

OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

PROFESSOR HARRY WHITE on 5 May 2022 in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*, on **AXEL KLEIN**

A Sheansailéir, a mhuintir na hOllscoile agus a dhaoine uaisle, cuireann sé an-áthas orm tráthnóna inniu an Dochtúir Axel Klein a chur in aithne agus é a chur i láthair anseo don chéim dochtúir sa cheol (*honoris causa*).

Chancellor, members of the university, distinguished guests: it is indeed an honour and a sovereign joy to introduce to you this afternoon Dr Axel Klein, and to present him for the degree of Doctor in Music, *honoris causa*, at this gathering of the National University of Ireland. Axel Klein is the foremost intelligencer of twentieth-century Irish art music most especially, and without hyperbole a scholar whose work has proved absolutely formative to the field in which he has distinguished himself over the course of thirty-five years.

He is also a singularly modest and unassuming person, so that if I enter these claims on his behalf in these formal, not to say ceremonial circumstances, I do so safe in the knowledge that he is, at least on this occasion, unable to disavow them.

But the musicologist whose work we honour this afternoon is also an historian whose patient and pliant excavations have courageously redressed the silence and cultural neglect in which Irish art music has lived for much of its existence. Notwithstanding the immense lustre and prestige which rightly attaches to traditional music in this country, it remains the case that Irish art music, or for want of a better phrase, Irish classical music, most emphatically including classical music of the present day, has stumbled in the shadows of a cultural and indeed educational milieu indifferent to the sounding forms of Ireland's European heritage and creative musical estate.



Merely to say as much is to court controversy, but as Axel Klein himself remarked at the outset of a paper published in 2005, ‘whereas virtually every other western country can listen to its own musical past, Ireland – apart from its ethnic traditions – cannot.’ In these reduced circumstances, ‘the distant music

mournfully murmureth’, to borrow a phrase from an early poem by James Joyce which served as an epigraph to Axel’s first book, published in 1996, and entitled *Die Musik Irlands im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert* (Irish Music in the Twentieth Century). That book, which was the very first monograph ever to devote itself specifically to Irish art music in this period, remains unsurpassed not only as a marvellously detailed chronicle and guide to the achievement of Irish composers in the twentieth century, but as an awakening, a stimulus to further research and a constant point of reference in the literature which has grown around this subject since its appearance twenty-six years ago.

One might well ask how it is that a young German musician (and classical guitarist), born in Münster, Westphalia, some sixty years ago, and educated at the University of Hildesheim (where he took his doctoral degree in 1995), should have in the meantime devoted practically his entire career as a musicologist to ‘listening to Ireland’s musical past’ (and indeed, to its musical present). The short answer to that intriguing question is that Axel spent the academic year 1987-8 as an exchange student in Trinity College Dublin, during which (he was then a student of cultural pedagogy) he came into contact with Irish art music for the first time. He also met Brian Boydell (then professor of music at TCD) and Aloys Fleischmann (professor of music at UCC) and these encounters were to prove decisive for everything that was to follow. In fact, Professor Fleischmann, whose name I can never utter without affection, profound respect and gratitude, was I daresay a pivotal influence on Axel Klein’s subsequent career (as he was on mine), even if we must likewise warmly acknowledge Axel’s *Doktorvater*, Professor Werner Keil, who supervised Axel’s brilliant forays into what was then largely unknown and unresearched territory.

We Irish, I may say in passing, owe a great deal to the intellectual curiosity and passion of German scholarship. Many people here today will readily acknowledge this in other domains, such as philology, folklore and the study of Irish itself, but it is no less true to say that the influence of scholars such as Heinrich Beyer (the first professor of music at Maynooth and subsequently at UCD) and Fleischmann himself provided a bedrock for the growth of Irish musicology in subsequent generations.

Axel Klein's own contribution to this more recent proliferation of Irish musical scholarship confirms and graces these German precedents. In musicological terms, moreover, Axel has proverbially become 'more Irish than the Irish themselves.'

He has also enlarged and deepened the template of Irish art music, and far beyond the confines of the twentieth century. In his subsequent monographs, including *Irish Classical Recordings – A Discography of Irish Art Music* (2001), *O'Kelly, an Irish Musical Family in Nineteenth Century France* (2014) and *Bird of Time, The Music of Swan Hennessy* (2019), Axel has single-handedly repopulated the hitherto forlorn ranks of Irish musical composition in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through the agency and empirical brilliance of his research.

He has also actively collaborated with musicians and recording companies here in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe to produce a steady stream of premier performances which truly affirm his own determination to attend upon and listen to Ireland's musical past.

The title of Axel's critical biography of Swan Hennessy comes from a remark by the composer himself: *The Bird of Time is on the Wing*, [meaning, in Hennessy's case, and in my own here today, that time is getting on!] and this motto flutters onto the page as I read this citation, because it is impossible in this brief advertence even to nominate the extent of Axel's transformative work on behalf of Irish art music, still less to appraise it. But let me close with just one further instance of his scholarship, and a characteristically generous one at that. I can honestly attest that without Axel's unrivalled expertise and prodigious contributions to *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland* (known to one and all as *EMIR*) which Barra Boydell and I edited in 2013, the scholarly heft and sinew of that publication would be far less than it is. To add that Axel himself contributed over 85 articles to *EMIR* gives some notion of his magnanimity and passion as a scholar of music in Ireland. I cannot count the number of times that Barra and I, in the course of editing this heroic enterprise, depended on Axel's astonishing command of the details of Irish musical history.

'Ask Axel' became our constant watchword and resolve throughout the ten years we devoted to this project. It is small wonder that because of his learning and generosity alike, Axel is such a well-beloved figure among Irish musicologists today, and that he was elected to honorary life membership of the Society for Musicology in Ireland in 2015. I cannot imagine a worthier recipient of the accolade he is about to receive, and I rejoice in the fact that Axel is the first musicologist to be thus honoured by the NUI.

When Edward Elgar dedicated his first symphony to the German conductor Hans Richter, who gave the premier performance of this work in 1908, he wrote on the score, 'To Hans Richter, true artist and true friend.' I likewise salute Axel Klein as a true scholar and true friend of Irish music, and thereby commend his wonderful work to you on this occasion.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis hunc meum filium, quam scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Musica, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo, totique Academiae.