

UR. JERNEJ WEISS

VLOGA NACIONALNIH
OPERNIH GLEDALIŠČ
V 20. IN 21. STOLETJU

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL
OPERA HOUSES IN THE
20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

musicologica
studia labacensia

Izid monografije so podprli



Mestna občina
Ljubljana

LJUBLJANA
Zmagavica 2016



Z E L E N A
PRESTOLNICA EVROPE



Organizacija Združenih
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LJUBLJANA:
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REPUBLIKA SLOVENIJA
MINISTRSTVO ZA KULTURO

vloga nacionalnih opernih
gledališč v 20. in 21. stoletju

*the role of national opera
houses in the 20th and 21st
centuries*

ur. Jernej Weiss



2019

Znanstvena monografija z mednarodno udeležbo
Vloga nacionalnih opernih gledališč v 20. in 21. stoletju
– *The Role of National Opera Houses in the 20th and 21st Centuries*
Uredil Jernej Weiss

Studia musicologica Labacensia, 3 (ISSN 2536-2445)
Glavni urednik • Jernej Weiss (Ljubljana/Maribor)
Odgovorni urednik • Jonatan Vinkler (Koper)
Tehnična urednica • Tjaša Ribizel (Ljubljana)
Uredniški odbor • Matjaž Barbo (Ljubljana), Primož Kuret (Ljubljana), Helmut Loos (Leipzig),
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Recenzenti • Lubomír Spurný, Ivan Florjanc, Igor Grdina

Oblikovanje in prelom • Jonatan Vinkler

Prevod • Amidas d. o. o.
Jezikovni pregled (slovensko besedilo) • Jernej Weiss

Izdali in založili
Založba Univerze na Primorskem (zanjo: prof. dr. Dragan Marušič, rektor)
Titov trg 4, SI-6000 Koper
Glavni urednik • Jonatan Vinkler
Vodja založbe • Alen Ježovnik
Festival Ljubljana (zanj: Darko Brlek, direktor)
Trg francoske revolucije 1, SI-1000 Ljubljana

Koper, Ljubljana 2019

ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4 (spletna izdaja: pdf)
<http://www.hippocampus.si/ISBN/978-961-7055-50-4.pdf>
ISBN 978-961-7055-51-1 (spletna izdaja: html)
<http://www.hippocampus.si/ISBN/978-961-7055-51-1/index.html>
ISBN 978-961-7055-52-8 (tiskana izdaja)
Naklada tiskane izdaje: 200 izvodov (tiskovina ni namenjena prodaji)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26493/978-961-7055-50-4>

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Kataložni zapis o publikaciji (CIP) pripravili v Narodni in univerzitetni knjižnici v Ljubljani
COBISS.SI-ID=298791680
ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4 (pdf)
ISBN 978-961-7055-51-1 (html)

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Opera in Ireland – A Continuing Struggle for Acceptance

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Operas have been performed in Ireland for more than 300 years while at times there has been quite an enthusiastic audience for it in Dublin and other urban centres on the island. However, two facts are of central importance when it comes to assessing the history and relevance of opera (and of a national opera house) in Ireland.

- At no point in its history did Ireland have an indigenous opera company producing an all-season programme.
- At no point in its history until 2008 did Ireland have a designated venue (be it called opera house or something else) that was dedicated to the presentation of opera alone, or even an equivalent of the German municipal theatre (Stadttheater) that would present a regular, roughly equal mix of opera, ballet and plays across the season.

This means that opera companies – be they Ireland-based or visiting from abroad – would run productions for a few days or weeks only, often travelling from one city to another.

On the other hand, since 2014 Ireland has a venue called “National Opera House”, and at the beginning of 2018 two Irish companies were merged to form “Irish National Opera”. This is the first time that the Irish state has committed itself to supporting an endeavour claiming to have a national reach and relevance. Yet venue and company are separate, and, as we shall

see below, while there are very promising recent developments all is not as well as it might seem in Irish operatic life.

This essay will focus on two periods, namely the early twentieth century (and the time leading up to it) and the 2017/18 season, comparing the provision of opera in both periods. A special focus will be on operas engaging with Irish subjects, Irish history and Irish mythology, and also on the Irish track record with regard to commissioning (and performing) new operas from Irish and Irish-based composers.

Opera in Ireland before 1922

The earliest confirmed staging of an opera in Ireland occurred in 1705 in Dublin; the piece was *The Island Princess* with music by Jeremiah Clarke, Richard Leveridge, William Pate and Daniel Purcell.¹ However, according to Axel Klein it was only in the wake of the success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* after 1728 that Irish audiences developed a taste for opera. During the nineteenth century interest in opera continuously increased, with Irish composers writing a number of operas that were quite successful at home and abroad. Among these were William Vincent Wallace (11 operas) and Michael Balfe (32 operas). Charles Villiers Stanford, arguably the most important Irish composer of the late Romantic period, wrote six operas, including one (*Shamus O'Brien*) on an Irish topic.

Operas by Irish Composers

Musicology as a discipline developed relatively recently in Ireland, in a systematic and significant way perhaps only since the late 1980s. With a few notable exceptions (particularly the work of Axel Klein), there has also been little engagement with Irish musical history outside of the island. Therefore some "traditional" views/biases are still upheld while new primary sources are regularly discovered. One such bias is that while opera was regularly performed in Ireland there was little indigenous operatic work by Irish composers (be it performed in Ireland or elsewhere). Axel Klein's research has unearthed numerous operas by Irish composers that remain widely unknown (composers such as the aforementioned Balfe or Stanford represent exceptions that confirm this rule) as they are neither recorded nor performed, and in most cases not

¹ Axel Klein, "Opera and music theatre," in *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, vol. 2, eds. Harry White and Barra Boydell (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013), 785–790: 785–786.

even edited. Klein estimates that Irish composers wrote ca. 280 operas between 1780 and 1925 – that is on average about two per year.² Among the earliest ones are:

- Charles Thomas Carter, *The Milesian* (1777)
- Tommaso Giordani, *Genius of Ireland* (masque, 1784)
- Tommaso Giordani, *The Island of Saints, or The Institution of the Shamrock* (pantomime, 1785)
- Johann Bernhard Logier, *Brian Boroihme, or Maid of Erin* (1809)
- Thomas Simpson Cooke, *The First Attempt* (1807)
- John A. Stevenson, *The Patriot* (1809)
- Thomas Simpson Cooke, *Thierna-na-Oge, or The Prince of the Lakes* (1829)
- Samuel Lover, *Il Paddy-Whack in Italia* (1841)

Klein concludes from this that “the absence of an Irish opera house was no handicap to the development of opera in Ireland”.³ As an aside he mentions an unsuccessful attempt by the Dublin-based Tommaso Giordani and the English singer Michael Leoni to establish an “English Opera House” in Dublin in 1783 – it had to close after seven months as it was too small to be sustainable and never generated a profit.⁴

Most of the operas by Irish composers did not survive for long on the stages. Balfe and Wallace were the first Irish composers to achieve lasting success not only in Ireland but also abroad, not least with the so-called “Irish Ring” consisting of Balfe’s *The Bohemian Girl* (1843), Wallace’s *Maritana* (1845) and Julius Benedict’s *The Lily of Killarney* (1862). Interestingly, only the London-based German Benedict engaged with an Irish subject matter while the two Irish composers placed their operettas in Bohemia (Balfe) and Spain (Wallace), respectively. There is no continuing story or thematic link between these three works; the “Ring” moniker derives entirely from the fact that they were regularly staged together in cyclical fashion.

2 Axel Klein, “Stage-Irish, or the National in Irish Opera, 1780–1925,” *The Opera Quarterly*, 21/1 (2005): 27–67: 34.

3 Ibid., 48.

4 Ibid., 34.

Opera in Dublin in the early twentieth century

In a recent article Maria McHale has analysed the provision of opera in Dublin between the years 1900 and 1916.⁵ During this period, opera was regularly performed in English, a trend that had established itself since the 1880s. Preferred venues were the Gaiety Theatre (opened in 1871 and then seating 1800) and the “New Theatre Royal and Opera House” (reopened in 1897 after the previous Theatre Royal – a regular venue for mainly Italian opera – had burned down in 1880; the new building seated 2300). McHale concludes that “in the seventeen-year period under discussion here, there were over 1000 performances of opera at the Theatre Royal and the Gaiety combined: an average of sixty nights of opera each year.”⁶ In the meantime McHale has expanded her research; at a recent conference presentation she revealed that the overall number of operatic performances between 1900 and 1922 at these two theatres was 1686, or c. 73 per year – so between 1916 and 1922 the number of performances must have increased further in order to increase the average number to that extent.⁷

This is likely to cover the vast majority of operatic performances in Dublin yet excludes possible performances at other venues, particularly with reduced forces and by smaller local companies. However, the main providers were British opera companies that travelled to Dublin once or twice a year to stay there for a number of weeks. Among the most regular visitors were E. Lockwood’s Opera Company, the Moody Manners Opera Company, the Carl Rosa Opera Company, the O’Mara Opera Company, the D’Oyly Carte Company and the Quinlan Opera Company. The early twentieth century witnessed an increased interest in Wagner among the Irish opera-going public: 1901 saw the Irish premiere of *Tristan und Isolde* while in 1913 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* was staged for the first time as a cycle on the island by the Quinlan Company. Between 1900 and 1916 *Tannhäuser* was given 37 times, *Lohengrin* 23 times and *Tristan und Isolde* seven times. While these numbers are quite impressive by today’s Irish standards, they are dwarfed by others: Between 1900 and 1922, Gounod’s *Faust* was given a

5 Maria McHale, “‘Hopes for Regeneration’: Opera in Revivalist Dublin, 1900-1916”; in *Music Preferred. Essays in Musicology, Cultural History and Analysis in Honour of Harry White*, ed. Lorraine Byrne-Bodley (Vienna: Hollitzer, 2018), 203-216.

6 McHale, *ibid.*, 205.

7 Maria McHale, “‘The Operatic Problem’: Issues of National Opera in Britain and Ireland, 1900-1922”, paper presented at the 16th Annual Conference of the Society of Musicology in Ireland, Cork, 15 June 2018. I am very grateful to Maria McHale for giving me access to her presentation slides.

combined 104 times in the Gaiety and the Theatre Royal, with Bizet's *Car-men* following in second place with 88 performances.⁸

The rich operatic life in Dublin during the early twentieth century is also reflected in discussions around establishing a dedicated opera house in Dublin (mirroring similar discourses in England). In 1900 Annie Patterson wrote an essay entitled "The Prospect of Native Opera" in the *Weekly Irish Times* in which she advocated establishing a "British Bayreuth in Dublin" which was to provide a "Home for Indigenous Opera".⁹ If the wording used by Patterson appears to be unexpectedly surprisingly pro-British, in 1909 she published "Music and the Nations" which was far more pro-Irish and relocated the intended Irish Bayreuth from Dublin to the Hill of Tara, the medieval seat of the High Kings of Ireland.¹⁰ McHale concludes from this that opera formed a central part in Dublin's cultural life at this time – that many people

*saw Dublin as a viable centre for British opera says much about the place of opera in Dublin's musical culture and its audience. And yet in Dublin, it would seem that there was a need for "regeneration" less in relation to audiences and more in terms of indigenous opera. [...] it was the Gaelic Revival that created the impetus for all these works. Language, folklore and mythology provided a distinctly Irish accent to operas, some of which were noted for their Wagnerism.*¹¹

Operas on an Irish subject matter and the Gaelic revival

Axel Klein observes that while many operas by Irish composers make reference to Irish traditional music – by using an Irish melody or integrating an Irish dance – only c. 30 of the 280 he has identified engage with an Irish subject matter. Many of these stem from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, commencing with John William Glover's *The Deserted Village* (1880), Paul McSwiney's *Amergen* (1881) and Charles Villiers Stanford's *Shamus O'Brien* (1895) as early representatives. However, their numbers increased significantly in the early years of the new century:¹²

8 McHale, *ibid.*

9 Axel Klein, "Stage-Irish, or the National in Irish Opera, 1780-1925", *The Opera Quarterly*, 21/1 (2005), 27-67, xx.

10 McHale, "Hopes for Regeneration", 212.

11 *Ibid.*, 215.

12 Klein, "Stage-Irish", 49-62; McHale, "Hopes for Regeneration", 211.

- Michele Esposito, *The Post-Bag: A Lesson in Irish* (1901)
- William Harvey Péliissier, *Connla of the Golden Hair* (1903)
- Thomas O’Brien Butler, *Muirgheis* (1903)
- Robert O’Dwyer, *Eithne* (1909)
- Michele Esposito, *The Tinker and the Fairy* (1909)
- Thomas Richard Gonsalvez, *Jozé* (undated, children’s opera)
- Joseph Seymour, *An Irish May-Day* (c. 1915, children’s opera)
- Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, *Finn Varra Maa* (1917)
- Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, *Srúth na Maoile* (1923)
- Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, *Grania Goes* (1924)
- Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer, *Deirdre of the Sorrows* (1925)

The increased interest in Irish operatic subjects was part of the Gaelic revival, a movement emerging in the late nineteenth century that promoted Gaelic culture in Ireland, focusing particularly on the Irish language, Irish literature, Irish music, and Irish sports. Societies were formed to support these activities, led by the Gaelic League (Conradh na Gaeilge), founded in 1893 under its first President Douglas Hyde – the librettist of Esposito’s *The Tinker and the Fairy* listed above, and later to become Ireland’s first President. Other societies important in this context are the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Literary Society and the Feis Ceoil (Irish for “Festival of Music”) which runs an annual music competition in Dublin since 1897, covering by now almost 200 categories across different instruments/voice registers, groupings, age ranges and genres. While the strong focus on Irish traditional music as an expression of “Irishness” (sometimes juxtaposed with classical music as the music of the British colonial occupiers and the protestant Anglo-Irish ruling class) stems from this period, there was also a movement advocating a “catching up” with other nations with regard to all other cultural areas.¹³ The proposal of a dedicated Irish opera house by Annie Patterson (who was also a leading driver behind the Feis Ceoil) mentioned above falls into the category, as does the increased number of operas engaging with Irish topics.

13 This may be comparable to earlier and simultaneous attempts by ethnic minorities in Eastern and Northern Europe (particularly in the Habsburg and Russian Empires) to assert a cultural national identity in the absence of political independence, for example among Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, Finns, Norwegians etc.

Two operas from this productive first decade of the twentieth century deserve special attention for they pursue the goal of the Gaelic League in two different way, representing the first attempts to not only engage with Irish mythology but also do it in the Irish language. The first one of these was Thomas O'Brien Butler's *Muirgheis*, written in 1903. It was, however, to be performed in English for pragmatic reasons – many audience members would not have been fluent enough in the language to be able to follow a performance in Irish; it is also not clear how fluent the composer himself (who wrote the opera during a stay in India) was in the language.¹⁴ The opera was not successful; the *Irish Times*'s critic commented that “Mr O'Brien Butler has not yet attained the art of writing a good opera [...]”¹⁵ Robert O'Dwyer's *Eithne* was more successful; after its premiere in August 1909 it was revived for a number of performances in May 1910 (only to have its run cut short by the funeral of Edward VII).¹⁶ O'Dwyer was a more accomplished composer, and the reviews were much more enthusiastic than in the case of O'Brien Butler. Still, after 1910 *Eithne* remained forgotten too until it recently received a concert performance in Dublin in October 2017.¹⁷ This performance revealed an eclectic approach with influences from many sides, including a partly Wagnerian sound world (some of the High King of Ireland's music reminds of *Lohengrin*) as well as Slavonic touches (some choruses have a Dvořákian flavour). Klein sees the reason for the failure of *Muirgheis* and *Eithne* mainly in a lack of compositional skills (in the case of O'Brien Butler), poor libretti and a “very underdeveloped public musical taste of the time”.¹⁸ While Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer wrote a few more operas in Irish in the early and mid-1920s, ultimately the experiment of writing music theatre in the Irish language has to be regarded as a failure.

14 A recent conference presentation hinted at the possibility that the O'Brien Butler set the music to accompany the English words while the Irish translation was created separately at a later stage – leaving us with the question as to how well the Irish words might fit the music. David Scott, “Rediscovering *Muirgheis*: The First Grand Opera in Irish”, *SMI/ICTM-IE Annual Postgraduate Conference*, Maynooth University, 20 January 2018.

15 Klein, “Stage-Irish”, 56.

16 Gavan Ring, “Robert O'Dwyer: A Colourful Life”, in Robert O'Dwyer, *Eithne*, programme booklet, Opera Theatre Company / RTÉ, 2017, 6-7: 7.

17 The 2017 performance of *Eithne* can be watched on Youtube; see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTtCcOwmIXo>; accessed on 26 August 2018.

18 Klein, “Stage-Irish”, 56.

Venues and Companies

As Italian and French operas by composers such as Rossini, Verdi or Gounod (but also operas by Irish composers such as Wallace and Balfe, as well as the Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas) became regular visitors to Irish cities, larger, more suitable theatres began to be built. These include the Cork Opera House (1877), the “Grand Opera House” in Belfast (1895), but also “Theatres Royal” in Limerick, Waterford, Wexford and Dublin. Still, all these venues were only witnessing opera on their stages for a few days or weeks per year (for example, in 1875 Dublin’s Theatre Royal played 13 operas for a total of 18 days).¹⁹ Alongside opera the theatres also presented plays, concerts, ballets, variety performances and other types of entertainment. These theatres could be quite large; after 1934 Dublin’s (third) Theatre Royal offered space for 4,000 people – almost twice as many as today’s largest Irish theatre. Before we move on to indigenous opera companies, a few other venues have to be mentioned: In 2008, a purpose-built opera house with 750 seats opened in the city of Wexford. It is associated with the “Wexford Festival Opera”, a festival which has been running in that city since 1951. Its goal is to present operas mainly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that never entered the canon, did it only locally, or have been forgotten altogether (some of them by well-known composers like Donizetti or Rimsky-Korsakov). Under the guidance of David Agler, its current artistic director, it was recently expanded to also include contemporary operas that have as yet received few performances at least in Europe; examples of these are John Corregliano’s *Ghosts of Versailles*, Jake Heggie’s *Dead Man Walking* or André Previn’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Currently the Wexford Festival runs for just over two weeks every year; during its best days it stretched over three weeks. It is certainly Ireland’s most important contribution to operatic life on the world stage, yet despite its international prestige it has to be said that building an opera house (at a cost of c. €35m) in a town of 20,000 people for an event that lasts 2-3 weeks was one of the last follies of the Celtic tiger (as the Irish boom that ended in the economic collapse of 2008 was called); for most of the year it stands idle, apart from hosting the occasional concert, touring opera, play or other performance. In 2014 it was rebranded as Ireland’s “National Op-

19 Maria McHale, “Theatre Royal, Dublin”, in *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, eds Harry White and Barra Boydell (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013), 982-983: 982.

era House” – this, however, did little to increase the number of operatic performances there.²⁰

In 2010, the new multi-purpose “Grand Canal Theatre” (now known as “Board Gáis Energy Theatre”) opened in Dublin’s redeveloped Docklands district. Due to its position in the Dublin metropolitan region populated by 1.5 million people this Daniel Libeskind-designed 2,100-seat theatre is in far more regular use and has become the venue of choice for many of Dublin’s opera and ballet performances (particularly those by visiting companies).

The turn of the 19th century saw the emergence of the first Irish indigenous opera companies that were dedicated to the regular staging of opera. Among them were the Ulster Operatic Company (founded in 1909), the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society (1913), the Cork Operatic Society (1917) and the National Operatic Society (1945-6). Most successful were a number of societies based in Dublin: the Dublin Operatic Society (1928-54), the Dublin Grand Opera Society (1941-2001; from 1996-2010 succeeded by “Opera Ireland”), and the Irish National Opera (1965-84, touring the country with reduced orchestra and minimal stage designs).²¹ In 1985 the Irish National Opera was succeeded by Opera Theatre Company which continued to perform full operas with a reduced ensemble (consisting of a string quartet and a handful of winds and brass; usually fewer than ten players altogether) and a minimalist staging which allowed the production to tour the island and perform in all sorts of local venues in smaller towns. Since few of those venues were equipped to operate surtitles, and also because the company targeted audiences not used to opera, all its productions were performed in English. In contrast, Opera Ireland staged all its productions in Dublin (usually in the Gaiety Theatre) with a full orchestra and in the original language with surtitles. The creative input of its Swiss artistic director Dieter Kaegi often made up for an acoustic a bit on the dry side. Opera Theatre Company benefitted from a string of imaginative productions (many by its long-time artistic director Annilese Miskimmon) which included, among others, stagings of *The Emperor of Atlantis* and *Fidelio* in Dublin’s Kilmainham Gaol (a former prison now serving as a museum). Opera Theatre Company also occasionally commissioned new operas from Irish com-

20 Like in many other countries there exists a continuous tension between the metropolis Dublin and the rest of the country where people almost automatically assume that the Dubliners keep everything good and important to themselves. The decision to build the Wexford Opera House was reached under a Minister of Culture from the South-East region and may in part have been an attempt to ease that tension.

21 Klein, “Opera and music theatre”, 788.

posers. Another company worth mentioning is Lyric Opera, founded by Vivian Coates in 1994. For a long time it staged concert or semi-staged performances sung in English in Dublin; in recent years it has switched to more fully staged productions in the original language and with surtitles.

All the opera companies named above have depended on state funding which is nowadays distributed by the Irish Arts Council. Since the Arts Council does not award money years ahead, strategic planning has always been very difficult. Opera Ireland, Opera Theatre Company and Lyric Opera have staged between one and three productions per year, depending on the amount of funding they were awarded.

In the wake of the economic crash of 2008, the Irish state had to cut all its expenditure severely; this also hit the arts sector. Opera Ireland and Opera Theatre Company were abolished in 2010, to be succeeded by a new “Irish National Opera Company”. However, at that time this venture did not get off the ground, and a few months later Opera Theatre Company – yet not Opera Ireland – was revived. This left Ireland without a company devoted to full-scale orchestral productions. To fill this gap, in 2012 “Wide Open Opera” was founded, opening with a production of *Tristan und Isolde* in Dublin’s Bord Gáis Energy Theatre, followed by *Nixon in China* in the same venue. It thus emphasised its intention to dedicate itself to the canon as well as to new compositions – in fact, it has since organised the Irish premiers of quite a few new operas by Irish composers. In 2010, “Northern Ireland Opera” was founded as the first opera company based in Northern Ireland. Funded by the Arts Council of Northern Ireland, it has staged about three operas per season, including commissions from Irish composers, with its productions travelling within Northern Ireland (mainly between Belfast and Derry) and occasionally further afield. Like other Irish companies, many of its productions in recent years were collaborations with one or more European opera houses or other Irish companies.

The latest twist in Irish institutional operatic history is that with effect from 1 January 2018 both Wide Open Opera and Opera Theatre Company were effectively merged to form an entity calling itself “Irish National Opera” (not to be confused with the above mentioned earlier Irish National Opera that operated from 1965-84); this new company has announced seven productions and altogether 34 performances for 2018 (four productions and 17 performances of these fall into the 2017/18 season – since Irish National Opera came into being in January 2018 it operates in calendar years rather than seasons for the time being).

Opera in Ireland since 1922

After the troubles of the First World War, the War of Independence and the subsequent Civil War, the new Irish Free State had little means to stage operas; even its first (and to this day only) full-scale professional symphony orchestra was not founded until 1948.²²

While several of the British opera companies mentioned in section 1.2. continued to visit Ireland until the beginning of the Second World War there was thus little chance for Irish composers to have new works commissioned or performed in their own country. Hence not many composers would engage with the operatic genre, with only a few pieces by composers such as Éamonn Ó Gallchobháir, Gerard Victory and James Wilson forming exceptions from this rule. From the 1960s and 70s onwards, contemporary Irish composers emerged in larger numbers, engaging more and more with modernist avant-garde styles (as opposed to the pastoral British style preferred by many of their predecessors). Since the late 1980s and early 1990s this also included operas written in a modernist style, as composers such as Gerald Barry and Kevin O'Connor (who are still active today) started contributing to the genre.

Appendix 1 gives an overview of all operas performed in Ireland (North and South) this season – that is, from September 2017 until August 2018. It lists 88 performances of 23 different productions (with Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* presented in two different versions by North Dublin Opera and Irish National Opera). Seven of these operas (*Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, *L'Italiana in Algeri*, *La Traviata*, *Eugene Onegin* and *Tosca*) are core parts of the canon; three (*Front of House*, *Dubliners*, *Ulysses: an Opera*) were world premieres, another one (*The Second Violinist*) was a revival of a world premiere from the previous season and a further two (*Eithne* and *The Sleeping Queen*) were revivals of long-forgotten works. The latter six were all written by Irish composers. This represents a comparatively low percentage of “canonic” operas (although in other years there has been more Verdi or Puccini on offer), and a relatively high number of lesser known and contemporary operas (even outside of Wexford were this is the norm).

22 This is the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra which is associated with Ireland's national broadcaster RTÉ. The station also runs a smaller professional orchestra, the RTÉ Concert Orchestra (45 positions) while the Ulster Orchestra is another full-size professional orchestra based in Northern Ireland. Members of the RTÉ Concert Orchestra are regularly involved in performances of smaller operas or travelling productions accompanied by a reduced ensemble.

The large number of opera companies can make it difficult to keep track of upcoming performances, particularly as there is no central institution or media outlet that collates this information.²³ Often I learn of an upcoming production only about two weeks in advance (despite working in the sector and therefore being reasonably well connected). An example of this would be DIT Operatic Society's *Acis and Galatea* in June 2018; this was the first production of a newly formed Society which is rather small and could not undertake much PR work; consequently the performance I attended (having been made aware of it on Facebook only a few weeks ahead) attracted a rather smallish audience. It is not inconceivable that some people may miss productions they would be interested in, particularly those run by smaller companies.

That two productions of the same opera (*Orfeo ed Euridice*) are staged by different companies in the same season indicates that at least some of them do not communicate much with each other.

Opera Companies

The 23 operatic productions and 88 performances that took place in Ireland in 2017/18 were produced by 16 companies and institutions, with several of them collaborating on a number of occasions. These are:

- National Irish Opera
- Wide Open Opera
- Opera Theatre Company
- Northern Ireland Opera
- Wexford Festival Opera
- Lyric Opera
- Blackwater Valley Opera Festival
- Kilkenny Festival
- Opera Collective Ireland
- North Dublin Opera
- Royal Irish Academy of Music

23 This would also make it very difficult to collate comparable lists for previous years – one would have to check the websites/archives of all the different companies separately and may still miss some visiting international ones.

- Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) – Conservatory of Music and Drama
- DIT Operatic Society
- Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ)
- Mikhailovsky Opera, St Petersburg
- Scottish Opera

With four productions/17 performances run by National Irish Opera (and 3/12 in the early stages of the season by its predecessors, Opera Theatre Company and Wide Open Opera) this newly formed company is now the largest provider of opera in Ireland. Wexford Festival Opera follows in second place with four productions (19 performances).²⁴ Northern Ireland Opera was responsible for three productions (14 performances). Between them these three companies staged 12 productions (55 performances) while most other companies – whether they were local or travelling visitors – only staged one opera, and mostly for a small number of performances. Three productions were performed just once, two more twice and six three times. The two conservatories in Dublin regularly produce operas for the benefit of their students; the singers, orchestral players and often also the conductors and directors come from the ranks of their students while they also collaborate with local institutions such as the National College of Arts and Design or the Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology in the area of set design and costumes. In 2017/18 the Royal Irish Academy of Music staged *La finta giardiniera* and – combined in one event as “Opera Briefs” – Monteverdi’s *Il ballo delle ingrate* and Weir’s *Scipio’s Dream* while the Dublin Institute of Technology’s Conservatory of Music and Drama contributed Balfe’s *The Sleeping Queen* and Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*. The Blackwater Valley Opera Festival (formerly known as Lismore Opera Festival and taking place in Lismore Castle, County Waterford) was founded in 2010 and stages one opera per season, alongside organising a number of concerts and recitals throughout the year. Opera Collective Ireland has produced on average one opera per year since 2014. The two international companies (Scottish Opera and Michailovsky Opera St Petersburg) that visited Ireland presented canonic works as is usual for travelling companies coming to this island.

24 Co-productions are counted separately for each company; thus Synnott’s *Dubliners*, for example, is included in the numbers of both Opera Theatre Company and Wexford Festival Opera.

Distribution of Performances

Appendix 2 provides a list of productions related to the cities and towns in which they took place. 19 of these performances were part of the Wexford Festival; outside the festival there were only two more operatic performances in the National Opera House (both by Irish National Opera). 14 performances took place in Northern Ireland, 74 in the Republic. Of those 74, 38 (or almost exactly 50%) took place in the capital Dublin. Only 15 performances in the South did not take place in either Dublin or Wexford. Three smaller towns (Navan, Sligo and Kilkenny) had only one operatic performance (during the *Powder her Face* tour) while no performance took place in major Irish cities such as Cork, Waterford or Drogheda. In 2017/18 only one opera (*Powder her Face*) travelled the country, visiting six cities (after having been performed in Northern Ireland in the previous season). This is a reduction compared to previous times when Opera Theatre Company would send two or sometimes even three productions per year around the country.

Like in other countries there is a trend to revive productions across seasons; for example, *The Second Violinist* was premiered in Galway in the summer of 2017, came to Dublin in autumn of the same year and visited London in autumn 2018. National Irish Opera's *Orfeo and Eurydice* started in Galway in the summer of 2018 and moved from there to Dublin in the winter of 2018/19 while *The Return of Ulysses* was premiered in Kilkenny in the summer of 2018 and visited Dublin in the autumn of that year. This means that several productions have been performed more often overall than indicated by the numbers in Appendix 2.

It is interesting to compare the numbers of the early twentieth century to those of 2017/18. As outlined above, between 1900 and 1922 there were on average 73 operatic performances per year in Dublin (counting only those taking place in the Theatre Royal and the Gaiety Theatre – so there may even have been a few more in other venues). This is almost twice the number of performances in Dublin compared to 2017/18 (72 versus 38). Of course, looking at just one year provides only a snapshot, but the number was almost certainly lower in previous years given that the combined number of productions and performances run by Irish National Opera in its first year of existence (seven productions and 34 performances in 2018, including one revival and three new productions between September and Decem-

ber which are included in Appendix 2²⁵) is larger than what its predecessors Opera Theatre Company and Wide Open Opera would have mounted between them in any given year in this decade. Irish National Opera is certainly starting with a bang, and it remains to be seen to what extent it will receive the support allowing them to keep this momentum going in the long term. It is, however, unlikely that any opera will manage to get performed 104 times over the course of 17 years as was the case with *Faust* in the early twentieth century.

Operatic Venues in Dublin in 2017/18

In the absence of a dedicated opera house, operatic performances in Dublin in the 2017/18 season were spread across eleven different venues of very different sizes and natures. They are here listed in descending order according to size, with the number of seats and the operas performed in them added.

- Board Gáis Energy Theatre – 2111 seats (*Tosca*)
- National Concert Hall, main hall – 1200 (*Eithne, La Traviata*);
- Gaiety Theatre - 1142 (*Le nozze di Figaro, Der Schauspieldirektor*)
- Sandford Parish Church – c. 900 (*Orfeo ed Euridice*)
- O’Reilly Theatre, Belvedere College – 500 (*The Second Violinist, Powder her Face*)
- Gleeson Theatre, Dublin Institute of Technology, Kevin Street – 400 (*Acis and Galatea*)
- National Concert Hall, John Field Room – 250 (*The Sleeping Queen*)
- Unitary Church – c. 250 (*Ulysses*)
- Samuel Beckett Theatre, Trinity College Dublin – 208 (*Dubliners, La finta giardiniera, Opera Briefs*)
- Mill Theatre, Dundrum – 207 (*Orfeo ed Euridice*)
- The Little Theatre, Skerries – c. 120 (*Orfeo ed Euridice*)

The Board Gáis Energy Theatre is the largest and most modern theatre in the country and best equipped to stage opera. The Gaiety Theatre is used for opera more often, yet it has a very small pit (on occasion one can

25 The revival is *The Second Violinist* (3 performances in London) while the new productions are *The Tales of Hoffmann* (11 performances in 9 cities), *Bluebeard’s Castle* (3 performances in Dublin) and *Aida* (4 performances in Dublin).

observe harps, percussion or brass playing from the boxes above the pit). In the National Concert Hall there are some concert performances (or occasionally semi-staged ones) mainly by Lyric Opera in its main hall while its smaller John Field Room plays host to chamber operas. The rich Irish theatrical tradition ensures that there is a range of medium and smaller-sized theatres which are also used on occasion for smaller productions or concert performances. These include Trinity College Dublin's Samuel Beckett Theatre, the Belvedere College's O'Reilly Theatre, Dublin Institute of Technology's Gleeson Theatre, and the small local theatres in Dundrum and Skerries. Most of these venues have minimal opportunities to change the stage during a performance while none of them has a pit. The two performances in churches listed here were concert performances.

There are five other venues that did not house opera in 2017/18 yet have done so repeatedly in the past: the Olympia Theatre (1298 seats), the Pavilion Theatre (324), The Lir Academy, Trinity College Dublin (c. 150) and the Temple Bar Arts Centre (c. 120). Both The Lir (Trinity College Dublin's "National Academy of Dramatic Arts" complex) and the Temple Bar Arts Centre contain small black box studio theatres with variable seating. Many of the smaller theatres or halls are not well equipped to change the scenery and use just one setting for all acts/scenes; this often coincides with the use of a much reduced orchestra or even just a piano – although the latter does not happen very often; its only occurrence in 2017/18 was in *The Sleeping Queen* which was actually conceived this way by Michael Balfe (he later produced an orchestrated version as well).

Contemporary Irish Opera

When Opera Ireland was dissolved and funding for Opera Theatre Company reduced in the wake of the 2008 crash, some additional funding was made available for new compositions. This resulted in the rather paradox situation that the situation for contemporary Irish opera actually improved slightly as more Irish or Irish-based composers than before received funding to compose and produce new works. Yet this funding was awarded on a case-by-case basis, and there was no way of knowing how much money would be available next year, or even if the different categories in which composers or producers can apply would still be there – for example, in 2018 there was an "Opera Projects and Production Award" while in 2017 there had been two separate categories ("Opera Production Award" and "Opera Commissions Award"). In 2016 there was no dedicated opera award

at all. However, operatic productions could also be supported through several more general categories such as “Project Awards”, “Annual Funding” or “Festivals and Events Scheme” (although the sums awarded in categories such as “Project Awards” tend to be comparatively small). It is impossible to anticipate how much financial support for opera commissions (and their production) may be available in future years, or even what the relevant categories will be. Of course, this applies as well to the production of “older” operas – apart from Irish National Opera (which the Arts Council will certainly support for a number of years), other companies and festivals have to try their luck every year anew, applying in ever-changing categories for awards of regularly changing sizes.

Appendix 3 lists new operas that have either been commissioned in Ireland or written by Irish (and Ireland-based) composers and performed in Ireland since 2013 (while it excludes Irish operas from before 2013 and recent operas by non-Irish composers that have been performed at the Wexford Festival Opera or elsewhere). There were eighteen operas altogether, or three per year on average. They were written by eleven composers, with one of them (Brian Irvine) providing three works and five others (Gerald Barry, Donnacha Dennehy, Evangelia Rigaki, Eric Sweeney, Andrew Synnott) two each. Gerald Barry’s operas were both commissioned (and premiered) outside Ireland, but all the other ones are home-grown. Only two of the eleven composers – Siobhán Cleary and Evangelia Rigaki – are female.

It is interesting that – unlike in the early 1900s – rather few of these eighteen operas deal with Irish topics, Irish history and mythology. Barry’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* is based on a source by an Irish writer (Oscar Wilde), but it is set in England. Rigaki’s *Antimidas* is a reaction to the economic crash which an Irish audience can well relate to, but it too contains no specific reference to anything Irish while the crash affected many other countries as well, of course. Deane’s *The Alma Fetish* relates to an episode in the life of Oskar Kokoschka, Synnott’s *Breakdown* to authentic episodes in the lives of three other, more recent artists, and Doyle’s *Heresy* to the life and death of Giordano Bruno. Dennehy’s two operas portray relationships between individuals and could be set anywhere. This is a general characteristic of contemporary Irish opera (with Synnott’s “setting” of two short stories from Joyce’s *Dubliners*, Irvine’s *The Oldest Woman in Limerick*, Sweeney’s *Ulysses: An Opera* and Rigaki’s *The Pregnant Box* as a response to the Irish abortion debate forming exceptions) – it regards itself as international, engaging with the human condition in general and drawing its inspirations

from anywhere in the world. Of the composers named above, Gerald Barry and Donnacha Dennehy have been particularly successful internationally (and not just as opera composers); their operas are being performed in the UK and the US, and their performances mentioned above were in fact part of international tours. Stylistically these pieces cover a broad range of musical languages, from Raymond Deane's modernism via Roger Doyle's electronically produced and/or enhanced sounds to Evangelia Rigaki's play with extended techniques and Brian Irvine's eclectic mix of different styles. Gerald Barry's recent comic operas can perhaps be described as a kind of "atonal Rossini" while Donnacha Dennehy has developed his own post-minimalist style. Given the general situation of art music in Ireland contemporary opera has done better than some may have expected, particularly in relation to the overall number of productions and performances.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the light of the establishment of a national opera company the situation of opera in Ireland is hopeful, yet still precarious, while the National Opera House is wrongly placed and therefore remains severely underused for much of the year. There is a constant low-key struggle going on between those supporting opera (and art music in general) and politicians and sections of the media which regard it as elitist and un-Irish. However, it is heartening to see that even under these conditions new and fascinating Irish operas regularly emerge, and that some Irish operatic composers have managed to take their place on the international stage.

Of the eighteen new operas listed in Appendix 3 nine were (wholly or in part) performed outside of Dublin – a good sign as in recent years Irish opera had more and more retreated to the capital city, with the Wexford Festival and Northern Irish Opera being the only notable exceptions (although 2018 appears to reverse this trend at least in part). The long-term future of opera in Ireland remains hopeful yet uncertain: while the designation of a "National Opera House" and the creation of "Irish National Opera" are positive developments, it is not clear whether this will lead to an increased provision of opera in the country in the long term. Irish National Opera has no long-term guarantee of existence which makes strategic planning difficult. The South's only two permanent professional orchestras (the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra) have not had principal conductors for several years while vacancies in both ensembles have been left unfilled in large numbers and for such a length of

time that one strongly suspects it to be the result of a deliberate strategy. Recently an independent state-sponsored report recommended detaching the National Symphony Orchestra from RTÉ and placing it under direct state control and funding. However, it is as yet not clear what the ultimate outcome will be – yet any decline of these two orchestras would be detrimental for the Irish operatic scene as their members form the backbone of the orchestras accompanying the majority of operatic performances in Ireland.²⁶

Given that the opera house in Wexford is now the National Opera House there is little chance of another dedicated opera house being established in Dublin. It also would hardly find a sufficient audience for a continuous operatic season running throughout the year – while there was by all accounts considerable enthusiasm for opera amongst different classes about a century ago even then this would probably not have been feasible. There are still fewer operatic performances in Dublin than there were a hundred years ago, but it is possible that there are more performances outside Dublin now than at that time – although numbers for the early twentieth century are not available it is likely that travelling companies would only have visited a few larger cities while today at least some productions are designed to also fit into smaller venues and perform in towns and regions that would not have seen opera in previous times. The live streamings of performances from the Metropolitan Opera in New York run in 30 cinemas in the South, including six in Dublin, and are quite successful. The broad range of larger and smaller companies staging opera in Ireland can be seen as an advantage in terms of the amount of energy, enthusiasm and variety of aesthetic approaches channelled into opera productions from many different angles, but it is also a source of insecurity as there is no long-term strategic planning possible even for the larger companies while some of the smaller ones in some years cannot present any production if they are not awarded funding. The multitude of providers also creates advertising problems particularly for the smaller companies.

Overall, 2018 was a hopeful year for opera in Ireland with more performances than in many a year before, but the genre still faces systemic challenges and continues its struggle for acceptance beyond the range of its enthusiastic supporters.

26 There are two smaller professional yet not permanent orchestras in the country: the Irish Chamber Orchestra and the Irish Baroque Orchestra. Their members meet for a small number of concerts per year, depending on the amount of funding they were awarded in any given season. Both orchestras occasionally accompany opera productions.

Appendix 1: Operas Staged in Ireland (North and South) during the 2017/18 Season

- Donnacha Dennehy, *The Second Violinist*
Dublin (4 performances), 2-8 October, Wide Open Opera (after four performances in Galway in July 2017 - three more performance will follow in London in September 2018)
- Robert O'Dwyer, *Eithne*
Dublin (1), October, Opera Theatre Company and RTÉ; concert performance
- 66th Wexford Festival Opera, 19 October – 5 November
 - Luigi Cherubini, *Medea* (5)
 - Jacopo Foroni, *Margherita* (5)
 - Franco Alfano, *Risurrezione* (5)
- Andrew Synnott, *Dubliners* (*Counterpoint*, *Boarding House*), two chamber operas after short stories by James Joyce
Wexford (4), Dublin (3), October/November; Wexford Festival Opera and Opera Theatre Company
- Giuseppe Verdi, *La Traviata*
Dublin (3), November; Lyric Opera
- W.A. Mozart, *Così fan tutte*
Belfast (4), Derry (2), December, Northern Ireland Opera
- W.A. Mozart, *La finta giardiniera*
Dublin (5), January; Royal Irish Academy of Music
- Michael Balfe, *The Sleeping Queen*
Dublin (1), January; DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama
- Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weill, *The Threepenny Opera*
Belfast (5), January/February; Northern Ireland Opera
- Thomas Adès: *Powder her Face*
Six cities (7), February/March; National Irish Opera and Northern Ireland Opera
- Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*
Dublin (3), March, May; North Dublin Opera

- Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca*
Dublin (5), March; Mikhailovsky Opera, St Petersburg
- Opera Briefs (two or three short operas annually presented by students)
Claudio Monteverdi, *Il ballo delle ingrate*
Judith Weir, *Scipios' Dream*
Dublin (3), March; Royal Irish Academy of Music
- W.A. Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*
Wexford (1), Dublin (3), April; National Irish Opera
- W.A. Mozart, *Der Schauspieldirektor*
Dublin (1), April; National Irish Opera
- Gioacchino Rossini, *L'Italiana in Algeri*
Lismore Castle (3), May/June, Blackwater Valley Opera Festival
- G.F. Handel, *Acis and Galatea*
Dublin (2), June, DIT Operatic Society (Gleeson Hall, DIT Kevin Street)
- Eric Sweeney, *Ulysses: An Opera*
Dublin (2), June, Unitary Church, extracts – concert performance
Words by James Joyce, adapted by Andrew Basquille
- Pyotr Tchaikovsky, *Eugene Onegin*
Belfast (2), June, Grand Opera House, Scottish Opera
- Christoph Willibald Gluck, *Orfeo ed Euridice*
Galway (5), July; National Irish Opera
- Claudio Monteverdi, *The Return of Ulysses (in English)*
Kilkenny (3), August, Kilkenny Arts Festival & Opera Collective
Ireland

Appendix 2

2017-2018 Season															
	Total	London	Cork	Letterkenny	Lismore Castle	Limerick	Derry	Belfast	Tralee	Kilkenny	Navan	Sligo	Galway	Wexford	Dublin
Eithne	1														1
The Second Violinist	4														4
Dubliners	7													4	3
Medea	5													5	
Margherita	5													5	
Risurrezione	5													5	
La Traviata	3														3
Così fan tutte	6						2	4							
La finta giardiniera	5														5
The Sleeping Queen	1														1
Threepenny Opera	5							5							
Powder her Face	7								1	1	1	1		1	2
Orfeo ed Euridice (NDO)	3														3
Tosca	5														5
Opera Briefs	3														3
Le nozze di Figaro	4													1	3
Der Schauspieler	1														1
L'Italiana in Algeri	3				3										
Acis and Galatea	2														2
Ulysses: An Opera	2														2
Eugene Onegin	3							3							
Orfeo ed Euridice (INO)	5												5		
The Return of Ulysses	3									3					
Total	88				3		2	12	1	4	1	1	9	21	38
Selected Performances in 2018/19															
The Second Violinist	3	3													
The Tales of Hoffmann	11		1	1		1			1	1	1	1	1		3
Bluebeard's Castle	3														3
Aida	4														4
Total	21	3	1	1		1			1	1	1	1	1		10

Appendix 3: Newly Commissioned Operas by Ireland-Based Composers 2013–2018

- Raymond Deane (composer) / Gavin Costick (libretto), *The Alma Fetish*
Dublin, 17 September 2013; Wide Open Opera
- Gerald Barry / Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*
five performances in four cities, 26 October-9 November 2013; Wide Open Opera
- Evangelia Rigaki / W.N. Herbert, *Antimidas, or Bankers in Hades*
Dublin, 12-14 December 2013
- Eric Sweeney / Mark Roper, *The Invader*
Waterford, 22-23 May; Wexford, 30 May 2014; Theatre Royal Productions
- Evangelia Rigaki / W.N. Herbert, *The Pregnant Box*, Dublin, 26 September 2014
- Brian Irvine / John McIlduff, *Things We Throw Away* (five short operas)
Dublin, 4-5 June 2014, 14 March 2015; Belfast, 10-11 April 2015; Wide Open Opera
- Brian Irvine / John McIlduff, *Bluebottle*
Dublin, 23 November 2014; Belfast, 15 April 2015; Derry, 22 October 2015; Music Generation Wicklow / Wide Open Music
- Brian Irvine / John McIlduff, *The Oldest Woman in Limerick*
Limerick, 12-13 December 2014; Wide Open Opera
- Ian Wilson, *The Last Siren*
Cork, 29 April 2014; Theatre Development Centre, Triskel
- Andrew Synnott / John Breen, *Breakdown*
Dublin, 20 January 2015 (concert performance); DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama
- Donnacha Dennehy / Enda Bates, *The Last Hotel*
Dublin, 27 September - 3 October 2015; Wide Open Opera
- Siobhán Cleary / Katy Hayes, *Vampirella*

Dublin, 21-25 March 2016; Royal Irish Academy of Music / The Lir National Academy of Dramatic Art

- Roger Doyle / Jocelyn Clarke, *Heresy*
Dublin, 28 October - 5 November 2016; META Productions
- Gerald Barry / Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*
Dublin, 2 March 2017 (concert performance); New Music Dublin
- Tom Lane / Lily Akerman, *Front of House*
Cork, 23-25 June 2017; Ulysses Opera Theatre & Cork Opera House
- Donnacha Dennehy / Enda Bates, *The Second Violinist*
Galway, 26, 27, 29 & 30 June 2017; Dublin, 2-8 October 2017; Landmark Productions / Wide Open Opera
- Andrew Synnott / Arthur Riordan, *Dubliners (Counterpoint, Boarding House)*, two chamber operas after short stories by James Joyce
Wexford, 20, 26, 29 October, 1 November; Dublin, 9-11 November 2017; Wexford Festival Opera and Opera Theatre Company
- Eric Sweeney, *Ulysses: An Opera*
Words by James Joyce, adapted by Andrew Basquille; Dublin, 15 & 16 June 2018 (extracts – concert performance); Unitary Church

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ISBN 978-961-7055-50-4

