



1894-1950

"John Ireland as Teacher" by E J Moeran



This article by Moeran, published in 1931, whilst ostensibly about John Ireland, Moeran's composition tutor in the early 1920's at the Royal College of Music, also offers a rare and fascinating insight to Moeran's own ideas and attitudes towards composition.

I lived and worked for a time in a Kentish village. One day I was feeling very pleased with myself, having composed a pianoforte piece that I liked. I was playing it

over when my landlord, the village grocer, looked in on me.

"You made that all up yourself, did you?" he asked, and added rather sorrowfully, "Ah, I wish I could do that; but you see, I never had the education."

I should mention that my good friend's knowledge of music amounted to precisely NIL. He was one of those who even had to be told when the National Anthem was being played.

It is undoubtedly a fact that there are some people who imagine that musical composition can be taught, even in the same way that a knowledge of languages, chemistry, mathematics, hairdressing, home-coping and countless other subjects can hammered into the receptive brain of any willing pupil by a skilled teacher. Also there are many who believe that given enthusiasm and a first-rate professor of composition,

...without
polyphony
nothing
can be
complete,
and any
attempt to
break
away
from it
has
invariably
ended in a
blind
alley...

any intelligent musician may become a composer if he works sufficiently hard. Hence, unfortunately, the existence of so much of that type of music which is known as 'Capellmeister' music

In this sense, John Ireland, in spite of the title of this essay, is not a teacher of composition. This is one of his virtues. He is a very wise adviser and an acute critic, both of his own work and of that of others, and he succeeds in instilling into his pupils that blessed principal of self-criticism. Moreover, he possesses an uncanny knack of immediately and accurately probing the aesthetic content of what is put before him, thus arriving at the state of mind which gave it birth, and understanding its underlying mood and aims. It is here that his sympathy is aroused, for he has the faculty of understanding the music from the pupil's point of view, and his wide experience then steps in to suggest the solution of difficulties, and not only the technical ones.

These are not the qualities of an academic teacher of composition, who is accustomed to dole out weekly lessons of forty minutes' duration to all sorts and conditions of students. Ireland is not a mere machine whose brains may be purchased at so much an hour. I recollect one session - this is a better word that 'lesson' in his case - which lasted for about an hour, then continued for another half-hour after tea. At this point Ireland advised me to go home and work at the problem concerned with while our discussion was still fresh in my mind, and to bring it back to him later in the evening for a final talk.

Ireland does not believe that any standardised technique can be taught. "Every composer must make his own technique," is his dictum. At the same time he is a firm believer in the strict study of counterpoint, and, much to my surprise and sorrow, I found myself expected to spend many weary hours, struggling with cantus firmus, and its embellishments in all the species. I state emphatically that I am glad of all this today, for I have come to realise that only by this means can a subconscious sense of harmony, melody, and rhythm be acquired.

Genuine harmony arises out of counterpoint, for it implies contrary motion among the parts; otherwise it is no longer harmony, but faux-bourdon. Moreover there can be no rhythm without melody, otherwise it descends to mere metre, which is not music. On the other hand melody, divorced from harmony and rhythm, descends into a meandering succession of fragmentary ideas, bearing little relation one to

another, and totally lacking organic unity. Thus it is that the greatest music, from Palestrina and Vittoria down through Beethoven and Wagner and the present day, has been polyphonic. For without polyphony nothing can be complete, and any attempt to break away from it has invariably ended in a blind alley.

I mentioned just now that first of all I was surprised at Ireland's insistence on counterpoint, but I hope I have grown a little wiser than I was just over eleven years ago when I commenced work with him, and I feel unbounded gratitude for having been encouraged to do the drudgery. I deliberately use the word encouraged, for Ireland has no interest in work done which is not worth while, and it is by the lucidity of his argument that he expounds to his pupils the logic of doing something that hitherto may have seemed futile, and the task, distasteful as it may appear at the time, is undertaken with the sure sense that there is a real reason for doing it, and doing it to the best of one's ability. Personally, I have always been so lazy that it would have been nearly impossible to induce me to go to the trouble of working a single counterpoint exercise, had I not been encouraged to believe in some very definite value in so doing.

Ireland's remarkable individuality in his own work does not hinder him from observing and fostering unity of style in the work of his pupils, even though it may be very different from his own. He will not tolerate the slightest falling off or failing in continuity. He has no use for padding in any form, and he does not consider a piece of work done with until the minutest detail has been scrutinised again, down to the last semiquaver rest and the smallest mark of phrasing and dynamics. "What about that sforzando?" he will ask. "Have you thought carefully about it?"

His own mastery of form has been evolved in the wake of some hard thinking and deep experience the results of which, apart from his creative work, bear fruit in the guidance which he is able to give to those who study with him. For him, form does not necessarily imply a dry-as-dust formula of first and second subjects, double bars and so on. He enjoins his pupils to look ahead and plan.

I took him one day the exposition of a movement in sonata form. "This is most exciting," he said. "But the question is, will you be able to go one better before the end? Otherwise you will have an

anticlimax."

Here again, Ireland is emphasizing one of the raisons d'etre of the heritage which has come down to us from the old masters. All the music which has escaped consignment to the shelf has been inherently logical. Music, without logical continuity and shape, is lifeless from its inception.

As for instrumentation, Ireland holds that the true principles thereof are not necessarily to be found in text-books, but they eventually come about in relation to the music ("Every composer must make his own technique"). It is essential, however, to understand the true nature and character of each individual instrument, apart from its compass and technical resources. This is only knowledge that can be gained by listening to concerted music, but it is when the beginner sets forth on his own first full score that the experienced adventurer is able to guide his faltering steps. It is here that Ireland's psychological sense, in getting to the rock-bottom in what the pupil is making for, enables to put his finger on the weaknesses and, by means of his considered suggestion, to point out the right road to take to over-come them.

I have tried here to show that John Ireland is an exceptional counsellor for those fortunate enough to work under his teaching. When all is said and done, it is the fact that he is the very antithesis of the so-called teacher of composition that is the secret of his success. He gives unstintingly of his very best to those who come under him, and behind that keen intelligence that brings to bear on their work and its many aspects and problems his pupils soon discover a very human personality and a very warm friend.

E J Moeran MMR March 1931