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In Extremis

## A Droning In The Eire: Jennifer Walshe On The Irish Avant-Garde

### Ian Maleney , April 29th, 2015 11:44

A new project has begun to explore and document the wealth of experimental music in Ireland's past. Ian Maleney speaks to the Aisteach Foundation's Jennifer Walshe about ecclesiastical drone, bog-dwelling noise musicians and a hitherto uncelebrated group of queer composers



*Zaftig Giolla (right middleground), Galway, 1929. Photograph courtesy of [aisteach.org](http://aisteach.org)*

There was this guy I went to school with, lived about a mile away from us. His grandfather was the principal of one of the three parish schools, back in the days before they were amalgamated into a single, yet still tiny, entity. That was in the late 70s I think, or around then. He wasn't that old then; 60, maybe 65, but a venerable civil servant all the same. Like many a civil servant in Ireland, he had things going on outside of the job that few people at the time really knew about. I guess his family knew, some of the parish probably did, but there were only ever hints of it publicly. He kept it mostly to the shed at the back of their house, itself a picturesque country home next to the parish hall, two storeys with a tall roof, cubic, squat but somehow elegant under the unnecessary shade of tall Douglas fir trees that dominated the front yard. Ivy was growing up the front of the house when I knew it, by which time it had been sold to a couple of German retirees. Master Madden was dead by then, and I never met him.

My friend's dad told me about one of the moments when Master Madden's second life peeked out from wherever he kept it locked. It was the occasion of the school's Christmas play, and Madden had decided that his two dozen pupils, aged between four and twelve, would perform a dramatic work of his own devising. Nobody called it an opera at the time, though I suppose that's what it was, in a sense. My friend's dad, Madden's son, was eight at the time, so this would have been 1960 or thereabouts. His own recollection was shady enough, but it was essentially an updated version of the great Greek myth of Perseus and Medusa, told from the perspective of Perseus' mother, Danaë, and set along the callows of the river Shannon.

The year before they'd done the nativity and they would return to that classic myth a year later, but Madden felt comfortable enough in his position as principal that he could take a risk every now and then. And so the kids were assembled each afternoon to paint masks, cut costumes out of old fabrics donated by their mothers and to practice singing their way through Madden's self-written score. The instrumentation was minimal: two drums, played by the rhythmically-minded Kelly twins, aged six-and-a-half, and a droning set of uilleann pipes played by Gary Flannery, whose dad owned the pipes. A radio was switched on and off irregularly. Madden's son was Perseus, of course, and Medusa was played by his older cousin Laura, a girl of ten. Two sixth-classers played Zeus and Danaë, who narrated, and the rest of the school rowed in as a chorus. This mass of terrified and confused children were made to rehearse a libretto that, in its theatrical atonality, resembled a sort of tribal version of Schoenberg's *Moses Und Aron*, albeit a couple of octaves up thanks to the unbroken voices of the children. It was, by all accounts, a disaster. Though no recording of the night was ever made, early drafts of the score were found in the shed after Madden's death. He worked steadily but at a slow pace, completing three full operas before his death, and a filing cabinet full of shorter pieces, sketches and unfinished ideas. To date, none of Master Madden's work has ever been published or performed, except by the pupils of the Clonleabe National School, sometime around 1960.

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I was reminded of the story upon encountering the latest attempt to open up the twisted and shadowy history of the Irish avant-garde for contemporary audiences. The [Aisteach Foundation](#), helmed by composer, performer and archivist Jennifer Walshe, have presented *The Historical Documents Of The Irish Avant-Garde* as an ongoing, transdisciplinary project incorporating a book, a website and several exhibitions. The idea grew out of another exhibition, 'Irish Need Not Apply', curated by Walshe in New York's Chelsea Art Museum back in 2010. The exhibition included a set of recordings, made by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1952, of a musician by the name of Pádraig Mac Giolla Mhuire, born in New York of Irish immigrant parents, playing in Cork with two friends, Dáithí Ó Cinnéide and Eamon Breathnach. The trio combined long, sustained notes from Mac Giolla Mhuire's accordion and Ó Cinnéide's fiddle with frantic, Eric Dolphy-like solos of tin whistle, and they called it dordán, an Irish world for drone. It's not a million miles away from early Velvet Underground recordings, or



La Monte Young's Theatre of Eternal Music. Mac Giolla Mhuire had returned to Ireland with his mother in 1950, after his father, a talented uilleann piper, had died of tuberculosis the same year, and he seemingly brought a mournful but radical style of traditional music back to the old sod. As Antoine Ó Murchu, who discovered the recordings in the Folklore Commission's archives, said at the time: "To think that the roots of minimalism could lie in Irish outsider culture...".

Walshe - a frequent collaborator of Tony Conrad's, who himself played in the Theatre of Eternal Music - began to pull on this loose thread of musical history, and soon the whole fabric of Irish artistic history began to open up, or to fall apart; depends on how you look at it. The key to the early Irish avant-garde, something of an aesthetic link between the names and histories that Walshe was discovering, was drone.

"I think that's the core, because you have the uilleann pipes and you have these drones, so it seems completely natural that you'd get rid of all the diddly-eye bit," she says. "You just sort of hose that off so you just have this core of the drone that's in there."

Walshe was also surprised to find out that the Irish predilection for drone extends beyond the musical, into the texture of the native language and its mythology.

"If you look in the Dinneen dictionary, which is the hardcore one, which is the best - it's like a weird, conceptual thing to read anyway - there's loads of different words for drone," she says. "There's the droning of pipes, the droning of bees - it's sort of like snow, you know, with the Eskimo? There's actually quite a good few words for droning, which refer to different types of droning, which I thought was fascinating because I thought, okay, this is something which is in-built into the language. It's a phenomenon that we can actually tell apart the pipes from the bees and things like that. I do think, to go back to [an etymologist] I spoke to, she said the etymology of the word dordán is attached to the word Deirdre, because when Deirdre, mythologically speaking, was in her mother's womb, she let out a really long scream which was like a drone. So I was like, okay, it's there in the language, it's there in the mythology, it's there in traditional Irish music and it's there in the church. I do think it's interesting to see these patterns emerge."

Along with musicians from a traditional music background like Mac Giolla Mhuire and Ultan O'Farrell, Walshe discovered the more ecclesiastical drone of Sister Anselme O'Ceallaigh and the Reverend Joseph Garvan Digges, who approached the organ in a similar way, discarding unnecessary elements like harmonic or melodic progression. From this base, the project opened out into a weird and wonderful history of unknown and forgotten radicals, often operating in parallel to the Irish cultural mainstream. Walshe invited friends and colleagues to contribute essays and research on these quiet revolutionaries, and the results of that work are presented in the book, with supplementary material available online.







*Sister Anselme O'Ceallaigh. Photograph courtesy of [aisteach.org](http://aisteach.org)*

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of the project is how it uncovers a previously hidden tradition of female and queer composers, who have often been written out of the official stories, if they ever stood a chance of getting in them.

"Everyone was very conscious, and it wasn't something that I mandated and it wasn't something that I asked people to do, but people wanted to have more women in there," says Walshe. "They wanted to have a queer angle on things. There was an attempt to open it up a bit."

An early example of this was Chancey Briggs, a descendent of British aristocracy, who was well-known as a philanthropist and supporter of radical art in the decades after Irish independence. Briggs' inherited wealth, supplemented by his own nous as an investor, provided the means for artistic retreats on Achill Island, experimental theatrical performances, sound poems and even a silent, all-male performance of Britten's *Peter Grimes*. His attempt to found Ireland's "first gay Brechtian cabaret



showband" in the 1960s unfortunately never came to fruition - perhaps because homosexuality was outlawed in Ireland until the 1980s.

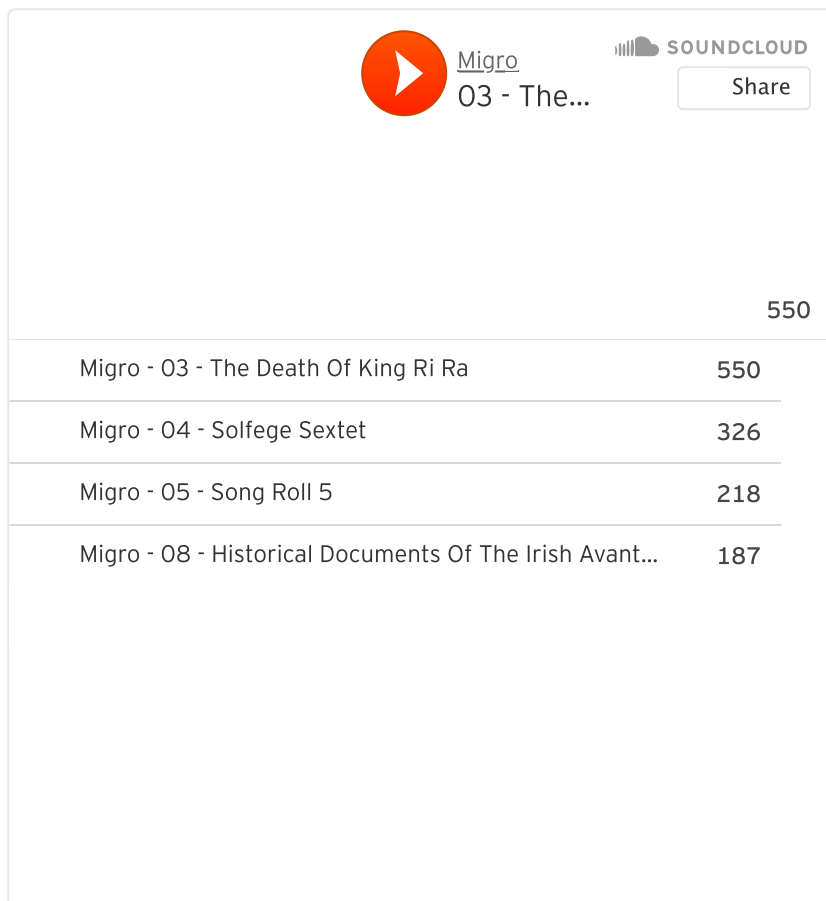
"Chancey appears and you're like, why couldn't I have been around when Chancey was alive?" says Walshe. "Life would have been so fun and so bizarre. I think there was an effort to open things up to communities who would have had a really rough time in Ireland, and they're still having a rough time in that respect. You think of Chancey Briggs, squandering the colonial, imperialist wealth to do drag queens reading Dadaist sound poetry or something, you think, 'Oh man, what would it have felt like to grow up in that environment?' How exciting is that? That inevitably makes you think: 'God, it was so straight and so constrained when I was growing up'."

While Briggs and his Dadaist drag queens were cavorting around Dublin, a great batch of outsider artists were working in a rural context. Walshe believes that many of these artists actively stayed away from the city, preferring to operate in the relative isolation of the quickly depopulating Irish countryside.

"You can sort of have some wacky stuff go on in a village that people put up with," she says. "Eccentric people are sort of cared for in rural communities and accommodated and people will look in on them, in a way they wouldn't be in an urban environment, so I think that's why we ended up with two outsiders who live within a forty-minute drive of each other. Of course they would never meet each other."

One example, of particular interest to myself as a bog-dweller (a former bog-dweller, though one is never totally rehabilitated), was the tragic case of Zaftig Giolla. A musician, composer, poet and field recordist from Monivea in Co. Galway, Giolla was a professional fiddle player in his youth. In the early 1930s, he acquired a Presto Model 'K' Recorder and began to document the everyday goings-on of his rural parish, including keening funeral rites (another source of drone in Irish culture) and crossroad dances. By the 1940s, Giolla had combined field recordings of his local marshes and bogs with a self-constructed noise box-cum-theremin, creating vast and ambitious noise-scapes in the vein of Edgard Varèse or John Cage, and anticipating the *GRM*-era work of Iannis Xenakis in the process. He orchestrated small-scale audiovisual installations called 'Lighttrancing dances', which looked somewhat similar to an early Velvet Underground show, but sounded altogether different. He died in 1959, aged only 53, on a bog outside Monivea; drunk, grief-stricken, and savaged by a rabies-infected stray dog. Only two recordings of his work survive.

"I love Zaftig, and the idea that he dies and the dog bites him and he's passed out in the bog and everything is so maudlin," says Walshe. "Very Flann O'Brien in that way. I know Richard Skelton and he lived in Ireland for a while and he does a lot of stuff to do with landscape. I do think his music is very, very beautiful but I do think there's a dark humour in the Zaftig stuff which gives it a slightly different spin. So I think of him as the Richard Skelton gone very wrong. Hit the bottle, sleeping in bogs. I love that when you read interviews with Richard and he talks so humanely about the grief he went through, and he also processed it in the most healthy way, whereas Zaftig, it just fucked him up forever."



The image shows a SoundCloud player interface. At the top, there is a red play button icon, the text 'Migro 03 - The...', and a 'Share' button. Below this, a progress bar is visible. The main content area displays a list of tracks with their respective play counts:

Track Name	Play Count
Migro - 03 - The Death Of King Ri Ra	550
Migro - 04 - Solfege Sextet	326
Migro - 05 - Song Roll 5	218
Migro - 08 - Historical Documents Of The Irish Avant...	187

There are many tragic stories collected in the book, like Theresa Flynn, a pioneering piano teacher at the Royal Irish Academy who lost her job after staging a performance of John Cage's *0'00"* as a tribute to the spirit of the Paris student revolutionaries in May of 1968. During the performance, she destroyed a piano with a hammer. A political activist all her life, she performed a sit-in in the council flat of a single mother due to be evicted for social impropriety in 1969, and died three years later of bowel cancer. It was only after her death that the aggressively radical artistic ethos she embedded in her students would flower, and she posthumously received the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in honour of her achievements as an educator. These kinds of stories, combined with the amnesiac culture which has largely forgotten them, creates a sadness within the project, a complement to its otherwise inspirational aims.

"That's the whole thing, the melancholy," says Walshe. "You're thinking, somebody must have been thinking weird shit. It's in the blood. Flann O'Brien was doing it, a weird performance art thing, in *An Cruiscín Lán*. It was happening all the time, but lot of this stuff was lost. Or it was found in a suitcase and half of it had rotted away in the Irish damp. Stuff like that. I think a lot of the time, what was enjoyable about it was the idea that there was stuff missing that we were trying to excavate."

On the other hand, it's hard not to see the parallels within Irish culture as a whole, which generally denigrates and expels its artists first, before welcoming them into the fold once they're dead, famous and not at all dangerous. Though Joyce, Beckett and Wilde are the oft-given examples, Walshe suggests that Eileen Gray, the modernist architect and designer, as the most pertinent comparison.

"I thought it was very interesting when all of a sudden Eileen Gray became a big thing," says Walshe. "You're thinking, she fucked off to Paris because it was much easier, nobody was supporting her. To live the life she wanted to life, she needed to go to Paris. Then all of a sudden, everybody wants an Eileen Gray table and she's reappropriated as a massive Irish design hero. I think her stuff is phenomenal, I think it's amazing, but you think it's quite weird how her position has sort of changed in my



lifetime from obscure person to being held up. There must have been more people, we had to have had more people thinking weird shit."

As the title suggests, the project is historical. All the artists mentioned in the book are now dead, and the documentation of their activity begins to run out around the early 1980s. This, Walshe says, was a conscious decision.

"I felt it was very important that we stopped when the [Contemporary Music Centre](#) opened," she says. "They opened in 1985. They're doing that sort of grassroots stuff and they don't give a shit what you make, they try and represent you. They will take all of our scores and keep them in an archive so we know, even if our computers explode, there's a copy of our work somewhere. They try their best, they really do. I just felt like I needed to hand it over to them, if that makes sense. It was a nod to the fact that that was a big deal when it started."

Walshe also believes that things have begun to change for the better for would-be radical artists and composers in Ireland, with major developments like the [Crash Ensemble](#) and the [New Music Dublin festival](#), as well as a thriving underground of DIY noise-making city-and-bog-dwellers, altering the picture somewhat. This, she suggests, is allowing people to investigate questions of Irish artistic identity, and the possibilities within, in a far freer way than the unfairly maligned and forgotten artists who populate the Aisteach project. Young artists now need not ask where's the Irish Cabaret Voltaire, where's the Irish Blaue Reiter or Bauhaus; they can crack on without asking for permission. So, while none of the Aisteach artists were ever supported by the Irish Arts Council, Aisteach itself is funded. Perhaps the support base - the audience, the funding, the media - for radical art in Ireland is only become adequate now, which makes it an excellent time to think about all those who missed out.

"I think there's a timely thing happening now in Irish culture where you do have people, and especially I think, you have people like myself or [Donnacha Dennehy](#), who were born and raised in Ireland but left and went other places, and came back and left and came back and left, and everybody is trying to figure out, what does it mean to be Irish?" says Walsh. "I think the idea among most composers is that it's an extremely messy, slippery identity which we can appropriate if an American cop with the surname Murphy stops us for running a red light. We'll appropriate in a heartbeat, but then there's a lot of messiness going on. I think with the Arts Council, they wouldn't have funded these people, especially in the 80s. If any of our people had applied, they wouldn't have got money. But I think there's more of an interest now in what does this all mean, for all of us, how things went and how we look back on that time. What we wish had happened and what we wish hadn't happened."

*The Aisteach Foundation is the work of Jennifer Walshe, John Berndt, Felicity Ford, Panos Ghikas, Paul Gilgunn, Stephen Graham, Majella Munro, Simon O'Connor, Rian O'Rahallaigh, Nick Roth, Benedict Schlepper-Connolly; head to its website [here](#). Historical Documents Of The Irish Avant-Garde, edited by Jennifer Walshe, is available to order [here](#), while a digital compilation collecting together some of the music is available now on [iTunes](#)*

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