



DDD

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IRELAND

Piano Works

Sarnia • London Pieces • In those days

John Lenehan, Piano



John Ireland (1879 – 1962) Piano Music Volume 1

The English composer John Ireland often complained of what he perceived as a lack of attention to his work. Nevertheless, during his life-time, he had his fair share of exposure, although this has certainly been followed by subsequent neglect, with once popular works such as his *London Overture* now heard much less often than they once were. He himself habitually referred to his early orchestral work *The Forgotten Rite* as *Forgotten Quite* and to the symphonic rhapsody *Mai-Dun as May Not Be Done*, a mark of his rueful sense of humour, as of a feeling that he was badly done by.

Ireland was born in 1879, the son of Alexander Ireland, a native of Edinburgh and, by the time of his youngest child's birth, business manager and publisher of the *Manchester Examiner*. His mother, also from Scotland, was his father's second wife and thirty years her husband's junior. Ireland had some of his early education at Leeds Grammar School, but took the initiative, at the age of thirteen, without his parents' knowledge, to present himself for audition at the Royal College of Music, where one of his sisters was already studying. He was accepted by the College, intending to become a concert pianist, and also taking organ lessons with Sir Walter Parratt, organist of St George's Chapel, Windsor. Two years later he persuaded Stanford to accept him as a composition pupil. In the following years, while he attempted to establish himself as a composer, Ireland, supported by the money he had by then inherited from his parents, earned an additional living for himself as an organist and choirmaster, establishing lasting friendships with some of the boys in his charge. He settled in Chelsea, dividing his time between London, a retreat in Deal and regular visits to the Channel Islands. After the war he joined the teaching staff of the Royal College. There he continued to exercise influence on generations of students, among whom was Benjamin Britten, who had reason to complain of the irregularity of lessons, a matter later remedied, while he seems to have learned to tolerate the tendency of his teacher to occasional alcoholic excess. In 1927 he made a brief attempt at marriage. His wife, a student some thirty years his junior, proved as unsuitable a partner as Tchaikovsky's had fifty years earlier, and the marriage was quickly annulled.

In common with other musicians, Ireland suffered disruption to his life in 1939. He had at first thought to find peace in the Channel Islands, to be evacuated to safety when the surrender of France became imminent. He spent much of the war lodging with a clergyman he had first known as a young choirmaster and once the war was over returned to Chelsea, until London became impossible for him. He spent his final years in Sussex, where he died in 1962.

Ireland, with his long connection with the Church of England and its liturgy, wrote music for services, hymns and carols. He also added to English vocal repertoire in a valuable series of solo songs and choral works. Works for chorus and orchestra include *These Things Shall Be* and *Greater Love Hath No Man*, both of which won success. Orchestral compositions include a *Piano Concerto*, the string orchestra *Concertino pastorale* and the symphonic rhapsody *Maidun*, inspired by the British defence of Maiden Castle against the invading Romans in A.D.43. With some labour he completed a score for the film *The Overlanders*, one of his last major achievements, and added to chamber music repertoire, with a *Viola Sonata* for Lionel Tertis, two *Violin Sonatas*, the second for Albert Sammons, a *Cello Sonata* that Casals planned to take into his repertoire and a *Fantasy Sonata* for the clarinetist Frederick Thurston. For the piano, essentially his own instrument, Ireland wrote a quantity of music, one sonata and some forty short lyrical pieces. His most popular composition, *The Holy Boy*, inspired by one of his choristers, was originally a piano piece, but found its way into other genres in versions for string quartet, for unaccompanied voices and for solo voice and piano. His thought was much influenced by the Celtic mysticism of the novels of Arthur Machen, haunted by the ghosts of Roman Britain, and he also found affinity with the poems of A. E. Housman and the novels and poems of Thomas Hardy.

The present collection of piano music by John Ireland opens with the two pieces included in *In Those Days*, written in 1895. *Daydream* and *Meridian* were published under their general title only in the composer's old age, when he refused to revise what he had written at the age of sixteen, as a student at the Royal College, rightly understanding the youthful spontaneity of the pieces, during his first encounters with Stanford. The first of them, romantic in feeling, has a mood of gentle wistfulness in its tender chromaticism. The second piece suggests the gift Ireland had for organ improvisation. The writing, however, particularly in the central section, is entirely pianistic in its rhapsodic language.

The group of three pieces under the title *Sarnia, An Island Sequence*, was completed in the difficult period of 1940 and 1941. *Sarnia* was the Roman name for Guernsey, and the first of the pieces, *Le Catiroc*, takes its name from the deserted place, with its ancient dolmen, from which Ireland would watch the sunset over the sea. He prefaces the piece with words from the first-century writer Pomponius Mela: *All day long, heavy silence broods, and a certain hidden terror lurks there. But at nightfall gleams the light of fires; the chorus of Aegipans resounds on every side: the shrilling of flutes and the clash of cymbals re-echo by the waste shores of the sea.* The outer sections of the piece are marked by a sinister repeated bass note and the plaintive melody that rises, with increasing intensity, above it. The central section, with its dotted rhythms, suggests the dances of the Aegipans, the goat-footed satyrs of Pan. The

piece was originally conceived at Fort Saumarez, where Ireland had been staying in 1940, and dedicated to the flautist Alfred Sebire, a friend of the composer in Guernsey. *In a May Morning* is preceded by lines from Victor Hugo's *Les travailleurs de la mer* (The Toilers of the Sea): *C'était un de ces jours printanier où mai se dépense tout entier. Sous toutes les rumeurs, de la forêt comme du village, de la vague comme de l'atmosphère, il y avait un roucoulement. Les premiers papillons se posaient sur les premières roses. La profonde chanson des arbres était chantée par des oiseaux nés d'hier. Ils chantaient leur premier chant, ils volaient leur premier vol. Le printemps jetait tout son argent et tout son or dans l'immense panier percé de bois. Les pousses nouvelles étaient toutes fraîches vertes. Partout une divine plénitude et un gonflement mystérieux faisaient deviner l'effort panique et sacré de la sève en travail. Qui brillait, brillait plus; qui aimait, aimait mieux...* (It was on of those spring days when May exerts her full power. Under all the confused sounds, of the forest and of the village, of the waves and of the air, there was a gentle song. The first butterflies alighted on the first roses. The deep song of the trees was sung by birds born yesterday. They sang their first song, flew their first flight. The spring cast forth all its silver and all its gold in great abundance. The new shoots were all green and fresh. Everywhere a divine fullness and a mysterious swelling gave signs of the effort, sacred to Pan, of sap in labour. What shone, shone more; those who loved, loved better). The music opens tenderly, a display of Ireland's harmonic language, a nostalgic picture of the beauties of spring, the initial mood returning, after the relative energy of the central section. The piece was conceived during a period Ireland spent in 1940 at the Birnam Court Hotel in St Peter Port and dedicated to Michael, the young son of the owner. *Song of the Springtides* has at its head words from Swinburne:

*Upon the flowery forefront of the year
One wandering by the grey-green April sea
...Along the foam-flowered strand
Breeze-brightened...*

The piece, written largely in retrospect after the composer's return to England, is dedicated to Mrs Mignot, who had invited him to design a new organ for a church in Guernsey, an opportunity he had welcomed, with the concomitant duties of organist. The music is a song of the joy of spring, as expressive as any water music of the period, as the tides ebb and flow, surging in delight and then subsiding.

The *Prelude in E flat* is a work of peculiar charm. As so often, it breathes an air of gentle melancholy, a poignancy that justifies the composer Geoffrey Bush's comparison of Ireland to Fauré, although within a specifically English tradition. There is a strong tendency towards the key of C minor in the opening section, before a shift of tonality and mood. The music mounts to

a climax of intensity, before something of the opening feeling is restored. The piece ends in quiet serenity, as it makes its chromatic way to a final E flat major.

Ireland's three *London Pieces* were written between 1917 and 1920. *Chelsea Reach* depicts the River Thames at Chelsea and the nearby Battersea Bridge, then lit by gaslight. The scene is set at night, suggested as he walked one night by the river with his young friend, pupil and chorister Charles Markes. The piece is marked *Tempo di Barcarole* and the swaying rhythm is maintained throughout.

Ragamuffin resulted from a chance encounter with a street-urchin the composer had met on his way to a choir-practice at St Luke's in Chelsea. The boy had whistled a tune that Ireland promptly incorporated in music of cheerful insouciance. This and the preceding piece are both dated Autumn 1917. *Soho Forenoons*, written in February 1920, is marked *Allegretto, quasi Tambourine*. The music suggests something of the life of the streets of Soho, with its varied and cosmopolitan population, and the performance of street-musicians.

Month's Mind, written in 1933, is preceded by a quotation from Brand's Observations on Popular Antiquities: *...days which our ancestors called their 'Month's Mind', as being the special days whereon their souls (after death) were had in special remembrance – hence the expression of 'having a Month's Mind', to imply a longing desire*. The piece is an example of Ireland's mastery of this form of piano miniature, here expressive of gentle longing.

Ireland wrote his intensely chromatic *Ballade* in 1929, as he returned to normal creativity after the difficulties of his short marriage. The *Ballade* is a work of sinister turbulence. It opens quietly enough, as an angular melody emerges in the lower register, marked *misterioso*. A chromatic and sad story unfolds, leading to events of greater excitement, against a continued figure in accompaniment, a figure that retains its importance, in one form or another. The music increases in agitation, subsiding onto trilled notes in the lower register, before moving to a joyful C sharp major tonality, the key in which the *Ballade* eventually comes to a triumphant conclusion.

Columbine, written in 1949 and revised two years later, appeared first in a collection of piano pieces assembled by Leonard Isaacs. The title, of course, suggests the feminine and the music itself, whatever the composer's original intention, turns into a waltz. It was Ireland's last composition of this kind and has a characteristically nostalgic air about it. After the 1940s he wrote relatively little and in his final years was hampered by ill-health and failing sight, the latter making composition finally impossible.

John Lenehan

John Lenehan is one of Britain's most experienced and sought after chamber musicians. He regularly partners Julian Lloyd Webber and Nigel Kennedy and has worked with many other leading instrumentalists including James Galway, John Harle, Steven Isserlis and Tasmin Little. During the last few seasons he has appeared in major concert-halls in London, Amsterdam, Vienna, Salzburg, New York, Washington and Tokyo and has made a number of recordings for major record companies.

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STEREO

John
IRELAND

(1879 - 1962)

DDD

Playing
Time
59:44Piano Works Volume 1
John Lenehan, Piano

In those days

- | | | |
|----------|----------|------|
| 1 | Daydream | 3:53 |
| 2 | Meridian | 3:10 |

Sarnia

- | | | |
|----------|--------------------------|------|
| 3 | Le Catiorec | 7:42 |
| 4 | In a May Morning | 5:20 |
| 5 | Song of the Spring Tides | 6:19 |
| 6 | Prelude in E flat | 5:21 |

London Pieces

- | | | |
|-----------|----------------|------|
| 7 | Chelsea Reach | 6:04 |
| 8 | Ragamuffin | 1:53 |
| 9 | Soho Forenoons | 2:34 |
| 10 | Month's Mind | 3:57 |
| 11 | Ballade | 9:23 |
| 12 | Columbine | 3:21 |

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from 14th to 16th April 1995.Producer: Chris Craker
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Music Notes: Keith AndersonFind out about other Naxos
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