frequently ametrical but also metered. They are highly ornate and highly individual to each singer in tone, delivery, and method of ornamentation. There are quite a lot of striking parallels between some *sean-nós* performances and that of classical Indian performances, and even more generally, traditional music from Arab-regions in terms of ornamentation.

*Sean-nós* specifically relates to the Irish language tradition because they are the older texts and songs and what has been handed down orally throughout the years. They differ from other English songs, which might be more "balladish" or transcriptions of songs that have been placed into a meter. Ametrical and highly ornate would be my two biggest descriptive words.

**Murphy:** If, for example, a violinist took a *sean-nós* tune and performed it on the violin, would it still be considered *sean-nós*?

**Molloy:** It would be considered a transcription, but depending on a context, the player would still be expected to adhere to the original shape of the songs and its turns and twists—depending on the pace of the words. In saying that, there is nothing wrong with taking traditional airs and playing them for what they are. I do this myself. In fact, when I say that *sean-nós* influences my compositions it is more than “actual *sean-nós*.” I’ve never undertaken any actual transcriptions. They are more oral triggers for me that take place in my compositions. There are some composers that are actively using *sean-nós* singers in their works. Iarla Ó Lionáird, who sang with the afro-celts, does this. This use honestly annoys me a bit, as it feels more like copying and pasting an air. I still admire those that do this, and it can produce some interesting results, but for me to use this would not be satisfactory in myself.

**Murphy:** How do traditional Irish musicians feel about larger popular culture bands employing ideas from traditional music?

**Molloy:** They really are two separate worlds that don’t overlap. From that perspective I suppose it’s of little consequence to them. In fact, I should point out that there is a *sean-nós* community that is not at all engaged with a larger music culture. I wouldn’t even be aware of their comings and goings. Many of them might be considered purists, not simply because they are dealing with one of the oldest aspects of Irish music that we know about, but they for the most part only do *sean-nós* airs. They would probably scoff at the likes of Celtic Woman and such, but it’s a totally different world as far as they are concerned. Now, I don’t know what they think of the likes of composers who use *sean-nós* in their art music.

I have stopped introducing my music as being influenced by traditional music because when people hear this they tend to just go looking for that and miss other things I am trying to say. I am hoping that my listeners will be transformed into a different plane or sound world.

**Murphy:** Would you consider your music to be Irish? What other context would you like your music to be understood?

**Molloy:** I would definitely want it to be considered Irish “art” music, if you will. I don’t see how it could be considered anything else really. But I also wouldn’t want to suggest that someone from outside of Ireland couldn’t listen to my music and get something from it. It’s not exclusive. It is Irish in that I am drawing from certain traditional markers and flavors, and it is my take and experience as a performer of traditional music. I would like to think that it has an Irish accent.

**Murphy:** Would an Irish man or woman that wasn't trained as a musician hear your music as Irish? Is it your goal that one would hear it as Irish?

**Molloy:** I think I would be surprised if they did pick this up. If they did, I would think that they would be confused as to why they were there. First and foremost, it is just music. It is a time and energy thing. By locking into something that is *sean-nós*, I am trying to access a different time frame, one that is more atemporal and floaty—just like what comes to you when you listen to a traditional air. In the jig rhythms and such, I would want a listener to sort of just get lost in the frenzy of it. I am not really interested if you want to dance to it or not, but it is an energy that I want to propel you. My music tends to vacillate between these two extremes—these floaty sort of textures and melodies, and intensely rhythmic.

*Sliabh Geal gCua* does this in its use of the air. For me, when I hear my *Sliabh Geal gCua* or play it, I hear the original air. For me the original air is there, even though it doesn't sound even slightly like the original air in its pitch content. For some people who are familiar with the original air, they might pick out a contour, but that possibility and that ambiguity of the material is useful because it dislocates them a little bit. It shifts them into this slightly different mode of listening. It doesn't place them in the sound world of a traditional air, but it is also not just listening to a piece of contemporary piano music. There is an effort in communication of trying to play with those senses of time and place. But also to someone who listens to it and thinks that it's just a rip-off of "Sliabh Geal gCua," it would still recontextualize the air.

When you try to plan these things out compositionally you don't just do it, you have to first create that space. For example, the opening of my violin concerto has these massive, huge, and heathen chords. The strings are playing this air in fifteen or twenty different versions at the same time. It's this almost nauseating mass of sounds that eventually swirls down to this place of repose where the solo violin plays exactly what you've been hearing. You sort of wonder if that's what you were hearing all along. It creates a space for that material. The material the violin plays is in my mind a slow air, in the same way I might play a *sean-nós* tune, but with elements of it changed. I haven't copied a melody in order to create that air, it just is. It is those instances of "it just is" that interest me most now. I think I have reached a stage in my musical ramblings that this is just there. For this violin tune, I didn't try to make it what it is, it is what it was always going to be, if that makes any sense. The way the ornaments are in it, the way I am thinking about the violin ... it's all me as a performer not being able to perform what I want to perform with a traditional "head" on me.

I don't usually use sources. *Sliabh Geal gCua* is quite exceptional in this regard. I don't quote from other tunes. I write stuff that is in the style of traditional music that is coming from a traditional well within me. It's constantly there. It's just my baseline. It's that mix of everything I have heard and how I want to express it—I am not making sense! I suppose I have become polluted in a way by everything I have ever heard. That's why I am not so much concerned with the label. This is producing some very interesting results.

Such as this piece I just finished for youth orchestra [*Ogham*]. It has a key signature. It's quite minimalist. It still does this same kind of floaty thing with a melody over a rhythmic fabric. It is still trying to do the same thing that I do in many of works—transforming your state of mind. But I am using more modal and tonal material than ever before. I also do this with *Dúchann*, my new work for piano and tape. There are parts of *Dúchann* I am really happy with. I feel that the sound world I reached is actually the ideal combination of my experiential approach to traditional music with a dusting of me as a performer in there and also a more complex harmonic context. The score itself is reflective of the struggle in me as a composer and a performer. One side is very text-based and specific. The other side is very improvisatory. The ideal place is somewhere in between. Maybe these two worlds are irreconcilable—the world of performing and the world of composition. One deals with musical things that are learned and assimilated over years in a culture and a style, and other things are learned in a completely different way. Maybe the two worlds cannot meet, and maybe I am getting to the point where I am comfortable with that now. I still want to work it out and get it right, but part of me thinks I'll never quite get there. However, I have learned a lot about how to incorporate traditional elements in my music and how to communicate that.

**Murphy:** Was there a point in your development as a composer that you decided to make use of traditional elements in your music? Was this always an undertone in your writing, or was this a conscious decision at some point?

**Molloy:** When I returned to composition after having ‘left’ to go and study chemistry, the MA at Queen’s University in Belfast introduced me to so much new music in a relatively short space of time and it gave me a space to develop creatively—this was essentially my first ‘proper’ efforts at free composition. It felt like the most natural thing for me to want to use my traditional music background in a new and exciting way (for me!). I don’t remember ever making a conscious decision to do this, it just always was there (if that makes sense). I feel that exploration was a natural part of my character as a traditional performer and this seamlessly (and perhaps logically) made its way into my approach to writing music. My first composition for the MA, *Saetre Brygge*, doesn’t really use traditional music (it only has a tenuous connection via the prevalence of minor sevenths in my opinion); it was started before *Mise Éire*, which is my first real effort at using trad [traditional] in contemporary music, but finished afterwards (I think?!). I just had a quick check through my emails there and I found one to Michael Finnissy in August 2008 that states ‘It was at Simon’s suggestion that I try to include a ‘mainstream’ genre in my portfolio for the purposes of the MA—this was actually meant to be my first piece and he thought it would be a good way to get myself back into composition by writing a set of miniatures.’ So this might explain the non-trad nature of the piano piece. In passing, I should note also that the sketches I submitted for my application to the MA also showed some trad influence (one in a very overt way, almost an arrangement, the other less so), so the desire to combine the two languages was always there I think, subconsciously.

**Murphy:** Could you describe some of your main goals or your philosophy as a composer? What key things would you want the public to understand about Ryan Molloy, what he wants to communicate in his music, and who he is as a composer?

**Molloy:** I would say my main goal as a composer is transcendence in some form or another. Generally speaking, and this might sound rather grandiose though I don’t mean for it to be thus, I hope that my music helps translate our experience of temporal reality into the language of atemporality—freezing time, flitting fabulously with the edges of eternity, heightening our perception of color, breath, and life. For me, this can happen in extreme stillness or in extremely active, rhythmic music; and my own works tend to vacillate between the two, sometimes inhabiting one of these spaces for the duration of the piece, other times moving erratically between them. For me also, this ‘other’ realm, music’s ‘otherness,’ or whatever it is these sounds (or our experience of them) try to do, is indelibly linked with my sense of place, the momentary fixedness of our being here and now, a feeling of belonging to a familial history, a particular patch of earth. I think this latter reason is why my musical instincts are drawn to my upbringing with traditional music. It helps me make these connections that I want to bring out in my music since they are one pathway for me to experience that transcendence. However—haha—nowhere

here do I suggest that I have actually been successful in all these efforts!! I feel that out of everything I write, I achieve everything above about 4% of the time. There is much more practicing to do!

**Murphy:** As a composer, do you see yourself as having any predecessors? Do you have any colleagues that you see as doing similar things compositionally as you?

**Molloy:** I suppose ... if I am to answer for myself, particularly in regards to the use of traditional music in contemporary classical music, I boldly would suggest that no one has done what I have done. That sounds terribly egotistical, and I hate that! There are loads of other composers who are on parallel or slightly divergent roads. In this kind of massive, sculptural sound world, we are all chiseling away at it, trying to get to this gem that lies underneath. That makes it sound like this task of mythological gargantuan proportions, as if there is some sort of pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, which of course is not the case. This is the problem that some composers who are vehemently against using traditional music in art music have.

Yes, I do have colleagues that do similar things. They could be considered predecessors by virtue of the fact that they are a bit older than me, but I wouldn't consider it a direct lineage at all. As for me in general as a composer, I have many predecessors. I mean, everyone we listen to is a predecessor. I find myself sometimes drawing heavily from Messiaen, Ravel, quite "Frenchy" composers that use colors and space.

**Murphy:** How would you explain to an outsider your self-identification as an Irish composer drawing from traditional material and reconcile that with an effort to avoid direct quotations and obvious Irish sounds?

**Molloy:** That's a good question, and that made it harder when applying for jobs. I always find my music and my research harder to rationalize with them because they might not get it. I began to wonder if one does need to have an inherent understanding of the sound world I come from in order to appreciate the music. I don't know, I can't really answer that because I can't be objective about it. The fact that you have felt the need to research traditional music in order to understand my music is quite interesting. Yes, it might give you a different perspective in what I do, but I hope that it wouldn't need to be done in order to understand my music for what it is.

I think it is important, as you have observed, that you will never get the "Irishy" sound when listening to my music. I think that's important. I have always stressed that, because the goal was never to write Irish traditional music. It was to write music that accurately represents the "mess" that is in my head. That person in me that is equally a fan of Messiaen and Frankie Gaven (the fiddle player)—it has always been a way to rationalize those two sound worlds to me. The complexities of the fabric that exist in contemporary music enthralled me, and I find them to be such important musical forces for me. However, at the bottom of the whole thing I find that traditional music is the expressive force in me. A lot of where I am placing any musical thought, even though it may be

entirely embedded in some sort of polymodal construction I am working out using a series of Messiaen's modes, it is all informed by traditional music—subconsciously or very consciously. I think that is what has given the range of pieces I have written their variety. Take *Sliabh Geal gCua* [Molloy's composition], no one has played that that plays traditional music, nor will they that I can ever imagine.

**Murphy:** Could you speak a bit more about your compositional influences?

**Molloy:** Old cap-wearing men in a pub playing a fiddle, weaving around a tune in their own way, laughing at me for my youthful innocence—just playing through the tune as fast as possible, and not really getting to the soul behind the tune that only really becomes apparent after many years of playing it. The conviviality of playing with other people in this context, and the sound world that you have no control over. It is a social and communal sound world. It is a frenzied thing. There's a drive to it. You just get caught up in it. Your contribution to this sound world is both futile and critical. You can drop out at any time, and the set will keep going. If you are leading the set, you can take it anywhere you want to. You can decide if this tune is going to be played in another time or if you're going to a different tune, or maybe you decide to change the key which suddenly increases the energy of the whole thing. That communal aspect of music making is almost a spiritual thing for me.

Other important compositional influences ... plainchant, my Catholic upbringing, the smell of incense, *Tantum ergo*.... These things are all very embedded in me. I think the *Tantum ergo*, *Pange lingua* is one of the most perfect constructions of music. I can't separate it from my youthful experiences of that tune. But it's all to do with a sense of belonging because when you are in that moment of benediction, you belong to various things. You belong, for me at least, first and foremost to a family—not the church family, but my family—this is a ritual for us. You also belong to a community, to a place, to the grounds. These notions are all very strong compositional influences for me. That sense of belonging to the land and being of the people. I suppose all this is wrapped up in folk music anyways because it is of the people and a land and an area.

Pérotin, as we discussed some yesterday, for the same reason but for a slightly extended reason ... Pérotin is behind some of the musical sound world that accompanies a Catholic upbringing in its use of chant. I only discovered Pérotin relatively late, but I was just bowled over by the freedom of his sound ... despite the fact that it's governed by rules and rules and rules! The whole thing is just quite indescribable. It is freedom, it is flow, it has kind of bizarre heterophonies and modal clashes. It gets it so very right, which makes you question everything that happened after. Why did we end up in equal temperament and in all these keys in which we could freely modulate, and then abandon key altogether? It's as if the man 900 years ago was really on to something. Why didn't we listen more? It has come full circle—really full spiral. We are back to that same place but a different section in the spiral. I think that will continue and that we will keep going around that spiral and there will be more developments. Like now, we come back to tonality, but with different dialects and different ears. That will surely continue. That is

probably Pérotin's influence in a nutshell. It is freedom in a nutshell along with being spiritual. The *cantus firmus* being this thing that could almost continue slowly indefinitely in the universe, and we only stop in place little bits at a time.

**Murphy:** In terms of chant, now that this subject has come up, is this also part of your sound world of composition?

**Molloy:** I think so, but perhaps not as directly. I think it's there in a primal sort of way—of melody. Of course this is also true of traditional music, which is also a melodic tradition. I think there are actually parallels to be drawn between some of the influences of *sean-nós* and chant in my work. Both are asymmetrical and quite similar. Frequently in my notebook if I am working out a melody, I will draft them as neume-like things—stemless noteheads that float about. They are kind of everywhere now that I think about it. Drones are really important as are these differences in time.

With *Sliabh Geal gCua*, the thing is the air. The air is the overarching thing that is always there. Essentially what happens is that this is a journey from complete freedom, which is in the air, to an entirely written-out improvisation. This is as detailed as it gets, with no freedom necessarily in that notation. It is as it is. But where does it go? Frequently what happens in traditional music when you are playing a slow air is that often you will go into a reel or a jig—some dance tune—afterwards for contrast, and without a break. That is precisely what happens here. I am playing this air, and improvising around this air, and eventually the improvisation becomes so involved that it becomes a jig. In terms of modes, the air underpins the whole thing. Drones are there as well, similar to *Innisfail*.

**Murphy:** Learning the aural sections of *Sliabh Geal gCua* are both enticing and intimidating to me! Is there a method in your mind that produces the best results for players to learn the sections that are to be played by ear?

**Molloy:** I don't think I have done this in any other piece and can't think of others by other composers. It's very easy for me to say, "just learn that," because I know the air from whence this comes. I think if you know the air, it is easier to get the air of my piece. [plays *Sliabh Geal gCua* traditional air on the piano] Basically, the phrasing of the tune and the shape of the melody are there [in Molloy's *Sliabh Geal gCua*]. The figures are also there. When the dyads come in in the end, the melody is there in those dyads, so it is quite deliberate. You can actually hear the melody a bit in the last section. The second part of the melody is the part that is written out. This is all quite unique for me to quote a piece so close to the bone.

About how to learn it, the main thing to get is the phrasing and the points of repose in the tune. Most people tend to stick to the ornamentation in the recording, but that doesn't mean you can't do your own thing with the improvised ornamentation. I learned the original tune aurally, so this is what is in my head. And again, the original tune is always going to be the original tune. My piece is not meant to be a representation of the original

tune. It is a rhapsody on it I suppose. In the words of Kevin O’Connell [Irish composer, b. 1958], if you don’t like it, the original tune is always still there.

The musical goal is the same. I try to access these multiple temporalities that are for me driven by the tune, but my goal is that the musical end result is the same, regardless of the knowledge of the original tune. But, as you say, it can bring a level of clarity. In both directions, it could also impair. I really can’t speak on that though objectively. I can’t unknow the tune, and as the composer, I can’t really listen to it properly.

**Murphy:** By the way, what is the literal translation of *Sliabh Geal gCua*?

**Molloy:** It means “Bright Mountain of Cua,” which is a region in County Waterford.

**Murphy:** Could you speak about Seóirse Bodley? He seems like a pillar of a person among Irish composers. Could you give any further insights?

**Molloy:** He is definitely a father figure among Irish composers being one of our eldest-living composers. I can’t really profess any great knowledge of his music. I have never actively sought anything of his out to spend time with it with the exception of *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. That, I have played. Orchestrally, his *A Small White Cloud Drifts over Ireland* is effective for sure. That’s really the extent of my interest in it. He’s written some interesting piano works that are really worth looking into—some piano trios, some quartets. His wife is actually my colleague here, which is why I know his birthday is coming up! We are different generations, and he had mostly retired by the time I came on the scene. He is still writing. He actually has a new song cycle that is about to be premiered. He has probably been retired for about 20 years now. His piano work *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* is interesting to me because of what he is trying to do with traditional music. Unlike what I have tried to do, the traditional tune here does not at all interact with his other harmonies. They are just juxtaposed and presented for what they are. In a way this is quite admirable the way he just says, “Let’s see what happens.” This is important because it does show that the traditional tune can hold its own among a rhythmically and harmonically disjunctive backdrop.

A piece that might be interesting to you is *Rhapsody* by Breffni O’Beirne. He’s a young fellow, but he is very gifted, but he may have stopped composing now. His *Rhapsody* is quite a good piece, and it does this thing of mixing the two languages.

Seóirse was instrumental in raising the profile of a certain strand of Irish composition and is a very important educator and ambassador for contemporary music in Ireland.

**Murphy:** I have noticed sevenths in your compositions. You admit a dislike for octaves. Can you explain this?

**Molloy:** I think this is a hangover from the modernist aversion to that tonic strengthening. My teacher was also an ardent octave hater, and he passed this on to me, I

suppose! But sevenths are amazing. I could just play them all day. There are two reasons why I love them so much. Partly it is spectral in origin but also traditional. The minor seventh is a very strong interval in a lot of traditional music. For example, anything in Dorian has a natural lean to the minor seventh. That relationship is quite strong.

**Murphy:** I have noticed that in many of your works you create these layers of sound that are then interrupted by sweeping gestures. It seems almost like a parenthetical [insertion]. These figures are introduced as small, but then evolve to become hugely important sections of music.

**Molloy:** I do this quite a bit, where background material becomes foreground material. Even here [references the opening of *Innisfail*], the ornaments are really important. If you overornament something, it can just become something else entirely which gives birth to its own little variation or even a tune. That's what is happening here.

**Murphy:** What sort of approach do you have to form? What types of organizational features govern your works?

**Molloy:** So, this is my weak spot. I have always had a problem with form. I will blame traditional music for this one. Traditional music has such a simplistic form and shape for the most part. Because of this, I am frequently dissatisfied by more complex or convoluted forms. In fact, *Innisfail* was a real challenge for me, as it was the longest piece I had written, by far, at that time. It was only meant to be 25 minutes. I had mapped out an energetic pathway for the piece, which I frequently do. In this one, I went so far as to dig into golden ratios in an attempt to place the climax roughly where a climax should be. I think it is where it is supposed to be. I worked backwards from there. There are a series of mini-climaxes which get bigger and bigger. The end was a bit of an accident. What became THE climax was not initially there in my mind. That's how I more or less approach larger forms. For smaller forms, I frequently start in a binary fashion. I will frequently have locally contrasting things that are held together by perhaps a drone underpinning or some divergence away or convergence to B.

It really varies on the piece. For *Sliabh Geal gCua*, I quite clearly was following an A1, A2, B, A2, repeat by 3, and then gradually increase the complexity.

**Murphy:** For *Innisfail*, do you feel as though you achieved what you set out to do?

**Molloy:** One of the biggest things for *Innisfail* was getting to it! I had this piano part for the original song I wrote that was very interesting to me. I knew the climax in the song was where the climax in the piano solo version had to be. That drove my overall trajectory of the piece. In hindsight, I think that is perhaps one of the unsatisfactory parts of the piece. I am still not sure if I like the overt "jiggy-ness" of the middle of it. I am torn here. I want a jig that doesn't sound like a jig. I want the motoric nature of it without people thinking, "oh, this is a jig." Rhythm is a powerful thing, and I am still working

this out in my own writing. Dave Flynn, a colleague [Irish composer, b. 1977], has influenced me here. He does a lot of beat insertion to traditional rhythms.

For form, some composers are intimidated by the blank page. I love the blank page; it is the double bar line I am afraid of! I can never seem to get there. Although, there is always a point in a piece where suddenly you see the totality of the piece and that is always nice. I know I can always jump back into work the following morning knowing what is exactly going to happen. There is always the thing of working it out. It's a self-revelation. The material has its own legs, and it's always a question of controlling that. Everything is very stylistically charged. One note on a page can automatically put you in a different place or different piece. Then you are influenced from the word "go." There is always a process at the beginning of a piece of breaking away from that and breaking back into your own sound world. This is why *Innisfail* spends so much time on these sevenths that are unapologetically bell-like.

**Murphy:** Could you say any words about *Saetre Brygge*?

**Molloy:** This was a very distinct place and time. I experienced a cessation of time in that place and this drives the material here. It is not traditionally influenced. It is all a journey to movement four. That moment when time stands still, and for a split second you have some sort of concept of forever. That sounds very grand, but that's what this gets at. But there is not any traditional music here, but I am really experimenting with sevenths and a journey to stillness. I am also using drones and trills, but the thing is about the journey there [to movement four] and breaking out of it again, which is why movement five is so short.

**Murphy:** Could you discuss *for Morton O'Leary*? What is the piece's/O'Leary's connection with Morton Feldman?

**Molloy:** *for Morton O'Leary* is thus titled for two main reasons: one, it draws on Feldman's approach to rhythm/freedom/notation as explored in his *Durations* pieces; two, it was written for Martin O'Leary who is a big Feldman fan and, in certain parts of Dublin, Martin is pronounced 'Morton'—it's a bit of an in-joke really! I had played some of the *Durations* pieces not long before this with the Hard Rain Soloist Ensemble—within a year or so previously I think—and I absolutely loved the effect they produced. It's a stasis-inducing technique that I wanted to bring into my own writing and it appears also (and more literally) in [my] *Gortnagarn II*, which was written directly after *for Morton O'Leary*. This piece was written at the end of a very hectic term and is deliberately designed to be a low-energy piece—a kind of end-of-term release! Martin had approached me previously about writing him a piece to include in a concert of new Irish piano works that he had planned to give that summer (and he has played it many times since). *for Morton O'Leary* is the result.

**Murphy:** In terms of the melody—it seems very much in the language of *sean-nós*. It also stays close to A Major in terms of notes used. Is there anything that one might easily overlook?

**Molloy:** It's pretty much in B Dorian, yes. At least that's how I imagine it ... More Bs again! It is deliberately written to emulate aspects of traditional Irish music but without quoting (as usual); the "*sean-nósyness*" coming from the ornamentation of the melody and its free, ametrical flow. The harmonic structure of it is such that it maintains this identity via a strong pitch center. The accompanying chords then aim to distort temporal perception by their distance from this center. The whole thing then comes to a point in an inverted F-sharp minor cadence before trundling off again to the far reaches of an E-flat fifth-oriented tetrad.

**Murphy:** *For A Lone Piper* (Organ)

**Molloy:** I don't think at this point I have any plans to complete an organ suite. I might come back to it at some point. You can see the strong overlaps in what we have been discussing. There are these drones. There is an air that is influenced by certain figurations of the uilleann pipes. It worked quite well. I do this sort of thing here that I do when I get stuck. When I am not sure what to do next, when I get stuck, I will often inject a bit of momentum and put some material in that is a bit snappier to try to push it on. But here to me, it rather sits as a thorn in the side of the piece. I haven't mastered that yet—being able to really get two modes of momentum side-by-side in a piece and it work really well.

**Murphy:** Other related compositions?

**Molloy:** *Seisiún* [session]—It is quite theatrical. I spoke earlier about the physicality of a session, about being caught up in a sound world and the fact that it has control over you. This piece is a reflection of that being lost, perhaps even too overtly. There are at times these violent gestures that are almost zoomed in on, such as a bit of ornamentation a fiddle player might be doing. In these boxes there are tunes that the performers play. You get this mass of tunes. You get oriented in one tune, get "zoned in," and then another will catch your attention. This kind of multi-layered aspect is only highlighted by the fact that these tunes just suddenly take off. The players are also all tapping their foot, which happens in a session, in their own tempo. Suddenly it all stops, and they are all "miming the tune." It is meant to be comical, but suddenly, you are just focused on the foot tapping. This actually happens in a session! It does the opposite thing of pieces that begin with airs and then go through dance tunes to get back to an air. This starts with a dance tune and then goes to an air, then it goes back to the dance tune. The violin has this very mournful tune, but the clarinet players have enough with it, and they keep trying to interrupt with this dance tune. As I have written, "look very happy." It is a theatrical thing that I was going for.

## APPENDIX C – Permission to Use Scores

From: Ryan Molloy <Ryan.Molloy@mu.ie>  
Sent: Saturday, October 13, 2018 8:16 AM  
To: Murphy, Brian <BMurphy@wmcarey.edu>  
Subject: Permission to use scores

Dear Brian,

This is to confirm that I give you full permission to use my scores for the purposes of your research project.

With renewed thanks for your efforts and willingness to engage with my music,

Ryan

**DR RYAN MOLLOY**

Lecturer in Composition  
Department of Music  
Maynooth University

=====  
t: +353 (1) 708 3730  
w: [www.ryanmolloy.ie](http://www.ryanmolloy.ie)

## APPENDIX D – Permission to Use Photograph

From: David Baker <david@milouvision.com>  
Sent: Thursday, January 17, 2019 4:43 AM  
To: Brian Murphy <BMurphy@wmcarey.edu>  
Subject: Use of photograph for dissertation

Many thanks for your email and your kind words.

Yes, that's fine, and thanks for asking.

Kind regards,

David

::: milouvision.com | commonground2017.com | mobile: 07809 370352 | twitter:  
@milouvision :::

---

From: Brian Murphy <BMurphy@wmcarey.edu>  
Sent: Monday, January 14, 2019 6:36 PM  
To: David Baker <david@milouvision.com>  
Subject: Use of photograph for dissertation

Hi David,

My name is Brian Murphy. I hope this finds you doing very well. I am currently writing a dissertation about the music of composer Ryan Molloy. In 2015, Dr. Molloy used one of your images, *Sea Fever (Blue Rocks)* as the album cover for his CD, *Innisfail*. I would like to use this photo in my document if possible and am writing to see if I could have your permission to do this? I have enjoyed looking through your website and seeing your work!

Thank you very much in advance for your reply.

All the best,

Brian Murphy

## APPENDIX E – IRB Approval Letter



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI**

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### **INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001

Phone: 601.266.5997 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | [www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board](http://www.usm.edu/research/institutional.review.board)

### **NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION**

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.  
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 18050301

PROJECT TITLE: Dissertation Research on Ryan Molloy

PROJECT TYPE: Doctoral Dissertation

RESEARCHER(S): Brian Murphy

COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts and Letters

DEPARTMENT: Music

FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A

IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Exempt Review Approval

PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 05/09/2018 to 05/08/2019

**Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.**

**Institutional Review Board**

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