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unity of being: the music of Deirdre Gribbin

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A memory: an evening in 1993 in the Harty Room at Queen's University, Belfast. Sequenza, Northern Ireland's late lamented new music ensemble, are giving the first performance of His Eyes by Deirdre Gribbin. There are four musicians, a violinist, a cellist (who also plays a second cello, weirdly tuned), an uilleann piper, and a percussionist (playing tabla, bodhran, bones, and kanjira, a south Indian frame drum). The foot of the stage is lit by candles. The musicians walk around at times; sometimes they play only by the flicker of candlelight; at one point we sit in total darkness. The programme note tells us that the music was inspired by The Blind Piper by Joseph Haverty. (The painting, the best known work of this nineteenth-century Galway artist, shows an aging piper playing his music at sunset in a leafy clearing in a wood. Beside him crouches a young girl, but she looks out at us, not at him, and seems hardly to be listening. Who is she? the programme note asks. A listener or a guide? His eyes?) Each of the four players seems to be in a separate world and, at the beginning, they find it hard to establish contact with each other, maybe analogously in some ways to the condition of blindness. It's one of the strangest pieces I've ever heard – utterly compelling and magical, with plaintive fragments of melody from the pipes against the banging and ticking of the percussion. It's experimental, profoundly Irish, and quite different in tone and content from any music I can think of. Its composer is a softly-spoken twenty-six-year-old from west Belfast. Somehow I don't quite find the courage to go up and speak to her afterwards, to tell her how knocked out I am by her music. The moment passes.

Twelve years on, Deirdre Gribbin has emerged as one of the strongest and most individual Irish voices on the international concert scene. She has written nearly fifty works, including an opera (Hey Persephone!, done at the Almeida and Aldeburgh Festivals in 1998); orchestral and chamber works; works for voice and for choir; pieces for solo players; music for the theatre and radio; and the haunting film score to My Kingdom, a brutal story of Liverpool's docklands, starring Richard Harris in his last big role. Her orchestral work Empire States, an RTÉ commission for the NSOI, was an award winner at the 2003 UNESCO International Rostrum of Composers; and earlier this year her violin concerto Venus Blazing toured Britain

on a Contemporary Music Network tour. She is Senior Fellow in Composition at Trinity College, London, where she currently teaches.

What does her music sound like? No composer likes to be categorised, but if pushed I'd describe it as generically European, specifically northern European – it has affinities with Scandinavians like Per Nørgård or Poul Ruders, particularly orchestrally, sharing a highly developed sense of colour and texture. It has a marvellous sense of time (or timelessness; in the last movement of her string quartet Amazing Face the folky, dance-like music unexpectedly gets stuck on a repeated phrase and settles into a quiet, ecstatic loop for minutes on end: time seems frozen). Her music is heard and felt, rather than calculated; it is aware of history and heritage, yet is contemporary and forward-looking; it's skilful and carefully made, yet approachable and inviting. Then, of course, there's the matter of its Irishness.

"I was only two years old when The Troubles began", she wrote. "The situation there though my childhood, teenage and undergraduate years has undeniably affected thoughts and feelings; has made me who I am". She grew up in the Falls Road area in a terrible time; going shopping with her mother she remembers having to dodge the cross-fire between paramilitaries and soldiers, and watching buses being hijacked and set on fire. "You don't forget things like that", she told a journalist. Yet it took many years before her "thoughts and feelings" about these years would find expression in her work.

There was music all around her when she was growing up. Many of her father's family were traditional musicians; one of her father's uncles made violins. Her mother's sister was a self-taught classical pianist with perfect pitch who, says Gribbin, had she lived in a different era, would have developed into a very fine performer. She took the young Deirdre from the age of six to Ulster Orchestra concerts every Friday night; in the mid-seventies not so many people ventured out to the Ulster Hall. She heard a lot of music that way, and "a lot went in". She would scribble on the back of her programme, her lines and shapes responding to what was happening in the music. At the age of ten she took up the flute, which remained her main instrument, though she also played piano; occasionally she'd play a bit of traditional music but concentrated on classical repertoire. She performed in wind bands, a youth orchestra and chamber groups at the Belfast School of Music and elsewhere. Even though she played "incessantly" throughout her teens, she wasn't particularly thinking of a career as a performer. Besides, she had another love: the visual arts. She would take herself off to exhibitions in Dublin during her later teens, and planned to study graphics and art history when she finished school. But at the very last minute, holding an offer of a place on a visual arts degree, she changed her mind. "Music was simply more important". At the age of eighteen she enrolled to study Music at Queen's University. Had she thought of leaving Ireland at that point? No, she says, she wasn't quite ready – and in any case there was no particular encouragement to go

elsewhere. Looking back, she is very pleased she stayed: at Queen's she discovered new music and began to compose.

One of the distinctions of the Queen's School of Music during her time, the late 1980s, was that "they had a composer in residence, which many University departments don't have. That was an incredible exposure". Kevin Volans, who held the post in her years there, "was the most outrageous person I'd ever met. And a real inspiration". Besides Volans there was the excitement of the Sonorities Festival, and the Lutoslawski performances organised by the then Head of Department, Adrian Thomas. These concerts provided her first concentrated exposure to new music. Although she was heavily into contemporary visual arts, contemporary music seemed rarer, less accessible practically; and yet, looking at new work by Anish Kapoor and other contemporary artists on her trips to Dublin, "I was always was thinking about where music was fitting in to this contemporary world". The first encouragement to compose came when she was twenty, by way of an Ulster Orchestra workshop at Queen's for which students were invited to contribute pieces. She wrote a short string quartet. "I really enjoyed it – there was something different about it". It seemed clear that this was the beginning of something. "Twenty is quite late to start composing", she remarks, "but I'm glad, because I was able to know why I was doing it". The first item on her list of works, the solo flute piece Giles (after a painting by Watteau) was written while she was still at Queen's, and she played it in her final recital there – consisting entirely of twentieth-century music – before graduating in 1989.

Having decided to become a composer she went on to do a Masters degree at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London, studying with the English composer Robert Saxton. Towards the end of her time there her career began to take off. The Isamniion Fragments was premiered by London Brass at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in 1991, and later that same year a piano piece, Per Speculum in Aenigmata (inspired by Borges's essay "The mirror of enigmas"), was played by Joanna MacGregor and won the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival Composition Prize. Professionally speaking, she had arrived. Yet in her own mind she hadn't yet perfected her craft. During her student days in London one of the composers whose music she most admired was the Danishman Per Nørgård (still today she thinks of Nørgård's orchestral work Twilight as one of her favourite pieces of music); plucking up courage, she sent him some of her scores and was astonished some weeks later to receive a phone call from him inviting her to come and study with him. She spent most of 1992 in Copenhagen, arriving in January in the freezing cold to "very grey skies and short days". She worked on a piano concerto, one of the few pieces she has never finished, but she doesn't regret it; her music was changing very fast. The main thing she learned there was orchestration. "It absolutely fulfilled my interest in colour", she says. "I love the idea that you're painting music".

She came back to London, worked in restaurants to pay the rent, and wrote music. It was at this point she had her first commission, for the 1993 Sonorities Festival at Queen's: Jack B., a piano quartet based on the work of the Irish painter Jack B. Yeats, who had become her favourite artist. (Today she still goes regularly to the Irish Sale at Sotheby's, where unknown canvasses by Yeats are auctioned, making fleeting appearances in public before disappearing back into the oblivion of private collections.) Yeats, she wrote, "avoided contemporary European ways of working and followed a unique perception... every stroke on the canvas counts, every detail is important". Jack B. is gutsy stuff, energetic and original; like its inspiration it dares to take chances, especially in the long, unflagging second movement ("...the darkest part of the spirit..."), the earliest example in her work of a long form that pushes past comfortable proportions and opens out to new dimensions that we haven't foreseen.

Her music of the mid-90s is quite often reflective in tone, a sort of nature period: the guitar piece The Sanctity of Trees, for example, or the viola piece North. The most beautiful of these works for me is How to Make the Water Sound, for violin, cello and piano, a commission from South East Arts for the Fidelio Trio. The exquisitely sparse fragments of melody of the opening get caught in swirling patterns, all in a very high register; the music flows and bubbles, never the same twice. "The biggest influence was the water's actual sound", she wrote. During these years she twice spent the summer months in Ladakh in India, a spectacular region framed by imposing mountain ranges, the Karakorams to the north and the Himalayas to the south. She spent time researching and recording Ladakhi folk music and learned much about Buddhism and meditation. Back home, the mid-90s were a time of professional consolidation: in 1997 she was appointed Northern Arts Composing Fellow and moved to Northumberland.

Through these years, even though her professional life was leading her outside of Ireland, Irish subject matter is a constant thread in Gribbin's music (even in miniature: Cease, a three-minute commission for the Composers Ensemble in London in 1995, is an arrangement of a song by the Belfast band The Barleycorn and U2's "Sunday Bloody Sunday"). However, this identification entered a new phase in 1997 with the composition of her large-ensemble work Tribe, her first political piece about Northern Ireland. Given the gentleness of so much of her mid-90s output, this music has a totally different tone of voice. She describes it as "very brutal"; it's an angry piece, a response to then-recent events in Northern Ireland, specifically Drumcree (the conflicts, particularly intense in the mid-90s, surrounding the Orange marches from the Episcopalian church of Drumcree, on the outskirts of Portadown, through the Catholic Garvaghy Road every Sunday before the Twelfth of July). The music sets snatches of folk-style music against marching band music – a juxtaposition that recalls Charles Ives, except that this particular juxtaposition is much bleaker and more politically charged. Tribe is dedicated "to all my friends living in Northern Ireland". It's the first time she'd spoken out in her music about

the pain she'd felt growing up in Belfast at the time she did. These feelings are abundantly clear in the music, but just in case there could be any doubt she decided to intensify them still further; given the chance to present the piece in an all-Gribbin concert in the Music of Today series (the free 6pm concerts held in London's Royal Festival Hall) she engaged lighting designer Jeff Ravitz to "light" the piece, and explained how she wanted it done. "He had a search light going through the audience. And people left. They were really disturbed. I'd lived in west Belfast, and often you'd be woken up at night by the search lights coming through the crack in the curtains and the room would suddenly be really bright. It was that sense of intrusion – I wanted that to be part of the experience for people in the audience as well". Tribes is a disturbing piece even without the lights; but then it's a response to disturbing circumstances. (And although some people left during the RFH performance, some 600 other people stayed: the music made its impact.)

Why does she think it took so long for Northern Irish subject matter to come out in her music? "Well, partly because I'd left, partly because I thought I shouldn't discuss this... then I saw others doing it, not Irish people, and I thought perhaps I could give another perspective". Besides which, "we can all talk about the Northern Irish self-deprecation, the feeling that 'oh, I can't possibly say that'. But I began to feel that I have a responsibility to talk about this". Confronting the Northern Irish question in Tribes "actually felt really good. It felt like a release to be able to write something about it".

Northern Irish issues, as we shall see, have not gone away. But Gribbin's music is about much more than Ireland. 1998 saw the première of her opera Hey Persephone!, the Greek story of Demeter and Persephone transplanted to the environment (and vernacular) of present-day Glasgow. The opera, which won an Arts Foundation Prize, is her largest work to date, and urgently needs a second production. Another line of interest was encouraged by living in the late nineties in Northumberland, in a remote village "surrounded by a great expanse of sky": a fascination with comets and planetary phenomena. (In 1997 she was able to observe Hale-Bopp every night.) Several works, including two major ones, have drawn inspiration from the behaviour of the night sky: the clarinet concerto Celestial Pied Piper (completed in New York, where she'd gone on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1999-2000), and the violin concerto Venus Blazing, a key work from 2001. While living in New York she often visited the Rose Center for Earth and Space on Central Park West, and gazed at data from the surface of Venus. The music of the violin concerto responds both to scientific observations of the planet and to the symbolism of Venus in literature and mythology. Most recently, Venus Blazing attracted a lot of media coverage in Britain as part of a Contemporary Music Network tour (which borrowed its name) when it was programmed alongside works by her Scottish colleague James MacMillan. Notably, she collaborated with theatre director Lou Stein and lighting designer Jeff Ravitz in setting the work in a visually spectacular stage environment, following on from their

earlier work with Tribe. Even more unusually, Gribbin herself performed in the concerto; in a long black dress, with elaborate make-up, long red nails and tousled hair, she first introduced the piece (in the role of an emissary from another world – the planet Venus – lit from below by an ultraviolet light); then, once the music began, she moved to one side of the stage to play percussion, both watching over and participating in the world she'd created.

The subject of her homeland resurfaced in her music in Unity of Being, subtitled "A Peace Anthem for Northern Ireland", an Ulster Orchestra commission to mark the orchestra's 35th season which was premiered in the Waterfront Hall in Belfast in September 2001. "The title comes from W.B. Yeats", she told an interviewer, "who was talking about never being able to find a balance between life and art. But the sense of unity I want to convey is that of Northern Ireland: neither Ireland nor Britain, but a place with its own distinct identity. Maybe a lot of people living there don't know how special that unified culture could be". The work acquired a whole new resonance thanks to the circumstances of its second performance a few weeks later, when it opened the UK With NY Festival in New York. "It was the month after 9/11", she recalls, "and the concert title became Unity of Being. People came up to me afterward saying they were expecting a lovely Irish thing, but it's a very brutal piece. And yet a lot of women came up and thanked me. It was very emotional. It was one of those moments when you think music is really important".

Her next orchestral work, Empire States, likewise engages with big issues. The piece has a strongly political agenda: it is "about" the American Dream, which the Empire State Building symbolises. But it bangs no drum (other than literally) and asks a question instead: what has happened to America? The music is "a reminder of that dream, of hopes and positive aspirations for the good of the masses rather than the selfish determination of the pig-headed individual". No prizes for guessing who she's referring to; present-day America, this music seems to say, has betrayed the American Dream. Given the conservative state of much new music programming in the U.S., Gribbin holds little hope that the piece will ever be done there. If not, then too bad for the Yanks; I'll nail my colours to the mast and say that Empire States is one of the best orchestral works of recent years by any composer – brilliantly written and marvellously paced, with an emotional curve that moves from the viscerally thrilling to the emotionally devastating. The clanging bells of the opening propel us into music of great energy and buoyancy which renews itself without let-up for fully nine minutes, then dissolves, as if lost, into music of unbearable beauty and poignancy; the piece ends in windswept, desolate terrain. Nothing is settled: the questions remain.

Given the unconventional career path she's taken, and her tendency to ask uncomfortable questions through her music, it was both surprising and gratifying that Gribbin was appointed Artistic Director of the London-based Society for the Promotion of New Music in 2003. "I was

very aware of the negative perceptions of the society", she admits, "and at one time I myself would have subscribed to the 'Society for the Prevention of New Music' label that people gave it". She'd never submitted any of her own work to the SPNM, "because it was very much a club at one time. I just wanted to open it out, and really change the whole face of it". She feels its work should centre around providing "professional development" for young composers. She has also embarked on a search for new venues and new forms of interdisciplinary collaboration, taking contemporary music out of the ghetto, and bridging the gap between the music and the listening public. "We did a concert at The Spitz, last December, of new string quartets – two-minute string quartets – and we could have sold the place out three times". She has little patience with composers who are content to stay in their garret and court their muse. "That's not the way it's going to be in the future. It's all about personal connections with people and performers... composers need to realise that future work will depend on their skills as communicators and in education contexts and in areas outside composition itself".

Gribbin says she can't imagine living anywhere else than London at the moment. And yet "I still feel very foreign. I know that even if I really wanted to be part of it I probably couldn't be! So it's very well that I'm just doing my own thing". And the commissions keep coming: her most recent is a BBC commission for the Ulster Orchestra, for a percussion concerto to be premiered at the Belfast Festival in 2006. "After I wrote Unity of Being", she says, "I thought: I won't write about Northern Ireland again. And now I'm just about to!" This new work takes the cultural issues she first addressed in Tribe a stage further; it's a concerto for six Lambeg drums and orchestra. Can she really detach the sound of the drums from their cultural signification enough to be able to work with them? The poet Louis MacNeice remembered "the voodoo of the Orange bands" as one of the nightmares of his Co. Antrim childhood; but Gribbin is unfazed. Yes, she admits, it involves "absolutely confronting a culture" that is not hers; "I looked at it in a very distant way and thought, this is a culture that shouldn't die, because this drumming is very skilled, and these people should continue to drum... I love the sound of it, and that's the prime force". Her inspiration is fired by the "fantastic sounds" and by "the whole dramatic impact of it – it's going to be an incredibly visual piece".

If there is a political message in her music it is one of unification, of healing rifts, of reclaiming values that are buried or are temporarily out of focus. Unity of Being is both the title of her peace anthem for her homeland and a quality that she strives for in her own life. Deirdre Gribbin is a quiet revolutionary, not content to leave things the way she found them. She is an artist who makes a difference.