

PHILISTINISM

...AN AERIAL VIEW

ROGER DOYLE



WE LIVE CLOSE TO OURSELVES, VAGUELY aware of bigger pictures, like people in large cities who wonder why they have respiratory problems, discovering their true situation only when someone takes to the air and photographs the haze of air pollution. So too with matters of culture.

Every musician I know feels frustrated that they can't reach wider audiences and feels as though something is wrong that they can't put their finger on. Sociologist Frank Furedi, author of *Where Have all the Intellectuals Gone? – confronting 21st century philistinism*, has the aerial view and it's just as disturbing as atmospheric pollution. This article lays out Furedi's arguments and places some of the issues raised in the context of Irish radio.

Consider this, on the subject of snobbery: if a snob is traditionally defined as 'one whose ideals and conduct are prompted by vulgar admiration for wealth and social position', then 'inverted snobbery' is motivated by an uncritical embrace of the ordinary and the popular.

The main targets of inverted snobs, says Furedi, are the 'elites', and their elitism is regarded as an unpardonable sin. According to Furedi this anti-elitist stance has had a profound impact on intellectual life. Nowadays there is great pressure upon academics, educators and cultural producers to buy into the populist dogma that has been constructed by anti-elitist thinking.

Sophisticated language, complex ideas, challenging education, and demanding art forms are today stigmatized as elitist and therefore deemed to be a bad

thing. The very claim to standards of excellence can be represented as elitist since, by implication, it disrespects those whose achievements fail to match it.

This embracing of the people and celebration of the ordinary paradoxically co-exists with a lack of belief in the capacity of the people to handle sophisticated and complex ideas. The philistine agenda, according to Furedi, patronises the public and treats them like children that need to be protected from more disturbing cultural and intellectual challenges. The aim of his book 'is to question... [the] patronizing underpinning of contemporary education and cultural politics. Such politics not only restrain intellectual and cultural creativity – they also infantilize the public and lower its expectations.'

This, I think, is promising material for anyone involved in the arts who may have been wondering why it is becoming so difficult to find outlets for new work.

Furedi's book focuses on Britain, where, he claims, there is a systematic attempt to reorient cultural institutions from dealing with serious subjects to mounting exhibitions that they believe the public can handle. There is now a barely contested consensus within the cultural and educational establishment that access and social inclusion should be at the heart of the missions of cultural institutions.

This approach is vigorously pursued by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and all the projects it funds have to publish access targets. Not surprisingly, institutions are attempting

A RECENT BOOK ARGUES THAT BRITAIN IS IN THE GRIP OF A 'PHILISTINE AGENDA' WHICH TREATS THE PUBLIC LIKE CHILDREN WHO NEED TO BE PROTECTED FROM CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL CHALLENGES. COMPOSER **ROGER DOYLE** FINDS PARALLELS IN IRISH BROADCASTING.

to meet access targets by any means that work to get more people to walk through the doors – ‘An ace caff with quite a nice museum attached’ was the slogan of Saatchi and Saatchi’s ad campaign for the Victoria and Albert Museum.

‘It is now never clear,’ says Furedi, ‘whether museums are masquerading as drop-in centres, or community centres pretending to be museums.’

Furthermore, Furedi cites a document published by the DCMS that demands that the curators of museums and galleries take on board the objectives of ‘combating social exclusion’ and try to ‘increase individuals’ self-worth, value and motivation’. It seems that the goal is to transform Britain’s cultural institutions into centres for therapeutic engagement with ‘excluded’ people.

But who are the real excluded people here? The artists past and present with something challenging to express, or the public who never normally go near museums?

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport also believes that people may be put off going to the library because it looks too much like... a library.

Better Public Libraries, a report published in August 2003 by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, blames ‘traditional notions of the book-lending centres’ for a 17 per cent fall in library visits. It demands that libraries should become a ‘living-room of the city’:

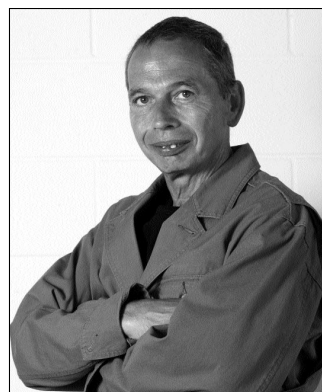
New libraries should increasingly be long-stay places for students, a safe haven for children, even a home from home. They should include cafés, lounge areas with sofas, and chill-out zones where young people can watch MTV, read magazines and listen to CDs on listening posts.

‘In other words, libraries can be involved in the provision of just about any service as long as it is not the tedious business of lending people books,’ says Furedi, ‘since getting as many people as possible to walk through the doors of the library is the principle objective.’

According to Furedi ‘inclusion’ is a policy peddled by bureaucrats for reasons

that have little to do with culture or education – a policy driven by officials who think they know best what the public needs, while pretending to be responding to public opinion.

There is a new breed of university managers, museum and gallery directors and ‘knowledge’ entrepreneurs who regard the content of culture and ideas with indifference. Their concern is to use culture to achieve an objective that is quite separate from its inner content... Because all of this really matters, a culture war against the philistines is long overdue.



*Sociologist Frank Furedi
– ‘a culture war against the
philistines is long overdue’*

New music and RTÉ lyric fm

In Ireland I have heard the words ‘inclusion’ and ‘access’ used by various Ministers for the Arts and Arts Council representatives over the years. We need to be very wary of these words and the possible negative influences there could be on the careers of living Irish artists in all disciplines as a result of policies derived from these words.

A good example in this country of the issues raised by Frank Furedi is RTÉ lyric fm, the classical music radio station. In recent years I have attended meetings with the head of radio at RTÉ, and separately, the head of RTÉ lyric fm, under the aegis of the Aosdána composers’ group, to try to convince them to increase their broadcasting output of Irish-composed music to 5 per cent (that works out at approximately 3 minutes per hour). Not a lot to ask and reasonable you might think, especially as there is

the matter of their receiving the licence fee money of the Irish people, which you would think would put the onus on them to fulfil their public service broadcasting remit, by reflecting the wide range of contemporary music activity on this island. But no, not that simple.

We were told that RTÉ lyric fm is under incredible pressure to keep its listenership up (it had just gone up to 3 per cent of total listenership at the time, from 2 per cent) and that playing works by living Irish composers (excepting those who compose in the Celtic/Riverdance style) would lose them that percentage. It is hiding away its composers instead of being proud of their achievements, which are many, in all age groups. Its particular brand of philistinism excludes the artists on its doorstep whilst waving everyone else in.

I heard Ravel’s *Bolero* on RTÉ lyric fm recently, after which the announcer said: ‘It goes on a bit doesn’t it?’ Lyric was desperate not to lose those listeners who thought it so, abasing itself to its imaginary short-attention-span audience.

Does RTÉ lyric fm see its role as fulfilling a therapeutic function like the museums in Britain? Its ads have shown people fishing, relaxing after a hard day, or on the way home having their road rage calmed by listening to the radio: music for the chill-out zone of the library and in the caff at the museum.

What is it about new music that is thought of as so alien to audiences? Other art forms can be challenging, mind-expanding and ground-breaking. Obviously music is too, but you’ll rarely hear it on Irish radio. A special role for music has been created – the equivalent of Valium, a de-stresser. Try to imagine this function being applied across the board to all novels, films and plays you will see this year, and you will have some idea how castrated classical music has become.

Recently RTÉ lyric fm invited proposals for the commissioning of new works ‘suitable for [its] daytime scheduling’. Without disrespecting any composer’s work that may result from this, I will eat my hat if any of these pieces are anything but easy listening.

A RESPONSE TO ROGER DOYLE

Below are a list of points made by Aodán Ó Dubhghaill, Head of RTÉ lyric fm, in response to the talk given by Roger Doyle at the Mostly Modern Open Forum.

- RTÉ lyric fm is not just 'the classical music radio station', rather we are RTÉ's 'music and arts' channel.

- While meetings took place prior to me being appointed Head of RTÉ lyric fm I am always open to such conversations. Since taking over as Head of lyric I have not been contacted by anyone about increasing the Irish-composed output on lyric. I would be very interested to know what is being referred to here – does it refer to *all* Irish-composed music or just a small section of Irish-composed music? Our current output on lyric stands at 6+% Irish content (composers and performers). There is an outline of some of lyric's commissions given below.

- It is simply wrong to say that we are hiding away our Irish composers – far from it. We are trying to increase their prominence in the schedule. This is about broadcasting and is not something I wish to apologise for – all radio stations are 'under incredible pressure to keep its listenership up'. I would go one step further – each radio station is under incredible pressure to *increase* its listenership! We broadcast to people and the listener is the most important person that we consider. That is our *raison d'être*. Without an audience we simply don't exist. RTÉ is co-funded – licence fee and advertising – both of which are crucial to our existence and both of which need to be satisfied. Irish-composed music in the 'Celtic/ Riverdance' style is popular and people want to hear it just as they want to hear the music of Beethoven, Mozart and Stravinsky.

- You may take sentences like the tongue-in-cheek 'It goes on a bit, doesn't it' regarding Ravel's *Bolero* out of context – but it

It would be unfair of me not to mention a programme which partially fulfils the public service remit on RTÉ lyric fm. It is Sunday night's *Horizons*, which is a half hour oasis devoted to contemporary classical music in all its acoustic and electro-acoustic manifestations, and is a breath of fresh air, so to speak, in the atmospheric haze.

I have always found the people who work on *Horizons* to be enthusiastic and professional. However, the format is of a magazine-type programme which plays only extracts of pieces, and those often underneath the voice of a composer being interviewed. There is still no dedicated programme for new music where the public can become accustomed to listening to complete untalked-over pieces.

BBC Radio 3, the British equivalent to RTÉ lyric fm, broadcasts its composers' works at all times of the day and has a dedicated two-hour Saturday evening programme called *Hear and Now*, its main contemporary music programme featuring live concerts and studio sessions as well as premieres of BBC-commissioned works. I would recommend going online to hear this programme as well as *Mixing It* – the 'basin of experimental music radio' – on BBC Radio 3's website (www.bbc.co.uk/radio). Each programme is archived and can be listened to at any time.

Irish composers need their music played in full and often, and must not be brought into an argument along the lines of '...but we played an extract of your music last month'. My royalty statements and the statements of all my peers show clearly that our music is being honoured by radio stations abroad a hundred-fold in comparison to the RTÉ lyric fm royalty returns. Irish composers have their noses against the window pane when they should be right inside at the party.

I should point out that RTÉ lyric fm's broadcasting of Irish traditional music, world music and jazz, though still limited, amounts to much more than the broadcasting of contemporary classical music, because of a perceived wider listenership I assume. 'Sure nobody listens to it', the oft-quoted attack, is now becoming true in a

ghastly way because nobody is broadcasting it.

During the last months of the last century RTÉ lyric fm broadcast a daring, brave and highly innovative series called *Countdown*, aired between 10 and 11pm, six nights a week. It was a series in one hundred parts – the music composed in each year of the twentieth century was highlighted for one hour each night. Presented by critic Michael Dervan, it gave us a historical and musically fascinating account of all the musical innovations and developments that took place in that century, year by year. Programming like that, it seems to me, will never happen again. In this century, my colleagues and I are witnessing the gradual abandonment by RTÉ lyric fm of its public service duty to acquaint the Irish public with what's going on in contemporary music practise.

I single out RTÉ lyric fm because here we have a cultural establishment, receiving finance from the public purse – which means most of the pressure to 'make money' is taken off its shoulders – that is behaving exactly like a commercial radio station – chasing the ratings.

This is a subtle new development of the last five years, as traditionally it has been the philistinism of commercialism which has been thought of as the enemy of artistic expression, or at least its main sparing partner. Now philistinism is in the process of growing another arm: cultural institutions.

This is a version of a talk given at the Open Forum of the Mostly Modern Contemporary Music Festival 2005, which took place on 2nd April in Dublin.

*Roger Doyle is a composer. His latest CD, *Passades – Volume 2*, has just been released on the Amsterdam-based label BV Haast. A few years ago a two hour live concert of his music, performed by the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, was broadcast on Dutch National Radio VPRO. Visit his website: www.rogerdoyle.com*

was a joke! Lyric has never been desperate not to lose listeners – our audience is increasing!

- The ad campaign you refer to is old (3 years+) – have a look and listen to more recent ads.

- To say that you will never hear music that is mind-expanding and groundbreaking on Irish radio is wrong. Look at the examples below – just a small sample of lyric’s ‘new music’ output. Please listen to the radio.

- RTÉ lyric fm’s 2004 commissions, far from being easy listening, are from these composers: Vincent Kennedy, Frankie Gavin, Marion Ingoldsby, Rob Canning, Mikael Fernstrom, Ben Dwyer, Frank Corcoran, Brent Parker, and Ronan Guilfoyle. We said we were particularly interested in short pieces for daytime radio – we never said that we would commission nothing else, and many of these pieces, or parts of them, will be played on daytime lyric fm.

- I moved the *Horizons* programme from being an hour-long programme for six months of the year to a year-round half hour as I felt the new music activity in Ireland deserves to be reflected all-year-round. The team working on this programme recently asked for more time as they wish to be able to play longer pieces. I am currently looking at this request. Stay tuned!

- The *Horizons* programme is not the only place in lyric where you will hear new Irish-composed works – try listening to

Soundings, The Full Score, The lyric Concert and other places in the schedule. It is not my belief that new music, particularly Irish new music, should be ghettoised on its own or into its own programme, rather it should stand up and be played alongside other composers.

For instance, this year so far we have included the following pieces in *The lyric Concert* on Tuesday evenings:

4/1/05: Seóirse Bodley, *A small white cloud drifts over Ireland* (15’)

11/1/05: George Osborne, *Piano Trio* (23’),

18/1/05: Mantovani, RTÉ LMF 2004 (13’)

25/01/05: Dusapin, RTÉ LMF 2004 (8’)

1/2/05: Siobhán Cleary, *Morphine*, RTÉ LMF 2004 (7’)

8/2/05: Saariaho, RTE LMF 2004 (9’)

15/2/05: Maresz, RTÉ LMF 2004 (15’)

16/02/05: Jane O’Leary, *In the Stillness of Time* (20’)

22/02/05: Ailís Ní Riain, *DON’T* (5’)

1/3/05: Rachel Holstead, *Enchant* (5’)

8/3/05: Gerald Barry, *Piano Quartet no.1* (11’)

15/3/05: RTÉ LMF 2005, Donatoni (15’)

17/03/05: John Kinsella, *Triptych* (11’) and *Osborne* (4’)

22/3/05: Benjamin Dwyer, *Paralaxis* (7’)

12/4/05: Frank Corcoran, *A Mhairín de Bharra*, RTÉ lyric fm commission (5’)

4/5/05: (tbc) Benjamin Dwyer, *Voces Criticas*, RTÉ lyric fm commission (15’)

19/5/05: (tbc) Raymond Deane, *Concursus*

(This is not a complete list of Irish composers broadcast on lyric – only a sample of one programmes output for the first five months of this year.)

- There is not, to my knowledge, a ‘British equivalent to RTÉ lyric FM’. RTÉ lyric fm is unique and has a unique (Irish) audience, although our listenership abroad is on the increase. Lyric is also a service based in a country of 4 million people. BBC Radio 3 is funded from a population 15 times that size! You can tune to *Horizons* and other programmes online also if you wish.

- Roger Doyle’s royalty payments indicating that his music is played more abroad are directly related to the size of the audience abroad.

- There has been no subtle new development. There has always been a lazy mind view that philistinism is alive and well and living in public service broadcasting. If there were any substance to what Roger Doyle was saying he wouldn’t be beating a tired old drum like this.

You don’t have any ‘enemies of artistic expression’ in RTÉ (if you are including us as a ‘cultural institution’) and particularly in RTÉ Radio and RTÉ’s Performing Groups. We have increased our commissioning from Irish composers and will continue to give Irish music the best exposure by bringing it to as wide an audience as possible both here in Ireland and abroad through our colleagues in the European Broadcasting Union.

RTÉ lyric fm is broadcast on 96-99 FM, Sky channel 915, and www.rte.ie/lyricfm

Interested in writing an article for JMI? JMI is always seeking new writers...

Traditional music • classical music • contemporary music • jazz • music education • music history • music criticism • letters to the editor • reviews • interviews • cultural debate • Irish musicians at home and abroad • a perspective from Ireland on music in the world

Cuirimid fáilte roimh altanna, léirmheasanna agus litreacha as Gaeilge

Contact the editor: editor@thejmi.com / Tel: + 353-(0)1-2867292