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Patrick Zuk

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of an Irish composer in social
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**Music School
University of Durham**



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**A. J. Potter (1918-1980):
The career and creative achievement of an Irish composer
in social and cultural context**

Abstract

A. J. Potter (1918-1980) was one of the most significant composers working in Ireland in the latter part of the twentieth century. This thesis surveys his career and creative achievement, which have not hitherto been subjected to detailed scrutiny. The opening chapter presents a biographical overview: its first part outlines the circumstances of Potter's childhood and early adulthood, including his studies with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London, his period of service in the British Army during World War II and his subsequent three-year sojourn in Africa; the second continues the narrative from 1951, when he settled permanently in Ireland, up to his death in 1980. In addition to detailing events of note in his private and professional life, an important subsidiary focus of this section is to depict the impoverished and culturally marginalised nature of Irish musical life at this period and describe the frustrations that these conditions engendered for the composer and his contemporaries. The remaining chapters are devoted to an examination of Potter's major works. Chapter 2 considers four student compositions that were written or conceived in the late 1930s and were subsequently revised when he resumed composing in 1949 after a creative silence of over a decade. Chapter 3 is divided in two parts: the first delineates the salient features of his mature creative aesthetic, while the second provides an account of his later orchestral works. The remaining chapters explore his choral music and stage works, which, in addition to the scores previously described, constitute his most noteworthy achievements.

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Introduction

Until fairly recently, the Irish tradition of European art music — to use the rather cumbersome and unsatisfactory designation which is generally used to distinguish it from Irish folk music — has been largely unexplored and unknown, even in its country of origin. Due to a number of complex circumstances intimately bound up with the country's troubled colonial history, this tradition has occupied a decidedly marginalised place in national cultural life. Audiences for classical music have always been small and musical infrastructures are quite underdeveloped in comparison with most other European states. No full-time professional symphony orchestra existed in Ireland until the twentieth century, and even today, concert life is rather restricted. Recent commentators, such as Harry White and Joseph Ryan, have argued — implausibly, in my view — that these circumstances can largely be attributed to the baneful influence of Irish nationalism, but their attempts at explanation neglect much more obvious causal factors. Ireland's present-day affluence is a recent phenomenon: for most of its history, the country was comparatively poor. It lacked the natural resources which had made the Industrial Revolution possible in Britain. It consequently never developed the sizeable manufacturing base that led to the formation of large urban centres in which the creation and maintenance of opera houses and symphony orchestras could be an economically viable possibility. By far the greater proportion of the Catholic population lived in conditions of extreme poverty until the later nineteenth century, particularly in rural areas. The calamitous effects of the potato famines of the 1840s are too well known to need description here, or the subsequent waves of emigration that ensued and which continued until the 1960s on account of mass unemployment and widespread hardship. Many Irish people never continued their education beyond primary school. Opportunities to encounter classical music or receive a specialised musical education were, needless to say, virtually non-existent outside the principal cities, and would probably have been considered an unaffordable and irrelevant luxury even if they had been.

These circumstances were hardly propitious for the emergence of a thriving musical life, let alone a flourishing native school of composers. It was really only from the 1930s onwards that, thanks to the efforts of a few pioneering figures such as Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992) and Brian Boydell (1917-2000) who made concerted efforts to improve the quality of musical education and foster the growth of musical infrastructures, that conditions began to improve slowly. Nonetheless, native composers still contended with significant frustrations. The conditions of Irish musical life placed considerable restrictions on their creative activity and rendered it infeasible to write certain types of works — if they wished ever to hear them performed, at any rate. Apart from the professional ensembles maintained by the national broadcasting station Radio Éireann (later, with the advent of television in 1961, Radio Telefís Éireann), which by 1966 comprised a symphony orchestra, a light orchestra, a small radio choir and a string quartet, there appear to have been no other performing groups in the country that operated on a full-time basis. Neither was there a full-time professional opera company or ballet company equipped with comparable resources to those operating in houses in Britain or on the Continent. For the most part, a composer's only hope of a performance lay with RÉ/RTÉ — a situation which, for many reasons, was hardly satisfactory. Then, there was no Irish music publisher with the resources to promote native works, which made it very difficult for them to make wider headway and also meant that it was virtually impossible for an Irish composer to make a living solely by means of his or her pen. And not only did composers receive scant remuneration for their efforts, but they also received scant recognition: if audiences for classical music in Ireland were small, audiences for new music were smaller still; and, gallingly, it sometimes transpired — as Potter was to discover — that the premieres of new works would not receive so much as a mention in the national newspapers, the only organs to report on such events in the absence of specialist periodicals. It is consequently hardly surprising that the outputs of many twentieth-century Irish composers, almost without exception, remain more or less unknown, even in their country of origin. Much of their music is still in manuscript and can only be consulted in archives. In most

cases, it is difficult to come by detailed information about their careers, as very few biographies or studies of Irish composers have appeared in print and scholarship on the Irish art music tradition is still in its earliest stages. These circumstances naturally tend to perpetuate the neglect of an important aspect of Irish cultural life which is of considerable richness and interest.

The present work attempts to remedy this critical neglect in the case of a composer who is generally regarded as one of the most significant figures of his generation, Archibald James Potter (or 'A. J. Potter', the form of his name that he preferred to use in professional contexts). Born in Belfast in 1918, Potter studied composition with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music in London between 1936 and 1938. The course of his professional career is somewhat unusual, in that it was interrupted for ten years from the outbreak of war in 1939 until 1949, during which time he served with the British Army in Europe and the Far East, and subsequently worked in Nigeria. For reasons that are not entirely clear, his ambition to become a professional musician reasserted itself at the end of this period and he began to compose once more. He settled in Ireland in 1951 to take up a position as Vicar Choral at St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. Around this time, his music began to come to wider attention, thanks to a series of competition successes, and he rapidly developed a reputation as a composer of talent. His output over the next three decades was rather unconventional in nature and reflected the straitened circumstances of Irish musical life at the period. He was not very productive of large-scale works in a serious vein, largely because of the dearth of professional ensembles and the consequent difficulty of arranging performances. In spite of this, however, he completed a number of substantial orchestral works, including two symphonies (one of which, the *Sinfonia de Profundis* is generally regarded as one of his finest achievements), four ballets, two operas and a number of works for chorus and orchestra. It is on some of these scores that his reputation as a composer will ultimately rest. Most of the remaining works in Potter's catalogue are very different in nature and largely fall into two categories – short pieces of light music and arrangements. These were initially composed mostly for the Radio Éireann Light

Orchestra in the 1950s and 1960s, but later in his career he also wrote a substantial quantity of pieces in a similar vein for brass, wind and military bands. As Potter would have been the first to admit, most of these amounted to little more than musical journalism and were undertaken solely for the purposes of earning a living. Although they are often skilfully written, it would be completely unfair to approach them with the same expectations that one might bring to bear on his serious compositions.

In assessing Potter's achievement, this study is consequently concerned mostly with the works in the first category that I have described – some of which should undoubtedly rank amongst the most noteworthy Irish compositions of their period. It opens with a biographical chapter that offers an overview of Potter's career: in view of the fact that comparatively little detailed information about the composer is currently available, this was clearly necessary in order to create a context in which individual works could be meaningfully discussed. It is divided into two parts. The opening section provides an account of Potter's early life before he moved to Ireland in 1951, while the second section outlines the course of his later career. An important subsidiary focus of this chapter has been to describe the circumstances of Irish musical life as Potter encountered them and to explore the various ways in which they impinged upon his work.

The chapters that follow survey Potter's principal compositions. Chapter 2 discusses a number of student works that he either revised or completed between 1949 and 1952 when he resumed composing after an eleven-year creative silence. The general stylistic orientation of these pieces is considered in some detail and I have also attempted to elucidate the ways in which Potter's later music evolved from the sound-worlds that they had defined. The remaining chapters are concerned with the major works that he wrote subsequently. One of the most notable features of Potter's output is that he wrote hardly any solo instrumental music, chamber music or songs: his catalogue lists a handful of items representative of each genre, but they are without exception all minor works and add little to his stature as a composer. By his

own admission, these media did not interest him very much and he felt far more drawn to writing for larger forces. Chapter 3 is devoted to an examination of his mature orchestral works: the focus here is on his major compositions of a serious nature, although a few examples of his light music and arrangements are also dealt with briefly for the sake of completeness. It opens with a fairly lengthy discussion of Potter's creative aesthetic and the stylistic orientation of his later music, which draws extensively on the texts of his radio scripts and his views as aired in his correspondence. Many of the observations made here, needless to say, are equally pertinent to the works discussed in later chapters. I have been particularly concerned to clarify Potter's attitudes on matters such as the employment of Irish folk music in his work, musical modernism and the contemporary *avant-garde*, and the artistic legitimacy of light music.

The last three chapters deal with Potter's remaining significant compositions: his choral and orchestral works, his four ballets and two operas. My account of these has been informed by several considerations. As with the orchestral works, my first concern was to provide a fairly comprehensive description of each work, discussing salient technical and stylistic points of interest, in an effort to establish which scores are viable and still worth performing. Not every work is considered in the same depth, however — even the most sympathetic listener will acknowledge that Potter's output is somewhat uneven and there seemed little point in dwelling on the shortcomings of pieces of lesser quality. Secondly, because it was generally difficult for Irish composers to secure performances of ambitious choral works and stage works at this period, I have outlined the circumstances of their genesis and first performances in a fair amount of detail. In some cases, this has necessitated a considerable quantity of original research into performing groups about which very little has hitherto been known, such as the short-lived company National Ballet (later, Irish National Ballet), for which Potter wrote three scores between 1959 and 1963. I have also been concerned to analyse the relationship of these works to a wider social and political context. As I studied Potter's stage works and choral works more closely, I was increasingly struck by how deeply strange — even peculiar — many of

them were in conception. In every case, however, these singularities seemed explicable in the light of the milieu from which they emerged. As is well known, a rebarbative Catholic triumphalism dominated many aspects of Irish life between the 1930s and 1960s to an extent which many prominent intellectuals found deeply objectionable. Its baneful effects inevitably made themselves felt in cultural matters; but while its deleterious influence on literature, theatre and film — in the form of stringent censorship — has been well documented, no-one has so far attempted to examine its effects on musical creativity. Several of Potter's choral and stage works were shaped by this repressive ethos in two diametrically opposed ways. At this period, the Catholic Church in Ireland attempted to promulgate a highly questionable construct of Irish cultural identity predicated on an adherence to the Catholic faith and a narrow xenophobic nationalism. I have argued that this construct found striking embodiments in two of what one might describe as Potter's 'semi-official' commissions — his television opera *Patrick* and a truly extraordinary setting of the prayer *Hail Mary* for vast choral and orchestral forces that was written in 1966 at the behest of the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid. As we shall see, Potter had little control over the nature of these commissions and certainly had no sympathy with the ideology that they reflected. Several of his other stage works — most notably, perhaps, the ballets *Careless Love* and *Gamble, No Gamble*, and his second opera *The Wedding* — present a radically different view of Irish cultural and society, however, one which is profoundly at odds with this official ideology and thoroughly subverts it. As I hope to demonstrate, not only are these compositions interesting in themselves, but they also shed a truly fascinating light on the Ireland of the period.

Durham, December 2007

A note on sources

As anyone undertaking research on twentieth-century Irish composition quickly discovers, so little detailed work has been done on most of the major figures that one is almost solely reliant on primary sources for information — assuming, of course, that one can succeed in unearthing these, which is not always very easy. Fortunately, in Potter's case, informative source materials are fairly abundant. A compulsive letter writer, he not only kept most of the correspondence that he received after he settled in Ireland in 1951, but also kept carbon copies of many of the letters that he sent. In addition, he hoarded considerable quantities of papers relating to his work: concert programmes, newspapers reviews, magazine features, PRS returns, institutional memoranda, minutes of meetings of the various professional bodies in which he was involved — and so forth. Much of this documentation — which runs to thousands of individual items — has been preserved in the Potter Archive, a collection in the private possession of Potter's executrix Sarah Burn. This undoubtedly represents one of the single most important collections of material relating to the life and activities of a prominent twentieth-century Irish composer and it will undoubtedly prove of immense value to other scholars working in the field of Irish music.

At the time of writing, the contents of the Potter Archive have not been systematically catalogued. In view of this, I have provided as much information as I can in the footnotes to assist anyone who may wish to consult documents to which I refer. Potter sorted his papers roughly into folders, though not always very carefully or systematically. In the earliest phase of his career, he simply gathered all of his correspondence into a folder for each year, but as his professional activities grew more diverse, this rudimentary filing system became somewhat more complicated. By the time of his death, over 160 boxes of materials and folders of correspondence had accumulated, some of the latter containing several hundred letters each.

To make the task of locating a particular item easier, every time that a letter (or other document) is cited in the text, a reference is always provided to the name that Potter assigned to the folder in which it is contained, thus:

AJP to Venetia O'Sullivan, 18 November 1968 ('№3 RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9', PA)

Here, 'PA', as one might expect, stands for 'Potter Archive', and I have consistently employed the contraction 'AJP' (a form that Potter himself frequently used to initial documents) in the notes when referring to the composer in these contexts. I have, incidentally, tacitly corrected spelling mistakes and other obvious errors when quoting from Potter's letters or writings, but have retained as far as possible his idiosyncratic, but highly expressive punctuation.

In addition to the materials I have already described, the Potter Archive also contains several dozen recordings of his compositions on reel-to-reel tape made by RÉ/RTÉ, as well as many of his musical manuscripts. This collection is by no means complete, however, and it has transpired that some of Potter's manuscript scores are not readily accessible. A considerable number of these are housed in the libraries of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland and the RTÉ Concert Orchestra; but while I have invariably found the librarians of the NSOI to be extremely helpful, sometimes well beyond the call of duty, those working in the RTÉCO Library do not seem particularly inclined to assist scholars. This meant that I was unable to consult the manuscripts of certain orchestral works, but none of these would appear to be of especial significance in the context of Potter's *oeuvre* as a whole.

The full extent, incidentally, of Potter's output remains uncertain. Mark Cronin's *A. J. Potter (1918-1980): An Annotated Catalogue of Works*, which was submitted as an MA Thesis to the Cork Institute of Technology, Ireland, in 2005 lists almost 700 separate compositions and arrangements — but this catalogue is very incomplete, as Cronin was unable to consult the holdings of the Artane Boys Band and various other ensembles, the contents of which would no doubt have brought the total up

considerably. In the days before cheap photocopying, Potter simply gave manuscripts away and did not bother to keep copies. It would appear, however, that these uncatalogued items are mostly minor works. In spite of these unavoidable omissions, Cronin's catalogue is very useful nonetheless, and I have had frequent cause to consult it in the course of my own researches.

All translations of texts from foreign languages are my own, unless otherwise stated.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to a number of people who have assisted me during the preparation of the present study.

I would like to express my gratitude to Potter's executrix Sarah Burn for permitting me unrestricted access to the material in the Potter Archives and for patiently answering endless queries about the composer and his work. It is no exaggeration to say that this project would simply not have been possible without her active involvement, and I deeply appreciated her unstinting support.

My supervisor Prof Jeremy Dibble was a highly valued source of advice and encouragement. His own researches on neglected British composers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods have been a constant source of inspiration for my own work on Irish music, and I hope he will consider these few words of thanks to be an adequate recompense for the assistance that he provided.

Joris de Henau read much of this thesis in draft and made extensive comments — an act of friendship which I greatly appreciated. Anne Fleischmann, Ruth Fleischmann and Maeve Fleischmann all read Chapter 5 in draft and made valuable suggestions for improvement.

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Chapter 1

Biographical outline

Part 1: 1918 – 1951

1.1 Early years

Archibald James Potter was born in Belfast on 22 September 1918, the youngest of a family of seven children. Our knowledge of his early life is somewhat hazy, but it is possible to piece together a certain amount from his correspondence. By his own account, his parents had originally come from comfortable backgrounds and both had quite an admixture of foreign blood in their veins. It is difficult to know how much credence to lend to his descriptions of his forebears, which seem heavily romanticised – although he claimed in later life that he was merely transmitting the facts as they had been related to him by his cousin Lucy who apparently functioned as the ‘family bard’.¹ According to this source, his father’s family was of Huguenot stock. Potter’s paternal great-grandfather had married a Spaniard and his son, the composer’s grandfather, ran a business in Spain. One evening, the young man chanced to hear the strains of a woman’s voice wafting towards him from the direction of a neighbouring garden, and was so enraptured that he was instantaneously seized with a desire to marry the possessor, without so much as having laid eyes on her. He duly did so, although as Potter remarked, ‘photographic evidence suggested that she had a face like the back of a corporation cart – or possibly the horse that pulled it.’² As it transpired, the unalluring *señorita* in question was not Spanish – she was the granddaughter of a Prussian Junker by the name of von Kägel. She had defied her father, a Hamburg businessman, to become an opera singer, but her career proved to be utterly undistinguished. Life had further trials in store: she had not been married long when her husband succumbed to yellow fever during a business trip to South America. According to family

¹ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 (‘№7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5’, PA). The account given here of Potter’s paternal grandparents and of his father’s childhood draws on this letter.

² *ibid.*



tradition, his untimely demise had taken place while playing the organ in a local cathedral, for he was a keen amateur musician. His widow, who had a sizeable brood of children to tend by this point, came to Ulster so as to be near her husband's relatives, who evidently undertook to provide for his wife and family. Potter's father, Arthur George Potter, seems to have been very young at the time of his father's death. We know very little about the circumstances of his upbringing, except that he lost his sight at an early age as a result of a nursery practical joke – a prank involving a firework that went disastrously wrong. The boy was sent to the Royal Normal College and Academy for the Blind in London, which had been established in 1871 by the Victorian philanthropist Thomas Rhodes Armitage and the American anti-slavery campaigner Francis Joseph Campbell (a 'normal school' being an obsolete term for a teacher training college, which the institution was in part). He evidently received a thorough musical education there, and on returning to his native Belfast, found work as a church organist and piano tuner.

According to Potter's cousin, his mother, Clare McMaster, could also claim aristocratic forebears. Her grandfather, a humble corn-chandler's assistant by the name of Wullie McMaster, eloped with one of the daughters of the local aristocracy, the Hamiltons of Abercorn, an old Ulster family who had traditionally played a very prominent role in the social and political life of the province. Lucy maintained that Wullie's brother was no less a personage than William McMaster (1811-1887), the founder of McMaster University.³ McMaster, who had emigrated to Canada from Omagh in 1833 as a penniless youth, had raised himself in the world by dint of natural ability and sheer hard work to become a highly successful businessman and politician.⁴ Unfortunately for Potter, his great-niece, if such she was, did not inherit his business acumen or his capacity for ceaseless industry. She emerges from Potter's reminiscences as a shadowy, but thoroughly sinister figure. We know next to nothing about her early life, apart from the fact that she married Arthur Potter on the rebound when she was jilted by her previous fiancé, who chose to marry Potter's

³ AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 8 September 1974 ('Nº13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

⁴ For details of McMaster's career, see 'McMaster, William', *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=39821> (accessed 30 November 2007).

aunt, his father's sister, instead. This disappointment left her with lasting feelings of rancour and her reaction to it appears to have been extreme. She sought consolation in the bottle and eventually became a chronic alcoholic. By this stage, she and her husband were living in very reduced circumstances. Potter told the Dublin music critic Charles Acton in an interview given in 1970 that his father had lost his job as an organist in Fisherwick Presbyterian Church on her account: the fact that she accompanied him to services in a state of manifest intoxication became a matter for scandalised comment in the sternly puritanical local community. Arthur Potter was forced to eke out a living as a piano tuner – a job at which he was apparently very skilled, but which paid badly.⁵ By the time their last son was born, they had moved to a house bearing the somewhat incongruous name of 'Cosy Villa'⁶, which, if it was not quite situated on the notorious Falls Road, as Potter later told Acton, was located only a few hundred years away in St James' Park, off Donegal Road, one of the poorest areas of the city. When the infant was a year old, they moved again to Agincourt Avenue, not far from Ormeau Park.⁷

In later life, Potter made no secret of the fact that his childhood was miserably unhappy and that his home life was very difficult. He imparted a few grim details to Acton, but in the last year of his life, Potter began to write a *roman-à-clef* in which he presented a thinly fictionalised account of his upbringing which is considerably more explicit.⁸ This remarkable document makes for decidedly uncomfortable reading and suggests clearly that these early experiences had left an indelible residue of anger and bitterness. The predominant impression of Potter's mother to emerge

⁵ See Charles Acton, 'Interview with A.J. Potter', *Éire-Ireland* [St Paul, MN], v/2 (1969–70), 115–40, 116.

⁶ See AJP to General Registrar's Office, 3 August 1973 ('No13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA).

⁷ See Enid Mackenzie to AJP, 4 October 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

⁸ Potter only completed part of what was to be the opening chapter. This fragment, which is given the heavily ironic title 'Honour Thy Father and Thy Mother', runs to twelve pages of typescript and will henceforth be referred to as *PAF*. Although the names of the personages have been changed, Potter told Sarah Burn that it was otherwise a faithful account of events. That it should be regarded as an autobiography rather than fiction is confirmed by a remark Potter made to Valerie Trimble's son Jonathan Williams in a letter of 26 November 1979 ('Personal 1978-80', PA): 'I have started my autobiography under the guise of a roman-à-clef... the only safe way to do it, so I have been advised by my legal eagles.'

from it is that she was quite mentally unstable. She is characterised as having a violent temper and behaving with sadistic brutality towards the children, whose very existence she seemed to resent. The first-person narrator recalls her habit of getting a sharp cane and 'whipping the youngest of my elder sisters until her body was completely red with cane strokes', and, her fury still unabated, getting him 'to throw buckets of cold water over her so as she could start the whole process again.'⁹ He goes on to recount how the children tried to 'get various do-gooding bodies and the medical profession to intervene but, like Pontius Pilate, they washed their hands of the whole issue', concluding with the grimly laconic remark that 'this has coloured my approach to all such do-gooding bodies ever since.'¹⁰ Potter's father seems to have made no attempt to prevent these gratuitous acts of cruelty or to come to his children's assistance. Unfortunately, it would appear that he too was culpable of gross maltreatment of the girl children in particular, subjecting them to repeated sexual abuse of a kind that the fictional narrator describes bluntly as 'rape'.¹¹ These appalling occurrences are narrated in a strangely flat and matter-of-fact manner which makes the rendition of them even more disturbing. It is notable that the interaction of the parents with the children is characterised throughout as overwhelmingly exploitative and abusive, any feelings of tenderness or affection being conspicuously absent.

There would seem to be little doubt that the family was deeply dysfunctional and the effect of these circumstances on the hapless Potter children can only be imagined. The fact of Clare Potter's alcoholism is confirmed by a reference to it in a letter from Potter's sister Enid, who subsequently emigrated to Canada.¹² She told Potter that she had 'few fond memories of my seventeen years in Ireland and none whatsoever of Cozy Villa [*sic.*]', but that she saw no point in 'warping my soul dwelling on unpleasant memories.'¹³ Not long before she died, another sister, Mareli, who also

⁹ PAF, 1

¹⁰ PAF, 1

¹¹ PAF, 11

¹² Enid Mackenzie to AJP, 7 August 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

¹³ Enid Mackenzie to AJP, 4 October 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

lived in Canada, confided in him that she felt very bitter about her childhood and had suffered from severe bouts of depression for many years.¹⁴ Difficult though the family's circumstances were, matters were made considerably worse by their seemingly inexorable slide into hopeless poverty. At the period, living conditions for the urban poor were often very harsh and Belfast was no exception. In his autobiographical fragment, Potter emphasised how the squalor and misery of everyday existence had a brutalising influence on general behaviour, remarking that the daily levels of violence he witnessed in the Belfast slums were far worse than anything he had encountered in comparable contexts in other large English or European cities, or even in the Far East.¹⁵ For the young boy, life outside the home was potentially as fraught with danger as life inside it. A powerful sense of ever-present menace is conveyed through a succession of vignettes interspersed throughout the narrative. He recalls being beaten up as a young boy of six by a group of older boys who rob him of sixpence earned on a paper round. He describes how he and his sisters would have to meet their father off the tram when he returned from work and escort him home to prevent him being set upon by the local children, who used to jeer at the 'bluddy auld blind mon', pelt him with mud or try and wrest his tool case away from him.¹⁶ He tells of watching his sister being gang-raped in Ormeau Park, screaming helplessly while a group of idlers gawp avidly at the scene and do nothing.¹⁷ One of his earliest memories is of a bizarre incident in which the family home was burned down by a local group of Sinn Féin supporters, who later admitted that they had mistakenly burned down the wrong house and tried to make amends by helping the family move their belongings to other accommodation nearby.¹⁸

The family's fortunes went steadily from bad to worse. Potter's mother resorted to pawning even the children's shoes to obtain money for whiskey, leaving them to go

¹⁴ Mareli Penn to AJP, August 1978? ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

¹⁵ PAF, 3

¹⁶ PAF, 3

¹⁷ PAF, 2

¹⁸ PAF, 3

around barefoot in the middle of winter. When she could no longer afford whiskey, she took to drinking what was popularly known as 'red biddy', a lethal concoction of methylated spirits diluted with cheap Australian wine. With a vein of gallows humour, the narrator observes dryly that she obtained the methylated spirits from a staunch local Protestant shopkeeper and the wine from an upstanding Catholic publican, 'an exercise in alcoholic ecumenism that anticipated Vatican II by several decades.'¹⁹ The family finances at last became so reduced that they could no longer afford to redeem any of their possessions from pawn. Potter was forced to stop attending national school because the headmaster was unwilling to have him come to school not wearing shoes. In a final stroke of bad fortune, when Potter was about nine years old, his father had an accident which left him unable to work.

Although it did not appear so at the time, this marked a turning point in the boy's luck. Potter was not terribly clear about what happened next, but it seems as if relatives finally chose to intervene. A decision was made to send him to England and place him and his sister Mareli in the care of his father's sister and her husband, Francis and Dell Drake who lived in Kent.²⁰ This was a rather strange turn of events, since Francis Drake was the man who had broken off his engagement to Potter's mother in order to marry the boy's aunt instead. The composer suggested to Acton that his aunt's decision may have been motivated by a desire to make amends for the suffering she and her husband had unwittingly caused. Potter's elder sister and her husband kitted him out with new clothes, including the first pair of pyjamas he had ever worn, and bought him a boat ticket to Liverpool. On arrival, a kindly steward saw the boy to Lime Street station and put him on the train to London, where he was met by his aunt. Many years later, he would recall his arrival at her home on 29 January 1928 and being made welcome with tea and toast.²¹

¹⁹ PAF, 5

²⁰ See Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 117; and AJP to Red Penn, 24 February 1980 ('Personal 1978-80', PA).

²¹ AJP to Maureen and Desmond Drake, 31 January 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

His aunt and uncle were not particularly well off, but life on their small farm near Maidstone must at first have seemed scarcely real in comparison with the drab surroundings of his native Belfast. Potter described his uncle as 'charming', but 'utterly incompetent'.²² He had started out in life as a farmer, but had somehow managed to go bankrupt during the early stages of the First World War despite the prevailing agricultural boom. He spent the years 1915-18 in Ireland as an officer in the British Army, where it seems that his engaging personal manner was employed to better account, as he somehow managed to remain on very good terms with the local population despite the turbulent political upheavals and considerable levels of anti-British hostility in the country during these years.²³ He came to like living in Ireland and was inclined to settle there after the war. These plans came to nothing, however, since he found it more difficult than he had expected to earn a living and before long he returned to England.

Potter's aunt appears to have been of a resolutely practical, but nonetheless kindly disposition. In order to supplement the meagre income from the farm, she set up a small school which catered for French students wishing to learn English. More importantly from the point of view of her nephew's future career, considerable emphasis was placed on music within the curriculum, since she also prepared musically talented boys for entry to the bigger English choir schools. Thinking ahead, perhaps, to the practical difficulty of funding her nephew's further education on her very limited financial resources, she began to give him singing lessons, probably hoping that he too might gain a place in one of these schools on a scholarship. It was discovered that the boy had a soprano voice of very good quality and his aunt took his musical education more seriously in hand. It is not clear if he had any opportunities to study music before this point: his parents could hardly have afforded to pay for musical tuition, and while it is possible that he might have received some instruction from his father, it seems unlikely, given the family circumstances, that he received systematic training of any kind. His aunt set about

²² *PAF*, 5

²³ *PAF*, 5

remedying the considerable gaps in his general musical knowledge, giving him two hours of singing lessons every day, as well as teaching him theory. The boy seems to have made rapid progress and fifteen months later was accepted into All Saints Choir School in Margaret Street, London, having won a scholarship there, as his aunt had perhaps hoped he might.²⁴ According to the school register, Potter auditioned on 4 May 1929 and was admitted to the choir on 25 May.²⁵

In many respects, Potter was fortunate in his new school, as All Saints had a very high reputation at the period on account of the excellence of its choral tradition. The choir school was established in 1843, not long after work was begun on the church itself, in order to provide music for the daily services. It was fortunate in securing the services of organists and choirmasters of the calibre of Richard Redhead (remembered today as the composer of *Rock of Ages* and *Bright the Vision*) and Walter Vale, who was to become Potter's teacher. The choir was called upon to perform at prestigious events such as the Golden and Diamond Jubilees of Queen Victoria in 1887 and 1897 and the coronation ceremonies of Edward VII and George V in 1901 and 1910. It was also associated with many eminent composers, both from England and abroad. Rachmaninov, for example, authorised the performance of an arrangement of his *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* in an English singing translation prepared specially for the choir by Walter Vale and came to hear it twice, in 1915 and again in 1923, declaring himself pleased with the renditions.²⁶

The boy's first encounters with the ceremonial trappings of high Anglicanism – not to mention the lavishly ornate interior of the church itself – seem to have been rather discomfiting after the austere Presbyterian services to which he had been accustomed. And All Saints seems to have been more high church than most – as the narrator of the autobiographical fragment wryly remarks, what with reservation of

²⁴ PAF, 7

²⁵ A photocopy of the relevant page of the register was kindly provided by Dr Christopher Rawll, Archivist at All Saints.

²⁶ These details are provided on the official website for All Saints Margaret Street, <http://www.allsaintsmargaretstreet.org.uk/music.htm> (accessed 1 December 2007).

the sacrament, secret confession, Mariolatry and Angelus at dawn, noon and eventide 'it made the average Roman Catholic Church look like a Welsh Baptist chapel.²⁷ It was obviously felt necessary that the boy should be confirmed in the Anglican faith. This ceremony took place on 8 March 1930 and he made his First Communion a day later.²⁸ Potter seems to have adapted without difficulty to this transition, since even at this young age he regarded organised religion with indifference.

All Saints attracted a notably well-heeled congregation, particularly since Edward VII had taken to attending services there. It became a fashionable place of worship for many prominent public figures – socialites, famous stage artists, Harley Street specialists, and the like. Another novel experience for the young boy – of a decidedly unspiritual kind – was provided by his first sight of the clergy counting the takings from the Matins' offertory. Amongst the coins and smaller denomination banknotes spread out on the large vestry table lay the first £100 note he had ever seen, made out in the old way with copperplate handwriting on white paper.²⁹ In those days, this was an unimaginably large sum of money for most ordinary churchgoers to consider leaving in the collection plate. But despite this atmosphere of glamour and affluence, life at the Choir School proved to be drab and oppressive. For one thing, as in many English boarding schools, the senior students tended to bully the younger boys. The skills Potter had acquired in back-street combat back in Belfast proved unexpectedly useful, but the experience cannot have been terribly pleasant, particularly for a sensitive child. Discipline in the school was also severe, relying heavily on the threat of strenuous corporal punishment. So-called 'lost marks' were awarded during each week for a variety of misdemeanours, many of them quite trivial, such as being late out of bed in the morning, forgetting to brush one's hair or accidentally leaving the light on in a room. For the first misdemeanour, one 'mark' was lost, two 'marks' for the second, on so on. Should any boy be so unlucky as to be caught three times in one week, he was punished with a humiliating

²⁷ *PAF*, 7

²⁸ Dates entered in school register (see note 25).

²⁹ *PAF*, 7

caning on the buttocks. In the autobiographical fragment, the narrator recalls that some of these sadistic beatings – administered by a clergyman who went on to become a bishop – left bruises which lasted for a fortnight.³⁰

Only the quality of the school's musical activities compensated for this grimly regimented existence. Not only was Walter Vale a very fine musician and an inspiring teacher, but he appears to have been a much more humane individual than the other masters at the school, never resorting to punishments of any kind if the boys made mistakes. Potter was exposed to a new repertoire which was far more sophisticated than anything he could previously have heard, given his background. It naturally included many of the staples of the Anglican Church music tradition, but Vale's musical sympathies were very wide and he by no means confined himself to performing this repertory. Under his direction, the choir also performed much music from the Renaissance and Baroque periods by composers such as Palestrina, Vittoria, Tallis, and Purcell. Repertoire pieces from later periods included the masses of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, the standard sacred works of the Romantic period by Gounod, Saint-Saëns and Dvořák, as well as works by modern composers such as Vaughan Williams.³¹

Potter seems to have responded with enthusiasm to this fresh imaginative stimulus and enjoyed his participation in the choir. The quality of his voice attracted attention and after only a year in the school he was chosen to sing a very taxing soprano solo from Gounod's *Redemption* which includes a high C, an assignment in which he seems to have acquitted himself well. He also took organ lessons with Vale, and began to compose around this time – although he recalled that Vale had not been very encouraging of his efforts, as he felt that the age of greatness in musical creativity was now past.³² The school authorities evidently appreciated his talent: a comment in an unknown hand appended to the register entry reads 'a very able boy in all ways and bearing an excellent character'. Potter stayed at All Saints for four

³⁰ PAF, 8

³¹ See PAF, 12; and AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('No7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA).

³² AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('No7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

years, until July 1933. This would have marked the end of his primary education and he was ready to transfer to a public school, presumably after sitting the common entrance examination.

The musical training he had received at All Saints stood him in good stead. In the school register, it is recorded that he had gained a 'musical scholarship' to the value of £70 a year at Clifton College in Bristol. This was a considerable achievement for a boy from a poor working-class background: Clifton College was one of England's most eminent public schools and entrance there was quite competitive. The school was particularly noted for the excellence of the musical training that it provided: the Director of Music at Clifton was Douglas Fox, one of the most remarkable figures in English musical life of the period. An organist of outstanding talent, whose abilities had won the unstinting admiration of Parry, Stanford and other prominent musicians, Fox had lost his right arm in the First World War. Undaunted, he continued to play using his left arm alone, as had the pianist Paul Wittgenstein, and successfully continued his distinguished performing career. He was much sought after as a teacher and the fact that a musician of his calibre could be attracted to work at Clifton is a good indication of the high esteem in which the institution was held.³³ Potter managed to obtain an organ scholarship to Clifton, a circumstance which is rather curious, since by his own admission he had little aptitude for the instrument and was an indifferent player. At his audition, however, the musicality of his performance of Bach's chorale prelude *O Mensch, beweine dein' Sünde gross*, BWV 622 seems to have made an impression on Fox. Potter also showed him some of his compositions, including a four-part fugue, which may have confirmed Fox in his intuition that the boy was possessed of considerable talent.³⁴

On the whole, his experiences at his new school seem to have been of an altogether more positive kind than at All Saints, particularly in terms of personal relationships. According to Sarah Burn, he benefited especially from the kindness of his

³³ For a useful account of Fox's career, see Winifred Fox, *Douglas Fox: A Chronicle* (privately printed, 1976).

³⁴ See AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('No7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA).

housemaster, who was very supportive of him.³⁵ In view of his emotionally starved childhood, with its lack of affection and normal intimacy, it is not difficult to understand why this association might have been very important to him. Around this time, perhaps not long after he started at Clifton, both of his parents died in fairly close succession, his father when he was fifteen, and his mother the following year. Potter does not seem to have been terribly stricken by these losses. During his time at All Saints, his parents had apparently proved a constant nuisance and cause of anxiety, and he greeted their deaths with relief. As he told Acton in 1970:

[The] fact of the matter is, if you've never had a couple of parents like that, you just don't know what a relief it is to know that you were safe, that there could never be one completely drunk woman coming raving around the place making trouble or even worse a sober and utterly [*sic.*] bloody fool of a blind man doing ditto. Life has *never* since been quite as bad as it was then.³⁶

Over the next few years most of his brothers and sisters would emigrate, and his emotional ties to his other siblings were considerably weakened.³⁷

To judge from various remarks in his letters, Potter was deeply appreciative of the opportunity with which he had been provided, and to the end of his life was thoroughly impatient with critics of public schools who condemned them as havens of privilege: 'I had to leave the so-generous "free school" [in Belfast] for not having shoes on my feet – and never mind what I had between my ears', he told one correspondent, '[while] wicked privileged [*sic.*] Clifton gave me an education chiefly because I happened to have brains.'³⁸ He appears to have been a good student and participated fully in all aspects of school life, including sporting activities. As far as his musical development was concerned, Clifton proved a very stimulating environment, as the range and quality of its musical life seem to have been altogether exceptional. Fox founded a Music Club in 1932 which organised a

³⁵ Personal communication, 26 November 2004

³⁶ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 120

³⁷ See AJP to Aoine Ní Dhobhailéain, 7 December 1968 ('Nº1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA).

³⁸ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Nº7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

concert series in which many distinguished artists participated, including Myra Hess, Léon Goossens and the Busch Quartet.³⁹ He ran two choirs – a chapel choir, and a Choral Society whose membership was augmented by local townspeople and which worked its way through the standard oratorio repertoire, including *Messiah*, *Creation*, the Bach Passions, *Elijah* and *The Dream of Gerontius*.⁴⁰ Quite a number of students at the school were proficient instrumentalists and used to augment the ranks of the mainly professional orchestra that Fox assembled for the school's annual orchestral concert. Potter availed of the opportunity to learn the flute and the violin, and played both in this ensemble – the repertoire of which included Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Ravel's *Boléro* and the overture to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*.⁴¹

Although he seems to have made little progress in his study of the organ – he described himself as 'the worst organ scholar [Fox] ever had'⁴² – his teacher remained unfailingly helpful. It seems as though Potter felt rather overshadowed in this respect by fellow students such as David Willcocks, who were far more gifted instrumentalists than he.⁴³ If he was forced to experience his limitations in one area of practical musicianship, however, a sense of his possible potential grew steadily in another. Potter continued to compose at Clifton, and although it is unclear just how much he might have written, two pieces from these years which have survived, songs entitled *The Violet* and *Pippa's Song*, are of considerable interest. While these are obviously immature works, they nonetheless display an impressive level of technical accomplishment for a young teenage boy and are very fluently executed. Potter may well have shown these to Fox and discussed them with him, as well as seeking his advice about arrangements of music that he apparently made for school

³⁹ For an account of Fox's activities at Clifton, see Fox, *Douglas Fox*, 58-65, in which she reproduces an extract from Yngve Liddell's contribution to *Essays Written on the Occasion of the Centenary of Clifton College*, 1962.

⁴⁰ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('No7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ See Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 119.

concerts and entertainments.⁴⁴ The relationship between teacher and pupil was a cordial one, to judge from the friendly letters that they continued to exchange for some years.⁴⁵

1.2 Studies at the Royal College of Music, London

By the time Potter left Clifton in 1936, on completing his examinations for the Schools Certificate⁴⁶, Fox had sufficient confidence in the abilities of his *protégé* to recommend him to Vaughan Williams for acceptance into his composition class at the Royal College of Music in London.⁴⁷ He was awarded an entrance scholarship, and remained there for two years from 1936 to 1938. Our knowledge of his life during this period is rather scant. Apart from his lessons with Vaughan Williams, he studied organ with Thalben Ball (who intimated in a kindly way what Potter already knew – that he had little aptitude for the instrument⁴⁸), criticism with H. C. Colles and Frank Howes, orchestration with Gordon Jacob and harmony and counterpoint with R. O. Morris.⁴⁹ He joined the Choral Society, which at that period was conducted by Reginald Jacques, but was unable to participate in the public performances because he could not afford to hire the obligatory dark suit or full evening dress.⁵⁰ He also participated in various orchestral concerts, but claimed to be unable to remember much about them⁵¹, apart from having played the sea-machine in the pit for Vaughan William's opera *Riders to the Sea* on the occasion of its first performance at the RCM on 1 December 1937.⁵²

⁴⁴ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('№7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁴⁵ A few items of this correspondence survive, dating from the early 1950s. The two men also exchanged a few letters after an elapse of many years in the 1970s.

⁴⁶ A letter dated 3 January 1952 from the headmaster of Clifton College is in the Potter archive, confirming that he obtained a School Certificate of the Oxford and Cambridge Joint Board Examination, with credits in Latin, German-with-Oral, Elementary Maths, English and History.

⁴⁷ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('№7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁴⁸ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 119

⁴⁹ See AJP to Guy Warrack, 21 July 1968 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA); and AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('№7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA).

⁵⁰ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('№7: Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA).

⁵¹ AJP to Guy Warrack, 21 July 1968 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

⁵² *ibid.* Potter erroneously describes the instrument as a 'thunder machine'.

By all accounts, he found Vaughan Williams to be a congenial teacher, but we have little idea of what actually took place at the lessons. In view of the fact that Potter was later to settle in Ireland and make his career there, it is interesting to note that Vaughan Williams exerted a considerable influence on several Irish composers. Ina Boyle (1889-1967) and Frederick May (1911-1985) had come to London to study with him; and others such as Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992) would have been broadly responsive to his philosophy that a distinctive national idiom could develop most naturally from an engagement with native folk music. He evidently encouraged his new Irish student to familiarise himself with this aspect of his musical heritage: in later life, Potter told one of his correspondents that the older man had impressed on him that 'as an Irishman, you must learn your own country's music'.⁵³ Potter was already familiar with some of this repertory since childhood, however: his mother was fond of traditional music and the surprising fact emerges that his parents knew Carl Hardebeck (1869-1945), an Irish composer of English birth who was one of the most prominent collectors of Irish folk music in the early decades of the twentieth century. Hardebeck, like Potter's father, had been blind from an early age. He lived in Belfast from 1893 and was organist in St Peter's Cathedral from 1904-19.⁵⁴ Potter claimed that the eminent musician was 'an associate of the family ... and dandled the young AJP on his knee'.⁵⁵ It would consequently seem likely that the boy had opportunities to hear traditional music performed in his home or in other people's houses. In any case, it is interesting that several of the works Potter composed during his time at the RCM reveal a pronounced indebtedness to Irish folk music. His student works bear the imprint of British folk music as well, although in a more diffused way. This stylistic trait may have derived from his teacher: like Boyle and May, Potter was deeply receptive to Vaughan William's music and his first mature works reveal a considerable influence of the elder composer's style and manner.

⁵³ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 - 3 - 4 - 5', PA)

⁵⁴ For details of Hardebeck's career, see Aloys Fleischmann *et al*, 'Hardebeck', *The Capuchin Annual* [Dublin] (1943), 226-31; and S. O'Boyle, 'Hardebeck', *The Capuchin Annual* [Dublin] (1948), 80-87.

⁵⁵ AJP to Aoine Ní Dhobhailéain, 7 December 1968 ('Nº1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

To judge from a diary that Ina Boyle kept during her studies with him in the 1920s, the English composer's preferred method of teaching was for students to bring him pieces in a reasonably advanced state of completion, which would then be discussed in detail during fairly long and intensive sessions. Vaughan Williams would read through works at the piano, offering comments on a work's overall structure as well as on technical details pertaining to scoring and management of texture. Boyle relates that while his criticisms could sometimes be quite severe, they were always expressed in a tactful and kindly manner and that the composer provided a great deal of constructive comment.⁵⁶ He also seems to have been content to allow the student's artistic development to proceed in an unforced manner, enabling them to pursue whatever mode of expression came most naturally to them. This is borne out by a remark of Potter's in a letter to Douglas Fox written in 1952, which confirms that Vaughan Williams was suspicious of premature attempts on the part of young composers to be 'original' in an artificial or contrived manner: he quotes him as saying 'Never mind when people talk about "influences" Mr Potter: we all have to use the common chord!'⁵⁷

Although we do not know what form Potter's lessons took or what tasks he was set, it seems reasonable to assume that they proceeded on similar lines to Boyle's. It is evident that the young man's period at the RCM was quite a productive one. He managed to compose a considerable quantity of music between 1936 and 1938, completing several works and making detailed sketches for others. Some of these are of an ambitious nature, including an elaborate *Missa Brevis* for double choir, a concertante work for piano and orchestra, a sparkling short orchestral work *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and a song cycle *Songs from the Glens of Antrim*. Potter later revised (or in some cases, completed) these student works shortly after settling in Ireland in 1950 and they have not survived in their original form. Nonetheless, bearing in mind that he was not quite twenty when he left the RCM, the fact that he

⁵⁶ This diary is kept with Boyle's musical manuscripts in the Manuscripts Section in the Library of Trinity College Dublin.

⁵⁷ AJP to Douglas Fox, 21 February 1952 ('Tutti '49-'52', PA)

was attempting to write such works at all seems to testify to a period of remarkably rapid artistic maturation. In these compositions, which will be considered in detail in Chapter 2, Potter's idiom is firmly tonal: like many contemporary English composers influenced by Vaughan Williams, he explores the expressive resources afforded by a modal harmonic basis which is shot through with chromatic inflections to quite piquant effect. In the same letter to Fox cited above, Potter readily acknowledged his stylistic kinship to the elder composer in these early scores. At this point in his career, the experiments of the continental avant-garde do not seem to have interested him. In one interesting passage, Potter tells Fox that he was unimpressed by Egon Wellesz's account of Berg's operas *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* during a lecture he attended while a student at the RCM. One gathers he found their subject matter rather morbid and repellent, as he offers the comment, 'the general theory at that time seemed to be that all that sort of thing was the outcome of post '14/'18 war conditions in Germany and Europe generally'.⁵⁸ This is not an unreasonable remark, since the anguished, nightmarish vision of these Expressionist operas is, in fact, intimately bound up with Berg's response to contemporary circumstances. Much later, Potter came to appreciate the expressive possibilities afforded by an atonal idiom and employed a modified version of serial procedures in pieces written during the 1960s. At this period, however, their use would not have come naturally to him.

There seems to have been no opportunity to arrange a try-out of his orchestral or vocal works while he was at the RCM, and the *RCM Magazine* makes no mention of any of his compositions being performed in house concerts (indeed, the magazine scarcely mentions him at all). He may well have managed to arrange performances of his compositions elsewhere, of course, but if so, no record of these has been preserved. In addition to completing the scores already mentioned, he tried his hand at writing several chamber works, including two other short pieces for string quartet described as 'Fantasies' (he later published one of these after moving to Ireland under the title *Ceathairéad Téad*), and two pieces for string trio, one of which appears to have come second in the prestigious Cobbett Prize, a in-house RCM composition

⁵⁸ AJP to Douglas Fox, 21 February 1952 ('Tutti '49-'52', PA)

competition for chamber music, in 1937.⁵⁹ The following year, Potter sat the final examinations for the ARCM diploma, which passed off without incident, apart from being asked a potentially treacherous leading question at his *viva voce*. The panel included Herbert Howells, a man who seems to have struck many of his students as being rather vain. At one point, Howells invited Potter to name 'the three most prominent modern composers of English vocal music'. 'To which I replied, "Holst, Vaughan Williams — and yourself, sir"', Potter later recalled, adding wryly, 'I passed...'⁶⁰

Potter could scarcely have graduated from the Royal College of Music at a less propitious time as far as his career was concerned. For much of the 1930s, England had been plunged into a deep recession precipitated by the New York stock market crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression in the United States, which had a catastrophic effect on the British economy. Although the situation improved to some extent towards the end of the decade, particularly in the south of the country, unemployment remained comparatively high. Potter, like hundreds of thousands of others, experienced great difficulty in securing adequately paid work. A small fund that had been left for him at his parents' death quickly disappeared⁶¹, and throughout his time at the RCM he seems to have supported himself by taking odd

⁵⁹ There is a certain amount of confusion over the year in which Potter won the prize and whether he was placed first or second. Potter told Ian Lord in 1974 that he had won first prize for his string quartet (AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)). This appears to be incorrect on two counts. In a letter of 1952 he informed a correspondent that he was awarded the prize for a string trio, not a quartet (AJP to Mrs J. Irons, 14 July 1952 ('"Official" correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52')). Enquiries made by David Willcocks on Potter's behalf almost forty years later elicited the information he was placed second in the competition in 1937, the first prize going to Dulcie Holland: see David Willcocks to AJP, 21 July 1975 ('№13: Personal 1974-5', PA). The compositions for string quartet, incidentally, appear to be incorrectly dated in several reference works. *Fantasia No. 1* dates from 1937 and *Fantasia No. 2* from 1938. The dates are given correctly in the first edition of Edgar Deale, *A Catalogue of Contemporary Irish Composition* (Dublin, 1968), but incorrectly in the second edition of 1973 as 1957 and 1958 respectively. This is probably a simple error of transcription. This error is repeated, however, in Bernard Harrison's *Catalogue of Contemporary Irish Composers* (Dublin, 1982).

⁶⁰ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA). Potter related a somewhat different version of this story to Guy Warrack: see AJP to Guy Warrack, 21 July 1968 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

⁶¹ See Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 120-121.

jobs – deputising as vicar choral at various London churches, playing the piano in restaurants and cafés, and at one point, busking on Oxford Street with what purported to be a male-voice quartet of ‘unemployed Welsh miners’. (‘I had learned a bit of Welsh at All Saints from a ghastly little Welsh-speaking bastard, so I didn’t do too badly’, Potter recalled.⁶²) He was lucky enough to find cheap digs with an Italian family in Soho, where he shared a room with an Italian waiter: Potter slept in the bed by night, while the waiter, who worked night shifts, occupied it by day.⁶³ On graduating, his financial situation became increasingly parlous. He knew that he stood no chance whatsoever of obtaining a church organist’s post, as he simply was not a good enough player. He took part-time jobs as a shop assistant and a silk-stocking salesman, before he finally managed to obtain a job in an optical instruments factory through the good offices of contacts at All Saints. His salary was a mere 15s a week – some £35 or €50 today – a sum which All Saints seems to have matched, presumably out of its charitable funds.⁶⁴ Potter supplemented this by taking work as a *plongeur* at the Café Royal, which meant that between these various sources of income he had just enough on which to live.⁶⁵

In desperation, he tried to enlist in the British Army as a bandsman, but was rejected on the grounds that his heart had been weakened through having contracted scarlet fever in his teens. He was also turned down by the French Foreign Legion before he managed to enrol successfully in the Territorial Army. This meant that he automatically obtained a bonus of £5 – about £220 or €310 now – which, in his phrase, represented ‘wealth beyond the dreams of avarice’, as well as a compulsory fortnight’s holiday from his regular factory job for annual training, during which he

⁶² AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 (‘Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5’, PA)

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Acton, ‘Interview with A. J. Potter’, 120. It is unlikely that he obtained this job through the good offices of the celebrated Henry Mackay, an Anglican theologian who was vicar at All Saints during Potter’s time there, as he intimated to Acton (who, incidentally, renders Mackay’s surname incorrectly), for Mackay had left to take up a canonry in Gloucester in 1934 and died in April 1936: these details are given in the last chapter of Sydney Dark, *Mackay of All Saints* (London, 1937).

⁶⁵ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 (‘Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5’, PA)

was paid 2s a day and received free board and lodging.⁶⁶ By his own account, he enjoyed the experience greatly⁶⁷ and particularly relished the chance to eat his fill of the army food, which he recalled as tasting 'gorgeous' after the preceding months of privation.⁶⁸ When the Territorial Army was mobilised the following year on 1 September 1939 subsequent to the outbreak of war with Germany, he greeted the news with relief, as a solution to his material difficulties was clearly imminent:

I went back to my Paddington digs, ... got into uniform, packed my things in a couple of suitcases, dumped them with an Irish friend, gave myself the mother and father of blowouts with 7/6- from my week's pay, 2/6- for the wine – and the remainder for a for a taxi to the Duke of York's HQ... and the world could sleep secure in its bed.⁶⁹

1.3 Army service 1939 - 46

This event marked the beginning of a ten-year hiatus in the young man's musical career, during which he appears to have composed very little, if anything at all. Our knowledge of Potter's wartime experiences is quite sketchy, and like many veterans, he was largely disinclined to discuss them in later life. While it is possible to obtain a general idea of his movements from isolated passages scattered throughout his correspondence, the picture that emerges is necessarily very incomplete. For most of the war, he found himself in theatres far away from the principal European fronts. During so-called 'Phoney War', Potter volunteered for the 'Winter War' of 1939-40 in Finland, which had been precipitated by the Soviet Union's demand for the Finnish border to be pushed back sixteen miles from Leningrad, ostensibly in the interests of national security. When this demand was refused, the Soviet Union attacked Finland on 30 November 1939. The tenacity of the Finnish military resistance took the Russians by surprise and mobilised world opinion in support of the Finnish cause. The Allies offered to come to their assistance in February 1940, but their efforts came

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 121

⁶⁸ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

to nothing as the Finns were eventually forced to sign a humiliating peace treaty with the Soviet Union only a month later. In the event, Potter served in the ill-fated Norwegian campaign of April-June 1940, which culminated in a decisive victory for the German forces and enabled them to occupy Norway. He returned to Scotland, a 'somewhat battered survivor ... with the clothes I stood up in, my rifle (of course), one bayonet and two last rounds of ammunition'.⁷⁰ At this point, he joined one of the newly-formed British commando (or 'special service') units – small, well-armed but non-regimental forces that employed unconventional and irregular tactics to harry the enemy in mainland Europe and Scandinavia. He was dispatched to a special services training area in the Scottish Highlands and was stationed at Arisaig Castle on Loch nam Uamh. In a letter from the mid-1970s, he described this period as a pleasant interlude in his period of service, recalling days spent training, hunting and fishing all over the western Highlands and on the islands of Rum, Eigg and Muck. He was subsequently transferred to the Isle of Wight and participated in a number of cross-channel raids.⁷¹

When, in 1942, war broke out in the Far East and Japan attacked British and Dutch colonial possessions there, Potter applied for a commission in the Indian Army. Before this could be awarded, it was necessary for him to undergo further training in the Officer Corps Training Unit at the Royal Indian Military Academy in Dehradun, a city situated south of the Himalayas in the far north of India, in which the British army had maintained a military training base since 1922.⁷² Some of his notebooks from this period are preserved in the Potter Archive, and contain detailed instructions on such diverse subjects as the correct method of setting up a camp, how to ensure adequate sanitation, procedures for imparting orders, record keeping, accounting, military law, the use of various implements and weapons, jungle warfare, tactics, coping with gas attacks, and how to conduct street and village fighting.⁷³ In addition, he had to take a compulsory intensive course in Urdu to

⁷⁰ AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 2 September 1974 ('Nº13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² See AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁷³ All in folder 'OCTU/RIMA Dehra Dun 1942', PA.

enable him to be promoted beyond the rank of lieutenant – though he does not seem to have found the language especially difficult.⁷⁴ He duly gained his commission in the IXth Jat Regiment of the Indian Army and was sent to the Burma front in late 1942. His new officer status entailed considerably increased responsibility: as he reminisced to his sister Gertrude many years later, ‘I had to look after a round 100 men of four different religions (and cooking systems), write their letters for them, check their temperatures for them, and see that they didn’t overdo the drug [hashish] scene.’⁷⁵

In the event, Potter would serve in Burma until the defeat of the Japanese in 1945. As is well known, the Allied campaign in this particular part of the Far East frequently proved a harrowing ordeal for the soldiers who participated in it. The Japanese Army constituted a formidable and brutal enemy, and much of the fighting took place in highly inhospitable terrain, ranging from jungle and swamp to extremely mountainous countryside. For soldiers who came from more temperate zones, the climate proved especially difficult, alternating as it did between torrid monsoons and unbearable heat. In his autobiographical fragment, Potter recalled an occasion on which he lost his water bottle and was forced to drink his own urine and that of a fellow soldier in order to keep some liquid in his body while under fire from the Japanese.⁷⁶ The Burma campaign initially went very badly for the Allies: the offensives in Europe and the Middle East were considered to be of greater strategic importance in the short term and progress was hampered by inadequate resources. A further problem was presented by the disordered state of East India at the time, which required large quantities of British troops to be deployed for the purpose of quelling the civil disorder that had broken out in Bengal and Bihar. To make matters worse, a freak typhoon in 1942 devastated large tracts of the countryside, resulting in a catastrophic famine in Bengal in which some three million people may have died. In these conditions, it was difficult enough to maintain adequate lines of

⁷⁴ AJP to Hugh Boustead, 25 October 1972 (‘Nº 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)’, PA)

⁷⁵ AJP to Gertrude Tree, 11 October 1978 (‘Personal 1978-80’, PA)

⁷⁶ PAF, 4

communication and supply to the front, let alone make effective progress against the enemy.

Precise information about Potter's movements and activities between 1942 and 1945 has proved difficult to come by. It seems clear, however, that like many other veterans of that campaign, he found much of what he witnessed to be deeply distressing. Several people who were close to him in later life recall him confiding in them that he suffered recurrent flashbacks and nightmares about some of these events right up to the end of his life. These experiences may have been a factor that contributed strongly to his later descent into chronic alcoholism.⁷⁷ Potter seldom allowed himself to be drawn on their precise nature, preferring not to discuss them. To Sarah Burn, his partner after his wife's death, he described coming upon Allied soldiers who had been subjected to sickening tortures such as mock-crucifixion by the Japanese and then left for dead. One of these unfortunates apparently begged Potter to shoot him in order to put an end to his sufferings. He was so appalled by the man's condition that he actually did so, as his death was in any case imminent.⁷⁸ It is surely not difficult to understand why macabre occurrences of this nature etched themselves indelibly in his memory and should have returned to haunt him with such vividness.

In early 1943, Potter contracted infective hepatitis on the Goppe Bazar front in the north-west of the country just over the border from India – the scene of fierce fighting during the First Arakan Campaign of 1942-43.⁷⁹ Later that year, he was evacuated to India as a casualty in circumstances that are unclear, but which apparently transpired in the aftermath of the Bengal Famine – a catastrophe that he

⁷⁷ Potter himself thought so. According to Dinah Thompson (*née* Molloy), who knew him well in later years, the composer told her that he periodically experienced flashbacks of this nature and that his heavy drinking was in part a desperate attempt to obliterate the memories of these incidents (interview, 20 August 2004). From a medical standpoint, this explanation is entirely plausible: I would like to thank Dr Ania Wasilewski, whom I consulted for an opinion on this matter.

⁷⁸ Sarah Burn, personal communication, 2 December 2007

⁷⁹ AJP to Valerie Trimble, 7 February 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

subsequently witnessed at first-hand.⁸⁰ He evidently made a fairly swift recovery and was well enough to be back in Arakan by Christmas, where, in what one imagines must have been a very rare opportunity to engage in musical pursuits, he organised a Christmas carol concert at the headquarters of Lieutenant General Philip Christison, one of the chief British military commanders.⁸¹ By this stage, the Allied Forces in the Far East had undergone extensive reorganisation, and the Indian Army had been absorbed into the XIVth Army, a large multinational force comprising units from various Commonwealth countries as well as Britain.⁸² Potter continued to participate in active combat. In one engagement, he received a sabre cut near his eye and narrowly escaped being blinded.⁸³ He recounted to the biographer Joanna Richardson with evident satisfaction that he had assisted in 'the extermination of a complete Japanese regiment ... simply because one quartermaster (on their side, of course) had "disregarded regulations"'.⁸⁴

In 1944, Potter found himself once more in India, fighting on the North Western Front — a transfer which came about in a faintly surreal manner on account of his ability to play the bagpipes:

[Having] been a bag-piper, they wanted to turn me into a signaller (temporarily) and so they sent me back to India to learn how to ride a horse: and when they found I already knew how, they offered me an attachment to the 45th (I think) Indian Cavalry which was then operating on the NWF [North Western Frontier]. It made a nice change to be fighting those nice gentlemanly Wazirs, Pathans and what-nots – as opposed to those very definitely NOT gentlemanly Japanese on the other flank of the

⁸⁰ See AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 8 September 1974 ('№13: Personal 1974-5', PA); and AJP to Gerald Priestland, 20 October 1979 ('№7 Fan Mail July 1977-8 + FIN', PA).

⁸¹ See AJP to Philip Christison, 15 December 1978, and Philip Christison to AJP, 24 December 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA): Potter refers to himself being 'musical director' for other army entertainments, but gives no details of the circumstances. In a letter of 1950, he informs his correspondent that he 'looked after the musical side of several unit entertainment groups and also started and ran for some twelve months in 1943/4 a male voice choir. This, incidentally, involved arranging the music': AJP to W. H. N. Downer, 12 June 1950 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA).

⁸² For an account of the XIVth Army's role in the Burma Campaign, see Michael Hickey, *The Unforgettable Army: Slim's XIVth Army in Burma* (London, 1992).

⁸³ AJP to Mareli Penn, 21 November 1979 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

⁸⁴ AJP to Joanna Richardson, 18 November 1973 ('№13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

sub-continent. ... Except that after hard-learned experience with our far-eastern friends, you'd never have found me cantering down any dark defile without blasting it first with grenades, mortar bombs – or blockbusters if I could have laid my hands on them.⁸⁵

By 1944, the Japanese had suffered serious reverses and the war increasingly turned in the Allies' favour. Nonetheless, Potter made no secret of his relief when Japan surrendered unconditionally after the dropping of the atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima ('for the which [*sic.*] thank you, thank you and thank you, Mr Truman'⁸⁶). He would not be permitted to return home just yet, however: much to his dismay his demobilisation was compulsorily deferred.⁸⁷ He soon found himself in Java, on the staff of the Allied Land Forces Netherlands East Indies which was under the command of Philip Christison, where the Allied forces had reluctantly agreed to intervene.⁸⁸ The occupation of the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) by Japan in 1942 had brought a long period of Dutch colonial rule to a sudden close. After the Japanese surrender in August 1945, the nationalist leaders Sukarno and Hatta issued a proclamation of Indonesian independence. The Netherlands, which had been weakened by a protracted period of German occupation during the Second World War, was yet not in a position to send a significant military force to subdue this national revolution – in the event, they could not attempt to do so until the following year. For the moment, the Dutch government had to content itself with a campaign of scaremongering, accusing Sukarno and Hatta of being pawns of the Japanese and denouncing the Republic as a creation of fascism. Reluctantly, the Allied forces and the Japanese agreed to act as caretakers until the Dutch could return. The British commander Lord Mountbatten was charged with repatriating some 300,000 Japanese and liberating prisoners of war, as well as maintaining civil order. As a staff officer, Potter now found himself in the curious position of

⁸⁵ AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 8 September 1974 ('N^o13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

⁸⁶ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

⁸⁷ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 122.

⁸⁸ AJP to Shelford Bidwell, 23 June 1972 ('N^o 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)', PA)

commanding Japanese troops.⁸⁹ Mountbatten was unenthusiastic about committing his army to a long campaign to reclaim Indonesia for the Dutch, however, and the last British soldiers departed the country in November 1946.⁹⁰

1.4 Nigeria: 1946 - 49

At some time during that year, Potter returned to England, having been discharged from the army with the honorary rank of captain.⁹¹ In view of the fact that he had participated in some of most arduous campaigns of the war, it need hardly be said that he was lucky to emerge from his period of service in good health and more or less unscathed – physically, at any rate, if not mentally. He enjoyed a period of well-earned demobilisation leave which lasted about three months⁹², but he was soon forced to confront the problem of making a living. As he later remarked, the economic situation in England did not look propitious and prompted ‘memories of horror stories of post-1918 papers full of ads from unemployed ex-officers willing “to go anywhere – do anything”’.⁹³ Rather than face the prospect of long-term unemployment or having to accept badly paid work, he took a job with the United Africa Company in Nigeria, where he was to remain for the next three years. The UAC, which had been formed in 1929 by the fusion of the Niger Company and the African and Eastern Corporation, was a subsidiary of the multinational corporation Unilever. It was by far the single largest commercial organisation in West and Equatorial Africa, trading in a truly bewildering variety of goods ranging from a vast array of foodstuffs to timber, oil, motors, cosmetics, clothes, fabrics, tobacco and hardware. Potter was offered the position of General Manager with the company at a depot in Port Harcourt in Nigeria, at a starting salary of £600 *per annum* (roughly £17,100 or €24,000 in today’s money).⁹⁴ According to D. K. Fieldhouse, the author of

⁸⁹ AJP to Beatrix Darnton, 2 September 1974 (‘Nº13: Personal 1974-5’, PA)

⁹⁰ This account draws on that given in Adrian Vickers, *A History of Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge, 2005).

⁹¹ See AJP to Gertrude Tree, 12 April 1973 (‘Nº13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3’, PA).

⁹² Acton, ‘Interview with A. J. Potter’, 122

⁹³ AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 (‘Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5’, PA)

⁹⁴ Contract dated 21 March 1946 in ‘UAC Correspondence etc. ‘46 – ‘49’, PA

a standard history of the United Africa Company, by the early 1930s the firm had established an extensive network of produce-buying points, wholesale stores and retail outlets all over Nigeria. In 1931, for example, it operated in 48 districts of the country, maintaining in each of them between one and six large wholesale stores which in turn supplied between six and sixty retail stores.⁹⁵ As Fieldhouse points out, this basic structure of the company proved remarkably durable, and would last with little change until the 1950s, unaffected to any great extent even by the upheavals of the Second World War.⁹⁶

Potter would remain in Nigeria until 1949. He sailed from Southampton to Lagos on 1 June 1946, travelling first class⁹⁷, and presumably took up his new post shortly thereafter. Very little is known about his life during this three-year period, as the surviving documentation is particularly scant. One imagines that his day-to-day existence cannot have been very eventful – or if it was, he never indicated as much in his letters. But one can safely conjecture that he was probably kept rather busy. The duties of UAC managers were quite demanding, and included the purchase of merchandise, drawing up of contracts, fixing prices, keeping accounts, engaging African staff and training new European staff, and generally promoting the business. Within their districts, these men were often figures of considerable power and influence.⁹⁸ A few folders of correspondence, company circulars and account sheets have been preserved amongst Potter's posthumous papers, but they are mostly uninformative. One or two of the documents that they contain provide a tantalising glimpse of the kind of lifestyle enjoyed by UAC employees, which extended to having African servants: and at one point, the company clearly deemed it necessary to send its European employees a lengthy circular offering advice on how to behave appropriately towards them in order to defuse a threatened strike.⁹⁹ Of Potter's

⁹⁵ D. K. Fieldhouse, *Merchant Capital and Economic Decolonization: The United Africa Company 1929-1989* (Oxford, 1994), 28-29.

⁹⁶ Fieldhouse, *Merchant Capital*, 33.

⁹⁷ Receipt for ticket in 'UAC Correspondence etc. '46 – '49', PA

⁹⁸ See Fieldhouse, *Merchant Capital*, 28-29.

⁹⁹ See undated circular 'Masters and Servants' (which seems to have been issued some time in 1949) in 'UAC Circulars 1946', PA.

social and personal life during these years we know virtually nothing. He kept a few dozen letters from family and friends overseas, but they contain little of interest and he had not yet formed the habit of preserving his side of the correspondence.

Interestingly, Potter's interest in music seems to have revived significantly during this period: he purchased a piano, an acquisition which aroused lively interest amongst his neighbours¹⁰⁰, and he also ran a mixed-voice choir.¹⁰¹ But one senses that the novelty of living in Africa quickly wore off, in spite of his new found material security. Potter came back to Britain on leave in April 1948¹⁰² and promptly succumbed to a severe bout of malaria.¹⁰³ During this visit, which seems to have lasted for several months, he had the impression that the economic situation in England was not as grim as he had previously thought, and that it might prove feasible, after all, to find full-time employment there.¹⁰⁴ He returned to Nigeria for one more year, presumably not intending to stay there for very much longer. In the event, he seems to have left the UAC under something of a cloud: in August 1949 he received a curt letter from the General Manager of the company in Port Harcourt notifying him that it had been decided 'to immediately dispense with [his] services'.¹⁰⁵ The following day, he received a sympathetic handwritten note from someone who was presumably an associate or colleague, which reads simply 'Just to say how very sorry I am about things.'¹⁰⁶ The surviving documentation offers no clues to what might have transpired. Although this is by no means certain, one likely explanation is that Potter may have been drinking to excess and neglected his

¹⁰⁰ Margaret Blyth to AJP, 19 December 1949 ('Private '48 – '52', PA)

¹⁰¹ See AJP to W. H. N. Downer, 12 June 1950 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA).

¹⁰² Receipt for liner ticket in 'UAC Correspondence etc. '46 – '49', PA

¹⁰³ Relevant correspondence from family members in 'UAC Correspondence etc. '46 – '49', PA; see also AJP to sister Winifred (surname unknown), 30 June 1968 ('№13: Personal 1967-8', PA)

¹⁰⁴ See AJP to Ian Lord, 23 December 1974 ('Fan Mail 1972 – 3 – 4 – 5', PA)

¹⁰⁵ C. Paris Jones to AJP, 24 August 1949 ('UAC Correspondence etc. '46 – '49', PA)

¹⁰⁶ Rex Reynolds to AJP, 25 August 1949 ('Official Civilian 1946 – 49', PA)

duties: one of his personal letters from this period contains a teasing reference to his fondness for alcohol.¹⁰⁷

1.5 Return to United Kingdom and subsequent move to Ireland

With hindsight, Potter considered that his departure from Nigeria was probably fortuitous in view of the increasing political instability of the country during the 1950s¹⁰⁸, and he does not seem to have regretted the loss of his job. By November 1949, he was once more back in Belfast, where he had hopes of obtaining a partnership in a firm of transport contractors.¹⁰⁹ This plan evidently came to nothing. After applying unsuccessfully for various jobs, including the post of Assistant Organiser with the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (Northern Ireland)¹¹⁰, he decided to try his luck elsewhere and moved to Birmingham in early October 1950.¹¹¹ In a rather surprising development that proved to have far-reaching implications for his future, Potter decided around this time to try and resume the musical career that he had forsaken over a decade previously. It is not entirely clear what prompted this decision. Twenty years later he offered the following explanation to Acton:

When I came home ... and had a chance to look around and see that things had settled down a bit, I realized that there was no need for me to exile myself out of music. When I looked around at the people who were making perfectly good livings out of it, I thought there was plenty of room for me. The only trouble was the business of working your way back, and time was going on, so I decided to work myself back via singing because it was the best thing to do.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ See 'José' (surname unknown) to AJP, 6 July 1948 ('Private '48 - '52', PA): this correspondent appears to have been an ex-girlfriend, and in this letter she expressed the hope that he will turn up sober to their next meeting.

¹⁰⁸ See AJP to sister Winifred, 30 June 1968 ('№13: Personal 1967-8', PA)

¹⁰⁹ See AJP to 'John' (surname unknown), 3 November 1949 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹¹⁰ Relevant correspondence in ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹¹¹ See AJP to Secretary, Shaftsbury Voice Choir, 9 October 1950 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA).

¹¹² Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 122

The fact that he had trained as a chorister evidently led him to believe that he might stand a chance of obtaining work as a singer. This explanation leaves quite a number of questions unanswered, however: Potter was now 32 years old, a rather late age at which to embark on a professional singing career, particularly when one considers that he had not sung since his teens. His expectations would consequently appear to have been quite unrealistic, particularly as the recordings of his performances that have been preserved in the Potter Archive indicate that his voice was not of exceptional quality. In June 1950, he auditioned unsuccessfully for the BBC in Belfast, only to be informed that his performance 'did not reach the necessary standard for your name to be added to our waiting list.'¹¹³ Nonetheless, he persevered, and embarked on a year's course of study at the Birmingham School of Music with Charles Harrison, at the end of which he took the licentiate performer's diploma of the Royal Academy of Music.¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, he supported himself by means of a variety of part-time jobs, including one with Birmingham City Transport and another with a machinery-knitting co-operative, and gained as much experience of choral singing as he could.¹¹⁵

The following autumn, his luck turned. A vacancy for a vicar choral was advertised at St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, one of the very few Church of Ireland establishments in the country that was in a position to maintain a salaried choir to perform daily choral services. At this period, the choir comprised fifteen men and two dozen boys. Vicars choral were assured a yearly salary of at least £240 a year, with the possibility of earning additional income from the chapel of Trinity College, Dublin, with which St Patrick's had an informal arrangement to share personnel.¹¹⁶ Potter auditioned on 4 October¹¹⁷ and was informed at the end of the month that he had been successful.¹¹⁸ Negotiations concerning fees and starting dates proceeded in a somewhat leisurely fashion. Eventually in mid-November it was agreed that he

¹¹³ See E. W. J. Boucher to AJP, ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA).

¹¹⁴ See AJP to E. W. J. Boucher, 15 January 1952 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA).

¹¹⁵ See AJP to Aoine Ní Dhobhailéain, 7 December 1968 ('No1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

¹¹⁶ Copy of job description in ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹¹⁷ See Robert Armstrong to AJP, 11 September 1951 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹¹⁸ Telegram from Robert Armstrong, 30 October 1951 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

would take up his duties on the 30th of that month.¹¹⁹ Potter quickly found a flat in Blackrock, a well-heeled suburb to the south of Dublin and took a lease on it for a year.¹²⁰ Although he did not suspect as much at the time, he would spend the remaining twenty-nine years of his life in Ireland, and from this point onwards it would take a very different course.

¹¹⁹ Robert Armstrong to AJP, 15 November 1951 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹²⁰ See AJP to A. McGuire, 12 December 1951 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA).

Part 2: 1951 - 1980

1.6 Resumption of composition and work as arranger: 1951 - 1959

When Potter moved to Dublin in November 1951, he clearly regarded his post at St Patrick's as little more than a stopgap until he found a position that was more lucrative. He had no intention of settling permanently in Ireland: indeed, he continued to apply for jobs abroad well into the mid-1960s, some of them in places as far afield as Australia.¹²¹ But in the short term, events were to take a wholly different course to what he had expected, for as it turned out, his career in Ireland would be as a composer rather than a performer. This was a rather surprising development. For obvious reasons, Potter's years in the army had been artistically fallow and to all outward appearances, his interest in creative activity seemed to have evaporated. And although his interest in music revived to some extent while he was in Nigeria, as we have seen, nothing in his surviving correspondence from this period suggests that he had resumed composing or was even thinking of doing so. His creative silence of over ten years' duration was broken on his return to England, when he revised a number of compositions dating from his period of study at the Royal College of Music, and resumed work on others that had been left unfinished. The circumstances are rather unclear, but it would appear that in 1949 he completed a substantial *Missa Brevis* (subtitled *Lorica Sanctii Patricii*) for soloists and double chorus *a cappella* and a set of songs with orchestral accompaniment, *Six Songs from the Glens of Antrim*, to texts by Moira O'Neill.¹²² His resumption of composition is a deeply mysterious turning point in Potter's life that would have far-reaching consequences for the future.

¹²¹ Relevant correspondence in 'J. F. B. 58-65', PA

¹²² See Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of what is known about the genesis of the *Missa Brevis*. One of Potter's letters suggests that *Six Songs from the Glens of Antrim* was also a student work: see AJP to Site Director, Corrymeela Centre, 23 November 1974 ('Nº 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 - (June + Finish)', PA)

Having gone to the trouble of reworking these student compositions, he was naturally eager to elicit the opinion of a professional composer as to their quality, and if possible, arrange performances of them. For someone in his position, who was completely unknown and almost without connections in the musical world, the most obvious way of bringing his compositions to wider attention was to enter them for competitions. Shortly after moving to Birmingham, he submitted the *Missa Brevis* for a competition organised for the 1951 Festival of Britain by CEMA, the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (Northern Ireland). As shall be detailed in the next chapter, it was awarded first prize in its category, winning considerable praise from the competition adjudicators Howard Ferguson and Julius Harrison.¹²³ The following year, he submitted another student composition, a Fantasy for String Quartet for a competition in the Republic of Ireland organised under auspices of the Dublin music festival An Feis Ceoil¹²⁴, which also won first prize.¹²⁵ His run of luck continued. Potter entered two further competitions in the Republic of Ireland in 1952. His orchestral *Rhapsody on Corrymeela* (later renamed *Aiste ó na Gleannta* [Music from the Glens]¹²⁶) received first prize in a competition organised by An tOireachtas, an annual Gaelic culture festival similar to the Eisteddfod in Wales, which was founded by the Gaelic League in 1897.¹²⁷ The adjudicator on this occasion was one of the most distinguished figures in Irish music, the composer Aloys Fleischmann (1910-1992), who had evidently been impressed by the score. In his report, he described it as ‘an interesting and original work’, continuing:

¹²³ CEMA was founded in 1943, and did much to foster the development of musical life in Northern Ireland in subsequent years: see Jack Loudan, ‘CEMA and Music in Northern Ireland’ in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland* (Cork, 1952)

¹²⁴ Feis Ceoil was founded in 1894 and comprises programmes of vocal and instrumental prize competitions, as well as competitions for composers. For an account, see Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair, ‘The Cultural Value of Festival and Feis’, in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, 214

¹²⁵ See AJP to Hon. Secretary, Feis Ceoil, 29 May 1950 (‘Tutti ’49 – ’52’, PA).

¹²⁶ The date of completion of this composition is erroneously given as 1952 in Mark Cronin, ‘A. J. Potter (1918-1980): An Annotated Catalogue of Works’, MA Thesis (Cork Institute of Technology, 2005): see Chapter 2 for an account of the genesis of this work.

¹²⁷ See Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair, ‘The Cultural Value of Festival and Feis’, in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, 215.

The writer has an assured technique, and treats folksong material in terms of a modern harmonic texture, achieving rich colour, especially in the blending of the deeper timbres of wind and strings. The structure is ingeniously conceived, since the same folk theme recurs in various rhythmic guises, ultimate unity being achieved by the reference to the introduction at the end. Modal, neo-romantic and bitonal elements are all used, and despite a certain lack of consistency in method, the general effect is deeply poetical.

NB This must be one of the best works ever entered for an Oireachtas competition.¹²⁸

In December of the same year, not long after he had moved to Dublin¹²⁹, Potter entered a competition that had been recently instituted by the music department of the Irish national broadcasting station Radio Éireann to encourage the efforts of native composers, the Carolan Prize.¹³⁰ In 1951, a £50 prize was offered for the best short orchestral work submitted, with the additional prospect of a performance by the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra.¹³¹ Potter sent in two contrasting scores, the meditative *Rhapsody under a High Sky* and an ebullient concert overture to which he had given the whimsical title *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*. In February 1952, when the results were announced, the Music Director of Radio Éireann, Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin notified Potter that he had won first prize.¹³² This time, the competition had been adjudicated by the eminent English composer Arnold Bax, who wrote a very complimentary report on both pieces.

Although Potter's surviving correspondence provides scant indication of his response to these successes, he must surely have found them gratifying. If his ambition to become a composer had reasserted itself in full force by this point, they would have given a welcome boost to his self-confidence and helped dispel any

¹²⁸ Fleischmann's report, 'Tutti '49 – '52', PA. The report is unsigned, but AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 3 November 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52), PA) confirms Fleischmann's authorship.

¹²⁹ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 18 December 1951 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹³⁰ See Chapter 2 for a fuller discussion of the Carolan Prize and the genesis of these works.

¹³¹ Copy of regulations for the 1951 Carolan Prize, 'Tutti '49 – '52', PA

¹³² Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 11 February 1952 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

lingering doubts about his abilities. But encouraging as they were and whatever new professional opportunities they might open up, it would scarcely have been realistic for Potter to entertain the expectation that he could immediately embark on a career as a freelance composer. In the short term, at least, he would need to find other ways of earning a living, for the circumstances of Irish musical life at the period would hardly have permitted such a step. For reasons intimately bound up with Ireland's troubled history, 'classical' music still occupied a decidedly marginal place in contemporary Irish culture in the early 1950s. As Aloys Fleischmann's pioneering survey of 1952 *Music in Ireland* reveals, native musical life remained painfully impoverished in comparison with most other European countries. In part, there were straightforward economic reasons for this. Ireland was a small, backward country with few natural resources and a small population. It had never developed the kind of industrial or manufacturing base that had led to the creation of large urban centres in Britain and on the continent, which in turn had made it possible for highly evolved musical infrastructures to come into being. Educational opportunities were restricted, particularly at more advanced levels, with the consequence that Ireland had produced few performers or conductors of international standing. The country entirely lacked a professional opera or ballet company which functioned on a full-time basis. Concert life was very restricted, especially outside of Dublin: in most provincial centres it was infeasible to put on even a modest musical event such as a piano recital for the simple reason that good pianos were in such short supply. Potter would shortly be able to confirm these dismal facts from his first-hand experiences as a peripatetic examiner, as an exchange of letters with the composer Elizabeth Maconchy reveals. In 1966, Maconchy contacted him to ask if it would be possible to organise an Irish tour for a violin and piano duo who were about to play one of her violin sonatas at the Cheltenham Festival.¹³³ Potter explained to her that such a proposal was completely infeasible:

¹³³ Elizabeth Maconchy to AJP, 30 April 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

I have just come back ... from an examination tour of the west [of Ireland]. In Galway city, instead of holding the examinations at one convent or suchlike, we hire premises and a piano, and get the individual teachers to bring their pupils there. The premises present no difficulty.... But the piano! I won't go into all my *via dolorosa* of looking for one. But in the whole of Galway and its environs, the best I could find was one a complete tone flat... but at least all the notes worked. That, by the way, is a pretty general picture of the state of things in the country as a whole. ... I personally examine about 2,000 candidates in centres all over the country every year, so I know what I'm talking about.¹³⁴

In view of this, it is not surprising to learn that no professional chamber ensembles operated on a full-time basis in Ireland at this period. As far as larger ensembles were concerned, there were only two professional orchestras in the country, a symphony orchestra and a light orchestra, both of which were maintained by Radio Éireann in addition to a small radio choir.¹³⁵ These represented the sum total of the indigenous professional performing groups when Potter settled in Dublin in 1951. From the composer's point of view, these circumstances could hardly be described as propitious: Potter must have been acutely conscious of the contrast with Britain, with its numerous regional orchestras and other ensembles, and its active concert life. Such performance opportunities as existed were mostly controlled by Radio Éireann and it was consequently important that he gain an *entrée* there.

Potter now attempted to do so in two different capacities. The first of these was as a performer. To judge from his correspondence, in addition to his duties at St Patrick's, Potter accepted professional engagements as a singer for about two years after coming to Ireland, making occasional appearances as a recitalist and in performances of oratorio.¹³⁶ His performance activities do not seem to have been very extensive, but they no doubt represented a welcome source of additional

¹³⁴ AJP to Elizabeth Maconchy, 5 June 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

¹³⁵ For a recent account of these performing groups and their activities, see Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin, 2005).

¹³⁶ Relevant correspondence in 'Tutti '49 - '52' and 'General 1953', PA

income. He duly auditioned for Radio Éireann on 1 February 1952.¹³⁷ The panel acknowledged that he was 'a good musician' and that his programme was 'well-prepared & correct', but had some reservations about the actual quality of his voice and the manner in which it was produced.¹³⁸ Nonetheless, he was asked to sing the solo bass part in a studio performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony later that month, but this does not appear to have led to further engagements.¹³⁹

Fortunately for Potter, another opening presented itself. In the summer of the previous year, he had written to Ó h-Annracháin from Birmingham to ask if RÉ might be prepared to organise a performance of his recent Fantasy for String Quartet.¹⁴⁰ In the course of the correspondence that ensued, Ó h-Annracháin informed him that he was particularly interested in acquiring new arrangements of Irish folk music for the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra, especially of 'good Irish melodies (with words) which have not been orchestrated before'.¹⁴¹ For some years, the Music Department had tried to encourage composers to produce arrangements of various kinds and since 1943 had put aside an annual sum to pay for suitable works.¹⁴² The background to this initiative was of considerable interest. Difficult though this is to imagine today, given its extraordinary resurgence in popularity over the last forty years, there appears to have been considerable anxiety at the period that Irish traditional music was entering on a phase of terminal decline and that it might even be in imminent danger of extinction. Standards of performances amongst traditional musicians were often poor, while the performance traditions themselves had become corrupt. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs at the time, Erskine Childers, who had a strong interest in folk music and viewed these developments with disquiet, suggested to Ó h-Annracháin that RÉ should play an active role in redressing this neglect. By the early 1950s, a considerable quantity of

¹³⁷ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 28 January 1952 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹³⁸ See Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 241

¹³⁹ See Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 18 February 1952 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹⁴⁰ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 15 June 1951 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹⁴¹ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 9 October 1951 ('Tutti '49 - '52', PA)

¹⁴² See Séumas Ó Braonáin, 'Music in the Broadcasting Service' in Fleischmann, *Music in Ireland*, 201.

traditional music had been collected and housed in the archives of the Irish Folklore Commission, but much of it was unknown except to a handful of specialists. The most effective way of bringing this cultural inheritance to the attention of a wider audience, in Childers' view, was to commission composers to make attractive choral and orchestral arrangements of it. These were not intended in any way to supplant the originals or to replace 'authentic' modes of traditional performance – but this strategy was felt to be a more pragmatic way of popularising this repertoire rather than an uncompromising purist approach. Ó h-Annracháin, who had considerable experience as a choral conductor before joining the staff at RÉ, was anxious to foster choral arrangements in particular, and thus had a personal interest in the success of the venture. He also wished to develop a repertoire of arrangements for light orchestra which would be based on material in the Folklore Commission archives, but treated it in a fairly sophisticated manner, rather than being redolent of a glorified *céilí* band: some of the transcriptions of Irish folk music played by BBC Northern Ireland Light Orchestra suggested themselves as suitable models.¹⁴³

Shortly after winning the Carolan Prize in 1952, Potter was contacted by Ó h-Annracháin to ask if he would be interested in arranging some Irish songs for RÉ Light Orchestra, at the suggestion of its conductor Dermot O'Hara.¹⁴⁴ On this occasion, his task was to orchestrate 'The Ballynure Ballad', 'The Ninepenny Fidil' and 'The Dear Little Shamrock', for which he received five guineas apiece (roughly £100 or €150 today).¹⁴⁵ Potter was not slow to realise that such commissions could prove a useful source of supplementary income and indicated to Ó h-Annracháin that he would be interested in fulfilling similar tasks in the future.¹⁴⁶ He was asked to undertake further work almost immediately. This marked the beginning of an association with RÉ which lasted for almost thirty years until Potter's death in 1980, and which was soon to expand rapidly in scope.

¹⁴³ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, interview with author, 19 August 2004

¹⁴⁴ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 27 February 1952 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹⁴⁵ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 25 March 1952 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

¹⁴⁶ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 21 March 1952 ('Tutti '49 – '52', PA)

Initially, Potter was asked to provide choral arrangements for the station's radio choir Cór Radio Éireann (which was reconstituted in 1953 as the Radio Éireann Singers), and orchestrate the accompaniments of solo songs for the RÉ Light Orchestra. He was generally paid between £2 and £3 for a choral arrangement (roughly £38-58/€55-84 today) and £3-8 for an orchestral arrangement (£58-155/€84-225), depending on the length of the item in question.¹⁴⁷ These fees seem comparatively small, but as Potter produced arrangements in considerable quantities in the early to mid-1950s, his total earnings from Radio Éireann must have been fairly sizeable. On occasion, he would also copy out the orchestral parts to earn additional money: some years later he told a correspondent 'it was quite usual to find that the copying paid more than the composing.'¹⁴⁸ While some of the solo songs were arrangements of Irish folk music, they were not exclusively so: Potter was also asked to arrange folk songs from other countries and a considerable quantity of light popular music and extracts from operettas. In most cases, his task was simply to orchestrate an existing version of the song, rather than arrange it from scratch. Various letters in the Potter Archive from the conductor of the Radio Éireann Singers Hans Waldemar Rosen provide a good idea of the character of the choral arrangements and the specifications to which they were produced. In a letter of 1953, Rosen specifically requested that they should be 'as simple as possible', with 'much unison or solo, [and] no modulations'. The piano accompaniment was to be 'always light please', with 'no experiments'.¹⁴⁹ Another letter from 1954 requests that Potter arrange some Spanish songs in a manner that is 'as Spanish as you can, but, PLEASE, not too difficult; solo, unison, 2- or 3- part always welcome.'¹⁵⁰ Other communications from Rosen make similar stipulations, leading one to suspect that the choir was not a very proficient ensemble at the period and that they would have struggled to cope with anything more complex.¹⁵¹ As a result, these choral

¹⁴⁷ The relevant correspondence concerning fees is in 'RÉ 1/1/53 – 25/3/54', PA.

¹⁴⁸ AJP to Fr Cathal O'Callaghan, 4 August 1967 ('Nº1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

¹⁴⁹ Hans Waldemar Rosen to AJP, 8 November 1953 ('RÉ 1/1/53 – 25/3/54', PA)

¹⁵⁰ Hans Waldemar Rosen to AJP, 12 September 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁵¹ In the light of Rosen's directives, one wonders to what extent Richard Pine can be justified in his lavish praise of the RÉ Singers' 'mastery' during the period 1955-60, which he claims revealed them 'at the peak of their achievement': see Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 388, 382.

arrangements are very routine, as Potter clearly had little scope to produce anything more elaborate. Many of them were also turned out at top speed: one has the impression from his correspondence that the Music Department personnel were somewhat disorganised and would sometimes submit requests for new material to be arranged at very short notice.¹⁵²

Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin evidently had sufficient confidence in Potter's abilities to encourage him from the outset to make additional arrangements on his own initiative, rather than waiting to be asked: in a letter of September 1952 he proposed:

In regard to arrangements of Irish music generally (including purely orchestral arrangements for small or full orchestra) I suggest you go ahead at your convenience and submit the scores to us when finished. Owing to the limited amount of Irish music available, there is little danger of our having too much of it in our library for some time yet!¹⁵³

Potter readily availed of this opportunity to arrange music for the light orchestra. According to Mark Cronin's recent catalogue of Potter's works, he arranged three hornpipes for the RÉLO some time in 1952, and in July 1953, he sent Ó h-Annracháin a set of hop jigs, notifying him that he had selected jigs, reels and hornpipes from the archives of the Folklore Commission in case other sets might be wanted.¹⁵⁴ Over the next few years, Potter produced other medleys of Irish traditional dance music along similar lines, starting with a set of reels in February 1954 for which he was paid 25 guineas (about £500 or €720 today).¹⁵⁵ Potter would later compose a small quantity of purely instrumental arrangements of Irish traditional melodies other than dance tunes for the RÉLO, the best-known of these being a version of *Finnegan's Wake* (1957), the jaunty ballad that inspired the title of Joyce's celebrated novel. He also

¹⁵² See, for example, Hans Waldemar Rosen to AJP, 28 November 1953 ('RÉ 1/1/53 – 25/3/54', PA); and 21 October and 26 November 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁵³ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 15 September 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

¹⁵⁴ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 6 July 1953 ('RÉ 1/1/53 – 25/3/54', PA)

¹⁵⁵ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 19 February 1954 and Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 23 February 1954 ('RÉ 1/1/53 – 25/3/54', PA).

composed a series of works of a slightly more sophisticated order, which can be regarded as occupying an intermediate position between arrangements and original compositions. The first of these was a 'Fantasy on Irish Airs' mentioned in a letter of September 1952 to Ó h-Annracháin, which seems to be identical with the work that is listed in Cronin's catalogue as *Fantasy Gaelach No. 1* [sic.] – a rather incongruous macaronic title that was subsequently modified to the equally unsatisfactory form *Fantasia Gaelach No. 1*.¹⁵⁶ He composed a further five works with the same generic title¹⁵⁷, as well as at least two other orchestral works, the scores of which seem to be lost, which one presumes were in a similar vein, the *Fantasia Éireannach* of 1957 and the *Irish Rhapsody* of 1963. None of these appears to have been commissioned, and Potter presumably composed them in his spare time and submitted them to RÉ as Ó h-Annracháin had suggested.

These items were presumably played on programmes that featured a home-grown variety of light music based on Irish folk music and which seem to have been popular, as they continued to be broadcast until the early 1970s. To judge from a number of remarks scattered throughout Potter's correspondence from the mid-1950s, it would appear that the Music Department was consciously striving at this period to develop such a repertoire, which was loosely referred to as 'National Music'. Potter was more than willing to satisfy this demand also. On 1 May 1954, he sent Ó h-Annracháin *Fantasia Gaelach No. 2*, a small fantasy on 'The Foggy Dew' and 'The Green Linnet' for solo harp and small orchestra, describing it as an item that might 'fit into the repertoire of national music on its normal merits' and which he might be interested in purchasing.¹⁵⁸

Within a few years, then, even though he was never formally an employee of the station, Potter's had become virtually an unofficial staff arranger for RÉ, as well as

¹⁵⁶ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 8 September 1952 and Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 15 September 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA).

¹⁵⁷ Mark Cronin's catalogue lists only five works with the title *Fantasy/Fantasia Gaelach*, but an undated work list that Potter drew up for Edgar Deale in 1968 lists six: this can be found in 'No1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA alongside AJP to Edgar Deale, 22 March 1968.

¹⁵⁸ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 1 May 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

providing occasional pieces of light music for their broadcasts. One has the impression that he offered his services to the station at exactly the right time, at a period when the recently-formed Radio Éireann Light Orchestra and the Radio Éireann Singers were in urgent need of the services of competent arrangers to furnish them with a suitable 'national' repertoire. On the whole, the Music Department personnel seem to have valued his abilities: in September 1954 Hans Waldemar Rosen wrote to thank him for his 'highly and gratefully appreciated work', praising his recent arrangements in flattering terms.¹⁵⁹ Potter developed a reputation as someone who could be relied on to produce good work under pressure and unfailingly met his deadlines.¹⁶⁰ His efforts met with approbation in other quarters: in January 1954, Séan Ó Súilleabháin, the Clárathóir [Secretary] of Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann [Irish Folklore Commission] wrote to tell him that 'you are, to my mind – and many others are of the same opinion – the best of the few "bright hopes" we have in Ireland, so far as the arrangement of Irish folk-music is concerned.'¹⁶¹

The most recent catalogue of Potter's works produced by Mark Cronin in 2005 reveals that choral and vocal items for Radio Éireann (and subsequently Radio Telefís Éireann, as the station was renamed with the advent of television in 1961) seem to constitute the bulk of Potter's output as an arranger until the late 1960s. Between 1953 and 1955 alone Potter arranged some 250 items of this kind. Thereafter, the demand seems to have moderated considerably; nonetheless, he still continued to produce at least a dozen to two dozen arrangements for RÉ/RTÉ in most years, in addition to other items. It is probable that Potter may have written yet other arrangements for the station which are not detailed by Cronin, as the RTÉ catalogues that he consulted are apparently very incomplete and do not list all of the

¹⁵⁹ Hans Waldemar Rosen to AJP, 24 September 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁶⁰ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, interview with author, 19 August 2004

¹⁶¹ Séan Ó Súilleabháin to AJP, 5 January 1954 ('General 1/1/54 – 31/12/54', PA)

holdings of the various RTÉ libraries.¹⁶² The total quantity of items that Potter arranged for the station may consequently be well in excess of five or six hundred.

While this activity may have helped to boost Potter's earnings, he can hardly have found it very rewarding to arrange the kind of mawkish kitsch such as 'Wrap the Green Flag round Me', or 'The Dear Little Shamrock' which constituted a considerable proportion of the repertoire broadcast by the Radio Éireann Singers and the guest vocal soloists who appeared with the RÉ Light Orchestra. As we have seen, his activity as a choral arranger was narrowly circumscribed, and internal evidence suggests that the orchestral arrangements that the present writer has been able to examine were subject to similar practical and creative constraints. With some notable exceptions, such as the version of *Finnegan's Wake* alluded to earlier and scores such as *Fantasia Gaelach No. 1*, both of which are discussed in Chapter 3, Potter's orchestral arrangements of Irish folk music are often disappointing, as can be judged from a selection of them that was issued on a long-playing record *Ceol Potter* in 1973. This compilation features versions of some of the most celebrated airs in the traditional repertory, including *An Chúileann*, *An Draighean Donn*, *Cailín Deas Crúite na mBó* and *Róisín Dubh*. Potter makes little attempt to evolve a harmonic language that takes satisfactory cognisance of the modal nature of the melodies, as Carl Hardebeck's imaginative settings had attempted to do several decades previously: the harmonisations are completely conventional and contain little that would have surprised Stanford. The scoring is similarly uninventive, tending to fall back on the same formulae and predictable accompaniment textures from piece to piece. The melody is given unrelieved prominence throughout, and is repeated in a more or less unvaried form several times, often without even a simple countermelody to offset the monotony, or any significant alterations in instrumentation. It is possible, however, that Potter may have had little choice but to construct these arrangements in the manner that he did. For one thing, as the dismal quality of the performances on the *Ceol Potter* recording attests, the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra was not a

¹⁶² See the introduction to Mark Cronin's 'A. J. Potter (1918-1980): An Annotated Catalogue of Works'.

particularly proficient body at the period, being apparently hard-pressed to give a respectable account of straightforward pieces that are easily within the capacity of a good student orchestra. One is led to conjecture that the players would simply not have been able to cope with anything more difficult and Potter was forced to tailor what he wrote to accommodate their technical limitations. There is also some evidence to suggest that Music Department policy favoured a certain style of arrangement which left very little scope for creativity. In a set of notes from the early 1960s for what appears to be a talk on the subject of light music, Potter complained that the restrictions on arrangers became intolerable at one point:

One of the new-style statues ... decreed that orchestrations must concentrate on one single line of melody at a time interspersed with a couple of burps from the brass every fourth bar and a third-year modulation every sixteen. Add a two-to-the-bar note bass and a backing of accordion-style chord symbols on the guitar, and the result wasn't exactly what you'd call artistically rewarding. But at three and six a bar, it did make it easy to lay up funds...¹⁶³

Unfortunately he does not enter into further details, but his remarks suggest that he was under no illusions about the quality of these productions and regarded them as little more than a mechanical chore that he undertook merely to make money.

Curiously, in view of Potter's intense bout of renewed creative activity between 1949 and 1952, he wrote few original compositions of any substance during the 1950s – a striking fact which calls for some explanation. In 1952, in addition to composing the *Rhapsody on Corrymeela* alluded to earlier, he completed another student work, the *Concerto da chiesa* for piano and orchestra. Potter entered this score for the Carolan Prize in the same year, in which it once again earned him first prize.¹⁶⁴ Both this score and the orchestral works that Potter had entered for the competition in the previous year were performed by the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra, helping to establish his reputation as a composer of promise. One imagines that Potter would

¹⁶³ Undated, untitled four-page script in 'Scripts etc. '59-', PA

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the *Concerto da chiesa*.

have been anxious to capitalise on his recent successes and embark on substantial creative projects. At first, this certainly appears to have been the case, but over the next few years it became increasingly clear to him that securing performances of any large-scale works was going to prove difficult.

In theory, the music department had a limited budget to finance the commissioning and performance of original compositions, as well as arrangements of folk music. According to the Irish composer Frederick May, in an article written for Aloys Fleischmann's *Music in Ireland*, £500 a year had been made available for this purpose since 1943, a sum that had recently been increased to £700. This was a reasonably substantial budget — roughly £14,000 or €20,000 in today's money — although May does not make it clear whether these funds were also used to cover the costs of copying new scores and preparing orchestral materials, in which case it would not have stretched very far. However, May points out that at the time of writing (*Music in Ireland* was published in 1952), 'as far as can be gathered ... the commissioning of new works [had] latterly been discontinued or is at least extremely rare.' He goes on to explain:

When ... the grant was used in the initial years, the sum allocated to the composer even for a small-scale work was less than that which had to be allocated to the copyist who wrote out the orchestral material, and even then the grant was based on the actual playing-time of the composition, irrespective of its nature — whether, for instance, it happened to be an arrangement of dance tunes for a salon ensemble, or a major work for full orchestra — so that a composer of light music, who entered repeat marks generously at the end of various sections of his score, would outdo the composer of a serious work without any effort whatsoever. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that in several years the major part of the grant was not expended. Granted that there are not many composers in Ireland capable of writing music fit for performance at a symphony concert, there are at least some whose work is worth encouraging, and no more retrograde policy could be imagined

than the discontinuance of the practice of commissioning new works, apart from arrangements of folk song or dance music.¹⁶⁵

May's account clearly suggests that the fund was quite mismanaged, being administered in such a way as to deter rather than encourage composers from writing ambitious works of a serious nature: as we have seen, Potter could confirm from his own experience that he frequently got paid more for copying his work than for composing it. It also would seem to indicate that, whatever idealistic impulse had prompted this commissioning scheme as originally conceived, by the time Potter moved to Ireland in 1952 the RÉ Music Department had little interest in commissioning serious works, and preferred composers to concentrate on producing arrangements of traditional music or light works in the 'National Music' vein.

Various documents in the Potter Archives lead one to infer that this attitude remained essentially unchanged throughout the 1950s. On 22 November 1954, Potter wrote to Ó h-Annracháin outlining plans for four new works, asking if he might be interested in commissioning one of them. These included a full-scale symphony, a cantata for soloist, choir and orchestra based on poems by Hillaire Belloc, a suite of contrasting dances (comprising a waltz, rumba, sarabande and reel) of about twenty minutes duration, and a short set of variations on the popular ballad 'The Wild Colonial Boy'.¹⁶⁶ Interestingly, Ó h-Annracháin did not express any interest in either the symphony or the cantata, but suggested that the variations (which were eventually entitled *Variations on a Popular Tune*) would be suitable for inclusion in the RÉSO's 'Winter Proms' series.¹⁶⁷ One wonders whether this choice was largely determined by the fact that, of all the four works that Potter had proposed, this was the only one that might conceivably be considered 'National Music'. It is also interesting to note in this connection that in addition to accepting various sets of Irish dances from Potter, Ó h-Annracháin readily purchased and organised performances of at least seven further fantasias on Irish folk tunes during

¹⁶⁵ Frederick May, 'The Composer in Ireland', in Fleischmann, *Music in Ireland*, 168

¹⁶⁶ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 22 November 1954, ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁶⁷ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 24 November 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

this period¹⁶⁸, as well as pieces that were not based on folk music *per se* but which employed original material closely modelled on it. In March 1955 of the following year, for example, he bought what Potter described as ‘a suite of four airs, original, but of a strongly “national” cast ... arranged for Light Orchestra’, for which he paid the composer £25 (roughly £450/€650 today).¹⁶⁹

A rare opportunity to write something of a more substantial nature arose late in 1955, when Potter was invited to compose a ‘special overture or other orchestral work’ for performance during the 1956 An Tóstal, a recently inaugurated national festival.¹⁷⁰ While it would be imprudent to draw unwarranted inferences from the nature of the completed score (which was eventually entitled *Overture to an Irish Occasion*), one wonders whether Potter felt obliged to bestow some ‘national’ characteristics on this work also, as its last movement was originally cast as a set of reels similar to those he customarily arranged for RÉ – a plan that he retained with some modifications.¹⁷¹ Potter received a comparatively small remuneration for his efforts on this occasion: Ó h-Annracháin balked at the payment of £82 16s that he had requested (some £1,400 or €2,000 – hardly an exorbitant figure for a work lasting fourteen minutes), and asked him to settle for the considerably smaller sum of 50 guineas (about £900/€1,300).¹⁷² As May had intimated in his article, an Irish composer would scarcely grow rich on the fees that the national broadcasting station saw fit to pay him. Potter consented, but asked Ó h-Annracháin if he might be able to arrange repeat broadcasts of the score so that he could recoup some money

¹⁶⁸ Namely, *Fantasia Gaelach* Nos. 2-6, *Nocturne in Bansha* (a fantasy on the folk tune ‘The Peeler and the Goat’ dating from 1955) and the *Fantasia Éireannach* of 1957.

¹⁶⁹ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 18 March 1955 (‘RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55’, PA). Potter originally called the work *Four Irish Portraits* and gave each of the movements descriptive titles. He subsequently abandoned these and changed the title to *Irish Suite*: see Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 23 March 1955 and AJP to Ó h-Annracháin, 25 March 1955 (‘RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55’, PA).

¹⁷⁰ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 10 October 1955 (‘RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55’, PA)

¹⁷¹ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 21 October 1955 (‘RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55’, PA) and 14 February 1956 (‘RÉ ‘55-‘60’, PA).

¹⁷² See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 14 February 1955, and Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 21 February (‘RÉ ‘55-‘60’, PA).

through performing rights fees, pointing out that his arrangements earned him very little in this regard.¹⁷³

In spite of these discouraging circumstances, Potter still seems to have harboured a desire to write a large-scale work: in October of the following year, he requested a meeting with Ó h-Annracháin at which the matter was evidently raised.¹⁷⁴ The latter agreed to commission 'a symphonic work of say 30-40 minutes duration', for which he consented to pay the composer the niggardly sum of £100 (£1,700/€2,500).¹⁷⁵ Rather mysteriously, there is no further mention of this project in Potter's correspondence with RÉ and he appears never to have finished it. A personal letter written two years later explains why he had not done so, and would seem to indicate that RÉ's support of Irish composers was in fact extremely limited when it came to providing opportunities to write large-scale works.¹⁷⁶ The letter in question was sent to an American acquaintance, John P. Cavanagh, who, as we shall see presently, was instrumental in organising performances of Potter's music with the Boston Pops Orchestra in the United States. In a previous communication, Cavanagh had remarked that Irish composers seemed to compose very few extended works and expressed the hope that Potter would write a 'full-scale tone-poem or even a symphony', offering to use his connections to secure a performance of it with the Boston Symphony Orchestra.¹⁷⁷ Potter commented:

I have a bit of a guilty feeling there, as it does occur to me that there is cause for complaint with us Irish composers for not delivering the goods. But it's only fair to say that we are in a bit of a cleft stick in the matter of large-scale serious works. Granted that they mean a very great deal if they are performed ... but the trouble is that it is so hard to get them mounted. The last time I spoke to Fachtna on the subject, he just told me in so many words that it was almost impossible to put on

¹⁷³ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 23 February 1955 ('RÉ '55-'60', PA)

¹⁷⁴ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 8 October 1956 ('RÉ '55-'60', PA)

¹⁷⁵ Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 25 October 1956 ('RÉ '55-'60', PA)

¹⁷⁶ As the following account should make clear, Richard Pine's assumption that this symphony is identical with the later *Sinfonia de Profundis* is unjustified, as is his assertion that the latter took some thirteen years to write: see Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 249.

¹⁷⁷ John P. Cavanagh to AJP, 21 November 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

more than the usual 8-10 minute job. As a matter of fact, I have myself broken up a complete symphony into separate overtures, elegies and what not simply because I knew that if I did keep it complete, I couldn't get it performed. A depressing thing to have to do, but half a loaf is better than no bread!

Only a couple of years back, I was discussing the subject of future commissions with F[achtna] Ó h[-Annracháin] and he just told me in so many words that the outlook for extended works was utterly remote. Both [Brian] Boydell and myself won the Carolan Prize some years back with big-scale concertos – his for violin, mine for piano. They were each performed twice in quick succession and that, for the last five years, has been that.¹⁷⁸

Although no sketches for this symphony have come to light and there is no further mention of it in his correspondence, Potter's catalogue lists a number of pieces composed between 1956 and 1958 which could very plausibly have originated as movements discarded from it. The 'elegies' to which he refers could well be the *Caoine* ['Lament'] for viola and orchestra of 1956 (the score of which appears to be lost), or *Elegy* for clarinet and strings of the same year. It is interesting to note that Potter incorporated the latter work in a more or less unchanged form as a slow movement of his Second Symphony, written twenty years later in 1976, and in doing so, may have been doing no more than restoring the movement to the context for which it had originally been intended, that of a multi-movement symphonic work.

Potter's comments in this letter raise a number of intriguing questions about Music Department policy at this period and suggest that it may have imposed irksome restrictions on Irish composers. Potter's contention that there was simply no opportunity to have larger works performed during the 1950s would appear to be borne out by a perusal of the catalogues of his contemporaries, which reveal that RÉ appears to have commissioned only a handful of serious works during this decade, all of which were comparatively short. That the Music Department's budget was

¹⁷⁸ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 28 November 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA). Potter made three drafts of this letter: the paragraphs cited here are taken from two different drafts.

small there can be no doubt, but this of itself does not adequately explain why Potter and his colleagues were afforded so few opportunities to write substantial works for the station's symphony orchestra and were confined almost exclusively to writing short pieces for the R   Light Orchestra. These circumstances clearly require further investigation. It is possible that the dearth of commissions resulted simply from a lack of interest in modern music on the part of the Music Department's senior staff. It may also be that they had very circumscribed notions about the form that an indigenous art music should take and thought that native composers should confine themselves to the cultivation of 'National Music'. Whether or not this may have been the case, R  's failure to encourage the growth of an indigenous repertoire of serious symphonic works in the 1950s had considerable implications for Irish composers, as regular access to the country's only professional symphony orchestra was effectively denied them. Writing for the R  LO was scarcely a satisfactory alternative, as this body was simply not up to performing music that was technically demanding – as the rather poor radio recordings dating from the 1960s of Potter's ballets reveal. When one considers that Irish composers had so few opportunities to write for professional chamber groups, proficient choirs or for the stage at this period, this restriction would surely have been felt even more acutely.¹⁷⁹

These circumstances, at least in part, would appear to account for the fact that Potter's output of serious music dwindled almost to nothing during the 1950s, and that he wrote little else other than short pieces of light music. It is also important to bear in mind that he was unable to make a living just from composing and

¹⁷⁹ The foregoing discussion should also make apparent the dubiousness of Joseph Ryan's remarks about the R   commissioning fund and about the work of twentieth-century Irish composers generally in his essay 'Nationalism and Irish Music', in Gerard Gillen and Harry White (eds.), *Music and Irish Cultural History*, (Dublin, 1995), 101-115. This essay advances the tendentious claim found in several of Ryan's publications that the collective output of twentieth-century Irish composers is largely of negligible quality on account of the deleterious influence exerted by Irish cultural and political nationalism. Ryan asserts that the 'generous scheme launched by Radio   ireann in 1943 designed to encourage native composers was poorly rewarded with an endless supply of arrangements and undistinguished dance selections' (111). This formulation, which clearly suggests that Irish composers were creative nonentities who were incapable of writing anything other than arrangements, is an egregious misrepresentation of the facts. For a critique of Ryan's views, see Patrick Zuk, 'Music and Nationalism': Part I, *Journal of Music in Ireland*, Jan/Feb 2002, 5-10.

arranging: as we have seen, the fees he could hope to receive from RÉ for commissioned works were rather small, and his work as an arranger was not particularly well paid either. In August 1957, Potter complained to the Director of Broadcasting Maurice Gorham that RÉ only paid its arrangers 1/9- a bar (about £1.50/€2.10 today), whereas the BBC paid 3/6- (£3.00/€4.20) – exactly double that rate.¹⁸⁰ Shortly after coming to Ireland, Potter had married in January 1953, and thus had additional responsibilities which made it incumbent on him to find yet other ways of supplementing the modest stipend he received as a vicar choral. To judge from remarks that he made later in life to the Dublin music critic Charles Acton, he seems to have found the ambiance at St Patrick's to be actively unpleasant¹⁸¹ and he eventually resigned his position in 1955 on grounds of ill health.¹⁸² He also gave up performing in public as a singer at the first opportunity and does not appear to have accepted any engagements after 1954. For a brief spell in 1954-5 he acted as music critic for the *Irish Times*¹⁸³; and in 1955 thought of applying for the post of Music Director in the Abbey Theatre after Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair resigned, but decided against it.¹⁸⁴ By this time, he had found alternative ways of making extra money which relieved him of the need to do so. His correspondence indicates that he had been taking private singing and theory students for several years by this point¹⁸⁵, and almost immediately after arriving in Ireland he set about equipping himself with suitable academic qualifications for a position in an educational establishment. He first acquired a BMus from Trinity College, Dublin (Trinity did not offer an undergraduate music course at this period and the degree was an external one), and the following year took an old-style DMus in composition, for which he had to sit the usual examinations in the history of music and advanced musical techniques, as well

¹⁸⁰ AJP to Maurice Gorham, 21 August 1957 ('RÉ '55 - '60', PA)

¹⁸¹ Potter intimated to Acton that discipline in the cathedral choir was very lax and that their conductor was ineffectual: a photocopy of a transcript of this interview with Potter (dated 14 January 1970) is contained in 'Nº7B: AJP', PA.

¹⁸² See AJP to Succentor of St Patrick's Cathedral, 13 June 1955 ('General 1955', PA)

¹⁸³ The relevant correspondence can be found in 'Irish Times', PA

¹⁸⁴ See AJP to Roibéird Ó Faracháin [Robert Farran], 18 June 1955; and AJP to Ernest Blythe, 3 and 8 June 1955 (all in 'General 1955', PA)S

¹⁸⁵ The relevant correspondence is contained in 'General 1953' and 'General 1954', PA.

as submit an Exercise.¹⁸⁶ In 1952 he was employed as a singing teacher at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, a private music school in Dublin.¹⁸⁷ Three years later, he was asked to take over as teacher of composition there from John F. Larchet when the latter resigned.¹⁸⁸ While his earnings from the RIAM would undoubtedly have placed his finances on a much more stable footing, his work there did not constitute a full-time post as we would now understand it. He only got paid by the hour, which meant that his salary fluctuated depending on the number of students that enrolled with him in any particular year. This arrangement also meant that he received no pay on public holidays or during the long school vacations.¹⁸⁹ He did, however, have the opportunity to augment his salary by acting as an examiner for the RIAM grade and diploma examinations in local centres throughout the country – an occupation that later came to consume considerable amounts of his time.

In addition to teaching, Potter started to develop another sideline which came to form an increasingly important part of his professional activities – giving occasional broadcast talks and lectures for R  . It cannot have escaped the Music Department staff that some of the lengthier communications they received from Potter on diverse subjects were stylishly written and often highly amusing: no doubt it occurred to one of them that he might prove an entertaining broadcaster. In 1954, the newly-appointed Assistant Musical Director John Reidy [S  an    Riada] (who had succeeded   amonn    Gallchobhair¹⁹⁰) proposed that he should give a radio talk and Potter promptly came up with ideas for four scripts, offering irreverent perspectives

¹⁸⁶ According to ‘Music Departments of the Universities’ in Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, 23-31, these rather formidable examinations would have included harmony and counterpoint in up to eight parts, double and triple counterpoint, canon in up to four parts, composition [*sic.*], orchestration, fugue in up to four parts, the history of music and ‘musical [*sic.*] criticism’.

¹⁸⁷ The standard history of the RIAM, Richard Pine and Charles Acton (eds.), *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848-1998*, (Dublin, 1998), does not indicate when Potter began to work there. A letter from AJP to the Secretary of the RIAM, 30 June 1952 (‘BBC ’52 – ’65’) seems to indicate that he commenced in 1952.

¹⁸⁸ See John F. Larchet to AJP, 27 October 1955 (‘General 1955’, PA)

¹⁸⁹ See AJP to P. Brennan T. D., 11 March 1963 (both in ‘General 1/1/62 – 63’, PA)

¹⁹⁰ See Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 161-2

on Baroque music, critics, music and musicians.¹⁹¹ Later that year, he was invited by the distinguished writer Francis MacManus, who was then General Features Officer, to script a substantial feature programme on the life of Mozart.¹⁹² From this point onwards, Potter began to feature quite regularly in the station's broadcasts: in addition to giving talks, he was also asked to present programmes of classical music and light music, and made occasional appearances on quiz shows and other programmes such as 'Pick of the Post'.¹⁹³ To judge from the scripts preserved amongst his papers, Potter's style of delivery was lively and engaging, and although his explorations of issues were never very profound, it should be remembered that these scripts were aimed at a general listenership and it would have been inappropriate to burden them with technical discussion.

By the mid-1950s, then, Potter's schedule had become so busy that he must have had very little free time for composition – and while he undoubtedly possessed sufficient technical fluency to turn out arrangements or short pieces of light music based on Irish folk tunes with little effort, his professional circumstances would hardly have been conducive to the composition of large-scale serious works such as a symphony which demand protracted, strenuous mental effort. It is consequently not surprising to find a note of despondency creeping into some of Potter's letters from the late 1950s, as he found that his time was increasingly consumed by activities that he found fundamentally unrewarding, such as his teaching and administrative duties at the RIAM and his work as an arranger, all of which he undertook simply for money and which allowed him very little time to compose the sort of music he felt he should be writing. In 1958, he confided to John P. Cavanagh:

I was ... much interested to see what you say about teaching: ... there is always a great temptation to pack it in for the simple reason that it is such an appallingly badly paid business. You don't want to spend all your time thinking about money, but when – like I do – you have to spend a good deal of your time and energy doing

¹⁹¹ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 4 September 1954 ('RE from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁹² See Francis MacManus to AJP, 5 October 1955 ('RE from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA)

¹⁹³ Relevant correspondence in 'RE '55 - '60' and 'RE/TE 1/1/61', PA

the Tin Pan Alley and light pop style of orchestrations in order to buy the bread & butter and the time to do more worth-while music, you do begin to wonder how you should spend the rest of your time. In my case, it's rather worse, for it involves rather a lot of administrative work: I have to be chairman of the board of studies and preside over regular committee meetings and draft syllabuses and all that kind of thing.¹⁹⁴

There was also the simple fact that the rewards for writing serious music in Ireland were so meagre. For one thing, even when a composer had expended the effort of writing a substantial new orchestral work, not only did he only receive a paltry financial recompense for his labours, but he would be lucky if his score was not mangled in performance. As Potter repeatedly complained in his letters, on the occasions when the R   orchestras played his works, substandard orchestral parts (which, in his vivid phrase, often looked like a 'collection of assorted fly-droppings and spider-trails'¹⁹⁵) and an insufficient provision of rehearsal time frequently made it impossible to secure an adequate rendition of them. Fine performances seem to have been the exception rather than the rule. In later life, Potter told one correspondent that it was not uncommon at the period for conductors to give an Irish work only a single run-through to check if the parts contained any errors, and then to devote the remainder of the rehearsal time to whatever standard symphonic work was on the programme.¹⁹⁶ As the recordings in the Potter Archives attest, not only was the orchestral playing often inadequate¹⁹⁷, but the technical quality of broadcasts was frequently so poor as to border on the inept. It was far from unusual to find the sound engineer had failed to obtain a satisfactory overall balance and that crucial contributions from various orchestral sections were inaudible. Shortly after the broadcast of the *Overture to an Irish Occasion* that    h-Annrach  in had commissioned

¹⁹⁴ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 7 January 1958 ('General 1/1/1957 – 5/6/58', PA)

¹⁹⁵ AJP to Cyprian Fahey, 9 April 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA).

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ This fact was confirmed by visiting foreign musicians. When in 1963 Stravinsky was scheduled to visit Dublin and conduct his *Symphony of Psalms* – a score of comparatively modest technical demands – his agent at Boosey and Hawkes in London, Rufina Ampenoff, wrote to warn him that the radio choir and orchestra were so weak that the work might well prove beyond them: see Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky – The Second Exile: France and America 1934-71* (London, 2007), 479.

for the 1956 *An Tóstal*, Potter lamented to the composer Frederick May that 'the recording ... gives absolutely no idea of what it is meant to sound like':

For a start off, the third trumpet was missing: next ... the times [i.e. *tempi*], particularly of the Allegro were far too slow (1½ minutes over metronome markings): then any recording but the very best will take the shine off a piece which intentionally depends on brilliant sounds. Last of all, that studio at RÉ in which you hear it is so padded up that it would make a tarantella sound like a sarabande.¹⁹⁸

Writing in 1964, after some twelve years' experience of having works performed by the RÉ orchestras, Potter summed up his impressions as follows:

An Irish composer, listening to his own works in the middle of others, usually undergoes a frustrating experience. The parts look like fly spots: the rehearsal time is limited: the strings crawl up the fingerboard: the woodwinds squeak like mice: and the drums seem to belong to a noise abatement society. In fact, one feels at a horrible disadvantage compared with other composers.¹⁹⁹

There were few alternatives, however. Potter soon discovered, as all of his colleagues did sooner or later, that the BBC displayed very little interest in the work of composers living in the south of Ireland.²⁰⁰ Despite the fact that he was born in Belfast and Protestant to boot, BBC Northern Ireland steadfastly ignored him, apart from programming one or two songs and short items of light music.²⁰¹ Potter

¹⁹⁸ AJP to Frederick May, 9 October 1956 ('RE '55-'60', PA). It is interesting to compare Potter's frank comments to May with his much more guarded remarks about the recording and performance to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin in a letter of 26 May 1956 (contained in the same folder) in which he is at pains to reassure the Music Director that he was happy with the results: he evidently felt that an honest opinion would not be welcomed by the RÉ management and might prove counterproductive.

¹⁹⁹ AJP to Frank Murphy, 24 September 1964 ('RE-TE 1/1/61', PA)

²⁰⁰ Potter's contemporary Aloys Fleischmann, for example, made repeated attempts in later life to interest the BBC in his work, to no avail: I am grateful to Séamas de Barra for this information.

²⁰¹ The relevant correspondence is mostly in 'BBC '52 - '65', PA. In 1969, the conductor Alan Tongue performed *Variations on a Popular Tune* with the Light Orchestra, and subsequently expressed interest in programming other items: his efforts on Potter's behalf do not seem to have come to anything, however. (Relevant correspondence in 'Nº3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9', PA)

attributed this to an attitude of blatant discrimination which, in his view, was all-pervasive amongst the Northern establishment. A letter of 1969 to his sister contains the following splenetic outburst on this topic:

Don't you think it's just the teeniest bit discriminatory that the orchestras in my native province only play my works once in a blue moon? Or that the only job I ever got offered [in Northern Ireland] was singing in an amateur choir? Or that when they wish to make a special post for a professor of composition in the university of my own native city, they make it for an Englishman, and not for me? However, these are only passing thoughts... God knows, there's plenty of demand for me and my stuff in other places, so if those miserable hoorsgets [i.e. *whores' gets* (= *bastards*)] up north don't know a good thing when they see it – well, why try to sell refrigerators to Eskimos?²⁰²

Nor did he have much luck with the BBC in London: indeed, in 1957 he had an experience of dealing with the corporation that he found profoundly humiliating and which seems to have shaken his self-confidence badly. In April of that year, he received out of the blue a notification that his *Concerto da chiesa* had been scheduled for broadcast on the Third Programme in a concert of music by Irish composers, given by the London Philharmonic Orchestra with Lawrence Glover as soloist.²⁰³ This occasioned some surprise on his part, as he had never submitted the score to the station; nonetheless, he duly arranged for scores and orchestral parts to be made available.²⁰⁴ The following month, the BBC Music Programme Organiser Harry Croft-Jackson wrote to inform him that he 'was unable to accept [the work] for broadcasting on our National Wavelengths', as it had inadvertently been scheduled 'before the score had been considered or the programme firmly decided upon'.²⁰⁵ This rather tactless letter had a devastating effect on the highly-strung composer, who clearly felt that his abilities and competence had been called into question. He

²⁰² AJP to 'Dessie' [Gertrude Tree], 7 October 1969 ('No13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

²⁰³ See L. A. Duncan to AJP, 2 April 1957 ('BBC '52 – '65', PA); and Laurence Glover to AJP, 9 May 1957 ('General 1/1/57 – 5/6/58', PA)

²⁰⁴ Relevant correspondence with RÉ in RÉ '55-'60

²⁰⁵ Harry Croft-Jackson to AJP, 24 May 1957 ('BBC '52 – '65', PA)

dashed off a lengthy letter to the Director of Broadcasting in RÉ urging him to protest on his behalf, fearing in his distraught state of mind that the BBC's summary rejection of his score would damage his professional reputation and affect his livelihood.²⁰⁶ He seems to have refrained from sending an irate letter to the BBC, presumably in case it might affect his chances of securing performances of future works. In the event, however, this made no difference: subsequent programmers at the BBC in London proved as stolidly indifferent to his work as Croft-Jackson had done.

In the same year, however, his work met with a much more positive response from a wholly unexpected quarter: the conductor Arthur Fiedler and the Boston Pops Orchestra in the United States. The year previously, the American branch of Decca had issued two long-playing records of orchestral music by Irish composers performed by the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra under its principal conductor Milan Horvat.²⁰⁷ This was an extremely unusual initiative, as very few commercial recordings of this nature had been issued up to comparatively recently.²⁰⁸ These compilations featured music by John F. Larchet, Brian Boydell and Seóirse Bodley, amongst others, and Potter was represented by *Variations on a Popular Tune*. In May 1957, Potter received a letter from the President of the Éire Society of Boston, an organisation that aimed to promote Irish culture in the United States, informing him that the officers and directors of the Society had not only voted to award him an honorarium of \$100 (in today's money, about £360/€520) in appreciation of his composition, but had arranged for it to be performed by the Boston Pops Orchestra during a forthcoming concert in its current season that was a designated Éire Society Night.²⁰⁹ This took place on 7 June and was accounted a great success: the orchestra

²⁰⁶ AJP to Maurice Gorham, 26 May 1957 ('55 – '60', PA)

²⁰⁷ These were called *New Music from Old Erin*, Vols. 1 and 2, Decca DL 9843 and 9844.

²⁰⁸ For a discussion of these circumstances, see Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 566-9. Unfortunately Pine provides very little information about how these Decca recordings came to be made.

²⁰⁹ Daniel J. O'Brien to AJP, 19 May 1957 ('General 1/1/57 - 5/6/58', PA)

played under Arthur Fiedler to a capacity audience of an estimated 2,500 people in Symphony Hall.²¹⁰

Shortly afterwards, Potter received a letter from a member of the Society's music committee, John P. Cavanagh, who expressed himself in highly appreciative terms about Potter's score and offered to try and arrange other performances of his work in Boston. Cavanagh, who appears to have been a semi-invalid, decided to devote his life to music after having contracted polio in his youth and had a central role in organising the Society's concerts.²¹¹ He subsequently proved as good as his word, using his influence and connections with the Boston Symphony Orchestra to see that further works of Potter's featured in the Pops concerts. These included *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, his arrangement of *Finnegan's Wake*, and a number of scores that Potter completed between 1959 and 1963, including the *Caprice* for solo 'cello and orchestra, and the suites extracted respectively from the ballet *Careless Love* and his incidental music to James McKenna's play *The Scatterin'*. Unfortunately, it evidently did not prove possible for Potter to visit America to attend any of the concerts at which these were played. In addition to his practical efforts on Potter's behalf, Cavanagh was supportive in other ways, and as we shall see, continually encouraged him to tackle more ambitious projects, such as an opera. The two men kept up a regular correspondence until 1963, after which point music by Potter ceased to feature in the Boston Pops Orchestra's programmes.²¹² The large-scale work that Cavanagh had hoped he might write for the Boston Symphony Orchestra was fated to remain unrealised.

²¹⁰ M. Frances Fox to AJP, 9 June 1957 ('General 1/1/57 - 5/6/58', PA)

²¹¹ See John P. Cavanagh to AJP, 28 April 1958 ('General 1/1/57 - 5/6/58', PA) and 23 May 1960 (General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA)

²¹² The last letter from Cavanagh in the Potter Archive is dated 13 May 1963. It is not known why their correspondence ceased after this point. Cavanagh was evidently in rather uncertain health and it is possible that he may have died unexpectedly: in letter of 21 November 1958 ('General 8/6/58 - 30/12/59', PA) he tells Potter that he had recently suffered a massive internal haemorrhage; a later letter of 23 May 1960 (General 1/1/60 - 31/12/61', PA) mentions severe problems with diabetes in addition to paralysis from polio.

Sadly, these performances by the Boston Pops Orchestra were to prove virtually the only ones that Potter's compositions would receive from a first-rate international orchestra in his lifetime. This episode had demonstrated beyond all doubt, however, that given dedicated promoters and sympathetic performances, Irish works were perfectly capable of making headway outside their country of origin. For a number of reasons, however, Irish composers found it more than usually difficult to arrange performances of their work abroad. One of the principal difficulties, of course, was the absence of an Irish music publisher with sufficient resources to promote works effectively. As Potter was the first to acknowledge, given the fact that there were so few professional performing groups in Ireland, and the population was so small, there was simply no market for scores by native composers of 'serious' music, let alone any possibility of making money on sales or rental of orchestral material.²¹³ And while the state publishing house An Gúm did publish some music by Irish composers, its catalogue largely consisted of simple part-songs in Irish for use in schools and by amateur choirs: it brought out only a small number of other works. To judge from Potter's experiences of dealing with the lethargic Department of Education civil servants responsible for running it, this seems to have been a staggeringly inefficient body as far as music publishing was concerned.

In June 1955, Potter submitted the score of a string quartet (a student work which he had revised and entered for an Oireachtas competition in 1952) for consideration, hoping that it might be published under a scheme to promote Irish music. The following December, he was notified that the work had been accepted.²¹⁴ He would hear nothing further for over six years. On 12 March 1961, he eventually wrote to enquire about it and another score that he had submitted in the meantime, the *Rhapsody on Corrymeela* for orchestra.²¹⁵ He did not receive a response either to this letter or to a follow-up letter of 5 April. When he still had not heard anything by August, he resorted in evident desperation to sending a letter in Irish, hoping that

²¹³ See, for example, AJP to Edith Zimmerman, 25 August 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

²¹⁴ P. MacMaoláin to AJP, 20 December 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA)

²¹⁵ AJP to Director of An Gúm, 12 March 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

this might stand a better chance of obtaining a response. He duly organised for one to be translated. It was surprisingly measured in tone, considering his lengthy wait, and concluded simply 'Ós rud é go bhfuil an gnó faoi sgrúdú ar feadh breis agus cúig blianta, beidh mé an-bhuíoch dhíbh, má's féidir libh tuilleadh eolais a thabhairt dom.'²¹⁶ [As this matter has been under consideration for over five years, I would be very grateful if you could provide me with any further information.] This succeeded merely in eliciting a completely impersonal post-card in Irish acknowledging receipt of his letter. Another six years would elapse before he eventually received a letter in April 1967 notifying him that the quartet was ready to go to the printers at long last.²¹⁷ Potter responded to this communication with the heavily ironic comment that 'it is very encouraging to know that things are moving.'²¹⁸ Two years later, in 1969, he was at last presented with a set of proofs to correct.²¹⁹ The entire process of bringing out a work comprising a mere thirty pages of full score had taken fourteen years. It is consequently no exaggeration to state that elderly composers submitting works to An Gúm could safely expect to be long dead before their work appeared in print. In addition to having to contend with these frustrations, composers also discovered that, having published a score, An Gúm made no effort whatsoever to promote it and simply allowed it to gather dust on the departmental shelves. This utterly moribund agency was clearly of no assistance whatsoever in raising the profile of native work. But like all of his Irish contemporaries, Potter had very little success in placing work with publishers in Britain (or elsewhere) and over the course of the coming decades he accumulated a voluminous collection of rejection letters – a situation that he understandably found deeply dispiriting.

In the absence of any assistance from a publisher's agent, he was left with no alternative but to try and promote his work himself. Although he was never someone to be shy about self-promotion, his efforts met with little success. At

²¹⁶ AJP to An t-Oifigeach Foilseachán, 21 August 1961 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

²¹⁷ An t-Oifigeach Foilseachán civil servant (signature illegible) to AJP, 27 April 1967 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

²¹⁸ AJP to An t-Oifigeach Foilseachán, 29 April 1967 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

²¹⁹ P. MacMaoláin to AJP, 13 May 1969 ('№14: Odd Jobs 1969 – 70 – 71', PA)

various times he sent his work to distinguished English conductors such as Malcolm Sargent, Adrian Boult and Thomas Beecham, but these men were presumably inundated with requests to look at scores and one is inclined to doubt that his manuscripts got any further than the desks of their secretaries.²²⁰ Potter also made efforts to promote his own work and that of fellow Irish composers in his capacity as Secretary of a composer's group which had formed under the auspices of the Music Association of Ireland, a national body which had been formed to represent the interests of professional musicians. He seems to have played a fairly active role in this group from about 1955 or thereabouts²²¹, helping to establish contacts with the ISCM and other bodies. While these initiatives were undoubtedly valuable, the number of performances that he secured thereby does not seem to have greatly increased, as Potter acknowledged with some disillusionment to the Irish conductor Michael Bowles a few years later in 1958:

Our activities in the Music Association as far as composers are concerned are now concentrated on trying to see that local talent is represented whenever visiting orchestras come on tour here. We are about fed up with RÉ playing foreign works – good, bad or indifferent – with no reciprocation from the composer's home country's orchestras re our stuff – and with the utter tripe that a great many of the touring outfits present in the way of 'contemporary' music, so right now we are presenting them all with a bunch of scores and a few polite reminders about courtesy to one's hosts. How it will turn out, I don't know as we have only (at my original suggestion) just started: but we hope for the best.²²²

As if these material difficulties were not discouraging enough, Potter and his colleagues also had to contend with the fact that the European tradition of art music occupied a wholly marginal place in Irish cultural life. The productions of native

²²⁰ See AJP to Malcolm Sargent, 9 April 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 12/31/55', PA); AJP to Thomas Beecham, 14 August 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA); and AJP to Adrian Boult, 22 December 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA).

²²¹ The first reference in his correspondence to his undertakings in this capacity occurs in a letter of 11 December 1955 to the Secretary of the ICA (Music Section) in London ('General 1/1/55 – 12/31/55', PA).

²²² AJP to Michael Bowles, 14 June 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

composers aroused little interest. This state of affairs was wholly understandable, given the fact that Ireland was a poor, backward country with a difficult history of colonial occupation during which the overwhelming majority of the population had no opportunity to come into contact with classical music or acquire the rudiments of a musical education. One's sympathetic comprehension of these circumstances did not necessarily make them any easier to bear, however. One of the most obvious effects of this marginalisation was the fact that new works by Irish composers generally received scant attention in the national press — the only forum in which they could be discussed, in the virtual absence of musical periodicals or specialist journals. Even on occasions when a substantial new work was performed, the most a composer could generally expect to receive was a perfunctory notice consisting of a few sentences — as Potter complained to the British patroness of the arts Lady Dorothy Mayer in 1960.²²³ The limited space devoted to music criticism undoubtedly resulted from editorial policy — but even if their editors had been prepared to allow them the necessary space, one is inclined to doubt that the Dublin music critics would have filled it with illuminating commentary. None of them was exactly conspicuous for intellectual brilliance, and their notices generally consist of little more than unobservant commonplaces and trite platitudes. Their writings offer no evidence whatsoever that any of them possessed the necessary skills and technical knowledge to equip them adequately for the task of assessing new scores, let alone had a sufficient breadth of intellectual culture to grasp the complex issues surrounding new music at the period. Potter was greatly exercised by the inadequate coverage of concerts and other musical events, as is witnessed by a letter he sent in 1960 to the radio critic for *Irish Times*, G. A. Olden, after reading an article in which Olden had claimed that he never 'knowingly [failed] to give the lion's share of a review to an original Irish work'. Potter retorted:

I would describe that as a distinct terminological inexactitude if it weren't for the let-out clause 'knowingly'. All the same, you surely get the Radio Éireann weekly hand-out, don't you? If so, and as a party who, at least according to your own paper, is in

²²³ AJP to Dorothy Mayer, 24 October 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

the habit of turning out original works, may I describe this 'lion's share of reviews' which has happened to various works of mine?

Two Pieces for Orchestra [i.e. *Rhapsody under a High Sky* and *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*], the RÉ Carolan Prize winner for the year... ignored *in toto*

Concerto da chiesa, ditto ditto and the first Irish piano concerto for over 150 years... ignored *in toto*

Missa Brevis, the most ambitious *a capella* [work] in the history of Irish music and the only attempt in modern times to set the liturgy in [a] contemporary idiom in this country... ignored *in toto*.

Fantasia concertante, the first Irish double concerto... ignored *in toto*.

And when I say 'ignored', I mean ignored by every department of your paper, although they have all been regularly scheduled broadcasts. Now for all I know, these works may stink to high heaven (how am I, poor innocent, to know if the knowledgeable critics don't tell me), but they are at least all 'original Irish works'. And they are, I'm afraid, only the more glaring instances of a collection that really does run into dozens. In the circumstances, then, do you blame me if my comments upon your claims are not entirely favourable? Or am I being unfair?²²⁴

1.7 Growth of reputation: 1959 – 1969

Such, then, were the conditions to which Potter had to acclimatise himself when he settled in Ireland in the 1951 and which were to persist more or less unchanged until his death in 1980. The national broadcasting station Radio Telefís Éireann (as it was renamed with the advent of a state television channel in 1961) would continue to provide virtually his sole access to professional performing groups. Nor can one say that there was a great deal of significant change in the other circumstances that have been described: the comparative poverty of the country and its persistently sluggish economy meant that funding for the arts, whether from public or private sources, remained at relatively low levels. It has already been noted that while Potter penned vast quantities of arrangements and various pieces in the 'National Music'

²²⁴ AJP to G. A. Olden, 6 December 1960 ('General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61', PA)

vein during the 1950s, he had not been notably productive of significant works during these years – indeed, after completing or revising his student compositions, the *Variations on a Popular Theme* and the *Overture to an Irish Occasion* were the only other scores in a serious vein that he composed. Potter's output of major works increased considerably during the 1960s, largely because he was commissioned to write more of them.

The period from 1959 to 1964 was a period of especially hectic creativity, during which Potter wrote no less than four substantial ballets scores and a television opera. As will be detailed in Chapter 5, three of the ballets were commissioned by a short-lived company based in Dublin, National Ballet (later renamed Irish National Ballet). Two of these, *Careless Love* and *Gamble, No Gamble*, were composed to scenarios written by two of the most eminent Irish literary figures of their generation, Donagh MacDonagh and Patrick Kavanagh, while Potter devised that for the third himself in collaboration with the Dublin-based choreographer Patricia Ryan. The fourth ballet, *Full Moon for the Bride*, which was eventually performed in 1974, was commissioned by the famous Irish actor and writer Micheál MacLiammóir, who devised the scenario himself. These scores are of considerable interest from the point of view of Potter's creative development: in writing them, he was evidently concerned to evolve a more aggressively modernist manner of expression, which led him to experiment with devices such as bi- and polytonality, as well as modified forms of serial procedures. Despite the extensive demands that these projects made on his time and energies, Potter seems to have found them very rewarding: he felt he had a natural aptitude for writing dance scores and deeply regretted that the break-up of Irish National Ballet meant that it had not been possible for him to write more.²²⁵ For the most part, the three ballets of his that the company staged were favourably received, but Potter earned very little money from writing them, as the commissioning fees involved were fairly small.

²²⁵ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 132

The television opera *Patrick* was commissioned in 1961 by Edward J. Roth, the newly-appointed Director-General of RTÉ when it expanded to provide a television service. Although he greatly welcomed this opportunity to write an opera, as well as the recognition and prestige accruing from the commission itself, composing it would prove something of an exhausting ordeal and the project was dogged by delays and difficulties from its inception to the time that it was eventually recorded in 1964. An account of these circumstances and of the opera itself has been postponed until Chapter 6: but suffice to say here that Potter attached great significance to *Patrick* and had high hopes for it. He was to be deeply disappointed: it was only broadcast once again in his lifetime after its initial screening in 1965 and was never realised in a stage production. Unfortunately, the work is marred by a very poor libretto and the quality of the music is decidedly uneven: consequently, although the work is of considerable interest for extrinsic reasons (not least of which is the extent to which it reflects the narrow Catholic ethos that prevailed at the time in Ireland), it is probably one of his least viable scores.

As Potter's correspondence with RTÉ around the time of *Patrick* indicates, he became increasingly concerned at the beginning of the 1960s to consolidate his reputation and prove himself worthy of serious consideration as a composer of ambitious, large-scale works. To some extent, he was successful in this aim: the reviews of his work by Irish critics from the 1960s onwards are notably more respectful and by the end of the decade he was unquestionably regarded as a major figure. For all his anxiety to be regarded as such, however, there is a curious disparity between his declared ambitions and the nature of the work that he actually wrote during this period — an issue that deserves to be considered in some detail here in order to arrive at a realistic appraisal of Potter's achievement. There is no question that several of the scores that he produced during the 1960s are significant in an Irish context, amongst them the ballet *Gamble, No Gamble* and two orchestral works, the *Concerto for Orchestra* and the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, which will be discussed presently. However, the fact remains that his output of serious works during this period is still comparatively small. The interesting fact emerges that he was unwilling even to

contemplate writing a score for which he would not get a commissioning fee and for which there was no immediate possibility of a performance. In other words, works were called into being solely by external impulses rather than internal ones: there seems to have been no question ever that a work assumed such importance to him that he was willing to write it anyway, solely for the satisfaction of having done so. His attitude on this question is summed up in his blunt statement to Charles Acton that 'I'm not wasting my time putting things down on paper until I know what I'm putting them down for.'²²⁶ While one can sympathise completely with his desire to make an adequate living and receive satisfactory remuneration for his efforts, there is nonetheless something rather disconcerting about such ruthless pragmatism. This reluctance to spend time doing anything for which he would not get paid extended even to the revision of works. Potter wrote a number of scores during these years (the *Scherzo concertante* for violin, piano and orchestra being a good case in point) which contained excellent ideas, but which were imperfectly realised, largely, one suspects, because they had to be written in great haste. He never seems to have been prepared to put in the necessary time and effort to rework them into a more satisfactory state, however: not for him the relentless perfectionism that impelled Ravel to spend an entire year rewriting the final *Bacchanale* of *Daphnis and Chloë* – a mere five minutes or so of music – until it satisfied him.

This attitude completely determined the nature of Potter's output. It meant that he composed no chamber music or solo instrumental music to speak of, and hardly any songs or choral music – for the simple reason there was scant prospect of being commissioned to write such works during the period.²²⁷ There also is some evidence to suggest that, ultimately, these media did not interest Potter a great deal. When the first RTÉ String Quartet was formed in 1966, he promptly wrote to the Director-General of RTÉ, Kevin McCourt, proposing that he be commissioned to write a cycle

²²⁶ Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 128

²²⁷ After Potter's death, the Irish Arts Council introduced a scheme to assist performers with the cost of commissioning new works – but no such assistance was readily available during his lifetime. As Potter told Acton, 'Writing chamber music or small solos or the rest of it, you are just up against the fact that it is very hard indeed to get it performed...': Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 129.

of string quartets.²²⁸ McCourt was unwilling to enter into an extended commitment of this nature, but nonetheless invited Potter to compose a single work for the new ensemble. Significantly, Potter never completed it, and eventually sent off the score of his re-worked student quartet, the *Ceathairéad Téad*, to the quartet's leader David Lillis in 1970.²²⁹ This hardly suggests that he was interested in writing a quartet for its own sake. If he was unable to write orchestral works for the RTÉSO – or scores like the ballets, for which the RTÉ Light Orchestra played in the pit – he largely concentrated instead on producing arrangements, many of which were mere hackwork. Yet he got paid for them – and that, for Potter, seems to have been the overriding concern: as he told a relative in 1961 while in middle of arranging music for a typical piece of ephemera (*Glory Be!* – a musical that was about to be produced in Dublin), this kind of work brought in what he ironically described as the ‘mug’s shekels’.²³⁰ In describing himself as a ‘professional composer’, he seems to have placed the emphasis firmly on the first word rather than the second. And in characterising his own particular concept of professionalism, Potter was at pains to stress two qualities. The first was that he was willing to compose or arrange literally anything that he was asked to produce. In a biographical note written around this time, he puffed his ability to ‘[switch] with his usual versatility from Teddy-boy rock and roll to serious scholarship’ – that is, to work of a more ‘intellectual’ nature.²³¹ The second was that he could be relied on to execute any task competently and with unfailing punctuality. Charles Acton encapsulated what had by then become a generally accepted view of Potter when he wrote in 1970:

“A real professional” is the phrase that every really knowledgeable person uses about Dr Potter, and they use it as a term of very high praise, indeed. In an age when too many people think that the creative artist waits for inspiration and only composes in the white heat created by inspiration, and when too many would-be composers only work when the spirit moves them, his dedicated professionalism is

²²⁸ AJP to Kevin McCourt, 7 April 1966 (‘Nº3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9’, PA)

²²⁹ AJP to David Lillis, 17 January 1970, (‘Nº3: RTÉ + BBC 1970-1-2-3-4’, PA)

²³⁰ AJP to relative identified only as ‘Uncle’, 3 April 1961 (‘General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61’, PA)

²³¹ Undated programme note by AJP for *Cardinal Fleury Suite* (copy in ‘General 1/1/60 – 31/12/61’, PA)

most refreshing. Especially as this means carrying out his undertakings to the letter and providing what people want. ... Dr Potter has a well-founded reputation that what you commission from him, you will get — and exactly when you expect it.²³²

From a purely artistic standpoint, of course, this constellation of attitudes had its dangers. The first was that he was sometimes compelled to sacrifice quality to efficiency: and while Potter almost invariably managed to fill the requisite number of bars, it has to be admitted that the music with which he filled them was not always very interesting. Secondly, there was a danger of becoming wholly indiscriminate about the sort of work he would undertake, which led him to accept commissions that it might have been wiser to decline. To take one particularly striking example: in 1966, Potter was asked to compose a setting of the prayer 'Hail Mary' for the Our Lady's Choral Society (a prominent choir in Dublin) which used the same gargantuan choral and orchestral forces as those demanded by the Berlioz *Requiem*. Other composers might have balked at such a ludicrous proposition, but Potter agreed without demur. Predictably, the result is a vulgar monstrosity in very questionable taste (it is discussed in Chapter 4), which adds very little to his stature.

The question naturally arises as to whether it was really necessary for Potter to take on so much hackwork. Although one imagines that Potter's total earnings would have been comparatively modest, they cannot have been inconsiderable, particularly if one considers that he also had a salary from the Royal Irish Academy of Music (albeit a modest one). Furthermore, he was childless and had only one dependent — his wife. Other men had to provide for fairly large families on a similar income. Under normal circumstances, he would not have needed to dissipate so much of his energies on routine drudgery, but one suspects that he may have been compelled to do so for another reason — to pay for an expensive drinking habit. By the 1960s, Potter had become mired in severe personal difficulties, to the extent that his personality increasingly seemed riven by deep rifts and apparently irreconcilable contradictions. Many people who knew Potter recall a man of a kindly and generous

²³² Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', 137

disposition, possessed of considerable personal charm and an ebullient sense of humour, and who projected an air of formidable competence and self-assurance. Underneath this self-confident public persona, however, was someone subject to periodic bouts of deep depression and who was highly vulnerable and insecure. This other Potter sought refuge in alcohol, ironically, just as his mother — whom he loathed and despised — had done. And while one must guard against glib psychological speculation, it is nonetheless very probable that Potter's alcoholism was somehow bound up with his appalling early childhood, as well as his traumatic wartime experiences.

It is difficult to establish precise facts at this remove, but there seems to be little doubt that the composer had developed a serious dependency on alcohol by the early 1960s, and possibly well before that. According to Annette Perry, a former colleague at the RIAM who got to know the composer and his wife Dorothy well during the 1960s, it was perfectly evident from the outset of their association that he was an alcoholic. His drinking assumed the pattern of severe 'benders' which could last weeks or months, alternating with 'dry' periods. During his sober periods, Potter struck her as someone who seemed to have enormous energy and was highly efficient. He generally worked very long days: he would rise early, attend to his correspondence and compose in the morning, and then teach all afternoon in the Royal Irish Academy of Music, sometimes until seven o'clock in the evening. He was also capable of working around the clock if deadlines loomed. In this state, she remembers him as being a witty and amusing companion, who could transform even a mundane task like the cooking of an egg for lunch into a comic turn. During his drinking bouts, matters were very different. In his cups, Potter tended to behave, in Perry's description, like 'an overgrown child'. He could be aggressive and argumentative, sometimes to the point of being offensive; and while some people were prepared to make allowances for him on account of his condition, others were not. His drinking inevitably had an impact on his work. He would sometimes arrive at the RIAM in such a state of extreme intoxication that he was unable to teach: on such occasions, colleagues would ring Dorothy Potter and ask her to come in and

collect him, or else entrust Perry with the task of driving him home. The RIAM seems to have been surprisingly tolerant of his wayward behaviour. Other professional colleagues also went out of their way to cover up for him. During the late 1960s and 1970s, Potter collaborated with the RTÉ radio producer Jane Carty in making series of educational programmes for schoolchildren; and Perry recalls that Carty sometimes had to rearrange schedules at short notice when Potter was too drunk to appear on air. To the best of Perry's knowledge, Potter underwent courses of treatment for alcoholism during the early to mid-1960s. He was hospitalised several times during the years that she knew him, and on some of these occasions, he had to be forcibly committed: his wife resorted in desperation to calling the police when his behaviour became completely unmanageable. His efforts to remain sober were only intermittently successful, however: he managed to refrain from drinking for a period of several years in the later 1960s until shortly after the completion of the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, but Perry had the impression that his condition deteriorated steadily during the 1970s.²³³

The turmoil that Potter's alcoholism engendered in his personal life must have been considerable, and although his correspondence is silent on the matter, must surely have placed his marriage under great strain. Given the severity of his condition, it is remarkable that he managed to commit as many notes to paper as he did. On the other hand, these circumstances account for a number of features of his output which would otherwise be puzzling. Alcoholics are notoriously spendthrift: and Potter was probably compelled to accept so much hackwork because he was in desperate need of money. Arrangements cost him very little effort and could be dispatched quickly – unlike music of a more serious nature, which required far greater care and thought. Potter's drinking may also explain why much of his music is uneven in quality, as it would inevitably have adversely affected the lucidity of his mental functioning and hindered his capacity to concentrate. It would have disrupted his working routine and caused him to lose time, forcing him to cut corners to meet deadlines. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the characteristic faults of

²³³ Annette Perry, interview with author, 10 August 2005

Potter's weakest music — structural incoherence, diffuseness, undistinguished invention and excessive repetition of material in an unvaried form — can be attributed, at least in part, to this cause.

It consequently does not come as a surprise to discover that Potter's output during the 1960s was uneven in quality. Of the four ballets completed between 1959 and 1963, *Gamble*, *No Gamble* and *Full Moon for the Bride* are undoubtedly the finest, and contain some of his most imaginative and original music. They are also eminently stage-worthy. The mid-1960s were not productive of important works, the most noteworthy being a humorous cantata *The Classiad* for female voices and chamber orchestra, and the hypertrophied setting of the *Hail Mary* to which reference has been made earlier. Neither of these represents an especially remarkable achievement, however — though it must be said that the former score is greatly superior in quality to the latter. Apart from these, virtually the only other compositions of any substance are a series of small-scale concertante works which were designed to provide various players in the R   Light Orchestra with a short solo spot (generally lasting between five and ten minutes) during the programmes of light music that the station broadcast at the period. Potter wrote no less than eighteen of these between 1963 and 1968. As we shall see in Chapter 3, many of these pieces seem to have been turned out in extreme haste; and although some contain strong material and have good moments, on the whole, they do not represent a very distinguished body of work. To be fair to Potter, he made no secret of the fact that they were of variable quality; and, in any case, since they were expressly conceived as light music, it would not be fair to approach them with the same kinds of expectations with which one might reasonably approach his serious music.

Potter would complete only two major works in the later 1960s, both of which are also for orchestra, but are on a far higher plane of accomplishment. These are the *Concerto for Orchestra*, which was completed in 1967, and the *Sinfonia de Profundis* of 1968. These scores, which are considered in detail in Chapter 3, were both commissioned by RT  . It is interesting to note that in the intervening period since

the composition of the *Overture to an Irish Occasion* in 1956, Potter had only one opportunity to write a major score for the R  /RT   Symphony Orchestra. This came about in 1959, when he was asked to write something at very short notice for a concert to raise funds for a custom-built concert hall in Dublin. At the time, Potter was hard-pressed to finish the ballet *Careless Love* and was not in a position to provide anything other than a suite which he hastily extracted from the work in progress.²³⁴ Although the opera *Patrick* obviously represented an important and indeed prestigious commission from the national broadcasting station, it was only five years later in 1966 that he was offered another commission to compose something for the RT   Symphony Orchestra. Potter chose to interpret this fact as a deliberate slight on the part of the new Director of Music Tibor Paul, who had been appointed in 1962.²³⁵ In a somewhat bizarre arrangement, the Hungarian-born Paul combined this post with that of Principal Conductor of the RT   Symphony Orchestra, in which capacity he had conducted the recording of *Patrick* for television. To judge from various remarks in his correspondence (as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 6), Potter seems to have taken an intense dislike to Paul and suspected him of operating a policy not to perform his work with the RT  SO. In the very first year of Paul's tenure, he had taken umbrage at an ambiguous remark that the conductor had made in the course of an interview printed in the *Irish Times*, which Potter chose to interpret as conveying an implicitly negative valuation of the work of Irish composers *en bloc*. Potter's responses to this incident revealed him at his most prickly and combative. He promptly dispatched a fiery missive to the newspaper, which opened:

In your feature 'Talking to Tibor Paul' that gentleman is quoted as saying 'much as I admire the enthusiasm at all concerts here, I find it absent whenever Irish works are

²³⁴ An account of this score is given in Chapter 5.

²³⁵ Tibor Paul (1909 - 1973) studied at the Budapest Academy. He settled in Australia in 1950, where he taught at New South Wales State Conservatorium for ten years and from 1951 conducted the Sydney opera company. He spent seven years in Ireland as conductor of the Radio   ireann Symphony Orchestra (from 1961-68), before returning to Australia to take up a post as conductor of the Australian Opera. In 1971 he was appointed conductor of the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, Perth. For details of Paul's career, see the obituary notice in *The Musical Times*, Vol. 115, No. 1571 (Jan. 1974), 65.

played'. As one of the composers responsible for producing a substantial proportion of these apparently depressive works, I should, I suppose feel suitably chastened and humbled at words like these from such an august and authoritative figure such as Mr Paul. Except for one thing: namely, that as far as I know, and with one exception, Mr Paul has never played any of my works in this country or anywhere else. How in heaven, earth or hell then, does he know what the audience reaction is – be it cheering, snoring or lynching – when he's never been there to see it? As to the one exception [Paul had conducted the premiere of the *Careless Love* suite], well the Theatre Royal [a large Dublin venue] was filled to capacity and the organisers made a clean £1,000 profit: that's enough enthusiasm for me.²³⁶

On this occasion, it seems fair to suggest that he overreacted; but this outburst was hardly likely to make for easy relations. It would be another four years before Paul commissioned to write the *Concerto for Orchestra* for the RTÉSO. Although Potter was undoubtedly hypersensitive when it came to his reputation or to other people's perceptions of him, one can nonetheless understand why Paul's comments had aroused his anxieties to such an extent: in a larger country, he might have been able to secure performances of his work with other orchestras, but in Ireland, it was a question of the RTÉSO or nothing. Paul's disapprobation might well mean that he would be passed over for commissions.

In many respects, this lack of alternatives to RTÉ was not a particularly healthy situation, either for the station or for composers, even if it there was little that could be done to remedy it. The station's resources were limited and it was not possible for the Music Department to commission large-scale serious works very often.²³⁷ This was naturally a source of deep frustration for the composer, since in the absence of alternatives, his dependence on RTÉ was complete. And as Potter found, the performances his works received from the RTÉ orchestras were generally of a poor

²³⁶ AJP to Editor of *Irish Times*, 23 January 1962 ('General 1/1/62 – 63', PA)

²³⁷ Indeed, as Richard Pine points out, 'from 1962, and the advent of television, RTÉ was to argue, for the rest of the decade, that the maintenance of the RTÉSO was an unwarranted financial burden': Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 425. If such was the attitude of the station's senior management towards the only symphony orchestra in the country, one imagines that the support of native composers was hardly likely to have been high on their list of priorities.

standard — a fact that is confirmed by the evidence of the reel-to-reel radio recordings in the Potter Archive. And if one considers, as has previously been described, that the rewards in terms of material remuneration and general recognition for the Irish composer were generally so meagre, it is somewhat poignant to realise that Potter was not even afforded the satisfaction of hearing adequate performances of what he wrote. Furthermore, it was far from unusual for composers to find that a work commissioned by RTÉ would never receive another performance after its premiere, or that they might have to wait many years before it was programmed again.²³⁸ There can be little doubt that these circumstances steadily undermined Potter's morale to the point where a major personal crisis would ensue at the end of the decade.

The *Concerto for Orchestra* was composed during a period when Potter was almost certainly on the dry and it cannot be a coincidence that it contains some of the most interesting music he had written in several years. As he approached his fiftieth birthday, he had evidently not lost hope of making a reputation for himself outside of Ireland and interesting foreign performers in his work. This did not merely reflect a concern for prestige, although that was undeniably present: in practical terms, it would have afforded a respite from what had become a rather claustrophobic relationship with RTÉ. It is in this context that one should interpret his responses during a deeply unfortunate contretemps with Tibor Paul which blew up unexpectedly in late 1966, while he was working on the *Concerto for Orchestra*. Paul had organised for the RTÉSO to give a concert in London that year as part of his strategy to develop the orchestra's international profile. In November, the London correspondent for the *Irish Times*, Peter Haley-Dunne, sent a letter to the editor of the newspaper in which he expressed his regret that no Irish work had been included in the programme. He went on to inform his readers that Tibor Paul had commissioned no less than four works from Irish composers with a view to including one of them in

²³⁸ An examination of the tables of Irish works performed by the RTÉ orchestras between 1959 and 1988 given by Richard Pine in *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (456-9, 499-501, 531-533) reveals this very clearly.

this concert, but that none of them had been completed in time.²³⁹ On reading this, Potter could scarcely contain his fury. Needless to say, he would have jumped at this rare opportunity to have one of his orchestral works given in London by the RTÉSO, which had never previously performed outside Ireland. Although the commission for the *Concerto for Orchestra* had been arranged in June, Paul had not discussed the London concert with him or given any indication that he was considering including one of his works in the programme. Potter immediately wrote to the *Irish Times*:

In writing about the omission of Irish works from the RTÉSO's proposed London concert later this month, your correspondent Peter Haley-Dunne quotes a statement to the effect that 'Works were commissioned from four Irish composers, but were not completed in time.' I believe this statement to be a lie, but will retain an open mind until the precise details are known. Will Mr Haley-Dunne please specify who these four composers were who were commissioned to write works for the November concert in London.²⁴⁰

This letter appeared together with one from the young composer Seóirse Bodley, which explained that Paul had indeed commissioned four orchestral works, one of them from him — but that all of them had been intended for inclusion in the RTÉSO's regular subscription concert series in 1966-7. In the case of his own new work, *Configurations*, the date of the first performance had been finalised as 29 January 1967 during the previous July. There had consequently never been any question of this work being performed in the London concert and Bodley indignantly repudiated the suggestion that he had failed to complete the score on time.²⁴¹

On 15 November, Haley-Dunne wrote again to the newspaper, and quoting a letter from Paul as his source, stated that the conductor had invited no less than five composers to write works — Brian Boydell, Séan Ó Riada, Gerard Victory, Seóirse Bodley and Potter — with a possible view to performing one of them in London.

²³⁹ *Irish Times*, 5 November 1966

²⁴⁰ AJP to Editor of *Irish Times*, 15 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

²⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 9 November 1966

Paul claimed that Boydell had declined, pleading pressure of other commitments, and that none of the others had completed the work by the agreed date.²⁴² In the meantime, the paper's music critic Charles Acton had managed to obtain a copy of Paul's letter from Haley-Dunne, which he forwarded to Potter. Unfortunately Potter did not keep it, but a sentence from it that Acton quoted in his hastily scribbled covering note indicates that Paul had evidently tried to cast a slur on Potter's professionalism:

[Please return at convenience]

Dear Archie,

Enclosed dated 7th received last night. I cannot imagine that a letter from the M[usic] D[irector] to Haley-Dunne had any sort of privilege. And one which suggests that 'up to today I have heard nothing from Mr Potter' is a clear libel on your professional reputation.

Salaam,

Charles²⁴³

On learning of Paul's duplicity, Potter's anger knew no bounds. He dispatched a blistering letter to the *Irish Times*:

My previous letter (I. T. 9/11/66) suggested that Mr Haley-Dunne had been the victim of lies. His latest (I. T. 15/11/66) would seem to confirm it. The facts are:

1. I have never been 'called together' to a conference with the composers mentioned at RTÉ either by Mr Paul or by anyone else.

²⁴² *Irish Times*, 15 November 1966

²⁴³ Charles Acton to AJP, 10 November 1966 23 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

2. Neither in January 1966 nor at any other time was I either 'asked' or commissioned to compose a work for the RTÉSO London Festival Hall Concert either by Mr Paul, or by anyone else.
3. I have never discussed the programme of that concert with Mr Paul.

These are the facts: who says to the contrary is a liar and may expect to be treated as one. In the past, present and future, I have executed, am now executing, and hope to continue to execute numerous commissions for RTÉ. They have nothing whatsoever to do with the present case, but I mention them because it is only fair that the enlightened policy normally pursued by RTÉ towards local composers should be made known to the public: after all, they pay for it. This policy is not perfect (what would be?), but it is, believe it or not, the envy of many a less happily situated overseas composer. But (and will all concerned please note it) that has nothing to do with the present case, which is but an unfortunate, localised and temporary (very temporary now, I should imagine) aberration in an otherwise most happy set of relationships.²⁴⁴

This missive elicited an appreciative note from Brian Boydell, who evidently felt that he too had been misrepresented. He professed himself 'delighted' with Potter's letters to the *Irish Times*, telling him, 'if there had been any challenge of your second one, I would have come out in support of your perfectly true facts: but you seem successfully to have impressed these facts.'²⁴⁵ On 24 November Potter received a rueful letter from Haley-Dunne, who now believed that he had been 'the victim of lies – systematic ones at that!' He continued, 'I am not taking any further part in this newspaper correspondence, since only the Music Director can do that now, and I

²⁴⁴ AJP to Editor, *Irish Times*, 15 November 1966 23 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

²⁴⁵ Brian Boydell to AJP, 23 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

note that he is conspicuously silent!²⁴⁶ Paul would continue to remain obstinately silent, evidently hoping that the storm would blow over as quickly as possible.²⁴⁷

This disagreeable episode must have confirmed all of Potter's worst suspicions about Paul, who, in his dual role of Director of the RTÉ Music Department and the Principal Conductor of the RTÉSO, was obviously a person who loomed very large in his professional life. It was disquieting enough to suspect that Paul was disinclined to programme his work; but it must have been alarming to discover that the conductor was capable of spreading untruths that were potentially damaging to his reputation. Potter's sense of vulnerability was probably acute and no doubt accounted for the ferocity of tone of his recent missives to the *Irish Times*. The conductor had run into professional difficulties of his own around this time, however, which would shortly lead to his resignation from RTÉ²⁴⁸ – a development that Potter no doubt greeted with immense relief.

After his departure, the posts of Principal Conductor and Director of Music once more became separate. Potter's next major commission from RTÉ was organised by his successor in the latter position, Gerard Victory, who seems to have been a much more benign presence. In June 1967, in a move that may have been prompted by a desire to normalise relations between the composer and the Music Department, Victory invited him to write a major work of symphonic proportions for the RTÉSO's 1968-9 season. This resulted in the composition of his first symphony, the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, which is discussed in detail in Chapter 3. As we shall see, this work met with a resounding critical and popular success when it was premiered in Dublin on 23 March 1969. Potter seems to have regarded it – with some justice – as his finest achievement to date. He made no secret of the fact that it was autobiographical in nature, depicting his triumph over acute personal difficulties occasioned by his

²⁴⁶ Peter Haley-Dunne to AJP, 24 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

²⁴⁷ As will be apparent from the foregoing, Richard Pine's account of this affair in *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* is partial and misleading, as he evidently accepts Paul's claims at face value: see *Music and Broadcasting*, 451.

²⁴⁸ See Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 446ff.

alcoholism and his psychological progress from despair to joyous affirmation. In view of its rapturous reception, he naturally had high hopes that this score might prove his passport to wider recognition and acclaim outside Ireland, something that had eluded him for so long. Having passed the threshold of his mid-life (he celebrated his fiftieth birthday in 1968, the year of the *Sinfonia's* composition), he decided to make yet another effort to interest an international publisher in his music.

In June 1969, he took the bold step of writing to the Chairman of Boosey and Hawkes, Dr Ernst Roth, whose recent book *The Business of Music: Reflections of a Music Publisher* he had read with interest.²⁴⁹ An interesting exchange of correspondence ensued which seems to demonstrate beyond all reasonable doubt that his failure to find a publisher for his major works did not necessarily have anything to do with their quality. Potter addressed himself to Roth as follows:

Dear Dr Roth,

I am a complete stranger to you, I apologise for troubling you, and I appreciate that you would be perfectly justified in putting this sort of thing in the dustbin without further ado. But if you could just bear with me, I should be most grateful for your answers to – or even your observations on – what I have to say. (And I might add that if you don't want to be bothered in this kind of way, then you shouldn't really write such thought-provoking books.)

Enclosed you will find the notices of a pretty well-received first performance. To save time and space, you might perhaps care to take my word for it that they are part of a series that has gone on for twenty years now. I have indeed been a full member of the PRS for a good part of that time, and, as a composer pretty much in demand in his own area who is turning away business rather than looking for it, I admit to making a pretty fair living at it.

²⁴⁹ *The Business of Music* appeared in 1966. For an account of Roth's remarkable career and his involvement with Boosey and Hawkes, see Helen Wallace, *Boosey & Hawkes: The Publishing Story* (London, 2007).

One thing has always puzzled me, though, and this is why I write to you. Why will no publisher touch my work with the proverbial barge-pole? Not even when the item in question has been performed not only on our own radio, but on the BBC and continental ones as well – with the obvious promise of more performances to come Large scale, small scale; long length, short length; simple or complex, it makes no difference: the inevitable response is always the same... “Regret not suitable for our catalogue...”

As you probably gather, I am now at an age when I no longer give much of a damn what happens one way or the other, but I would just love to solve this one particular mystery before I die. And this is the reason why I write to you.²⁵⁰

This disarming missive elicited a very courteous response from Roth, who replied to the effect that publishers were not infallible and sometimes made regrettable misjudgements which led them to reject works that were wholly deserving of publication. He proposed that if Potter sent him some of his scores, he would examine them and give his frank opinion ‘for what it [was] worth’.²⁵¹ The composer readily took up him up on this offer, and forwarded nine contrasting scores that included the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, *Variations on a Popular Tune*, *Patrick*, *The Classiad* and examples of his light music and folk-song arrangements.²⁵² Roth was as good as his word. Some weeks later, he wrote back to say that he was ‘quite impressed’ with the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, and had recommended it to the reading panel at Boosey and Hawkes. He also recommended *Variations on a Popular Tune* and the *Irish Rhapsody* [*Rapsóid Gaelach*] for violin and orchestra, although he felt that both works ended in a somewhat perfunctory manner and hinted that they might be revised to advantage. ‘For various reasons the other works do not seem so promising’, he told Potter:

Patrick suffers perhaps from a limitation on the duration imposed by television. Without a libretto I could not quite follow that action, but the scenes are very short and I have the feeling that you did not have the opportunity of developing the

²⁵⁰ AJP to Ernst Roth, 30 June 1969 (‘№ 1: Misc. 1969–70’, PA)

²⁵¹ Ernst Roth to AJP, 13 July 1969 (‘№ 1: Misc. 1969–70’, PA)

²⁵² AJP to Ernst Roth, 26 July 1969 (‘№ 1: Misc. 1969–70’, PA)

musical material. *Lovlie Jemmie* and the *Suite for Piano* are, if you forgive me saying so, not quite to my liking. The songs *Aileen* and *As the Blue Smoke* are very good (the third less so), but unfortunately there is no longer a market for songs. I enjoyed both the words and music of *The Classiad* but, an occasional broadcast apart, I can see little practical use for the work.

He concluded by saying that he had delivered the first-mentioned scores to the Boosey and Hawkes premises in person, and that while he was no longer active in the company and unable to 'do much more than recommend', he hoped nonetheless that the verdict might prove favourable.²⁵³ Much to Potter's disappointment, the firm declined to accept any of the works²⁵⁴, leaving him, as he subsequently told Roth, 'as puzzled as ever'.²⁵⁵ Roth took the trouble to send a kindly note to the composer:

I am sincerely sorry about the decision of the executives at Boosey & Hawkes of which I heard only after Christmas when I enquired. But even when I was an executive myself I rarely forced a work on those who would have to promote it because it is so easy for the promoter to prove wrong. But I discussed the works and often enough convinced them and so obtained their co-operation. This, I am sorry to say, is no longer done and the opinions of the readers are accepted without argument. But — publishers do make mistakes and this is certainly one of them. And I can only hope that it will not discourage you.²⁵⁶

It would be interesting to know what impression Potter's scores made on the readers at Boosey and Hawkes — or for that matter, on those who worked in the other firms that he approached. To be fair, music publishers had found themselves operating in an increasingly difficult climate after the Second World War which sometimes rendered the publication and promotion of works even by major figures

²⁵³ Ernst Roth to AJP, 17 September 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁵⁴ Martin Hall to AJP, 12 January 1970 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁵⁵ AJP to Ernst Roth, 15 January 1970 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁵⁶ Ernst Roth to AJP, 31 January 1970 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

problematic.²⁵⁷ They naturally had to publish music from which they could hope to make a profit – otherwise they could not have survived as business concerns. One surmises that they simply did not regard Potter's music as a commercially viable proposition. The bulk of his output consisted of light music, much of it based on Irish folk music. This repertory, which would probably have had a limited appeal outside Ireland in any case, declined rapidly in popularity from the early 1960s onwards and was broadcast to much lesser extent. (Potter was aware of this change of policy, as he had been notified of in 1964 by E. W. J. Boucher, a member of the senior management of the BBC in Northern Ireland, who informed him that henceforth 'lighter Irish arrangements' would not feature as prominently in the programmes of the station's Belfast-based light orchestra.²⁵⁸) His serious music, on the other hand, was largely couched in idioms that would probably have been regarded as *passé* by reading panels, particularly if they were sympathetic to the styles of the contemporary avant-garde. The composer cannot have been unaware of this difficulty: only a few months later, Gerard Victory reported that he generally found it difficult to interest his counterparts in other European radio stations in broadcasting Potter's compositions under the various exchange schemes that they operated – its stylistic conservatism, coupled with the fact that much of it was in a lighter vein, made it unattractive in a climate that increasingly favoured compositions couched in avant-garde idioms.²⁵⁹ Needless to say, this circumstance cannot be taken to imply a definitive value-judgement about the quality or intrinsic interest of Potter's output: Roth's endorsement of works such as the *Sinfonia de Profundis* surely suggests a contrary view – and this from a hard-headed businessman who had spent a lifetime in publishing and was unlikely to offer his opinion lightly. But it may help to explain why Boosey and Hawkes refused to publish his scores nonetheless: they probably thought that it would prove very difficult to promote them and arrange performances of them.

²⁵⁷ The chapters in the latter half of Wallace, *Boosey & Hawkes*, provide ample evidence of this in the case of the firm of Boosey and Hawkes itself.

²⁵⁸ See E. W. J. Boucher to AJP, 1 December 1964 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

²⁵⁹ See Gerard Victory to AJP, 30 January 1970 ('№3: RTÉ + BBC 1970-1-2-3-4', PA)

Sadly, Potter's elation over the reception of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* quickly evaporated and gave way to a mood of deep dejection. At some level, he seems to have hoped that his recent success would somehow transform his circumstances. It is difficult to know exactly what he can have imagined might happen — perhaps he entertained expectations that the work would be performed abroad to similar acclaim, or that official recognition of his achievement would ensue and result in his being offered a state subsidy (he would unsuccessfully make representations to be granted one a few years later). As we shall see in a moment, he certainly expected that the Royal Irish Academy of Music might offer to raise his salary. None of these things happened, however; and as his euphoria subsided, the disillusioning realisation seems to have set in that the triumphant premiere of the symphony would change nothing: the conditions of his day-to-day existence would remain the same as ever, seemingly without any possibility of an escape from their attendant frustrations. And in some respects, the success of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* had been bittersweet: it was almost as if it had come too late, now that he was too old to hold out hopes that his career would take off, as it might have done under other circumstances — perhaps if he had not stayed in Ireland. Bitterness and self-pity welled up in him. When Aloys Fleischmann wrote to offer his congratulations 'on the great success of your symphony and on the profound impression which it created'²⁶⁰, Potter replied 'my gratification at it all was only tempered by the rather sad reflection that some other pieces might have gone equally well if they had the thorough and devoted preparation given to them that Rosen and his various colleagues did for the *Sinfonia de Profundis*.'²⁶¹

Two letters that Potter sent around this time to the Dublin critic and journalist John O'Donovan reveal him to have been so depressed that he had more or less decided to abandon composing altogether. It is not clear what initially prompted this exchange of correspondence, but it appears as if O'Donovan may have tried to arouse his

²⁶⁰ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 9 April 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁶¹ AJP to Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 12 April 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

interest in collaborating on a project — perhaps an opera. Potter wrote back, declining politely but firmly:

The fact is that, after the failure of *de Profundis* I had already decided to call it a day as far as fresh composition is concerned. I'll still be clearing up odds and ends of uncompleted business, of course, and I don't say that if someone were to offer me sixty thousand pounds for sixteen bars of waltz-time, I wouldn't break out the old think-box and do something about it. But as far as embarking on any new compositions is concerned, well, a nod's as good as a wink... I'm neither blind nor a horse: and I have in these past few months, as our Salvation Army colleagues would have it, 'seen the light'.²⁶²

O'Donovan was understandably distressed on receiving this letter: he wrote back anxiously to reassure Potter that his symphony had been anything but a failure and urged him not to give up composing.²⁶³ Potter's response makes for quite uncomfortable reading: he makes no attempt to conceal the extent of his accumulated resentments or his conviction that writing music in Ireland was a futile and thankless business. At the same time, the reader's sympathy is all but alienated by the letter's uncharacteristic tone of grandiosity and the exaggerated claims that Potter makes for the significance of his work in the history of twentieth-century music — one is almost inclined to think that he must have been on the verge of a nervous breakdown:

My dear John,

That was very kind of you to go to all that trouble and write me such a helpful letter. I much appreciate it, and find it very heartening that someone who is as busy as you are at writing on their own account should take, as it were, such a busman's holiday on mine.

I'm afraid, however, that the lines must have got a bit crossed: it's probably my fault, but the fact is that I did not at all mean to give the impression that you seem to have

²⁶² AJP to John O'Donovan, 30 June 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁶³ John O'Donovan to AJP, 5 July 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

got from my letter. When I described *de Profundis* as a 'failure', I didn't mean that it had failed artistically. Quite the contrary! As far as I am concerned — let's have no false modesty — it was the finest job in its line that I have heard which has been produced either here or anywhere else in this century. Full stop. Wrong I may be — but, depressed? No!

What I meant to imply was not my failure to write a satisfactory work, but the failure of that work to earn me some reasonable returns for all the efforts I put into it. And here, of course, I am including not only *de Profundis* itself, but all those other works — some good, some not so good — but all, in my immodest eyes a street ahead of anything (well, most things) that have been produced in the same area over the last twenty years.

For instance, you ask 'Wasn't Charles [Acton] appreciative?' Be fair to the man, dammit! He was not only appreciative, he gave it a ruddy rave. So, for that matter, did every other critic without one single exception. Even old Quidnunc [*the nom de plume of the Irish Times columnist Séamus Kelly*] weighed in and described the event as the most significant musical happening in Dublin since that night way back in Fishamble Street... [*i.e. the first performance of Handel's Messiah*] Stirring stuff, you'll admit — even if a little exaggerated perhaps... but singularly soothing to a starved ego. Fine words as they say, butter no parsnips. That glowing appreciation in print didn't extend to the boardroom of the RIAM where, you will remember, the salary of what the press described as 'our major composer' had a short time previously been fixed not far above that of a young lady starting out on her first job... and not much more than half of what it was proposed to pay some Maestro Schrimadamolto or Herr Schnautzniss-Heddoff who was certainly something other than a major national event. Of course, I had been told that the money 'simply wasn't there' — not for the likes of me, anyway, whose parents never sat in the right place and whose name don't [*sic.*] have the correct continental ring. Well, we all know the answer to the one about 'no money'... As the man said, it's in the plural and it bounces. But suppose for a moment that it really had been true about the money... Was that all that could have been done to show appreciation? I don't think so, do you? ... My return from the RIAM for writing what your colleagues of the press described as 'a major

national event' was — a letter: which was supposed to have been written, but which I haven't actually got yet.

So you see, my dear John, that you are wide of the mark indeed in supposing that when I refer to 'having seen the light', I mean that I have perceived my compositions to be inferior. Quite the contrary: my intention was to explain to you that I had at long last fully realised that writing good, competent, progressive, understandable and popular music was not the way in which to obtain for me and mine those good things of life which, as a family man, it is my duty to provide. Having the right connections may do the trick, as may the ability to wear an Aran sweater the right way up... But as far as material advancement is concerned, you could, as far as I can see, stick the pen up your anus and shake it over the paper for all the difference it's likely to make. (There is also another strictly practical, artistic and business-like consideration: I have written so much that it really is time both in the interests of my pocket, and for the sake of the works themselves, that [I] stopped producing new ones, and concentrated on exploiting and furthering the interests of those already written)²⁶⁴

This letter did not bode well. Ironically, the triumph over personal difficulties that Potter had celebrated in the last movement of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was short-lived: not long after the premiere, he resumed drinking.²⁶⁵ And although he did not cease composing altogether, as he had threatened to O'Donovan that he might, he would produce few major works during the decade of life that remained to him.

1.8 The last decade: 1970-1980

As one assembles the details about Potter's day-to-day existence over the next few years from his correspondence, it is difficult not to conclude that something in him seems to have snapped in the wake of the symphony's premiere. As is always the case in matters pertaining to his alcoholism and its disruptive effects on his life, it is difficult to establish hard facts, but one has the distinct sense that his personal life in

²⁶⁴ AJP to John O'Donovan, 7 July 1969 ('№ 14: Odd Jobs 1969 — 70 — 71', PA)

²⁶⁵ Annette Perry, interview with author, 10 August 2005

the early 1970s was particularly difficult. An invoice from the Stillorgan and Dublin Ambulance Service which has been preserved amongst his papers suggested that Dorothy Potter may have tried to have him hospitalised on 20 December 1969: she rang the emergency services just after four o'clock in the afternoon on that day, but Potter refused to co-operate and sent the ambulance away.²⁶⁶ In November of the following year, he seems to have been forcibly committed.²⁶⁷ On the advice of his doctor, Potter sought and was granted leave from the Royal Irish Academy of Music until the start of the next academic year. Whatever grudges he harboured against the institution, its governors responded to his predicament in a humane fashion and continued to pay his basic salary for the year in question.²⁶⁸ Potter duly returned to work in September 1971, having apparently been certified fit by his doctors.²⁶⁹ This period of sobriety did not last very long: on 12 November, the Secretary of the RIAM, James Callery, wrote to notify him that he had been suspended from his job pending the submission of a medical report on his condition. Two weeks later, the institution's Board of Governors had decided to relieve him of his duties with immediate effect. Callery informed him that he would not be able to return to work until the Board was satisfied that he was fit to resume, and on this occasion, his salary was discontinued.²⁷⁰ Potter was hospitalised once more.²⁷¹ The question of when Potter would return to work remained uncertain throughout the winter and spring. In March 1972, he contacted the institution to ask if it might be possible for him to resume work in April. The Board was evidently reluctant to permit this, particular as the doctor's certificate that Potter had submitted was somewhat vague as to whether or not he could be considered to have made a proper recovery. In the event, it was decided that 'as there were very few pupils enrolling for the April term, Dr Potter be offered the option to resume on a part-time basis for that term at an hourly rate of £2.50, and that he be informed that sympathetic consideration would

²⁶⁶ Invoice from Stillorgan and Dublin Ambulance Service, 20 December 1969 ('Nº13: Personal 1969 - 70 - 1 - 2 - 3', PA)

²⁶⁷ Dorothy Potter to B. Perren, 23 November 1970 ('Nº5: RIAM Sept. '70 - 71', PA).

²⁶⁸ James Callery to AJP, 11 December 1970 ('Nº5: RIAM Sept. '70 - 71', PA)

²⁶⁹ AJP to James Callery, 22 September 1971 ('Nº5: RIAM Sept. '70 - 71', PA)

²⁷⁰ James Callery to AJP, 25 November 1971 ('Nº5: RIAM Sept. '70 - 71', PA)

²⁷¹ Minutes of meeting of RIAM Board of Governors, 24 November 1971

be given to his resuming on a full-time basis as from September 1972.²⁷² Potter was duly notified that the Board was prepared to consider permitting him to return to work after the summer vacation, subject to a further medical report.²⁷³

He seems to have resumed teaching in briefly in September 1972, but by October Callery reported to the Board that he was ill once again.²⁷⁴ It was not long before he found himself back in hospital. In Annette Perry's recollection, the immediate cause of his hospitalisation on this or perhaps another occasion during the early 1970s was a failed suicide attempt. Potter ingested a notoriously toxic weed-killer called Paraquat, but was discovered by his wife and rushed into hospital. Potter subsequently told Dorothy that he had tried to kill himself because he had felt unable to face being forcibly committed to hospital – something that he knew to be imminent. He was extremely fortunate that his health was not seriously impaired, although he apparently suffered some lung damage. His thoughts often seem to have turned to suicide during these years: he confided to his sister Gertrude on one of her visits that he had frequently thought of jumping to his death – a conversation which she naturally found highly disturbing.²⁷⁵

Potter seems to have been a rather reticent man and seldom discussed his inner life in his correspondence. One of the very few letters to betray any hint of the mental anguish that he suffered during these years was written during a spell of hospitalisation in late 1972. It was sent to a fellow member of the RIAM Board of Governors, Desmond Carney, a medical doctor who evidently had considerable admiration for Potter's abilities and liked him personally. On discovering that the composer had had a relapse and was in hospital, Carney sent him a warmly supportive note, expressing his view that the main reasons his previous treatments had failed was because he had not experienced a sufficiently empathic response from his medical advisors:

²⁷² Minutes of meeting of RIAM Board of Governors, 29 March 1972

²⁷³ Margaret Furlong to AJP, 30 March 1972 ('№5: RIAM Sept. '70 – 71', PA)

²⁷⁴ Minutes of meeting of RIAM Board of Governors, 11 October 1972

²⁷⁵ Annette Perry, interview with author, 10 August 2005

I frankly believe that you have never been adequately handled in the years you have had your problem, i.e. no doctor has communicated with you at your own very high intellectual and cultural level. I may be wrong, but this is what I believe.²⁷⁶

He went on to suggest that Potter should see another doctor of his recommendation whom he considered more suitable and concluded his letter by urging him to try and get well for the sake of his talent. Carney also took pains to assure him that many people in the RIAM genuinely wished him well – even if was, as he put it, a somewhat ‘old-maidish’ institution – and wanted him to continue playing a prominent part in its activities. Potter’s reply reveals how keenly he resented the indignity of being forcibly committed, and gives eloquent expression to his profound sense of despondency:

Many thanks indeed for your letter. I appreciate it very much that you should have taken the time to embroil yourself with my problems. Since you have chosen to do so, however, I feel it is only fair to fill you in more fully with sundry details of information which do not appear to have been available to you when you were writing. Here they are:

1. I have never, as far as I know, chosen to attend in the present institution where I am, but have been forced to do so by certain parties – perfectly well known to you – who, uninhibited by any scruples regarding *habeas corpus*, the rights of man as outlined in the statutes of such bodies as the UN or the Council of Europe, or indeed, my own ultimate welfare. If, as your letter implies, you do not think that I have been properly treated medically or psychologically, then surely it is them you should speak to, NOT me. Under Sections 184/5 of the infamous Mental Health Act, I have no power to affect their decisions one way or the other.
2. You suggest a second opinion I should seek: I should be delighted to do so, but before being released from my present sentence, I presumably need the OK of a doctor. This might not present any problem in your mind, but when I tell you that I have seen one on the following dates, 17 October, 6 November and 8 November in

²⁷⁶ Desmond Carney to AJP, 12 November 1972 (‘Nº13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3’, PA)

the past month, you will understand how difficult it is for me to predict when, if ever, I shall be in a position to consult as you suggest.

3. Furthermore, I would add that (as I suggested to the party who saw me on 6 November) to a person of my make-up, whilst physical hardship means very little, mentally, my tolerance level is very low. To be kept in the state of uncertainty which is the perpetual lot of the unfortunates confined to these places is to me the most exquisite torture. Since I am now entirely without medication of any sort, you can presumably understand that, as far as I am concerned, the whole business is nothing more than an exercise in punishment... and that when they have tortured me enough to satisfy themselves, they will let me go. When I further add that the party referred to promised faithfully to see me every day – that when questioned re my treatment – bluntly threatened me with six months' confinement... and that his efforts to make me see his viewpoint included a fair amount of religious brainwashing... And when both you and I reflect that not only him, but all the others engaged in this prolonged persecution of me are all members in good standing of the IRISH MEDICAL PROFESSION – well, it doesn't exactly give one very much confidence in any other members of the profession whom one may encounter, now, does it?

However, if I am ever released, I promise faithfully to see your gentleman at the time agreed.

4. You speak of friends in Westland Row [*the street in Dublin on which the RIAM's premises were located*]... Candidly, from the experience of the last twenty years, I didn't feel I had any – in any of the places that matter. But if I have (barring yourself, of course) I should be delighted to hear who they are. I could have been doing them an injustice all this time. ...

I am perfectly well in regard to myself, and apart from the routine scripts etc. have just finished a test piece for [male-voice] choirs in ... next year's Choral Festival at Cork. Some pieces for the new liturgy... and am half-way through a largish orchestral work. What else am I supposed to do? Juggle a set of dinner-plates with my big left toe just to keep up interest?²⁷⁷

²⁷⁷ AJP to Desmond Carney, 14 November 1972 ('Nº13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

Potter's correspondence with the RIAM during this period does not appear to have been preserved, but he evidently contacted Callery early in 1973 to ask if he could resume teaching there. His finances must have been pretty straitened by this point, and he was probably in dire need of money. Unfortunately, he was still unable to provide the Board of Governors with the satisfactory medical report that they – quite justifiably – required. The Board accordingly decided at a meeting on 10 January 1973 that he should not be permitted to return until one was forthcoming.²⁷⁸ At the end of that month, the Secretary reported that 'Dr Potter had not yet submitted a Medical Report'.²⁷⁹ In the event, Potter never returned to work there. No correspondence has so far come to light either in the holdings of the RIAM or in the Potter Archive which might clarify what eventually transpired: it is possible that he was approached informally by a representative of the Board of Governors and prevailed upon to resign. One imagines that the senior management of the institution must have greeted his departure with very mixed feelings. It would hardly have come as a surprise to them, however, if they heard that he spent another spell in hospital in June and July of 1973.²⁸⁰

Potter's letters to family and friends at this period do not make for particularly pleasant reading, consisting as they often do of unrelieved outpourings of atrabilious sentiments and expressions of intense hatred of his surroundings. Writing not long after his release from hospital to his sister Gertrude, who had recently returned to live in Northern Ireland after a sojourn in South Africa, he snarled:

Am I really to believe that you actually wanted to give up life there and come back to this wind-swept rain-sodden hell-hole? Today is one-third of the way through the holiday month of August, and it was raining so bloody hard that I had to put on my raincoat and Wellingtons, and take the golf-umbrella to get me into the post office without being drowned – and it has been like this for weeks except for a few

²⁷⁸ Minutes of meeting of RIAM Board of Governors, 10 January 1973

²⁷⁹ Minutes of meeting of RIAM Board of Governors, 31 January 1973

²⁸⁰ See AJP to Brother Bursar, St John of God Hospital, 19 July 1973 ('№13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA) in which he alludes to staying in this institution from 22 June until 19 July 1973.

intermissions. Well, what can you expect when it comes down like the micturition of a million mammoths on St Swithin's Day itself?

[I] have had to be working all this time – deadlines for the opening of a new band hall and the whole damned repertoire seems to be having to be re-writ... Not to worry though, one thing about these boyos at least – they do pay on the nail – which is more than you can say for some of my customers... RTÉ for instance are 8 or 9 years behind with their mechanical-copyright dues, but of course nobody ever gives a shite about that – much too busy worrying about the plight of the poor persecuted brethren in the wicked north to have time to pay their own bloody debts: just like everyone else is much too busy either breezing round those bastards in the useless UN like so many blue-arsed flies to have time to worry about the appalling rise in living costs, the shaitannically [*sic.*] scrofulous transport service, the fact that you can walk the length and breadth of Dublin without finding a single public telephone in working order... And if you're wondering if there is not here a gentle suggestion to the effect that your humble and obedient servant has just about had the bloody place – you are right. He has...

Bitched, buggered and bewildered – fed up, fucked and far from home ... that's little Archie. Hence my amazement that anyone who has actually succeeded in escaping from the God-damned cesspit should ever want to come back... I might feel a bit less of a scunner about things when I've actually had my holliers [*Dublin slang for 'holidays'*]. ... Not the Côte d'Azur this time though: in the first place, I don't feel like spending all that money to swim in a sea of shit when you can do that at home. ... No, this time, we're going further afield and trying Yugoslavia. Several reasons... First, it's as far away as I can reasonably get within the limits of a normal holiday. Secondly, I understand that they have a habit of either shooting, maiming, poisoning or otherwise appropriately dealing with demonstrators there - and it would certainly do my heart good to see some of that, or even just to be in a country where you know that it is done from time to time.²⁸¹

The rest of the letter is filled with sneering, curmudgeonly attacks on targets which became veritable obsessions in Potter's correspondence at this period: 'BBC

²⁸¹ AJP to 'Dessie' [Gertrude Tree], 10 August 1973 ('№13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

bastards', 'shitebound Oxbridge pinkos', 'Gobshit Ghandi' — and other institutions and public figures on whom he blamed the sorry state of the world in which he was condemned to live. At times, his negative attitude towards Ireland — 'this poverty-stricken hell-hole', 'our own God-Fearing Bible-Punching Craw-Thumping Voteen-Ridden Ireland of Saints and Scholars'²⁸² — seems to have verged on deep loathing. A more disturbing conviction surfaces in other letters: that the dissolution of the British Empire had been an unmitigated disaster for both rulers and ruled. In the first place, he maintained that it was directly responsible for the spiralling costs of living in the 1970s — as he remarked to a relative,

[What's] the use of trying to explain to people that things were bound to be cheap when you had a nice, big colonial empire to get them from... but if you free the same colonies, well, they're going to ask the market price for them, aren't they?²⁸³

The fact that subject peoples might have viewed the matter somewhat differently does not seem to have bothered him unduly: in his opinion, they had been better off, in any case, under colonial rule. After hearing the veteran Labour peer and social campaigner Lord Donald Soper speak on the BBC programme 'Thought for the Day' in 1972, Potter was moved to send him a heated letter which concluded:

If your good self, Lord Brockway, Bishop Huddleston and all who thought likewise were to take an objective look at the facts of life in such places as Uganda, Ghana, the Sudan, the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia etc. etc. since the Europeans withdrew... If you were once to put your intellectual pride in your pockets... admit just this once that you might conceivably have been wrong... and that the ordinary inhabitants of the unhappy countries I have listed were, in fact, happier under the so-called jack-boot of colonialism than they have ever been since.²⁸⁴

²⁸² AJP to 'Dessie' [Gertrude Tree], 22 April 1974 ('№13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

²⁸³ AJP to Desmond Drake, 28 June 1974 ('№13: Personal 1974-5', PA)

²⁸⁴ AJP to Donald Soper, 16 November 1972 ('№ 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)', PA)

This formulation of his views was positively temperate in comparison with the manner in which he sometimes expressed them in private correspondence. He felt so strongly about the breakup of the British Empire and the emancipation of subject peoples that in 1972 it caused him to leave the Church of Ireland. His reason, as he explained to his sister, was that it was in communion with the Church of England, which 'tolerated' and 'even promoted' anti-apartheid campaigners such as Bishop Trevor Huddleston: 'personally I'd rather be in communion with a syphilitic warthog'.²⁸⁵ While such opinions are, of course, indefensible, one must also add they are additionally startling because they seem so uncharacteristic: nothing in the twenty or so years of previous correspondence preserved in the Potter Archive betrays so much as a hint that he entertained views of this nature. Whatever his faults, Potter could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as a monster – but he was clearly during this period a very disturbed man, and perhaps at times barely mentally stable. This is the most plausible and the most charitable explanation for his outbursts in this vein.

As can readily be imagined, this period of his life, which was punctuated by prolonged spells of hospitalisation, was scarcely conducive to creativity; and it is consequently not surprising that it was more or less completely barren from an artistic point of view. Moreover, in addition to being under severe psychological strain, he must also have been under considerable financial strain, occasioned both by his drinking and the costs of his medical care. His departure from the RIAM inevitable rendered his financial position far more precarious: his salary had been quite small – a mere £1,540 *per annum* in 1971²⁸⁶, roughly equivalent to £15,000 or €21,000 today – but it represented a stable source of income nonetheless and it was by no means certain that he would succeed in earning a comparable sum by other means. In the short term, however, he kept his head above water – though quite how, one finds it difficult to imagine, in view of the mental turmoil that he was evidently experiencing.

²⁸⁵ AJP to 'Dessie' [Gertrude Tree], 17 June 1972 ('№13: Personal 1969-70-1-2-3', PA)

²⁸⁶ See James Callery to AJP, 30 September 1971 ('№5: RIAM Sept. '70 – 71', PA)

The turbulent circumstances of his personal life notwithstanding, he still managed to earn part of his living by his pen. Fortunately for him, he managed to secure a considerable quantity of work from RTÉ during the early 1970s, mostly composing incidental music for television documentaries and other programmes. He had considerable experience in this line, as he had previously composed incidental music for various documentaries made in 1966 to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising, and seems to have dispatched these commissions with his usual efficiency. He also composed a number of orchestral arrangements of Irish folk music for the RTÉ Light Orchestra which were issued on a long-playing record *Ceol Potter* ['Potter's Music'] by the Irish recording company Gael-Linn in 1973.²⁸⁷ Around the same time, Potter found another outlet for his skills which seems to have proved quite lucrative over the next decade, namely composing and arranging pieces for wind, brass and military bands of various descriptions. This seems to have come about as a result of his involvement with a band based in a northern suburb of Dublin, the Artane Boys Band. This ensemble had been founded in 1872 and had been set up in a so-called Industrial School established in the locality by the Congregation of Christian Brothers to take in boys who had been orphaned, abandoned or involved in petty crime.²⁸⁸ It came to enjoy a national following, largely because of its performances at major hurling and Gaelic football matches which took place at Croke Park in Dublin, the country's largest sport's stadium. In 1969, Potter assisted in what he described as 'a rescue operation' in aid of the band when its instruments and library of sheet music were destroyed in a fire, and prepared a large quantity of new arrangements for them.²⁸⁹ Over the years, these arrangements brought in fairly sizeable PRS revenues, because they were performed in front of audiences of anything up to 70,000 people in Croke Park, and these sporting events were relayed by radio to the United States, Australia and

²⁸⁷ Gael-Linn CEF034

²⁸⁸ A brief history of the band and a description of its activities is given on its webpage http://www.mycharity.ie/donate_charityHistory.php?charityID=97 (accessed 9 December 2007).

²⁸⁹ AJP to Cyprian Fahey, 9 April 1969 ('Nº1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

elsewhere.²⁹⁰ Other bands began to call for his services, including the Band of the Irish Guards, the Arklow Silver Band and the band of the Irish police force, the Garda Band. The quantity of arrangements that Potter prepared for these bodies seems to have grown extremely numerous: in 1972 he informed a correspondent that 'before I got fed up with counting them', the total number that he had made in the course of his career exceeded one thousand.²⁹¹ This figure may well be conservative: Potter evidently did not bother to keep copies of most of these pieces and simply gave the manuscripts away, so it is not possible to tell with certainty how many he actually wrote. A considerable number of them appear to be in private collections that were inaccessible to Mark Cronin when he was preparing his catalogue of Potter's music between 2003 and 2005. If one considers, however, that Cronin came across a manuscript of two works for military band written in 1973 entitled *Twentieth March Medley* and *Twenty-First March Medley* respectively (the previous march medleys seem to have disappeared without trace), it is likely that the composer's estimate was not exaggerated. Much of this activity, needless to say, was hackwork, but it brought in money. It was also far less demanding to write than symphonies or other serious works, and it was often much better paid: as he told an acquaintance in Yugoslavia on returning from a holiday there in 1973,

[My] homecoming has been met with the usual deluge of work: a television score to be done before the end of the month, and a signature tune cum fanfare for some football team by yesterday afternoon – the usual thing. The extraordinary thing is that I shall get exactly the same for 45 seconds of drivel for the footballers as I got for 30 minutes of lifework put into a symphony: which is why I always maintain that the only really happy people in this world are in lunatic asylums. The outside world is so full of lunatics and lunacy.²⁹²

²⁹⁰ AJP to 'Maureen', 28 February 1970 ('N^o13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

²⁹¹ AJP to M. Waterworth, 24 June 1972 ('N^o 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)')

²⁹² AJP to Klara Montani, 22 September 1973 ('N^o13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

Such remarks suggest that his disillusionment about the failure of his major compositions to make greater headway was as intense as ever, and that he was confirmed in his conviction that composing in Ireland was a futile occupation.

Fortunately for Potter, his prolonged leave of absence and ultimate departure from the RIAM occurred not long after a change in Irish law that made it more feasible for creative artists to earn a living from their work: in 1969, Charles Haughey, the Minister for Finance in the current Fianna Fáil government, had introduced legislation exempting them from paying tax — a move which was widely welcomed.²⁹³ In the wake of this, Potter attempted to explore the possibility of obtaining a state subsidy similar to the one that had been offered to Sibelius by the Finnish government. He wrote to the Taoiseach Jack Lynch in January 1970 to request a meeting at which he presumably outlined his proposal.²⁹⁴ Nothing would come of Potter's initiative, although Lynch seems to have been sympathetically disposed: he informed him in November of the following year that after 'very full consideration' of the matter, he and his ministerial colleagues had concluded that such an arrangement would not be possible.²⁹⁵ Sadly, Potter did not live to see the foundation of Aosdána, the Irish academy of creative artists, in 1981, which made available a *cnuas* or stipend to some of its elected members.

In the absence of such a provision, Potter had little choice but to take whatever steps he could to ensure that he would earn a reasonable living from his activities as a composer and arranger. In 1974, he eventually managed to settle a long-standing dispute with RTÉ about overdue payment of royalties under Section 12 of the 1963

²⁹³ The relevant section of the 1969 Finance Act can be consulted in the online version of the Irish Statute Book that is available on the website of the Office of the Irish Attorney General at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1969/en/act/pub/0021/sec0002.html#zza21y1969s2> (accessed 9 December 2007).

²⁹⁴ AJP to Jack Lynch, 16 January 1970 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

²⁹⁵ Jack Lynch to AJP, 8 November 1971 ('No 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)', PA)

Copyright Act (a change in the law which he had actively lobbied to bring about²⁹⁶), and received his first payment for the years 1964-69²⁹⁷ – a sum of over £15,000 (about £108,000/€150,000 today), which one imagines must have helped considerably to alleviate his financial difficulties.²⁹⁸ To judge from his correspondence around this time, he appears to have been in a rather strange state of mind: shortly after receiving this money, he wrote to Concern, an Irish charity that carried out aid work in Third World countries, informing them that he was actively considering volunteering his services as a field-worker ‘once I have put my own affairs in order’.²⁹⁹ Needless to say, nothing came of this impulse – but the incident certainly suggests an attitude which is strikingly at variance with his comments about emergent nations in the Third World in his other correspondence.

As far as one can tell, apart from participating in once-off events such as summer schools, Potter does not appear to have taught either privately or in another institution after leaving the RIAM: he informed one correspondent a few years later in 1978 that the 1969 Finance Act had ‘emancipated him’ from the need to do so.³⁰⁰ Nonetheless, he largely supplemented his income from composition through a variety of part-time jobs connected with education. In addition to carrying out a considerable amount of peripatetic examining in secondary schools for the Irish Department of Education, he also presented regular educational radio programmes for RTÉ which were aimed at students taking the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations in Music – the equivalent of the O-Level and A-level examinations in Britain. This idea originated with the RTÉ radio producer Jane Carty, who oversaw the making of the first series in late 1969.³⁰¹ By this stage, Potter

²⁹⁶ See AJP to James Everett T.D., 15 January 1963 (‘General 1/1/62 – 63’, PA); and AJP to W. B. Stanford, 19 January 1963, and Stanford’s reply of 6 March 1963 (both in ‘General 1/1/62 – 63’, PA).

²⁹⁷ AJP to Mary Robinson, 19 July 1974 (‘Nº 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)’, PA)

²⁹⁸ AJP to Secretary of Concern, 28 June 1974 (‘Nº 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)’, PA)

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰⁰ AJP to John McDowell, 27 July 1978 (‘AJP Miscellaneous 1978-80’, PA)

³⁰¹ See Jane Carty to AJP, 22 August 1969 (‘Nº3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9’, PA)

had almost twenty years' experience of appearing on radio and he proved ideally suited to this new role. His programmes, which continued throughout the 1970s, were extremely popular with music teachers and students alike, and attracted a large listenership, thanks to his engaging radio personality and his ability to convey information in an unstuffy manner without condescending to his teenage audience. They were also responsible for a sizeable increase in his correspondence, as listeners from all over the country took to writing to ask his advice or for help with queries. It is worthy of note that Potter answered all of these letters with impeccable courtesy — no matter how gauche or trivial the queries raised by his correspondent — and sometimes at very great length. His replies, which have all been preserved in the Potter Archive, reveal his personality at its most engaging and attractive, and offer a stark contrast to the dejected tone of his personal correspondence.

In addition to these activities, Potter undertook occasional work as an adjudicator on audition panels for RTÉ and the Arts Council. But although his professional life was fairly active and brought him into contact with a great many people, one has the impression nonetheless that Potter had very few, if any, close friends within the music profession. In the recollection of the composer James Wilson (1922-2005), Potter always kept something of a distance from fellow composers and did not seem anxious to cultivate closer associations with them.³⁰² Sadly, he also never seems to have developed a friendship with anyone whose opinion he trusted and who could have provided him with perceptive criticisms of his work: one's predominant impression is that he felt largely isolated for most of his career.

Potter displayed little inclination to compose serious works of any substance during these years. In early 1971, he toyed briefly with the idea of writing another symphony, and contacted Gerard Victory to sound him out about the possibility of organising a commission. His letter is rather curious and offers a number of interesting clues about his state of mind at the time: as was so often the case with him, its flippant manner of expression seems to mask rather serious concerns. Potter

³⁰² James Wilson, interview with author, 31 August 2004

was evidently worried that he might have sunk in Victory's estimation because he had composed very little of substance over the past three years and seemed to have thrown away the opportunity to capitalise on the resounding success of the *Sinfonia de Profundis*. Writing music for television documentaries and making arrangements for bands may have allowed him to earn some badly-needed money, but he must have known that these scores added little to his stature as a creative artist. As he had resumed drinking by this point, he may also have been concerned about the possible consequences for his professional reputation – particularly when it came to dealing with RTÉ, one of his principal sources of income. Potter's letter undoubtedly reveals more than he intended – especially his rather maladroit attempts at self-justification:

[Since] the time when you were far-seeing enough to commission the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, I have, so to speak, been maintaining a rather low profile in the compositional field. But, although the fact that that was a rather hard act to follow, as they say, this was not a case of resting on the laurels your help had brought me... It was just that RTÉ having done me so proudly in this particular instance, I felt that I might take off into some other fields – like the one at Croke Park where the Artane Boys [*i.e.* the Artane Boys Band] play, for instance, plus some school music and general odds and ends – and even a couple of items for the band of the Irish Guards... Well, one ought to earn what foreign currency we [*sic.*] can, shouldn't we?³⁰³

Although Victory indicated that he would be interested in the project, Potter failed to pursue the matter and his interest seems to have evaporated. He would only complete *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* (as the piece eventually came to be called) in September 1974. This was the only substantial work that Potter had written in the last five years, and sadly it proved to be one of his weakest scores (it will be discussed in Chapter 3). In the event, it was not performed until 1976. November 1974 saw the long-delayed premiere of his ballet *Full Moon for the Bride*, which he had completed in 1963, but had never orchestrated. Curiously, as we shall see in Chapter 5, Potter could only be persuaded to undertake this task with the greatest of

³⁰³ AJP to Gerard Victory, 29 April 1971 ('No3: RTÉ + BBC 1970 – 71 – 72', PA)

reluctance when a definite possibility of a performance at last materialised with the Cork Ballet company. In December of the same year, he completed *Cornet of Horse*, a setting of Rilke's poem *Die Weise von Liebe und Tod des Cornets Christoph Rilke* [The Lay of Love and Death of the Cornet Christoph Rilke] in an English translation by Constantine FitzGibbon for mezzo-soprano, male voice choir and orchestra, of which an account is given in Chapter 4. He seems to have approached the composition of this score (the idea for which had been suggested to him by the Dublin critic Fanny Feehan) with somewhat greater enthusiasm, largely on account of the poem's resonances with his wartime experiences. Although it is an uneven piece, *Cornet of Horse* is of much greater interest than *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* and, in contrast to the latter, is undoubtedly informed by a genuine creative impulse. Potter's only other major work from the mid-1970s was his Symphony No. 2, which was commissioned in 1975 by the Irish-American Cultural Institute to commemorate the life and achievement of the Irish political leader Éamon de Valera. This was completed in July 1976, but was only performed in 1981, in the year after the composer's death. Sadly, this symphony is also an undistinguished score and it seems evident that he had little interest in writing it. With the exception of certain passages in *Cornet of Horse*, none of these compositions is as vivid or interesting as the best of Potter's music from the 1950s and 1960s.

Nonetheless, Potter continued to occupy himself with other, more routine compositional tasks – further arrangements of Irish folk music, more pieces for brass bands, simple settings of the Mass for school and parish choirs – anything, in short, that would earn some money. One has the impression that, by this stage, such activity had become almost a matter of mechanical routine: as he confided to Valerie Trimble a few years later:

[You] know the way it has always been with me: it's such a struggle to get anything performed at all (even here in the R[epublic] of I[reland]) and when it has been projected, to get a reasonably decent performance – as I say, there is so much to that side of it that I never get the chance to wonder about the quality of it at all: I just have to bash ahead getting the stuff down on paper in time for the deadlines – and hope to



hell that it is reasonably alright as to quality: but I'm afraid that we'll have to leave that decision to posterity or whoever there is around to make it.³⁰⁴

On the basis of his correspondence, one is tempted to wonder if he would have been happy to give up composition altogether if he found some other way of supporting himself. He even considered taking a full-time job, and applied for the post of Director-General of RTÉ in January 1975 when it fell vacant.³⁰⁵ Unsurprisingly, he was not even short-listed for the position³⁰⁶ — a highly sensitive and largely political appointment for which he would have been completely unsuitable in any case — and he must have known that in the unlikely event of being appointed, his duties would have left him with little time to compose.

Fortunately the closing years of Potter's life seem to have brought him a measure of personal contentment — even if they were overshadowed by the death of his wife from cancer in May of 1978, an occurrence which affected him very deeply. Potter later told his sister Mareli that Dorothy had sought medical help while they were on holiday together in Italy in 1977 because she had started to feel unwell, and the Italian doctor had informed him in confidence of his suspicion that she was seriously ill and might not live another year.³⁰⁷ This prediction was confirmed. By February 1978, Dorothy Potter had begun to suffer from excruciating back pain which was misdiagnosed and attributed to a slipped disc. She was operated on in March, at which point her real condition became apparent: she disimproved rapidly and not long afterwards her doctor declared her condition to be hopeless.³⁰⁸ By 12 May she was in a coma³⁰⁹ and she died two days later on 14 May. One can only guess at Potter's feelings: his wife had stood by him loyally for many years and stoically seen him through crisis after crisis. He was almost certainly overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and remorse: he had apparently been sober for some time when his wife fell

³⁰⁴ AJP to Valerie Trimble, 12 June 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

³⁰⁵ See AJP to Dónal Ó Móráin, 6 January 1975 ('№14: JFB 1975 – 6 – 7', PA)

³⁰⁶ See Dónal Ó Móráin to AJP, 7 February 1975 ('№14: JFB 1975 – 6 – 7', PA)

³⁰⁷ AJP to Mareli Penn, 29 January 1980 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

³⁰⁸ AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Bob', 11 May 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

³⁰⁹ AJP to Mareli Penn, 12 May 1978 ('Personal 1978-80', PA)

ill, but resumed drinking when it became clear that she was dying. The Irish composer Séamas de Barra recalls encountering him at the Cork International Choral Festival at the start of May, and being struck by the fact that he not only looked wretched, but that his hands shook uncontrollably as he tried to hold a cup of tea.³¹⁰

Potter coped, as usual, by immersing himself in work. Curiously, although he seems to have largely lost interest in composing serious works after the premiere of the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, there was nonetheless one project which he was very anxious to finish and which he had been mulling over for many years. This was another opera, initially entitled *The Emigrants* and later renamed *The Wedding*, based on a tale of treachery and betrayal in small-town Ireland that had been recounted to him by his father-in-law many years before. As shall be detailed in Chapter 6, he was unwilling to commit the work to paper until he managed to arrange a production of it, but all of his efforts to raise money had been unsuccessful. Much to his pleasure, the Arts Council awarded him a bursary of £2,000 in November 1978 which made it feasible for him to turn down various routine commitments in order to write it. The opera was complete in full score by September 1979. One of the saddest circumstances in Potter's life is that he did not live to see the production of it in June 1981, when it was at last realised on stage some twenty-five years after he had first conceived it. It is undoubtedly one of his finest scores, and represents perhaps the most persuasive embodiment of his quirky perspective on life.

Potter died suddenly at his home in Greystones, a small coastal town south of Dublin, on 5 July 1980. He was survived by his second partner Sarah Burn, an English music student who had come into contact with him in 1978. After his wife's death, their friendship developed into a closer intimacy and they had become engaged to be married in July 1979. Potter's death prevented their marriage from taking place; but Sarah Burn still lives in his former house in Greystones and, as his executrix, continues to encourage interest in his music and facilitate the work of scholars.

³¹⁰ Séamas de Barra, personal communication to author, 9 December 2007

Chapter 2

Beginnings

2.1 Introduction

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Potter's compositional career was rather unusual in a number of respects, not least because of the protracted fallow period between 1938 and 1949 during which, it would appear, he composed very little, if anything at all. This creative silence of over ten years' duration was broken dramatically on his return to England in 1949, when he completed in quick succession a substantial *Missa Brevis* (subtitled *Lorica Sanctii Patricii*) for soloists and double chorus *a cappella*, and a set of songs with orchestral accompaniment, *Six Songs from the Glens of Antrim*. He continued to compose steadily after moving to Ireland in 1950 and over the next two years he completed or revised — it is not always clear which — several significant works that should be regarded as his first mature achievements, in which he managed to assimilate the various stylistic influences manifest in his earlier music to the point where he attained a recognisably personal manner of expression.

In this chapter, I have chosen to discuss four representative scores dating from this early phase of Potter's creative career between 1949 and 1952 — namely the *Missa Brevis*, two shorter orchestral pieces, *Rhapsody under a High Sky* and *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, and a concertante work for piano and orchestra, *Concerto da chiesa*. Although these works were brought into a final form during this period, the chronology of their composition is rather complex, for, as we shall see, Potter commenced work on at least three of them while studying with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music. Clearly, during this early phase of his resumed compositional career, Potter was concerned to complete or polish a number of pieces conceived during his student years, the ideas for which he obviously still regarded as viable when he came to re-examine them a decade later.

A close examination of these scores sheds considerable light on Potter's early development as a composer. In them, we can observe him taking as a starting point a musical style that is clearly indebted to Vaughan Williams, but extending its boundaries in accordance with his own expressive needs. This is especially noticeable in his experimentation with bitonality within a fundamentally modal harmonic idiom – a stylistic trait which remains fairly consistent throughout Potter's career. Between them, these four compositions define sound worlds that he would continue to explore in his later music. They also established prototypes for other works that he would compose subsequently: various short compositions in a lyrical pastoral idiom, for instance, or high-spirited, lighter orchestral pieces.

2.2 *Missa Brevis Lorica Sanctii Patricii*

Despite the designation *brevis* in its title, this is an elaborate and ambitious work of fairly extended proportions for SSATB soloists, an SSATB semi-chorus and a larger SSATBB choir, lasting about twenty-five minutes. It is in five movements, comprising a *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus* and *Agnus Dei*. In an undated programme note for the work found amongst his posthumous papers, Potter stated that he commenced work on it in 1936 when he was 18 – presumably during his period of study with Vaughan Williams, although he does not mention this specifically.¹ It is unclear how much of the score was written at this stage, however, and the chronology of its composition is very uncertain. Potter gave its date of completion as 1949 in various catalogues of his compositions included in publications brought out by the Association of Irish Composers, but in view of the fact that his circumstances were very unsettled at this period, as he struggled to support himself through a variety of odd jobs, it seems unlikely that he would have had sufficient leisure to compose the bulk of the score in that year – although it is not impossible, of course, that he may have done so.

¹ Undated programme note in 'Scripts etc. Oct '59', PA. Curiously, on the manuscript of the *Missa Brevis* Potter renders the subtitle of the mass as 'Sancti Patricii Thorax', but he does not appear ever to have used this designation subsequently.

The designation *Lorica Sanctii Patricii* in the title presents something of a puzzle. This refers to a famous seventh-century Irish prayer known in English as 'St Patrick's Breastplate', which was traditionally attributed to St Patrick and had supposedly been composed in thanksgiving after he had achieved a decisive victory over paganism in Ireland. This prayer was adapted to form the text of a celebrated hymn sung to a traditional Irish melody which is probably best known in Stanford's arrangement of it.² In the programme note to which allusion has just been made, Potter states that this hymn is used 'thematically' in the work. A close inspection of the score, however, reveals that his use of it is virtually confined to quoting its first strain at the point where he sets the words 'Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum scripturas' in the *Credo*. None of the material in the other movements seems to bear the slightest resemblance to motifs or contours deriving from it. In view of this, it is perhaps more likely that Potter chose the subtitle on account of its Irish associations rather than because of his employment of this fleeting quotation.

It is not clear whether Potter tried to secure a performance of the work upon completion of the score, but if so, he was unsuccessful in the short term. Two years later, he entered it for a composer's competition organised by CEMA for the 1951 Festival of Britain, which was open to composers born or normally resident in Northern Ireland. Entrants were invited to submit scores in various categories, one of which was for 'a choral composition, with string orchestra, or unaccompanied, lasting a minimum of 15 minutes'.³ The adjudicators for the competition were Julius Harrison and Howard Ferguson and a prize of £100 was offered. At the end of April, Potter was notified that his *Missa Brevis* had been awarded first prize in its category⁴, the other awards going to Havelock Nelson and Ivor Keys.⁵

² This is published as Hymn 655 in the 1922 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.

³ CEMA circular ('Tutti 49-52', PA).

⁴ W. H. N. Downer to AJP, 26 April 1951 ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

⁵ AJP to Douglas Fox, 21 January 1952 ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

The adjudicators' reports expressed warm approbation for the piece, though with some reservations about the challenges presented to prospective performers by its harmonically more adventurous passages. Harrison noted perceptively that composer was 'obviously well acquainted with the liturgical music of the Church, and, it can be inferred, with the "newer" traditions of the Solesmes School in the rhythms applicable to Plainsong'. From a technical point of view, he had particular praise for the judicious balance of homophonic and polyphonic textures achieved in the work, and though, in his opinion, 'the harmonic development [went] to extremes here and there', he conceded that its harmonic language derived logically from the implications of its thematic material.⁶

Ferguson's report was equally complimentary and is worth quoting in full.

An interesting and individual setting of the Mass. The vocal writing, the rhythmic flexibility and the justness of the verbal accentuation is admirable. [sic.] Curiously enough, the two most difficult movements of the Mass from a musical point of view, the Gloria and the Credo, are, together with the Sanctus group, more successful than the much simpler Kyrie and Agnus. The latter, though shapely in themselves, seem over-elaborate for a *Missa Brevis* which is otherwise suited to liturgical use. In particular, the length of the *Dona Nobis Pacem* section of the Agnus obscures the essentially three-fold nature of the whole movement. (Perhaps it was a mistake to recapitulate so much of the material of the Kyrie?). In spite of the well contrived vocal lines, parts of the work may be difficult to bring off harmonically; for example, the Kyrie page 5. But I should like to hear it performed.⁷

Potter acknowledged the validity of at least some of Ferguson's criticisms and was led to revise the *Missa Brevis* in the light of them. In January 1952 he wrote to his former teacher Douglas Fox, sending on a copy of the score and telling him that he had 'revised the Kyrie since, and have largely rewritten the Agnus as I agreed with

⁶ Typewritten copy of Harrison's report ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

⁷ Typewritten copy of Ferguson's report ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

[Ferguson's] criticisms on its form entirely'.⁸ Similarly, writing to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin (then Director of Music in Radio Éireann) later in the same year, he again informs his correspondent of these revisions, adding that 'Mr Ferguson's criticisms were my very own'.⁹ Unfortunately, the earlier versions of the Kyrie and Agnus Dei have not come to light, so it is not possible to assess how radical Potter's revisions may have been.¹⁰ To judge from these remarks in his letters, however, he evidently felt they were worth undertaking and that they strengthened the piece considerably.

Interestingly, Fox's estimate of the composition's merits differed considerably from Ferguson's. At the end of January 1952 he wrote a warm letter of congratulation to the composer, telling him that he was 'very glad you have given up that colonial business and come back to music' and relaying his favourable impressions of the score. He singled out the Sanctus and Agnus Dei for special praise, telling Potter he was 'most impressed' with it, while finding the Gloria and Credo 'less individual'. He was less perturbed by the work's harmonic boldness than Ferguson or Harrison had been, commenting wryly that though 'some of its asperities [were] pretty fierce', these sounded 'clean and refreshing' in comparison with the ultra-modernist idiom of *Wozzeck*, which he had recently heard. He also opined that the work would sound very well in performance, particularly in the resonant acoustic of a vaulted building, and helpfully offered to send the score to several conductors of his acquaintance, including David Willcocks.¹¹

Potter hoped to secure a performance of the *Missa Brevis* from the Ormiston Choir in Belfast, one of leading choral societies of their day, since their conductor had expressed interest in the work after it had been awarded first prize in the CEMA competition. On the basis of this, Potter undertook to copy parts for the choir. For

⁸ AJP to Douglas Fox, 21 January 1952 ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

⁹ AJP to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin, 16 July 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

¹⁰ The autograph of the *Missa Brevis* in PA contains a number of deletions in the composer's hand in the Kyrie, but it is not clear if these constitute the full extent of the revisions which were made. The new Agnus Dei, which is copied in an unidentified hand, has been bound into the score, replacing the earlier version of the movement which had been excised.

¹¹ Douglas Fox to AJP, 30 January 1952 ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

reasons that are not entirely clear, the choir reneged on its commitment on the grounds that the performance material which had been supplied was inadequate — an explanation that Potter was inclined to deem spurious.¹² It is possible that it found the work too difficult and resorted to this excuse in order to save face; it is equally possible, as Potter hinted to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin, that some of its stauncher Presbyterian members might not have felt entirely comfortable performing an *a cappella* setting of the Roman liturgy.¹³ In the wake of this disappointment, he attempted to interest other English and Irish choral societies in the piece, but to no avail. In a letter to Ó h-Annracháin, Potter recounted how he had approached various choirs in Birmingham (where he was working at the time), as well as a number of other groups, describing with characteristic mordant humour the rejections he had encountered and their sometimes rather bizarre justifications:

I would not try your patience with a complete list of all the various bodies who have severally, but unanimously, refused to have anything to do with the work, but some of their reasons for doing so are not, perhaps, without interest. Here are a few samples of objections raised from various quarters:

1. It is too 'modern'.
2. It is too old-fashioned.
3. The spirit is too 'Catholic'.
4. The spirit is too 'Protestant'.
5. The counterpoint is too harsh and the harmony too sugary.
6. The harmony is too 'fierce' and the counterpoint commonplace.
7. The work requires too big a choir.
8. The work is only suitable for a small, select choir.
9. The style is too reminiscent of Vaughan Williams.
10. The style is too reminiscent of Rachmaninoff.

¹² The relevant correspondence between Potter and the director of the Ormiston Choir can be found in 'Tutti 49-52', PA. See particularly his letter of 8 March 1952 to W. H. N. Downer.

¹³ See AJP to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin, 16 July 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA).

— and so on and so forth until, in spite of my natural modesty, I was coming to be almost convinced that I must have produced something quite unique in the annals of the art. [...] Unfortunately, with the professional choirs I have come up against so far, my standing as a composer appears to be a cross between that of an unmitigated nuisance and a more or less harmless lunatic.¹⁴

Fortunately, Ó h-Annracháin was undeterred by any of these strictures and arranged for the *Missa Brevis* to be performed by the Radio Éireann Singers under the baton of Hans Waldemar Rosen in 1953, much to Potter's gratitude.¹⁵ This performance successfully demonstrated that its technical difficulties were far from insurmountable — indeed, as Potter pointed out, his choral writing was less demanding than that of other contemporary composers such as Bax in his *Mater Ora Filium* or *This Worlde's Joie*¹⁶ — and that its demands are in fact well within the reach of a proficient amateur choir, and not just a professional one. Nonetheless, the score was not performed in public until 1971, some eighteen years later, when Rosen included it in a concert given by the Radio Éireann Singers as part of the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music. It has only received infrequent performances since, which is much to be regretted, as it is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and ambitious Irish choral works of its period.

As is immediately evident even on the most cursory examination of the score, the *Missa Brevis* is clearly the work of a composer thoroughly at ease with the difficult medium of unaccompanied choral music. The individual lines are always shapely and grateful to sing, as is perhaps only to be expected from someone with such extensive experience as a choral singer. Potter is also manifestly sensitive to the nuances of colour to be derived from the exploitation of different vocal registers and the placing of dissonance. His contrapuntal writing is deft and natural, never sounding laboured or self-consciously contrived. Equally, his word-setting is

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 25 September 1952 ("Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

¹⁶ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 16 July 1952 ("Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

unfailingly felicitous, even in those passages in the text of the Creed which composers have often found to be rather intractable.

As Potter readily acknowledged to Fox, one of the dominant influences on the style of the *Missa Brevis* was the *Mass in G Minor* of his teacher Vaughan Williams. The other influences which Potter identified as important in his exchange of letters about the work with Fox are perhaps more surprising, and, in so far as they are perceptible at all, are certainly more indirect and very thoroughly assimilated. Potter felt that his mass was also indebted in certain respects to Rachmaninov's *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom* — a work, it will be remembered, in which he had performed under Walter Vale's direction while at All Saints' — as well as the choral works of Saint-Saëns and Henschel. Since, on the surface, at any rate, his *Missa Brevis* does not bear the faintest resemblance in style to music by any of these composers, one can only assume that their influence made itself felt in the spirit rather than the letter of his score, which may indeed owe something to Saint-Saëns' and Henschel's elegant suavity of manner as much to Rachmaninov's rich choral textures.¹⁷

A further inspiration was the choral music of post-Palestrina contrapuntists such as Allegri and Abbatini, for whom Potter had a warm admiration: he told Fox that 'I have intentionally imitated them so far as I could in my own way because I consider them to be unsurpassed masters in the art of handling vocal bodies'.¹⁸ But sensibly enough, whatever models he may have adopted as a starting point for his own composition, he evidently felt that it was foolish for a composer to worry unduly about influences on his work or to pay too much attention to discussions on this subject by others, since he concludes his account by quoting with approval a remark *a propos* of such matters made to him by Vaughan Williams — 'Never mind when people talk about 'influences', Mr Potter: we all have to use the common chord!'¹⁹ As this clearly implies, Potter was content to find his distinctive compositional voice

¹⁷ See Douglas Fox to AJP, 30 January 1952, in which he points out the 'kinship' of the *Missa Brevis* with the *Mass in G Minor*; and Potter's reply of 21 February 1952 (both in 'Tutti 49-52', PA).

¹⁸ AJP to Douglas Fox, 21 February 1952 ('Tutti 49-52', PA)

¹⁹ *ibid.*

by utilising techniques and a harmonic vocabulary firmly rooted in traditional practice, allowing his individuality to emerge in an unforced way through his creative reinterpretation and personal manipulation of these in his own work.

As far as the harmonic idiom of the *Missa Brevis* is concerned, it is rather difficult to understand at this remove why it should have occasioned so much comment about its supposed extravagances. A few passages apart, Potter's musical language clearly takes the practice of Vaughan Williams as a starting point, most obviously in its experimentation with modal progressions that are clearly inspired by the harmonic vocabulary of Tudor polyphony. Nonetheless, this influence should not be exaggerated, since Potter's harmonic language is frequently rather more dissonant than Vaughan Williams', even if it is always firmly tonal and certainly never becomes so chromatic as to veer in the direction of atonality. These dissonances create a sound world that is considerably removed from the chaste and austere atmosphere of the Vaughan Williams mass — one which is much more sensuous and luxuriant, even if there are strong points of resemblance in Potter's handling of choral sonorities. It is also important to point out that Potter extends the boundaries of this inherited modal idiom in a highly inventive fashion, sometimes to rather striking effect.

An analysis of some passages in the *Kyrie* of the *Missa Brevis* should serve to demonstrate this contention, as well as to illustrate the range of harmonic resources to which Potter has recourse. Although the movement conforms to a conventional tripartite structure, it presents a number of decidedly unusual features, not least as far as its overall tonal organisation is concerned. The opening setting of the *Kyrie eleison* commences in C major, moving towards A minor for the central *Christe eleison* after exploration of other, remoter tonal regions. This section in turn merges seamlessly with a much curtailed and freely developmental restatement of the initial *Kyrie eleison* material, but closing in E major rather than the expected C major. As we shall see in a while, a closer examination of the movement reveals that its conclusion in this tonality has been carefully prepared from the very beginning.

Ex. 2.1: *Missu Brevis, Kyrie*, bars 1-5 (Ex. 1)

The musical score for Ex. 2.1 is in 3/4 time, marked 'Andante' and 'pp'. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: 'Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, e - lei - son.' The piano accompaniment has two motifs marked 'x' and 'y'. Motif 'x' is a dotted rhythm in the first bar. Motif 'y' is a three-bar phrase starting in the second bar, consisting of a dotted quarter note, a quarter note, and a half note, with a slur over the last two notes.

The lilting three-bar phrase enunciated at the opening [Ex. 2.1] presents two contrasting motifs, here marked *x* and *y*, which are employed extensively throughout the movement. The first is characterised by a simple dotted rhythm, the second features a returning note and the rise and fall of a third. These figures are separated by a crochet rest on the downbeat of the second bar, which lends a forward impetus to the phrase through the introduction of a gentle syncopation. Both motifs emphasise the note E, the third of the tonic triad, and the mediant is further emphasised by the harmonisation of the prominent alto G in bar 3 — the point of melodic culmination — with a root position mediant triad, employed in this context as a weaker substitute for the dominant. This oscillation between triads of the tonic and the mediant arising from these motifs continues for another twelve bars, rising in intensity as the soprano voices introduce first a long sustained G and then a B, forming an aggregate of a tonic seventh chord (bars 11-13, shown in Ex. 2.2). The introduction of this sonority is a noteworthy event, since it forms the point of departure for some of the more dissonant passages yet to follow. It is also worth noting in passing that Potter offsets any danger of monotony incurred by the multiple repetitions of these motifs by arranging this opening statement in two asymmetrical units of seven and five bars respectively, a grouping which is made even more irregular by the elision of two bars of split common time into one bar of 3/2 time in the second unit. This paragraph culminates in a brief contrapuntal flowering which moves to the key of E — lending prominence to this pitch once more — by way of a Phrygian cadence. During this passage (bars 15-19 of Ex. 2.2), the crotchet movement of *y* is extended into a derivative motif, *y1*, which outlines a rising scale, a figure much employed in next paragraph. The harmonic simplicity of

Ex. 2.2: *Missa Brevis, Kyrie*, bars 12-20

Musical score for bars 12-14 of the Kyrie. The score is written for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The tempo is marked *mf*. The lyrics are: Ky - ri - e e - - - le - - - .

Musical score for bars 15-19 of the Kyrie. The score is written for Soprano (S.), Alto (A.), Tenor (T.), and Bass (B.). The tempo is marked *pp*. The lyrics are: -le - i - son, e - - - le - - - i - - - son. i - son, e - - - le - - - i - - - son. i - son, e - - - le - - - i - - - son.

the opening statements now yields to a more complex succession of diatonic dissonances arising through the free coincidence of the various contrapuntal lines,

which result in a succession of sevenths, ninths and elevenths, further enriched through multiple passing notes and appoggiaturas.

At bar 20, the opening material is restated in E major, but in a considerably intensified form [Ex. 2.3]. The returning note motif *y* is now presented in a more pungent harmonisation in parallel root position triads, alternating between chords of E major, D major and G major, which results in a colourful false relation between the G sharps sounded in the soprano and the G naturals in the bass. The passage that follows — which was singled out for comment by Ferguson in his adjudicator's report — is undoubtedly the most harmonically complex in the entire work, showing Potter's idiom at its most experimental. Beginning in bars 25-29, the lower four parts of the semi-chorus enunciate three statements of motif *y*, still in E major, but now made much more dissonant by the simultaneous employment of Phrygian and Mixolydian inflections. D natural is maintained consistently throughout, but the alternation of F and G sharps and naturals in the different voices together with the presence of a persistent C natural generate considerable harmonic tension. This employment of pitches drawn from different modal variants of the tonality of E lends the passage an almost bitonal feel.

Against this, the first soprano presents two statements of the rising scale motif, *y1*, which undergoes further development, becoming more extended and presently incorporating an opening descent of a major seventh. These both outline a scale of E major — including a C sharp which clashes harshly with the C natural sounded in close proximity in the tenor. The first of these statements ends on the note D sharp — clearly implying an E major seventh chord analogous to the C major seventh chord sounded in bar 11 — although this is somewhat obscured by being sounded momentarily against a D major triad which harmonises the returning note in the statement of motif *y* in the lower voices (bar 27). The next statement culminates a semitone higher on E. This rising semitonal progression continues in subsequent repetitions of the idea.

progressions. Against this texture, the soprano presents a third statement of the motif *y1* up a semitone from the last statement, this time rising to F and outlining a rising scale formed from the notes of C major, again introducing a fleeting sense of bitonality. A further repetition of this contour yet a semitone higher follows, comprising the notes of a D \flat major scale and culminating in a G flat. Simultaneously with this, the lower voices shift abruptly up a semitone to the key of C \flat minor (the last C in the previous bass scale resolving onto the new tonic C flat), presenting a further series of vagrant harmonies relating to this tonal region, once more over a descending scalar bass.

At this point, the larger choir interjects with a *fortissimo* chord of C minor, with G in the first soprano and C in the bass — which constitutes at once the melodic culmination of the steadily rising semitonal shifts in the semi-chorus soprano line heard previously (whose climax notes define a contour of D \sharp , E, F and G \flat) and the harmonic goal of the shifts through B \flat minor and C \flat minor in the lower voices of the semi-chorus. The coherence of this section depends entirely on the implied logic of this latter progression being made audible in performance, as well as the contrapuntal logic of the driving scales in contrary motion in the soprano and bass lines of the semi-chorus (bars 30-36). From a technical point of view, therefore, it is a passage of considerable interest, especially in the light of Potter's future development, since bitonality and passages based on vagrant harmonies become prominent features of his later style. It also represents a noteworthy extension of the harmonic vocabulary of his most important model for this composition, the Vaughan Williams *Mass in G Minor*.

The next passage, during which this climax slowly abates, is rather more straightforward. The tonal flux of the preceding six bars now stabilises. The antiphonal texture continues, the larger choir intoning a series of triads in the dotted rhythm of motif *x* in a gradual diminuendo, while the semi-chorus intersperses shortened variants of the scalar motif *y1* in harmonies relating to each of them. These triads (bars 36-42) move from the climactic C minor to G \flat minor (a tritone

relationship mirroring to the previous shift from E major to B♭ minor in bars 28-30) and from there fall in a succession of 6/4 chords through A minor and G minor, coming to rest on a chord of F minor, which is now heard as a tonic. This sense of arrival probably derives from the fact that these triads define a series of strong progressions in F major/minor, starting with the dominant (C minor as a substitute for C major), the supertonic (with G♭ minor, the minor Neapolitan as a substitute for G minor), followed by two strengthened variants of the dominant and the supertonic once more (A minor, the mediant in F acting as a substitute for C major, reasserting prominent E naturals as the leading note after the preceding E flats; and G minor serving to neutralise the chromaticism of the minor Neapolitan), before coming to rest on a tonic 6/4 chord of F minor. The underlying harmonic logic is further reinforced by the clear voice-leading of the soprano and bass parts, which move in octaves from the climactic G through a whole-tone descent from G flat to C.

This is followed by a brief excursion into B♭ minor, a region with a subdominant relationship to F, for five bars (43-47), during which the semi-chorus restates a variant of the lyrical contrapuntal passage heard in bars 14-19, which concluded the very first paragraph of the movement. This passage further stabilises the sense of prevailing tonality, since apart from emphasising the subdominant, it employs gentle diatonic dissonances only. It also prepares a return to the gentle mood of the opening material, which is now heard once more. Interestingly, although this is presented at the same pitch in the soprano part as before, it is harmonised in such a way that the C major triads which figure prominently are heard as the dominant of F (bars 48-50). For one thing, these triads are never sounded in root position, but always as 6/4 chords; and the returning note motif *y* is now harmonised by what sound like dominant ninth chords in the key of F, with persistent B flats sounding throughout.

At this point, Potter's long-term plan of tonal organisation becomes more evident. In the next passage [Ex. 2.4], during bars 53-60 the prolonged pedal G in the bass falls to F (after a three bar contrapuntal interpolation during which the B flats are restored to

Ex. 2.4: *Missa Brevis*, *Kyrie*, bars 53-60

53

Soprano
Ky - ri - e e - le - - - i - son, e -

Soprano
Ky - ri - e e - le - - i - son, e - le - i - son, - - -

Alto
Ky - ri - e e - - - le - - - i - son, e -

Tenor
Ky - ri - e e - - le - - - i - son, e - le - i - son, - - -

Bass
e - - - le - - - - - i - son, e -

Bass
e - - - le - - - - - i - son, e -

57

S.
- le - - - - - i - - - - - son.

S.
- e - - - - le - - - i - son.

A.
le - i - son, e - - - - le - i - son.

T.
- e - le - i - son, e - - - - le - i - son.

B.
le - - - - - i - - - - - son.

B.
le - - - - - i - - - - - son.

p Solo Chris - te

B naturals) before finally coming to rest on E, introducing another, more elaborate, Phrygian cadence onto the actual chord of E major, which is allowed to sound for two long bars of 3/2 time with a slowly resolving 4/3 suspension (bars 59-60). For the

second time in the movement, E major is firmly established as a tonal centre, asserting its primacy over C major at a cardinal structural juncture — the final cadence of the opening section before the commencement of the central *Christe eleison*. It is now clear that the extended excursion to F major/minor during the preceding section has functioned as an elaborate tonicisation of the second degree, F, of the Phrygian mode starting on E — a pitch which, of course, is crucial component of the penultimate chord in a Phrygian cadence (usually the bass note) and which functions as what one might describe as an upper leading-tone. This serves to tonicise E major itself and make the Phrygian cadence at this point sound so final and inevitable. In retrospect, the C major opening is heard as an oblique approach to what is afterwards revealed as the real tonality of the movement, E major, C major acting as the dominant of its modal 'dominant'. This is a compositional strategy of some subtlety that should serve to demonstrate Potter's skill and considerable originality.

The central *Christe eleison* is much more straightforward by comparison, providing suitable relief after the high drama of what has preceded it. Potter adheres to tradition by composing this section for solo voices, which between them weave an intricate web of flowing imitative polyphony [Ex. 2.5]. Most of the counterpoint is allotted to the upper four voices — two sopranos, an alto and a tenor — who enunciate their lyrical phrases in a subdued dynamic register, with the solo bass entering only towards the very end of the section, in bar 79. The textural contrast provided by this ethereal sonority is highly effective and well-calculated. As far as the harmonic organisation of the passage is concerned, it is wholly free of the astringent dissonances employed previously, being almost completely diatonic throughout. Tonally, it moves in a simple fashion from a Dorian A minor to E minor and back again. From a compositional point of view, it is notable that this archaising counterpoint is integrated into the musical argument in a completely convincing manner and does not sound at all incongruous in the context of what we have previously heard.

Ex. 2.5: *Missa Brevis, Kyrie*, bars 60-68 [semi-chorus only]

60 *p*
Soprano
Chris - - te e - le - i - son, e -
Soprano
Alto *p*
Chris -
Tenor *p*
Chris - - te e -

65
S.
le - - - - i - son.
S. *p*
Chris - - te e -
A.
te e - le - i - son, e -
T.
le - - - i - son.

This section closes into a reprise of the opening *Kyrie eleison* material at bar 85 (see Ex. 2.6). This has quite a number of interesting and unusual features. In the first place, the presentation of the principal ideas is very considerably curtailed — comprising a total of a mere 22 bars in comparison to the 60 bars of the opening section. The most probable reason for this condensation is to obviate the risk of monotony that would be incurred by a lengthier statement of material which has already been used so extensively. In the second place, the tonality does not return at any point to C major, confirming our impression that this key, in which the movement opened, was a satellite tonality. Rather, the *Kyrie* closes in E major, wholly as one would have expected, given the logic of the previous tonal argument.

Ex. 2.6: *Missa Brevis, Kyrie*, bars 85 to the end [semi-chorus omitted in first bar]

85

Soprano

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Bass

pp Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e *più f*

pp Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e *più f*

pp Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e *più f*

pp [Ky] - ri - e, Ky - ri - e *più f*

91

S.

S.

A.

T.

B.

B.

più f > Ky - ri - e

e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e

e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e

e - lei - son, Ky - ri - e e - lei - son, *mf* e - le - i -

Ky - ri - e e - le - i -

97

S. e - lei - son, e - lei - son, e - le - i - son,

A. e - lei - son, e - lei - son, e - le - i - son,

T. e - lei - son, e - lei - son, e - le - i - son,

B. son, Ky - rie e - le - i -

B. son, Ky - rie e - le - i -

Rit.....en.....u.....fo.....

102

S. e - le - i - son. *p* *pp*

S. *f* *mp* *pp*
Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

A. *f* *mp* *pp*
Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

T. *f* *mp* *pp*
Ky - ri - e e - le - i - son.

B. *f* *mp* *pp*
son, e - le - i - son.

B. *f* *pp*
son, e - le - i - son.

Significantly, however, the melodic material is still presented at the original pitch, rather than being transposed a major third higher, thereby continuing to assert the importance of the note E. This statement is harmonised by chords relating to the subdominant of the overall key of the movement, namely A major (Ex. 2.6, bars 79

ff.) — an excursion to this tonal region being a time-honoured means of stabilising the tonality of a movement before its close. The entire reprise is constructed over a series of long pedal notes in the bass, which fall from A though G and F natural to E at the final cadence. A fleeting Phrygian inflection of A is made felt through the introduction of the pitch B flat in bars 92-4, sounding like a softened reminiscence of the pungent dissonances arising from the employment of F major seventh chords during the E major statement of this material in the first *Kyrie eleison* (bars 20-30). As the bass moves to F in bar 95, the upper voices intone motif *y*, now chromatically altered to emphasise the third of E major, G sharp, oscillating between a triad of A major and an augmented triad on C natural over the dissonant bass. Again, this recalls the corresponding passage in bars 20-30 which employed false relations for the first time, the present close juxtaposition of C sharp and C natural mirroring the earlier juxtaposition of G sharp and G natural. In the context, these references to earlier harmonic events suggest a delayed resolution of the tonal disturbance they had previously engendered, as they are now neutralised and stabilised by being sounded over a pedal bass.

The last five bars constitute a highly elaborated form of a chromatically modified Phrygian cadence, the most intense of all the Phrygian cadences onto E major which we have so far heard. Over the E in the bass, the second soprano, alto and tenor sound a sudden accented *forte* 6/3 chord of F minor, forming a harsh dissonance in which the F natural and C natural clearly suggest the Phrygian mode (bar 101 of Ex. 6). This is essentially an appoggiatura chord to E major and has a decorated resolution via 6/3 chords of E flat major and D major before resolving onto an E major triad. Over this, the first soprano presents a freely augmented variant of the scalic motif *y1*, which has been held in reserve up this point. The line ascends from E above middle C to the E an octave higher, sounding all the intervening pitches of the Phrygian mode. Against this, the second bass has a brief scalic descent in contrary motion, progressing from E through D and C to B flat before falling a diminished fifth to E. Once again, this passage contains a clear reference to earlier material, this time presenting a stabilised form of the turbulent passage between bars 30-36, being

nonetheless still quite dissonant, if much less astringently so than before, on account of the bitonal tensions between the soprano scale and the accompanying harmonies. This and the other two references to the more dissonant moments of the first *Kyrie eleison* provide a clear indication of Potter's alertness to issues of large-scale organisation — most crucially to the necessity of following through the structural implications of the moments of intense chromatic disruption in the opening section and 'resolving' these fierce tensions at long range so that the close in E major could sound truly final and logically achieved. The ingenuity of the movement's overall design is impressive, as is Potter's intellectual grasp of the compositional problems he had set himself.

The remaining movements of the *Missa Brevis* are of a lesser order of complexity — particularly as far as their harmonic language is concerned, which tends to be rather more conventional. The *Gloria* is set in a radiant B major and Potter writes in six parts throughout, which allows him abundant scope for the creation of rich choral textures. The sonorities of the opening bars (shown in Ex. 2.7) are characteristic of much of the movement, with their colourful false relations and free treatment of diatonic dissonance. Much of this, as can be seen, is created by the collisions of contrapuntal lines which are thickened out in parallel triads — a technique that is obviously indebted to Vaughan William's practice in works such as the *Pastoral Symphony*. A slower contrasting section begins at the words 'Domine Deus, Rex coelestis', which provides effective contrast in its use of simpler homophonic textures (many of them set in lower, darker tessiture) and solo voices. The faster music of the opening returns at the traditional place, with the lines 'Quoniam, tu solus sanctus...', rising this time to a resplendent climax, featuring a sustained top B for the sopranos, before closing with a succession of majestic *allargando* chords for the final Amen. On the whole, this movement has much to recommend it. Potter's thematic material is consistently interesting and he devises a number of striking choral textures. The movement is neatly structured and maintains a strong sense of forward momentum. Its most serious technical inadequacy is Potter's tendency to overuse melodic climax notes (such as the soprano A in the passage just quoted, which recurs a number of

Ex. 2.7: *Missa Brevis, Gloria, opening* [some parts slightly simplified rhythmically]

Glo - ri - a in ex - cel - sis. in ex - cel -

8 cis - De - o, Glo - ria -

12 in ex - cel - sis De - o. [etc.] et in ter - ra

times at high points), as their effectiveness is vitiated by dint of excessive repetition, but no doubt this weakness could be overcome in a sensitively shaped performance.

The *Credo*, while effective, is perhaps less interesting than the music we have already heard. Potter's responses to the text seem on the whole to be rather conventional and his setting impresses one as fairly routine, a couple of inspired touches — such as the movement's lovely final cadence — apart. The *Sanctus* is more distinguished. The opening is especially finely judged, making effective use of antiphonal exchanges between semi-chorus and chorus in a hushed pianissimo, alternating slowly rising sequences of modal progressions with widely-spaced, static chords, which divert unexpectedly to remote tonal regions (Ex. 2.8). It provides a very good instance of Potter's talent for achieving impressive effects with great simplicity of means. The *Agnus Dei* opens with a modified restatement of material from the *Kyrie*, which one is tempted to judge a miscalculation: while one can readily understand Potter's concern for long-range formal unity, as Ferguson pointed out, the melodic shapes that he

employs again have already been used extensively and simply cannot bear so much repetition. On the other hand, the movement features a very effective contrapuntal build-up on the words *Dona nobis pacem* — which is one of most powerful passages in the mass as a whole — before dying away into a serene close in A major.

Ex. 2.8: *Missa Brevis, Sanctus, opening*

Adagio

Sanc - - - - - tus, Sanc - - - - -

6 tus, Sanc - - - - - tus, tus,

Sanc - - - - - tus, Sanc - - - - - tus,

10 Sanc - - - - - tus,

Do - mi - nus De - us Sa - ba - oth,

In conclusion, while the *Missa Brevis* is undoubtedly a rather uneven work, it also displays abundant evidence of a substantial and original talent. Furthermore, many of the traits of Potter's later style are here present in embryo, even if he never composed anything quite like it again. In particular, his experimentation with the expressive possibilities afforded by a fusion of a modal idiom with bitonality and polytonality adumbrates a sound world to which he would repeatedly return in his later music.

2.3 *Rhapsody under a High Sky and Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Potter moved to Ireland in 1950 to take up a post as Vicar Choral at St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. Having broken his long creative silence with the completion of the *Missa Brevis* the previous year, his resolve to continue writing music and, if possible, to make his living as a composer appears to have intensified. On the whole, it seems reasonable to surmise that the generally favourable responses to his Mass must have given a welcome boost to his self-confidence and may well have been a decisive factor in encouraging him to make music his full-time profession. Though the restricted circumstances of Irish musical life in the early 1950s were not particularly propitious for any composer, let alone one who was still in the very early stages of his career and had no reputation to speak of, Potter was clearly determined nonetheless to make the best of the situation in which he found himself and avail of any opportunities that arose to advance himself professionally.

Fortunately for him, precisely such an opportunity presented itself before too long. In 1948, the music department of the Irish national broadcasting station, Radio Éireann, inaugurated a new competition to encourage the efforts of native composers.²⁰ This was given the title of the Carolan Prize, in commemoration of one

²⁰ See 'Singer Wins Prize for Orchestral Competition', *Irish Times*, 23 February 1952, in which it is stated that Potter won the competition in the third year of its existence.

of Ireland's most famous musicians, the blind harper Turlough Carolan.²¹ This competition was to prove a short-lived enterprise and it petered out after only a few years. While it lasted, however, it undoubtedly served to stimulate interest in the work of younger composers and some of the entries which were submitted are of considerable distinction. Potter managed to win the Carolan Prize in two successive years, 1951 and 1952 — an achievement which helped bring his work to prominence and earned him a measure of serious critical esteem in Irish musical circles, as well as assisting the subsequent growth of his reputation.

For the first Carolan Prize that he entered, a £100 prize was offered for the best short orchestral work submitted, in addition to the enticing prospect of a public performance of the winning entry by the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra. Potter sent in two contrasting scores, an attractive lyrical work entitled *Rhapsody under a High Sky* and an ebullient concert overture with the whimsical title of *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, which were designed to be played together.²² Each score lasts about twelve minutes. Once again, the chronology of their composition is rather uncertain. There is little mention of the *Rhapsody* in Potter's correspondence, but as with the *Missa Brevis*, it is not impossible that he reworked music that he had composed while a student at the Royal College of Music in London — although no sketches have so far come to light which might confirm this conjecture. Slightly more is known about the genesis of *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*. In a letter of 1977 to Eoin McKiernan (at that time, President of the Irish-American Cultural Institute) Potter informed his correspondent that the work was written between 1936 and 1938 — that is, during his period of study with Vaughan Williams — and that he had unsuccessfully attempted to interest the BBC in performing it at the time.²³ Writing to his sister Gertrude in 1974, he mentions the amusing detail that he began to get the ideas for

²¹ Turlough Carolan (1670-1738) was an itinerant harper, the last great exponent of a tradition of harp playing which had been patronised by Irish feudal aristocracy but died out fairly rapidly after the more aggressive phases of English colonisation of Ireland in the seventeenth century and the attendant overthrow of the old Gaelic social order.

²² In AJP to John Beckett, 14 June 1952 ("Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA), referred to below, Potter expressly confirms this.

²³ AJP to Eoin McKiernan, 10 March 1977 ('*The Emigrants*', PA).

the piece while 'sitting on top of the old M & D [Maidstone and District] busses going from Hollingbourne' — presumably at a time when he was living in London and still visiting his relatives in Kent fairly regularly.²⁴ Potter, understandably enough, appears to have made no mention of the fact that the piece had been written over a decade before when submitting it for the Carolan Prize. Nor is it clear whether or not he revised it before doing so — no document has so far come to light which makes it possible to pronounce on the matter with certainty.

In due course Potter was notified that he had won the competition. The adjudicator for the Carolan Prize had been Arnold Bax — an obvious choice on the part of the RÉ Music Department, in view of the English composer's long-standing interest in Ireland and his close personal ties with a number of prominent Irish musicians, most notably the Fleischmann family in Cork.²⁵ Potter does not appear to have received an adjudicator's report and he wrote to Radio Éireann asking if it might be possible to elicit Bax's responses to the scores he had submitted. After a delay of some months, he eventually received a brief, but complimentary note from Bax himself offering his congratulations:

I have been intending to write to you in order to congratulate you on your winning the Carolan Prize. I think your pieces [have?] good orchestration and they are effectively laid out. You are not afraid of allowing a figure to continue for several pages, and so you avoid the extreme restlessness of much present day music. I think when you come to hear them you may find both pieces a little over-long. But anyway they are good work and I congratulate you.²⁶

Despite Bax's minor reservations, this favourable endorsement of his work by one of the most eminent living English composers must have been particularly gratifying.

²⁴ AJP to Desmond Drake, 28 June 1974 ('Personal 1974-5', PA)

²⁵ For an account of Bax's relationship to Ireland and his friendships with Irish musicians, see Séamas de Barra, 'Into the Twilight: Arnold Bax and Ireland', *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (March-April 2004) and 'Arnold Bax, the Fleischmanns and Cork', *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (January-February 2005).

²⁶ Arnold Bax to AJP, 18 February 1952 ('Tutti '49-'52', PA)

Whatever the precise chronology of their composition may be, the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and the *Rhapsody under a High Sky* mark an important stage in Potter's progressive mastery of his craft and are also the first works in which all the distinctive hallmarks of his mature style are fully present. Moreover, they define two characteristic veins of musical creativity which Potter was to explore again and again throughout his career. The sound-world of the *Rhapsody* was to be developed in a series of lyrical orchestral pieces (including several of the miniature concertante works that Potter wrote subsequently during the later 1950s and 1960s), which, if not actually based on folksong, employ a modal idiom and melodic contours that obviously derive from it in a manner that is clearly indebted to the example of Vaughan Williams in his earlier works such as the *Norfolk Rhapsody*. The overture, by contrast, reveals a more flamboyant side to Potter's musical personality and gives full expression to his innate propensity for rumbustious humour — characteristics which are abundantly in evidence in much of his later music.

The *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, though subtle at times in detail, is quite straightforward in conception and design, being an essay in *plein air* pastoralism after the manner of many contemporary English composers. Potter's immediate source of inspiration for this piece came from the landscape paintings of Paul Henry (1876-1958), who is now widely regarded as one of the most distinguished Irish artists of his generation. Potter had great admiration for Henry's landscapes depicting the rugged and dramatic scenery of the west coast of Ireland. Some of the most evocative and memorable of these, such as *The Roadside Cottages* or *The Road to the Mountains*, depict massed cloud formations against the luminous sky of the western coast. A draft for a programme note found amongst Potter's posthumous papers makes explicit the importance of Henry's work as an imaginative stimulus:

This Rhapsody was first performed in 1952 as a companion piece to *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*. The overture portrayed the boisterous, bucolic side of Irish life, while the rhapsody pictured the idyllic beauty of Irish scenery. Particularly that of Connemara, Achill and the west, where the characteristically Irish high sky, blue

mountains, white cottages and wind-ruffled waters were so effectively captured in paint and on canvas by that prince of landscape painters, Paul Henry.

A Tone picture then, where basic format of melody, trio and melody is prolonged and concluded by a rhapsodical violin solo whose soaring notes carry the [mind], ear and eye across that ruffled water, over the blue mountains and into the fading distance of the high Irish sky.²⁷

Rhapsody under a High Sky is a work quite without intellectual pretensions of any kind, aiming solely to provide an uncomplicated pleasure through its attractive melodic ideas, piquant turns of harmony and colourful scoring. In a letter to John Beckett, who had written to him in June 1952 requesting information about the piece in connection with a forthcoming radio broadcast, Potter described it as 'very very simple' and declared that its title was wholly self-explanatory, adding wryly, 'at least, if people don't know what a high sky is, it's no use trying to tell them at this stage.'²⁸

The atmospheric introduction evokes the sense of distance and open space suggested by the title with admirable economy of means, featuring plaintive woodwind interjections set against an ethereal accompaniment of muted upper strings playing slow-moving sustained chords [Ex. 2.9]. The parallel triadic motion in the accompaniment and bittersweet lyricism of the woodwind solos and violin cadenzas, with their fleeting moments of discreet bitonality, are immediately reminiscent of early Vaughan Williams works such as the *Pastoral Symphony* and *The Lark Ascending*.

²⁷ Undated sketch for programme note in possession of Sarah Burn, PA. Punctuation and capitalisation as in original.

²⁸ AJP to John Beckett, 14 June 1952 ("Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

Ex. 2.9: Rhapsody under a High Sky, opening

Lento

2 Oboes

Violin I

Violin II

mp

pp

con sord.

con sord.

pp

Ob.

Vln. I

Vln. II

mp

pp

con sord.

Ob.

Cl.

Bsn.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

piu f

mf

mf

pp

div.

div., con sord.

pp

A

12

Bsn.

2 Ten. Tbn.

B. Tmb., Tba.

Vln. solo

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

mf *ff* *mf*

unis.

molto sf *molto sf* *molto sf*

pp *pp*



14

2 Ten. Tbn.

B. Tmb., Tba.

Vln. solo

5 6

The *Allegro* opens with a suave, long-breathed melody enunciated by violas and 'cellos in unison, with a gently undulating semi-quaver accompaniment in the violins [Ex. 2.10]. This melody, which Potter took from the fourth of his *Songs from the Glens of Antrim*, is notable for its supple rhythmic organisation deriving from the fluid alteration of bars of three-four and four-four time, as well as its employment of

Ex. 2.10: *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, from 5 bars after rehearsal letter B

Allegro
vle & vc.

mf, cantabile

sf

lowered sixth and seventh degrees of the G major scale. It has a faint flavour of Irish folk music, deriving perhaps from the prominence lent to the raised sixth degree of the scale E at approaches to cadential points and the stepwise ascent to F natural in the second and tenth bars which immediately recalls the contours of Irish folk song.

As Potter describes in the programme note referred to earlier, the *Allegro* has a tripartite structure. The outer sections comprise statements and counterstatements of the melody just quoted, alternating with a more impassioned continuing strain. The middle section is largely based on a freely developmental treatment of an arabesque-like motif *x*, which was prominent in the oboe and violin solos of the slow introduction. This section modulates quite widely and features rather more chromatic chord formations, thus forming a well-calculated harmonic contrast to the fundamentally diatonic harmonic organisation of the outer sections. Towards the end of the section, for example, whole tone progressions featuring descending successions of unresolved ninths are introduced to quite striking effect [see Ex. 2.11, commencing 13 bars after letter G]. A curtailed restatement of the slow introduction

Ex. 2.11: *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, from 14 bars after rehearsal letter G

Musical score for woodwinds and strings. The score includes parts for 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes, Clarinet 1 in Bb, Clarinet 2 in Bb, 2 Bassoons, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The woodwinds play a melodic line with various dynamics including *mf* and *f*. The strings play a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamics *p* and *pizz.* A first ending bracket is present over the first two measures.

Musical score for brass and keyboard. The score includes parts for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet 1 (Cl. 1), Clarinet 2 (Cl. 2), Bassoon (Bsn.), Horns 1 & 2 (Hrns 1 & 2), Harp (Hp.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Via.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Double Bass (Db.). The brass instruments play a melodic line with dynamics *mf* and *sf*. The harp and strings play a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamics *p* and *sf*. The double bass part includes *arco* markings.

follows upon the reprise of the opening material of the *Allegro*, dying away into rapt silence.

Although it is a slight piece, the *Rhapsody under a High Sky* shows evidence of a considerable talent. On the whole, it makes an impression of a well-organised and deftly written composition, even if one is inclined to agree with Bax in thinking that it might have benefited from some small cuts, particularly as far as the subsequent repetitions of the main theme of the *Allegro* are concerned. On the other hand, Potter's melodic invention is consistently distinguished and his harmonic language, though fairly conservative, is not without some interesting subtleties. The composer's assurance in handling the orchestra is particularly impressive, given his previous lack of experience in writing for the medium. He displays a fine understanding of the characteristics of the different instrumental families, especially the woodwinds, as well as a real feeling for orchestral colour.

The *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, in contrast, is a rather more substantial work. This work is one of the very few scores from the neglected repertoire of Irish compositions written between the late 1930s and the 1960s which still enjoys occasional performances in Ireland. It undoubtedly deserves to be more widely known, as it is not only one of the most distinguished works from this period, but also one of the most accomplished pieces Potter ever composed. Its rollicking high spirits and sparkling orchestration make a brilliant impression in a live performance, leaving the listener with an impression of headlong kinetic energy and coruscating wit. The title requires a few words of explanation. In the decades before the Second World War, a number of Irish playwrights wrote comic plays set in rural Ireland and making extensive use of local dialects, which came to be known as 'kitchen comedies', on account of the fact that much of the action typically took place in the kitchen of a country cottage or farmhouse.²⁹ These were extremely popular with

²⁹ Although the designation 'kitchen comedy' is widely employed by historians of Irish theatre, I have been unable to trace the origins of the term or ascertain when it first came into use. Standard reference works such as Christopher Fitz-Simon's *The Abbey Theatre: Ireland's National Theatre – The First Hundred Years* (London, 2003) or Robert Welch's *The Abbey Theatre, 1899-1999: Form and Pressure* (Oxford, 1999) provide no information on the subject. According to Laura E. Lyons, the Ulster Literary Theatre, which operated in Belfast from 1904 through the 1930s, started to perform comedies set in Northern kitchens, some of which developed as

Irish audiences of the day and comprised for a time the staple fare of companies such as the Abbey Theatre and the Ulster Group Theatre. The most distinguished exponent of the kitchen comedy was the Ulster playwright George Shiels (1881-1949), whose play *The New Gossoon*, written in 1930 for the Abbey, is widely regarded as a characteristic representative of the genre.³⁰ As Potter pointed out to John Beckett, these comedies were largely formulaic and much of the humour derived from satirising the provinciality of small-town life:

'Kitchen comedy' [...] is, first of all, hopelessly provincial; hence the slight sense of disparagement with which the term is usually used. Secondly, it is, in [its] own way, as stylised and conventionalised as the Alexandrine drama: there must be the Mater and Paterfamilias – sympathetic types; there must be the comic servant or neighbour; there must be the love interest – completely irrelevant to the plot and as full as clichés as an egg is full of meat; and there must be the pompous nincompoops full of platitudes and possibly bad faith as well. You know what is going to happen before the curtain even rises, but you don't go there for the sake of the plot, any more than you go to Shakespeare for the sake of the scenery. You go to hear the accents – the infinity of variety discernable to the connoisseur between a man from Ballymacarrett and one from Ballyhackamere³¹ a couple of miles down the road – and also to see the acting. [...] But it is most definitely not for export. As I have said above, 'Kitchen comedy' is hopelessly provincial, hopelessly stylised, hopelessly typed: and it is completely unintelligible to anyone except the locals. [...]. My overture is not intended as being for any particular one play: as can be seen from what I've been at pains to say, they're all of a type, and the overture would serve for any or all.³²

parodies of the Abbey's repertoire and production style: see her article 'Of Orangemen and Green Theatres: The Ulster Literary Theatre's Regional Nationalism', in Eileen M Morgan, Shakir Mustafa, Stephen Watt eds., *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, (Indiana, 2001). It is unclear, however, whether these works were the prototypes for the new genre. Interestingly, kitchen comedies were also popular in Scotland during the 1920s and 1930s: see the article on *Scotland* in Martin Banham ed., *The Cambridge Companion Guide to Theatre*, (Cambridge, 1995), 971-2.

³⁰ *Gossoon* is an Anglicisation of the Irish word *gársún*, meaning a boy or a young lad.

³¹ Two extravagant parodies of the names of Irish villages.

³² AJP to John Beckett, 14 June 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

His affectionate appreciation for this rather offbeat form of drama inspired Potter to write a comic overture which, as he suggested to Beckett, could have been sub-titled 'Hommage à Rossini'. Once again, the work shows clear affinities with pieces by contemporary English composers, many of whom habitually wrote lighter orchestral pieces — Walton being a good instance in point, with works such as *Portsmouth Point*, *Scapino* or the *Johannesburg Festival Overture*. In particular, several English composers of this period produced works specifically designated as comedy overtures — Arthur Benjamin's *Overture to an Italian Comedy*, Hamilton Harty's *A Comedy Overture* and Arnold Bax's *Overture to a Picaresque Comedy* amongst them — any one of which may perhaps have fired Potter's imagination to write a similar piece of his own. The borderline between such pieces and light music proper was somewhat fluid and Potter's score undoubtedly also reveals his fondness for music by composers such as Eric Coates, for whom he had keen admiration. On the face of it, only the idea of writing an overture to an imaginary specimen of this parochial form of drama — which, as Potter put it, 'was not for export' — was somewhat unusual. The kitchen comedy, however, was not as surprising a choice of subject on which to base a musical work as might first appear, given Potter's ready wit and keen sense of the ridiculous — qualities which are fully in evidence in many of his letters to his friends and close relatives. His sense of humour was, in fact, of a very Irish kind, as he relished the kind of extravagant wordplay and exuberant satire that is a feature of work by Irish writers such as Sean O'Casey, James Joyce, Brendan Behan and even Samuel Beckett. In the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, Potter gave full expression to this more unbuttoned side of his artistic personality, producing a work that is a particularly engaging embodiment of anarchic clowning in its irreverent send-up of stage-Irish kitsch.

As his letter to Beckett reveals, Potter's aim in the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* was a light-hearted one — to poke affectionate fun at a particular artistic manifestation of Irish provincialism encapsulated in the genre of the kitchen comedy and, by extension, to hold the narrow horizons and limited preoccupations of a provincial Irish mentality up to gentle satire. In doing so, he succeeded in evolving a personal

manner of expression which had considerable originality and freshness, largely because of his unorthodox, ironised treatment of stylised material modelled on folk sources. It is no exaggeration to say that the sound world of this score, with its surface brilliance of manner, its panache and sly humour, was quite without precedent in Irish music and revealed new expressive potential deriving from use of traditional music in an orchestral context which had not been previously explored. Although the idea of writing a comedy overture was not, of course, new, the idea of writing a comedy overture with an Irish subject in this satirical vein does seem to have been a novel inspiration. Potter's score certainly does not bear the faintest resemblance to any of the orchestral works by his Irish contemporaries such as Aloys Fleischmann, Frederick May or Brian Boydell, which are wholly different in spirit and manner, being much more serious in tone. The only Irish musical precedent which suggests itself as a possible source of inspiration seems to have come from popular music — namely the comic ballads of the Irish singer and songwriter William Percy French (1854-1920), which enjoyed an enormous vogue in the early twentieth century.³³ Many of these are sharply satirical of the Ireland of the day and make extravagantly ironical use of familiar tropes of stage Irishness. According to the Irish composer Séamas de Barra, Potter confirmed that one of the more rumbustious subsidiary themes in the overture was meant to be redolent of the melody of a rousing Percy French ballad, explicitly recalling its extra-musical associations.³⁴

Although *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* makes an impression of assured technical fluency, it cost Potter considerable labour before he finally succeeded in completing it to his satisfaction. As we have seen, Bax inclined to the opinion that the work was somewhat too long. This opinion was shared by the conductor Michael Bowles, who urged Potter to undertake some 'judicious pruning' of the piece after he heard it performed in America in 1958.³⁵ It seems that Potter considered making revisions as early as 1952, to judge from a letter from the conductor who had premiered the work,

³³ For Percy French, see J. N. Healy, *Percy French and his Songs* (Cork, 1966).

³⁴ Personal communication from Séamas de Barra, 21 December 2005.

³⁵ Michael Bowles to AJP, 17 July 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

Jean Meylan, written in June of that year, in which he requested that Potter send him on a fresh copy of the score when he had finished revising it.³⁶ It would be another five years before he eventually completed these revisions, however. No scores of earlier versions of the work have so far come to light, but it would appear that Potter was primarily concerned with the elimination of what he, too, had come to regard as unnecessary *longueurs*: writing in March 1957 to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin, he informs him that the overture was now 'something under two-thirds of its length and has, in addition, been generally tidied up'.³⁷

Although it would appear unnecessary to provide a detailed structural analysis of the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, since it is quite straightforward in design, it is worth commenting on a number of technical features of interest, particularly insofar as these adumbrate stylistic traits of Potter's later work. The work is cast in a simple ABABA form prefaced by a brief introduction, the music of the B sections being slower in tempo and more lyrical in nature than that of the quick A sections. The principal thematic idea of the latter is a jig tune in six-eight time 'of the type of The Irish Washerwoman, Father O'Flynn and Garryowen *et hoc genus omne*' as Potter described it in his letter to Beckett, adding, 'you wouldn't know who its father was'.³⁸ This breezy, mock-innocent melody [quoted in Ex. 2.12] with its insistent chattering quavers is an inspired creation, perfectly evocative of the generic kitchen comedy with its array of stereotypical characters. It is succeeded by a number of secondary ideas in a similar stage-Irish vein. Potter manages to maintain the sense of impetuous, headlong momentum with great skill, keeping the music buoyant by constant disruptions of expected regular phrase lengths as well as excursions to remote harmonic regions in a manner that is reminiscent of Prokofiev. He also shows considerable resource in varying the presentation of this melodic material at each recurrence, particularly as far as its harmonisation is concerned. This score reveals Potter continuing to explore free combinations of diatonic dissonance

³⁶ Jean Meylan to AJP, 25 June 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

³⁷ AJP to Fachna Ó h-Annracháin, 14 March 1957 ('RE 55-60', PA)

³⁸ AJP to John Beckett, 14 June 1952 ('"Official" Correspondence from May '52 to 31/12/52', PA)

Ex. 2.12, *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* (from rehearsal letter A)

A

resulting from the employment of the layer technique which he had first used in the *Gloria* of the *Missa Brevis*, by which a number of contrapuntal lines are thickened out in accompanying parallel intervals or triads. The orchestra, needless to say, offers far more scope for the exploring of these effects than the medium of choral music and Potter takes fully advantage of the textural possibilities if affords to create some brilliantly colourful sonorities. Ex. 2.13 quotes part of a characteristic passage constructed on these lines, that initially consists of three textural elements — the melody with its triadic doublings assigned to the violins, a counterpoint predominantly in contrary motion given to divided violas and a third part assigned to ‘cellos and basses — which are later expanded to four, with the addition of block woodwind triads doubling the contour of the bass and brilliant fanfares in the horns. Coherence is ensured at all times by strong bass lines which maintain a clear sense of harmonic function, so the resultant dissonant collisions never sound arbitrary. Another interesting passage is shown in Ex. 2.14, in which Potter makes similar use

version of the principal theme on the first clarinet as an accompaniment to an augmented version of the same theme presented on the tuba. Potter's treatment of diatonic dissonance in these passages may owe something to the example of French composers such as Milhaud or Ibert, but his employment of these techniques to harmonise material resembling Irish folk music is undoubtedly original in the context of Irish music of the period — and adumbrates the rather more complex montage techniques that he would employ in presenting similar material in the *Sinfonia de Profundis*.

The orchestration of *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* may also owe something to French models, especially the music of Ravel, for which Potter had an intense admiration. Although it is not possible for us to determine whether or not Potter made radical alterations to the scoring of the piece while revising it, since the earlier versions have not come to light, the skilful orchestration of its companion score for the first Carolan

Ex. 2.14: Overture to a Kitchen Comedy, 5 bars after letter M

Flutes I & II
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Oboes I & II
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Clarinets I & II in B \flat
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Bassoons I & II
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Tuba
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Fl.
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Ob.
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Cl.
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Bsn.
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Tba.
mf, staccatissimo sempre

Fl.

Ob. *molto* *sf*

Cl.

Bsn.

Tba.

The first system of the score shows the initial entries of the woodwinds and tuba. The Flute and Oboe parts are in treble clef, while the Clarinet, Bassoon, and Tuba parts are in bass clef. The Oboe part begins with a *molto* marking and a long note, followed by a *sf* (sforzando) dynamic. The woodwinds play rhythmic patterns, and the tuba provides a steady bass line.



Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Bsn.

Tba.

The second system continues the musical texture. The Flute and Oboe parts play rhythmic patterns. The Clarinet and Bassoon parts have more active lines with various rhythmic figures. The Tuba part continues its steady bass line. The overall texture is dense and rhythmic.

Prize suggests that Potter, though comparatively inexperienced, would certainly have been capable of devising its brilliant orchestral textures as a younger man. As in *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, Potter reveals a marked fondness for wind and brass colour, as he brings all the wind instruments to prominence in turn — even the tuba — by allotting them highly idiomatic solos. In this score, however, he explores a

wider gamut of more unusual sonorities and combinations of instruments, often to pungently witty effect, as befits his subject matter. Despite his evident delight in orchestral virtuosity, his scoring is notable, however, on the whole, for its economy and its avoidance of unnecessary, fussy complexities – each instrument playing in any particular texture makes a precisely calculated contribution to the overall effect and there is little superfluous padding.

2.4 *Concerto da chiesa* for piano and orchestra

The last composition to be considered in this chapter is the *Concerto da chiesa* for piano and orchestra, which Potter completed in 1952. This score is notably more ambitious in scope than the two orchestral pieces previously discussed, being a large-scale work lasting almost half an hour which represents his first attempt to compose an extended symphonic structure. As with the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and the *Missa Brevis*, Potter's ideas for this composition had begun to take shape during his period of study with Vaughan Williams. It was, however, to be many years before he felt able to complete it to his satisfaction and his initial concept was modified considerably during the work's protracted gestation. In a programme note for the work dating from 1966, which was found amongst his posthumous papers, Potter describes how his initial plan had been to write a prelude and fugue for organ based on the well-known chorale *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* by Hans Leo Hassler (1562-1612) – a melody familiar to English church-goers in its transplanted guise as an Anglican hymn *O Sacred Head, surrounded* and habitually referred to in England as the 'passion chorale'.³⁹ This projected prelude and fugue was intended to be a loosely programmatic representation of the Passion itself. Potter goes on to recount how he felt forced to abandon work on the project for various reasons: for one thing, he sensed that the piece might assume fairly substantial proportions and he was not confident that his compositional technique was as yet sufficiently developed to

³⁹ It appears, for example, as Hymn 111 in the 1922 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, where it is given the subtitle of 'Passion Chorale'.

enable him realise his conception adequately. Neither was he certain that the organ would prove a wholly satisfactory medium for the kind of work he had in mind:

I began this [work] in about 1938 when I was at the RCM under VW. The original idea was to be a prelude and fugue on the general idea of the Passion. [...] After a time, I realised that I wasn't up to it yet. In particular, I couldn't get enough into — or out of — the fugue, which, after all had to have the guts of the piece. Apart from this, the medium I had chosen, the organ, didn't have the qualities that I wanted. I needed percussiveness for the fugue and I needed a lot more expressiveness (of the romantic type) for the prelude. And, to crown it all, I found that even when I had finished with what I could at that time do with the fugue, I still hadn't said half of what I wanted to say on the subject. So, summing it all up, I decided that what I needed was a larger scale work altogether, and with much wider means to express it. I let it simmer until the time should come when I could do something about it.⁴⁰

In a letter written eight years later in reply to the Dublin music critic Frances ('Fanny') Feehan, who had contacted him looking for information about the work after hearing a performance of it, he substantially reiterated this account, but further intimated that his inability to make headway with the piece at the time derived as much from his emotional immaturity as his artistic inexperience, suggesting that he lacked a sufficiently broad perspective on life to engage successfully with its ambitious subject matter — namely, the suffering engendered by man's seemingly inexhaustible capacity for inhumanity to his fellow man, of which the story of the Passion is, at least on one level, a potent symbolic representation. Potter explicitly relates the psychological and emotional import of the work to his own distressing wartime experiences, hinting, as we shall see, that it not only seeks to evoke these, but represents an attempt to transcend them and re-affirm the value of existence in the face of such tragic and appalling suffering as he had personally witnessed. This letter is a particularly interesting document and is worth quoting here at some

⁴⁰ Programme note for *Concerto da Chiesa* dated 18 April 1966 and headed 'To Whom it May Concern', in 'General Correspondence from December 1965 to December 1966', PA. This descriptive essay appears never to have been used as a programme note, and to judge from its rather unpolished prose, may only have been a preliminary sketch for one.

length: apart from the light it sheds on the genesis of the work, its flippant opening paragraph furnishes a good instance of the kind of self-protective irony to which Potter characteristically had recourse when writing about matters that had affected him deeply — his wartime experiences being a notable case in point — and to which he would usually refer only obliquely, if, indeed, at all.

Dear Fanny,

[...] In re your other letter (of 23rd) many thanks indeed. I have not the slightest objection to your making cassettes [of the radio broadcast of the work] to listen to — and am only too delighted that you should think the thing worth the while. I only wish you had heard the rehearsals for the thing as well as the performance: without the large mass of audience-portered clothing, the old S[aint] F[rancis] X[avier] Hall⁴¹ has a much, much more resonant ring which suits that particular item much better. It wouldn't be so bad if they came in the nude, and it was only their actual carcasses which were deadening the sound — flesh and bone is not so effective for that as serge & satin — but I suppose that would be a bit much to expect with winter coming on — and in the St. F. X. Hall either, come to that. [...]

As to the 'ethic' of the thing — well, seeing as how you have taken such an interest in it...you might as well have the true story which was really too complicated to put complete into the programme notes...

It all started as an effort to do an organ 'prelude and Fugue' [*sic.*] in my teens: I had done various chorale prelude types of settings on the same 'passion' tune, and this

⁴¹ The St Francis Xavier Hall was the principal venue for symphony concerts given by the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra during Potter's lifetime. It was, by all accounts, a very unsatisfactory hall for this purpose, having poor acoustics and a decidedly unprepossessing interior. William Mann, reviewing a concert held there as part of the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music in the late 1970s, wrote of his dismay at 'the utilitarian aspect of St Francis Xavier Hall', describing it in unflattering terms as 'a sleazy backstreet venue for music' which 'betrayed the most raucous qualities' of the somewhat less than proficient RTÉ Symphony Orchestra of the period: see his review of a concert there, 'Dublin casts its nets wide' in *The Times*, 13 January 1978.

one⁴² — which contained most of the earlier part of the present prelude (sans piano) — only like most of the organ stuff I ever wrote, it was far more orchestral [than] organ — possibly due to having listened to so many brilliant adaptations of orchestral music for organ — everything from *The Ride of the Valkyries* to *Walk to the Paradise Garden*...by old Dr Duggie Fox, of course.

But when it came to the fugue, I found that either my technique or the possibilities of the organ weren't enough: I needed something more percussive. Apart from which, although I was (forgive the rather high sounding bit) what you might call spiritually up to the prelude's contemplation of suffering — which one may well be in one's late teens — or I was, anyhow — I just felt I hadn't seen enough to justify the rest.

So I put it on one side — and didn't come back to it until long after — when having seen all the combat bits from Finland to Burma — plus the blitz and the 1943 Bengal famine and the aftermath of it all in the survivors of the concentration camps in Malaysia and Indonesia, I thought one might have another stab at the problem of setting one's reactions to human sufferings — one's own and other peoples' — to music.⁴³

As this letter makes clear, the score outgrew Potter's initial conception and became linked in his imagination with his harrowing experiences in the Far East during the Second World War — a subject which, like many veterans of his generation, he was deeply reluctant to discuss even with those who were closest to him. Clearly, it took several years after the war ended before Potter succeeded in assimilating these experiences to the point where he could view them with a measure of detachment and attempt to give objective artistic expression to his emotional responses. The external stimulus which eventually prompted him to try and complete the work came in an unexpected form, when, in 1951, Radio Éireann announced that its Carolan Prize for the forthcoming year would be awarded for the best piano concerto submitted by an Irish composer. In the letter to Feehan referred to above, Potter

⁴² Sketches for a Choral Prelude for organ (?) on *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* are contained a music manuscript book which dates from 1936, the first year of Potter's studies with Vaughan Williams.

⁴³ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 23 September 1974 ('N^o 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

described how this 'lucky chance' caused him to reconsider his earlier ideas for the piece and recast it as a concertante work for piano and orchestra, a medium which offered far more dramatic and expressive scope than the organ. His new conception appears to have clarified rapidly and he completed the score in time for the competition deadline. The adjudicator for the competition was once again Arnold Bax, who awarded Potter first prize for the second year in a row. Radio Éireann duly undertook to arrange a performance of the winning composition and the work received its premiere the following year, on 25 September 1953. The soloist was Anthony Hughes, a promising young Irish pianist who was then studying in Vienna on a government scholarship.⁴⁴ Potter declared himself very satisfied with Hughes' rendition of the solo part, commenting that '[he] has a pretty exacting part and plays it extremely well'.⁴⁵ The Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra was conducted on this occasion by their principal conductor Milan Horvat. Interestingly, Potter insisted on undertaking the preparation of the performance materials for the *Concerto da chiesa* himself because the Radio Éireann house copyists were so unreliable, commenting wryly to Feehan that he earned more from copying the work than from actually writing it.⁴⁶

Potter's second success as a competitor for the Carolan Prize naturally helped to consolidate his reputation as one of the most promising young composers working in Ireland at the period. Unsurprisingly, the *Concerto da chiesa* attracted considerable attention, not least because it was one of the few concertante works for piano of any significance to have been written by an Irish composer since the keyboard concertos of Stanford and Harty. It thus represented something of a landmark in the history of Irish composition and as a result earned Potter a welcome measure of esteem from Dublin music critics. One of the most prominent of these, Denis Donoghue, who reviewed concerts for the *Irish Times* as a young man and subsequently gained a certain notoriety for his acerbic pronouncements on much music by Irish composers

⁴⁴ AJP to unidentified correspondent, 19 September 1953 ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA). Hughes later became Professor of Music at University College, Dublin.

⁴⁵ AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Watchman' (presumably a newspaper columnist or music critic), undated [September 1953?], ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA)

⁴⁶ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 23 September 1974 ('Nº 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

written during these years, wrote to Potter expressing his regret that he would now not be able to review the work, though he had 'noted [the] concerto for special mention', adding, 'your music seems to me to be very interesting and important'.⁴⁷ Such respectful attention must have been both gratifying and reassuring at this fledgling stage of Potter's recently resumed compositional career.

In its final form, the *Concerto da chiesa* is a traditional three-movement structure. The first movement comprises a slow *Adagio* opening section headed 'Chorale', which leads via a brief cadenza for the piano into an extended *Allegro moderato*, described by the composer as a *Fugato*. This sequence corresponds to the prelude and fugue of Potter's original scheme. The middle movement, entitled *Arioso*, bears a tempo marking of *Andante piacevole*. This leads seamlessly into the finale, a brisk *Allegro vivace* in 9/8 time. As far as the title of the work is concerned, it would appear that this was chosen with regard to the work's programmatic basis, rather than on account of any overt compositional indebtedness to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century models. In a letter written shortly before the work's premiere, Potter informed his correspondent that '[the] concerto is entitled thus, not because it bears any resemblance to the XVIIIth century prototypes, not because there is anything particularly religious about it, but because the first movement is based on the tune by Hassler which came eventually to be known as the "passion chorale". Otherwise, it is a piano concerto in the accepted meaning of the word'.⁴⁸ Writing to Feehan, he modified this description somewhat, telling her that:

Of course, as that long solo-less introduction should warn anyone, strictly speaking, it's not so much a 'piano concerto' as a symphony for orchestra with piano obbligato — but it qualified as a piano concerto within the meaning of the act, and Dear Old Sir

⁴⁷ Denis Donoghue to AJP, 27 September 1953, ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA). Denis Donoghue, of course, later came to international prominence as a literary critic, but was fairly active as a music critic during his youth: see Chapter 3.

⁴⁸ AJP to unidentified correspondent, 20 September 1953 ('General from 1/1/53 to 31/12/53', PA)

Arnold evidently considered it so, and with a hundred nicker in the kitty, that was good enough for me.⁴⁹

In the programme note alluded to earlier, he explains something of the private programme underlying the work which led him to choose the rather odd designation *da chiesa* in the title. Once again, this extract is notable for its curiously offhand and even flippant tone, which one is tempted to assume that Potter adopted as a self-protective strategy in order to avoid talking too directly about his emotional responses to his wartime experiences. Certainly, this self-ironising account teasingly conceals from the reader far more than it reveals:

It is, of course, as it was originally intended to be, what you might call 'a poor man's Passion'. Why I chose to set it in a concert hall rather than in church is easy to explain: first, the contemporary idea of what is fitting in ecclesiastical music doesn't (or rather didn't) fit in with my own ideas of expressiveness; secondly, as I have already suggested, I wanted the technical means available in the like of piano concerto stuff, and which was not, as far as I could see, likely to be available in church. The third reason, I won't embarrass you with mentioning: we can take it as read.

So programmatically speaking, the work divides up like this: the introduction follows the normal course of a chorale prelude more or less, and, in effect, tells the basic story of the events. The fugato which leads on from it is meant to be the faithful's reaction to that story: indignant and treating the whole thing as just another case of worldly injustice. The slow movement is seen as a more philosophical reflection on the real meaning of it all, but the finale brings it all down to the human level again. 'Man's inhumanity to man' — 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done it unto me' — and so on. A reminder that from the metaphysical point of view, the story didn't finish in AD 33 or whenever it was, but has been having twice nightly performances with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays (but especially on Sundays!) ever since. That the particular form of this happens to be an Irish Dance (a slip jig) isn't inappropriate since we've managed

⁴⁹ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 23 September 1974 ('N^o 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

through the ages to have our own share of highly unchristian behaviour will, I take it, be not too offensively obvious.

This fast finale leads to the cadenza in which all the various ideas are considered, and at the end of it all, we are left with a triumphant conclusion in the shape of a coda: after all, the passion did end in triumph if you look at it that way.

So much for the programmatic plot: if it surprises you, don't forget it was conceived a long time ago.⁵⁰

This teasing tone is maintained in Potter's more informal summary of the work's overall dramatic thrust in his letter to Feehan:

So — you get the Prelude — Contemplation of suffering as AJP saw it in the late '30s...then *Fugato* — the actual vision of that suffering being inflicted — ending in the merciful release as you either sink under the anaesthetic, or (presumably, and I hope) die — Then the *Arioso* which is all about love and the peace of mind that can come in the middle of the bloodiest strife...and last of all, the finale — that slip jig which — but wild horses will never get me to say just exactly what set of circumstances it was that dictated that particular piece. Full stop. I'll maybe leave the reasons in a codicil to my will, but I want to be safely off this earth first.⁵¹

Despite the persistent note of banter and mildly self-deprecating irony in these accounts, there can be no doubt about the work's fundamental seriousness of import or, indeed, about its personal significance for the composer. Although the *Concerto da chiesa* is rather more uneven in quality than the other works discussed in this chapter, it nonetheless contains some of the most individual and deeply felt music Potter had written to date, achieving in its finest passages a concentrated eloquence and affecting sincerity of expression. From a stylistic point of view, it is notable for its continued exploration of the expressive possibilities afforded by the fusion of modal diatonicism with passages of plangent bitonality, a trait which was to become

⁵⁰ Programme note for *Concerto da Chiesa* referred to in footnote 2 above.

⁵¹ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 23 September 1974 ('N^o 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

a strikingly consistent feature of Potter's mature harmonic idiom and was already in evidence in the early *Missa Brevis*. The brief descriptive account of the concerto that follows concentrates on discussing some aspects of the piece which are of particular interest, rather than providing an exhaustive analytical commentary.

As one might have expected, the *Concerto da chiesa*, like all of Potter's early work, displays marked stylistic affinities with music by several prominent English composers writing between the two world wars. On the whole, the influence of Vaughan Williams seems less pronounced than in the *Missa Brevis* or *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, although the lyricism of the concerto's slow movement undoubtedly owes something to the sound world of works such as the *Serenade to Music*. The more robust passages in the first movement and finale more readily recall E. J. Moeran and John Ireland, particularly in the bracing astringency of their harmonic language. This stylistic indebtedness did not go unnoticed by contemporary listeners: Feehan, for example, informed Potter that she thought she discerned a strong resemblance between the *Concerto da chiesa* and the Ireland Piano Concerto.⁵² In his reply, Potter refrained from commenting on this putative kinship, though frankly professing an 'unbounded' admiration for Ireland's music and telling Feehan that he considered him 'one of the most underrated of all the English lot'.⁵³ Feehan's assumption that the Ireland concerto might have served Potter as a model is, nonetheless, a rather questionable one, Ireland's obvious harmonic influence on Potter's compositional idiom notwithstanding. For one thing, the two works are wholly dissimilar in atmosphere and mood; and Potter's luxuriant, highly ornate piano textures bear a far stronger resemblance to those of Bax rather than the considerably sparer textures that Ireland habitually employed. Curiously, Potter was at pains to deny categorically to Feehan that Bax had influenced him in any way, remarking: 'I never then, or since have been able to either remember or in the least comprehend one single bar of anything the man wrote...so how he could have

⁵² Fanny Feehan to AJP, dated only 'Mon.' by FF but referred to as letter of 23 September 1974 by AJP in his reply of the same date ('N^o 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

⁵³ AJP to Fanny Feehan, 23 September 1974 ('N^o 13 Personal 1974-5', PA)

'influenced' me — is beyond me'.⁵⁴ Despite this emphatic disclaimer, it is difficult not to think that Potter was being somewhat disingenuous when one considers the striking similarities between a passage such as Ex 2.15 (bars 17-25 of the slow movement) — with its opulent quasi-orchestral textures and elaborate filigree accompaniments in the right hand — and the piano writing of Bax in his sonatas and concertante works, some of which Potter would surely have had occasion to hear during his years of study in England.

On the whole, Potter's writing for the solo instrument is amongst the most conspicuously successful features of his score — surprisingly so, perhaps, considering that he was by his own admission a rather indifferent keyboard player. He solves with assurance the perennially difficult problem of devising idiomatic and effectively contrasted piano textures, displaying a remarkable inventiveness and an impressive understanding of how to write tellingly for the medium. In his letter to Feehan, he informs her that, in this respect, his score owed a very great deal to the imaginative stimulus provided by Liszt's piano writing in his operatic paraphrases and transcriptions of Schubert songs.⁵⁵ Taxing though the piano part is, however, Potter avoids indulging at any point in a meretricious show of virtuosity for its own sake, the technical difficulties being always in the service of a genuine expressive need.

The idea of basing the work on Hassler's so-called 'passion chorale', with thematic material deriving from it, was also an imaginative and original one, even if the underlying programmatic concept for the work — the composition of a musical representation of the Passion — strikes one perhaps as a little naïve, at least in Potter's somewhat gauche verbal formulation of his intentions. Nonetheless, the expressive dynamic of Potter's three movement design — a turbulent first movement with an intense slow introduction, a poignant, meditative slow movement followed

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

Ex. 2.15: *Concerto da chiesa*, II, bars 17-26

Piano

8va
len.

Pno.

8va
poco stringendo

Pno.

len.
a tempo

Pno.

8va
5

by a triumphant finale — could have worked very well, if it had been successfully realised. Furthermore, an attempt to employ a piano concerto as a vehicle to convey the suffering occasioned by war is in itself a novel idea, given the abundant opportunities provided by this medium for highly charged, even violent, dramatic confrontations between the solo instrument and the orchestra.

Hassler's chorale was potentially an ideal symbolic adjunct for a musical exploration of these psychological states, its austere simplicity evoking a timeless sense of tragic loss and inconsolable grief in a profoundly moving, yet wholly dignified way. From a purely technical point of view, it offered intriguing expressive possibilities to the composer because of a number of distinctly unusual features — most notably, structural ambiguities which suggest possible harmonisations in both the Ionian and Phrygian modes at important cadential points (see Ex. 2.16, Hassler's own piquant harmonisation as given in the 1922 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*). The

Ex. 2.16: Hymn *O Sacred Head, surrounded*



problems of interpreting these ambiguities in a harmonisation evidently intrigued J. S. Bach, because no less than seven different harmonisations of the melody can be found in Richter's edition of the Bach chorales – taken from Cantatas 135, 153 and 161, the Christmas Oratorio and the Matthew Passion – some of which must be counted amongst the most ingenious and complex harmonisations of a chorale melody that Bach ever devised.⁵⁶ Potter was undoubtedly familiar with at least some of these Bach harmonisations from encountering them in the course of his studies of harmony at Clifton College, as well as from his experience as a choral singer.⁵⁷ The expressive potency of the chorale melody itself evidently made an impression on him, to judge from his persistent preoccupation with it in the compositions of his

⁵⁶ All given in B. Fr. Richter (ed.), *Joh. Seb. Bach: 389 Choralgesänge für gemischten Chor*, Breitkopf und Härtel, Leipzig, n.d.

⁵⁷ According to Annette Perry, Potter told her that the study of harmony at Clifton involved protracted study of the Bach chorales, which the students were encouraged to employ as models (interview with author, 10 August 2005).

student years. While it is difficult to think of precedents for basing a piano concerto on musical material of this nature, it is perhaps possible that Potter's imagination was fired by the example of Vaughan William's recently completed *Fantasia (quasi variazione) on the Old 104th Psalm Tune*, for piano solo, mixed chorus and orchestra, of 1949, if he had the opportunity to hear the work or to see a score.

In the *Concerto da chiesa*, the chorale is introduced almost at the very opening of the work, in the course of the slow introduction to the first movement. The cor anglais intones the melody in slow note values, its rhythms and contours slightly modified from Hassler's original. It is enveloped in a web of modal counterpoint in the strings which creates a texture reminiscent of Bach chorale prelude — an idea clearly retained from Potter's original plan for the piece. The introduction as a whole serves to define a tonal region of E minor, though, interestingly (in view of Potter's employment of this in the *Kyrie* of the *Missa Brevis*) with extensive employment of the Phrygian mode. Several motivic ideas in these accompanying counterpoints, together with a number of shapes deriving from the chorale tune itself, generate most of the thematic material for the entire work, reappearing in new transformations in the later movements. The most important of these germinal motifs are shown in Ex. 2.17 in short score: *a*, a crotchet idea first heard in the 'cellos and basses which outlines two adjacent triads; *b*, a running quaver idea in the violas; and *c*, the first three notes of the chorale tune itself. The latter shape forms the basis of a derivative lyrical idea *c1* sounded a few bars later in the upper strings with a flowing horn counterpoint in thirds, which develops into the principal melodic idea of the slow movement (Ex. 2.18).

This fairly compressed introduction, 49 bars in length, rises swiftly to a climax towards its close. It concludes with a series of strident fortissimo discords followed by a few moments of tense silence, which heighten to great effect the drama of the piano's first appearance in a brief cadenza. The pianist enters with a flourish, presenting two thunderous cascades of brilliant scales, each rising from lowest bass to highest treble and culminating in a ferocious, brittle chordal tremolo. These terse

Ex. 2.17, *Concerto da chiesa*, I, opening [some parts omitted]

Adagio, ♩ = 48-60

cl., bsn. pp horns vln. b

vc. and db. in 8ves pp a

THEMA: *Herzlich thut mich verlangen* cor ang.

vln I.

+ vln. 2.

ob.

upper strings

bass cl.

Ex. 2.18, *Concerto da chiesa*, I, bars 29-33 [some parts omitted]

gestures, with their intense rhetorical charge, brusquely dispel the poignant mood of the introduction and provide a transition to the *Allegro moderato* that constitutes the main body of the movement.

Potter described this *Allegro moderato* as a fugato in the score, but it must frankly be acknowledged that this designation appears to make no sense whatsoever in the context. Even if we allow a very generous measure of latitude in understanding the term *fugato* as a composition which employs fugal textures intermittently, but in a less rigorous or thoroughgoing manner than a fugue proper, it is still baffling as why Potter would have chosen to describe this movement as such. In point of fact, scarcely any of the textures in the movement are genuinely contrapuntal, let alone fugal. There is nothing which even remotely resembles an orthodox fugal exposition, which is the very least that one might expect to find in a movement described in this way. One can only confess bafflement and regard the title as a confusing red herring.

This conundrum of Potter's misleading title notwithstanding, it is difficult, in fact, to account for the structure of this movement in terms of any traditional formal categorisation. As we shall see, the underlying coherence of its overall tonal organisation is decidedly elusive, which complicates the analyst's task considerably. Perhaps the most persuasive description would be to view it as constituting a modified and expanded variant of a traditional five-part form, A — B — A¹ — B¹ — A², with a coda. This designation is still somewhat problematic, however, as the movement also has pronounced characteristics of a variation form. The thematic material of the A and B sections consists of transformations of two motivic ideas heard in the slow introduction. These themes, though contrasted in tempo and character, are still very obviously related to one another and, as a result, the boundaries between the various sections are often not clear cut, with one section merging seamlessly into the next. Furthermore, the thematic ideas of the A and B sections are varied considerably on each of their subsequent appearances, lending to the movement as a whole the character of a set of developing variations. The following brief descriptive commentary should illustrate these analytical difficulties more clearly.

After the cadenza, the principal idea of the initial A section is immediately announced in the piano. Its opening phrase is a vigorous transformation of motif *a* from the introduction, which now appears in a much more active rhythmic guise in stentorian octaves; this is followed by a toccata-like idea, a transformation of *b* in a semiquaver diminution, featuring an arresting sonority of clangorous parallel fourths (Ex. 2.19). This composite idea defines a tonal region of a modal A minor. It is promptly restated in the orchestra (with an abrupt transient shift to the remote region of E \flat minor before retuning to the tonic) and is presented a third time, in a rhythmically varied form, by the piano in E minor. The orchestra intervenes once more, veering now to B \flat minor, a tritonal chromatic shift which parallels the earlier one.

Ex. 2.19: *Concerto da chiesa*, I, bars 52-58

Fugato: Allegro moderato, ♩ = 100-120

Piano

ff

Pno.

sempre staccato

più f

sf

Pno.

più f

sf

5 6

5 6

At this point, there is a fairly clear sense of a transition to a new section. The piano takes up the toccata-like figure in an intensified scoring, which, after five bars, becomes an accompaniment to a new lyrical transformation of motif *a* from the introduction, sounded in slower note values in the bass. This theme constitutes the principal idea of the B sections. The tempo slackens somewhat and the agitated semi-quaver figuration gives way to a more flowing chordal accompaniment in quavers in the right hand, against further restatements of the theme. Tonally, the music drifts through F minor, and then in a series of semi-tonal descents, through E minor into E \flat minor, whereupon the new idea is restated in the woodwind and, later, on the horns. Harmonically, this passage is quite complex in detail, although the function of the constituent chords in context is always clear enough. In the first five bars, for example, the treble and bass are thickened out in parallel 4ths or in parallel triads, a sonority that is something of a commonplace in much music of the earlier twentieth century. Later, the figuration accompanying the bass melody makes use of complex vagrant harmonies and appoggiatura chords, some of which are highly

dissonant and suggest fleeting moments of bitonality in a manner almost reminiscent of Reger or Szymanowski, although Potter's harmonic language otherwise bears little resemblance to that of either of these composers [see Ex. 2.20].

A clear reprise of the material of the A section follows, starting in E minor, its principal ideas shared between piano and winds in rhythmically varied forms. This A¹ section is freely developmental, introducing a new fanfare motif in dotted rhythms in the brass, which is heard against brilliant uprushes of arpeggios in the piano. It is tonally unstable, moving towards the region of A \flat minor, in which a curtailed restatement of the lyrical idea of B is heard, lasting a mere 16 bars. The A section material returns once more, now in A minor, its contours outlined in double octaves on the piano against brusque punctuating chords in the orchestra. This moves swiftly towards a climax in which the recently-introduced brass fanfare motif is prominent, arriving finally at a series of dissonant chords similar to those heard at the very end of the slow introduction. The piano is given a short cadenza which clearly recalls the gestures of its first cadenza at the opening of the *Allegro moderato*. This is followed by a brief coda ending in the key of the introduction, E minor, which presents a fragment of the Hassler chorale tune and variants of the quaver motif *b* in a dialogue between a solo cello and the piano, before dying away in a hushed final cadence.

Although this movement is clearly the work of a composer with considerable imaginative gifts, it suffers from a number of serious defects which detract from its success. The first of these concerns Potter's failure to achieve a coherent sense of large-scale tonal organisation. There seems to be little, if any, logic to the succession of tonal regions which he employs and one suspects that his choices are the result of improvisation and chance rather than conscious intention. The moment-to-moment choices of harmonic progressions are often interesting and even piquant, but the overall tonal design seems frankly incoherent. The following summary of the principal tonal regions employed should make this point more forcefully:

Ex. 2.20, *Concerto da chiesa*, I, bars 86-106

Piano

Crescendo e stringendo.....

A tempo

ben marcato il basso,
pedale a piacere

diminuendo, poco a poco meno staccato

Legato e tranquillamente

Musical score for the first system, featuring piano accompaniment with triplets and a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic marking.

Musical score for the second system, featuring piano accompaniment with triplets and a decrescendo (dim.) dynamic marking.

A tempo, ma poco meno mosso, $\text{♩} = 100$

Musical score for the third system, including a flute part with a "fiati" marking and piano accompaniment with "e poco rubato" and "loco" markings.

Musical score for the fourth system, featuring piano accompaniment with sustained chords and melodic lines.

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Introduction: | E minor |
| A section: | opens in A minor, but highly unstable, with excursions to E \flat minor and E minor |
| B section: | opens in F minor, moves through E minor to E \flat minor |
| A ¹ section: | opens in E minor, later unstable |
| B ¹ section: | A \flat minor |
| A ² section: | returns to A minor |
| Coda: | E minor |

For one thing, there seems to be no compelling reason why the movement should end in E minor, as there is no attempt to prepare for this conclusion by establishing its dominant at any structurally crucial juncture as a part of a long-range tonal strategy. Neither is there any attempt to account structurally for the long-range implications of the remote chromatic shifts which take place in the B sections. Consequently, the returns to E minor and A minor in the A sections are robbed of any expressive or dramatic point, and the returns of this material are distinctly anti-climatic. This in turn militates against any sense of tonal dynamism in which the climaxes might serve to mark the attainment of important stages in the unfolding of a larger design, and produces an impression of structural flaccidity rather than tautness.

The second prominent defect concerns Potter's management of phrase structure. Much of the material in the A section is enunciated in one-bar units, which produces an impression of short-windedness. Furthermore, these units tend to emphasise the same pitches — the pitch E is sounded prominently in every bar of the opening statement of the first A section, for example — which, in addition, results in an impression of stasis rather than dynamic progression. One also wonders whether it was wise to risk so much repetition of the motivic shapes which generate the material for both the A and the B sections. While one can readily understand Potter's concern to ensure the motivic consistency of his material, rather than having an uncontrolled proliferation of motivic shapes, by the end of the movement one is

tempted to say that these ideas have simply been heard once too often and that he should have attempted to provide greater aural relief by means of sharper thematic contrasts.

The same observations, *pari passu*, could be made about the slow movement and the finale, which it is unnecessary to analyse in detail here. The slow movement contains some fine ideas, but once again its impact is marred by some elementary miscalculations in tonal organisation. It opens in E minor, before settling down to a principal tonality of A major. Both of these keys are poor choices, since they have been so prominent in the first movement. Furthermore, the principal thematic idea of the slow movement — the lyrical figure *c*¹, which was first enunciated during the slow introduction to the first movement — returns repeatedly to A major during the movement's course, which reinforces the impression of tonal stasis. Potter compounds this miscalculation by making another which is even more unfortunate, that of having a finale which is also in the same key.

Again, the finale has some strong material and notably effective writing for the piano, but this tonal miscalculation mars the movement beyond redemption, rendering the work as a whole unviable. Its main theme is a new transformation of motif *a* into a kind of slip jig in 9/8 time. While this thematic idea might have worked well in another context, it sounds incongruous here and is unconvincingly integrated into the fabric of the movement as a whole. Much more successful is a contrasting idea in fleet semiquaver runs and elfin staccato quavers which is given to the piano. The piano's long cadenza towards the end of the movement, while ingenious, reviews material from all three movements which the listener has wearied of hearing by this point and seems like redundant repetition. The triumphant close of the work, which is presumably meant to convey a transcendence and resolution of the foregoing conflicts, degenerates into empty bombast, sounding neither truly achieved in the context of the finale nor like a satisfactory culmination to the work as a whole.

In spite of these reservations, the *Concerto da chiesa* is still a work of considerable interest, even if one feels that Potter was ultimately unsuccessful in realising his initial conception. It was the first large-scale structure that he had attempted and many of its faults are no doubt due to inexperience. The challenge of composing extended forms was one to which he would return in his stage works of the early 1960s, in which he would meet it with a far greater measure of technical assurance.

Chapter 3

The Later Orchestral Works

Part 1: Stylistic issues in Potter's later music

3.1 Introduction

This chapter is devoted to an examination of the orchestral works that Potter wrote after moving to Ireland in 1951, other than the various student compositions that he revised or completed between 1949 and 1953. As has been previously discussed, Potter's later output of orchestral music is unusual in a number of respects. Although his catalogue lists about three dozen works for the medium, only a small proportion of these are of a serious nature. If one leaves aside his four ballet scores and the suites extracted from them, there are only six significant compositions: a short set of orchestral variations, *Variations on a Popular Tune* (1955), a concert overture, *Overture to an Irish Occasion* (1956), the *Concerto for Orchestra* (1967), the *Sinfonia de Profundis* (1968), a three-movement suite, *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* (1974) and *Symphony No. 2* (1976). The remaining scores come under the rubric of light music, and can be divided into two categories. The first of these comprises a series of twenty-three single movement concertante works lasting about ten minutes which were composed at various times between 1959 and 1978. The works in the second category are somewhat less numerous, and can best be described as fantasias on Irish folk music that are more sophisticated in nature than mere arrangements.

An output of this kind clearly has a number of features that stand in need of explanation. In the first place, the comparative paucity of substantial works of a serious nature seems odd, although as we have seen, this can be accounted for in part by the comparatively restricted performance opportunities that were available to Potter during his lifetime. The preponderance of light music, a considerable proportion of it based on folk music, is also noteworthy. The critical climate that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s was generally inimical both to light music and

idioms based on folk music, and this was no less the case in Ireland than elsewhere. It is consequently a matter of some importance to investigate why Potter persisted in writing music of this nature at a time when it had come to be regarded as *passé*. The general stylistic orientation of Potter's later work also requires comment. Although he was willing to experiment, up to a point, with serialism and other modernist techniques in some of his serious works, his music remained stylistically conservative. This, in conjunction with the fact that he continued to write light works based on folk music, means that his creative aesthetic is potentially vulnerable to misinterpretation, particularly in the light of some recent writing on Irish music. Harry White and Joseph Ryan, for example, are highly critical of many figures composing between 1930 and 1970, particularly those making use of folk music: in doing so, Ryan and White suggest, these composers were helping to reinforce an officially promulgated construct of Irish identity predicated on highly questionable nationalist premises. Ryan himself has gone so far as to claim that Irish nationalism effectively stifled musical creativity during these years, leading composers to persist in employing folk-based idioms at a time when they had become outmoded, rather than adopt contemporary styles. Their compositions, he contends, are as a consequence wholly devoid of interest, at best a regrettable product of cultural insularity, and at worst a sinister manifestation of cultural chauvinism — in one article, he goes so far as to draw an explicit analogy between their work and the musical 'rubbish-heap' left by Nazi composers.¹ Although Ryan does not refer to Potter (or indeed, to any other Irish composer) by name, his remarks could readily be construed as an implicit condemnation of his work.

¹ See Ryan's essay 'The Tone of Defiance' in Michael Murphy and Harry White eds., *Musical Constructions of Nationalism* (Cork, 2001), 197-211. To suggest that any meaningful comparison can be drawn between the effects on musical life of Nazism in Germany and Irish nationalism in Ireland is, of course, manifestly absurd: the Irish state never attempted to control musical life by imposing stringent censorship or exerting blatant pressures on composers to produce propaganda works. Of Ryan's other writings, see in particular: 'Assertions of Distinction: The Modal Debate in Irish Music' in Gerard Gillen and Harry White eds., *Irish Musical Studies 2: Music and the Church* (Dublin, 1993) 62-77; and 'Nationalism and Irish Music' in Gerard Gillen and Harry White, eds. *Irish Musical Studies 3: Music and Irish Cultural History* (Dublin, 1995), 101-115. Of Harry White's writings, see *The Keeper's Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland* (Cork, 1998); and 'Nationalism, Colonialism and the Cultural Stasis of Music in Ireland' in Michael Murphy and Harry White, eds., *Musical Constructions of Nationalism* (Cork, 2001), 257-271.

I have argued at considerable length elsewhere that Ryan and White's sweepingly negative characterisation of Irish music at this period is deeply unjust.² As far as Potter's compositions are concerned, the validity of their arguments seems particularly dubious. For one thing, Potter's letters reveal him to have been impatient with many aspects of Irish social and political life, especially with the native brand of Roman Catholicism which was widely held by some nationalist ideologues to form an essential constituent of authentic 'Irishness'. Nor did Potter have much sympathy for or understanding of Irish nationalism – indeed, remarks in his later letters, as we have seen, indicate unequivocally that he regarded the dissolution of the British Empire as a deeply regrettable occurrence. Given this constellation of attitudes, it is simply unthinkable that he would have envisioned his music as a vehicle for Irish nationalist propaganda. Secondly, as I hope to demonstrate in the chapters that follow, Potter's output, although uneven, contains works of genuine merit which are wholly deserving of serious attention, far more so than the overwhelmingly negative generalisations of these commentators would suggest.

In view of the misunderstandings to which Potter's music may be subject, I have chosen to preface the discussion of his later orchestral works with a detailed consideration of his compositional aesthetic in an attempt to dispel possible misconceptions. Naturally, many of the observations about his style made in the course of this discussion are applicable, *pari passu*, to the choral works and stage works considered in the later chapters. Fortunately for the researcher, Potter's correspondence and other writings contain abundant indications of his attitudes on various issues pertaining to his activity as a composer and make it possible to present a fairly coherent summary of his views. This section commences with an exploration of his attitudes towards Irish folk music, both from a compositional

² For a detailed review and critique of their writings, see Patrick Zuk, 'Musical Constructions of Nationalism', two-part book review in *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, 2, 2 (2002) 5-10 and 2, 3 (2002), 25-30; and 'Nationalism: The Debate Continues' in *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, 3, 5 (2003), 12-21.

perspective and in his capacity as a professional arranger. It continues with an examination of his responses to the new musical styles that emerged after the Second World War and the manner in which he attempted to engage with these in his work. Finally, an account is given of Potter's stance on the question of light music. The detailed elucidation of these issues should assist us to a clearer understanding of Potter's view of his creative enterprise, and establish a context for the sympathetic appraisal of his later development as a composer. Part 2 of this chapter presents an overview of Potter's orchestral output, discussing his most significant works for the medium in some detail.

3.2 Potter's engagement with Irish folk music

Potter moved to Ireland at a rather interesting historical juncture. Before the attainment of political independence in 1922, musical life had remained very underdeveloped in comparison with that in many other European countries and the native tradition of composition had been largely undistinguished.³ Naturally, prominent members of the musical intelligentsia, beginning with figures such as Annie Patterson and Herbert Hughes at the turn of the last century, hoped that this dispiriting situation could be ameliorated over time and were anxious to see the emergence of a flourishing native school of composers. Unsurprisingly, some native figures explored the possibility of using folk music in an attempt to forge nationalist idioms that would be distinctively 'Irish', in a manner analogous to the productions of nationalist composers in other European countries. This tendency continued after the foundation of the Free State, reaching a climax between the 1930s and the late 1950s. *Pace* Ryan and White, this was surely an entirely natural development, particularly given the comparative absence of a tradition of art music. Looking back from the vantage point of the present, Irish composers may appear to have left it comparatively late to explore the novel expressive possibilities that folk music might

³ For a discussion of these circumstances, see Patrick Zuk, 'Words for Music, Perhaps? – Irishness, Criticism and the Art Tradition', *Irish Studies Review* 12, 1, 2004, 11-27.

afford, but this did not necessary mean that the experiment was inherently infeasible or not worth attempting.

That Potter should have employed Irish folk music as a basis for some of his work is scarcely surprising. He had been familiar with this repertory since childhood, and as we have seen, his interest in it from a compositional perspective appears to have been encouraged by Vaughan Williams. Several of his early works, including the *Songs from the Glens of Antrim* and *Rhapsody under a High Sky*, make use of material suggesting stylised folksong. His engagement with Irish traditional music thus long predates his move to Ireland and cannot be attributed to the influence of the new environment in which he found himself. Indeed, it seems clear that the fantasies and rhapsodies on Irish folk music that Potter composed for the R   Light Orchestra in the 1950s represent a kind of work that he would probably have been happy to write anyway, even without the commercial incentive provided by Radio   ireann.

This is an important point and is worth stressing here, given the extremely critical stance that commentators have tended to adopt towards works of this nature. In a recent article, for example, Richard Pine claims that the preoccupation of Irish composers with folk music at this period indicates that they experienced covert pressures to write in a self-consciously ‘Irish’ manner, and contends that they experienced ‘a form of mental constriction’ on account of ‘anxiety about the nature of Irishness and about “how to be Irish”’.⁴ I have argued elsewhere that Pine’s thesis is rather dubious and that there is little evidence that the kinds of pressures and anxieties he describes actually existed.⁵ And as far as Potter is concerned, nothing in his writings suggests that he experienced these after moving to Ireland in 1950 or that his recourse to folk music was anything other than a matter of free personal choice. It would be wholly unjustified to interpret it as a response to social pressures, or for that matter, as being occasioned by insecurity about his ‘Irishness’. Nor is there any reason to believe that the Irish musical scene in the 1950s was

⁴ Richard Pine, ‘The National Ear’, *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, 3, 3 (2003), 17-22: 20, 21.

⁵ See Patrick Zuk, ‘Nationalism: The Debate Continues’, *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, 3, 5 (2003), 12-21.

characterised by an atmosphere of intolerance. While there are a few shreds of evidence to suggest that a minority of extreme nationalists were only prepared to accept as authentically 'Irish' compositions which amounted to little more than straightforward arrangements of folk song, this question has not been adequately researched and it is difficult to determine the extent to which such attitudes may have exerted an influence. In a handful of journal and periodical articles, one occasionally finds Irish composers making explicit reference to this obscurantist position, and pleading the case for a broad-minded conception of Irish art music. Annie Patterson and Herbert Hughes did so – though notably without referring to anyone by name - and Aloys Fleischmann would articulate views similar to theirs in the 1930s.⁶ There is no reason to believe that the narrow mentality that they sought to combat was widespread, however. Potter never seems to have encountered it, let alone perceived it as a serious threat.

Needless to say, intelligent and discriminating musicians regarded such a narrow understanding of any potential Irish art music as stultifying and creatively limiting. That such a healthy counterview existed is evidenced by a letter written by the Irish conductor Michael Bowles in 1958 to congratulate Potter after hearing a performance in the United States of *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* by the Boston Pops Orchestra under Arthur Fiedler. Bowles concluded his missive with the following eminently sensible exhortation:

I hope you write plenty more. Do not be too much affected by the local pressures in favour of being 'Irish' and 'doing something for Irish music' and the wonderful country songs and dances that are our national heritage and so on. This is all doctrinaire, propagandist stuff. I hope you will write freely and bring out what you have in you, whatever it is. In Irish music, any consideration of style and trends is

⁶ See, for example, the various contributions on music by Herbert Hughes (1882-1937) and others to the periodical *Uladh* which was published in the early 1900s and of the Lurgan-born composer Annie Patterson (1868-1934) to the Cork-based *Journal of the Iovernian Society* which appeared from 1909. (See the articles by Zuk cited in footnote 2 above for a discussion of these). For a discussion of Aloys Fleischmann's position on this question, see Séamas de Barra, 'Aloys Fleischmann and the Idea of an Irish Composer' in *The Journal of Music in Ireland*, 5, 5 (2005), 25-29.

useless and, indeed, harmful unless it comes after the music has been written. [...] As a mark of the poor thinking on the subject, I remember the bold Jack Larchet's *Macananty's Reel* was always conceded more importance than those pieces poor Fred May wrote in his young days when he had signs of a real and first-class talent. An arrangement of a country tune but with no originality of chording or orchestration, it impressed people because it conformed to the simple-minded, pre-fabricated notion of what was 'Irish' music. By simply writing the best music you can, even if you have never heard of a folk song, you are writing Irish music. After all, you are an Irishman, aren't you?

By all this, I don't mean, of course, that the corpus of Irish folk-music is negligible. It does enshrine melodic idioms and harmonic implications that have very important possibilities. [...] But it is a long haul, and is about as tricky as the problem of Irish political independence.⁷

In contrasting the careers of John Larchet and Frederick May⁸, Bowles is drawing a clear moral, presenting the artistic Scylla and Charybdis that, in his view, the contemporary Irish composer was obliged to negotiate. Larchet, he suggests, though possessed of slight talent, had found favour with the public by writing undemanding arrangements of Irish folk music. May, on the other hand, who as a young man had shown evidence of creative gifts of a much greater order, had stopped writing altogether by the late 1950s, partially on account of distressing problems with his health, but also, it would appear, because of the comparative lack of interest in his work and the discouragements he had experienced. Bowles was clearly concerned that Potter should steel himself to disappointment as far as the public's response to his music was concerned and retain his sense of artistic integrity, feeling free to

⁷ Michael Bowles to AJP, 17 July 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

⁸ John Francis Larchet (1884-1967) was Professor of Composition in the Royal Irish Academy of Music and later Professor of Music in University College, Dublin. He was a minor composer of some distinction and the arrangement of the traditional Irish dance tune *Macananty's Reel* mentioned by Bowles was one of his best-known works. Frederick May (1911-1985) was a student of Larchet's, who went on to study composition with Vaughan Williams and Egon Wellesz in the early 1930s. He showed considerable ability as a younger man but his promise as a composer was fulfilled only to a very limited extent, largely, it would appear, because of poor mental and physical health. He had effectively ceased composing by the late 1950s.

develop in whatever direction his imagination and creative talents were to lead him. For him, the question of Potter's musical 'Irishness' was ultimately unimportant — despite his acknowledgement that experimentation with Irish folk music could reveal hitherto unsuspected, 'very important' creative possibilities.

It seems clear, however, that Bowles was preaching to the converted. While Potter undoubtedly had a genuine affection for Irish folk music and was interested in exploring precisely such possibilities in his original work, he was also willing to explore modernist idioms. Nor can his attitude to Irish folk music be described as excessively reverent. As we shall see presently, his writings show him to have been thoroughly impatient with intolerant purists of any description and he stoutly defended his right as a composer to employ traditional melodies as he saw fit. Furthermore, as the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and a number of Potter's later works reveal, his admiration for Irish folk music did not preclude his employment of it in a highly unconventional way that is far removed in sensibility from composers such as Larchet. In the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy*, Potter finds a musical correlative for dramatic constructs of stage-Irishness by using thematic material that parodies traditional Irish dance music. The satire on this occasion is gentle and good-humoured, but in some later works, such as the scherzo from the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, Potter's musical humour is of a dark and decidedly disturbing kind. In these works, Irish folk music or stylised material resembling it is subjected to highly ironical treatment, being presented in grotesque orchestrations and startlingly incongruous harmonisations. This tendency reaches its climax in Potter's late opera *The Wedding*, which, as we shall see in the last chapter of the present study, can readily be interpreted as a clear expression of disenchantment with certain aspects of modern Irish society. It is difficult not to conclude that Potter employed folk music on occasion to convey some ambivalent, if not hostile, responses to prevailing understandings of 'Irishness' and that he aimed to deconstruct these through musical satire.

Despite his extensive engagement with folk music however, Potter's attitudes towards it were quite different to those of his Irish contemporaries in a number of striking respects. It is instructive to contrast his position with that of Aloys Fleischmann, who is arguably the only composer from this period who succeeded in evolving a sophisticated musical style based on a transmutation of the folk idiom. Fleischmann's recourse to Irish traditional music formed part of an unusually intense preoccupation with indigenous Gaelic culture which was perhaps unique amongst his fellow Irish composers at the period, however. Although he was not a native speaker, he spoke Irish fluently in his youth and had an extensive knowledge of Gaelic literature and folklore. His profound interest in folk music led him in later life to undertake a monumental work of scholarship, his *Sources of Irish Traditional Music*, a compilation of all Irish folk tunes found in printed sources between 1583 and 1855. By comparison, Potter's involvement with folk music was of a much more casual nature, though there is no reason to doubt that his interest was wholly genuine. For one thing, he never acquired more than a few words of Irish, which would have considerably limited his capacity to appreciate native folksong, as this relies extensively for its expressive effect on the text. Although he became acquainted with an undeniably wide range of Irish traditional music in the course of his work as an arranger, it seems to have represented little more to him than a corpus of attractive melodies on which he could exercise his skill: there is no sense that it had any greater imaginative resonance for him. Unlike Fleischmann, Potter does not seem to have been greatly interested in Gaelic culture and in all his writings there is scarcely a single allusion to it. He seldom employed folk music to convey anything of deeper psychological import, nor was he much concerned to explore how it could be mined as the basis for a novel personal style, as his elder contemporary had been.

If Potter produced copious quantities of arrangements of Irish folk music, there is no reason to assume, as Harry White and Joseph Ryan appear to have done, that this activity was informed by some sinister political ideology of cultural chauvinism. As we have seen in Chapter 1, for the most part, Potter undertook this work solely for money and not out of inner creative necessity. He made much of his living as a

professional arranger and accepted commissions to arrange music in a variety of styles: and if many of the arrangements in his catalogue are of Irish folk tunes, this simply reflects the fact that there was a considerable demand for material of this kind at the period. It should also be noted that his declared attitudes towards Irish folk music would probably have disturbed purists. In arranging this repertory, he saw his primary task, quite simply, as that of devising a suitably ear-tickling embodiment for whatever tune was used: his aim was to transform it into a kind of Irish light music, a home-grown equivalent to the productions of British composers such as Eric Coates, Ronald Binge and Haydn Wood. This much is clear from a letter he sent in 1955 to the radio critic of the Dublin newspaper, the *Evening Herald*, who had written an appreciative review of Potter's arrangement of the patriotic Irish ballad 'Wrap the Green Flag round Me' for the Radio Éireann Singers and the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra, which was broadcast in a concert of 'National Music'. The reviewer's remarks had concluded:

The arrangement gave to this last named song, already a ballad of which no nation need be ashamed — a new quality of popular appeal which would qualify it for inclusion in the Top Twenty. I am by no means sure that such a compliment would be acceptable to the arranger concerned, but I pay it in all good faith.⁹

Potter's letter of acknowledgement makes his attitude to arranging Irish folk music and ballads quite explicit, allowing, perhaps, for a certain degree of exaggeration in his populist pose, calculated, no doubt, to produce a favourable impression on the recipient:

Many thanks indeed for your kind words last Thursday about my arrangements I can assure you that your remarks re the Top Twenty were most certainly NOT unacceptable. Like yourself, I think that our songs and ballads are unbeatable, and as such, they deserve the very best treatment there is. Well, the men who arrange the Top Twenty are some of the best at their job in the world: they have to be — otherwise no-one would listen to the tripe they arrange.

⁹ *Evening Herald*, 13 October 1955

Our songs and ballads are good: so good that the more people hear more of them, the better. And the way to get people to listen to them is NOT to put them in the musical equivalent of cotton-wool in settings that will only appeal to high brows and antiquarians. They should be heard in settings that give them the kind of build-up that beats Hollywood at its own game and that is precisely what I try to do in my arrangements.

There are of course people (including one eminent expert from England) who tell me that this is vulgarising the tunes and lowering my own professional standing, but that doesn't worry me. I have arranged hundreds of Irish songs (between 300 & 400 at the last count) for all sorts of ensembles and I don't think any of them is the worse for the treatment.¹⁰

His admired models, clearly, were the slick productions of Hollywood arrangers and film composers. While one would not wish for a moment to denigrate the abilities of these musicians, many of whom were exceptionally competent, one might wonder whether the glitzy, somewhat meretricious sound world of the typical Hollywood film score, replete with voluptuous swooning strings, wordless choruses and swirling harp glissandi was perhaps quite suitable for arrangements of Irish folk song. To be fair to Potter, his arrangements never degenerate into the sort of stage-Irish kitsch found in Hollywood musicals such as *Finian's Rainbow*, and on the occasions where he subjects folk tunes to flamboyant orchestral treatment — as in his popular version of *Finnegan's Wake* — he remains well within the boundaries of good taste. In other cases, however — the orchestral arrangements that feature on the long-playing record *Ceol Potter* being a good instance in point — Potter's response to the folk tunes seems disappointingly pedestrian, suggesting that his creative sympathy with these products of Gaelic culture was, in the last analysis, comparatively superficial.

¹⁰ AJP to 'O.G.D.' [pen-name of *Evening Herald* radio critic], 17 October 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA)

This impression is reinforced if one examines the scripts of Potter's broadcast talks on the subject of Irish traditional music that have been preserved amongst his papers. One of these, which bears the provocative title 'Folklore and Horse-laugh' and appears to have been written in 1958, is of particular interest, not only for what it reveals about his attitude to folk music, but also because it subsequently prompted a radio debate.¹¹ It is quite short and its somewhat careless composition suggests that it was probably written in haste. To judge from its contents, Potter seems to have intended it as a polemical counterblast to hostile criticisms of his work by folk music enthusiasts or specialists, though he does not identify any of the perpetrators by name. He opens — somewhat unwisely from a strategic point of view, perhaps — by expressing resounding scepticism about the competence of many *soi-disant* folk-music 'experts' that he had allegedly encountered in the course of his career and insinuates that many of them were frauds, unable to tell the difference between genuine folk tunes and contemporary popular ballads. He is equally dismissive of purists who claimed that transcriptions of Irish folk music employing Western staff notation inevitably misrepresented it, ignoring its distinctive subtleties of intonation and rhythmic organisation. He concludes with a scornful attack on those whom he described as 'the anti-arrangement boys' — purists who maintained that arrangements of folk music inevitably traduced its essence, a matter on which he had strong feelings for obvious professional reasons. Potter's formulation of his views on this subject reveals him at his most pugnacious:

What is wrong with an arrangement? Is there any extra special intrinsic beauty in hearing a song sung by someone who has learned to call hogs rather than one who has learned to sing? Does a tune become better because it's wheezed out by some asthmatic *ould besom* from Kerry, rather than sung in an arrangement by Elisabeth Schwarzkopf?¹²

¹¹ A draft of this script can be found in 'Scripts etc. '54 – '59', PA. It would appear that this does not represent its final form: the same folder also contains a résumé of the talk (under a different title; 'The Lore of the Folk and the Laugh of the Horse') which indicates that he may subsequently have expanded this draft. The account of the talk given here is based on this.

¹² From Potter's synopsis of his arguments, attached to the script (copy in 'Scripts '54 – '59', PA)

When Potter submitted this script for consideration, the personnel of the RÉ Music Department evidently felt that it raised issues which deserved to be explored in greater depth and asked the General Features Officer, Francis MacManus, to organise a radio debate in conjunction with the Assistant Musical Director, Éamonn Ó Gallchobhair.¹³ MacManus suggested that the debate should be chaired by Brian Boydell and asked Potter to recommend other participants.¹⁴ Potter proposed the former music critic for the *Irish Times*, Denis Donoghue, and the current incumbent Charles Acton, as well as the young Irish composer Seóirse Bodley. All of these had apparently commented on the relevant issues in the press and were thus 'the types ... upon whom my scurrilous vituperations were aimed', as Potter told MacManus.¹⁵ Of these, only Denis Donoghue could be persuaded to take part, however. The Gaelic scholar Seán Ó Tuama also agreed to participate, however, and the broadcast was duly scheduled for transmission at the end of January 1959.¹⁶

In the event, the debate revealed that the Irish composer's engagement with folk music was perceived to have become increasingly problematic by the late 1950s. Potter was supplied in advance with written summaries of the other participants' responses to his views, which have survived amongst his papers. Seán Ó Tuama, who subsequently came to be regarded as one of the finest Irish scholars and literary critics of his generation, evidently took exception to the tone and content of Potter's script, and found his attitude to Gaelic culture rather distasteful. It must be said that Potter's somewhat intemperate manner of expression, and his wisecracks about hogs and 'ould besoms from Kerry', could very easily be construed as sneering and dismissive. In his response, which seems to have been very measured and dignified, Ó Tuama rejected most of Potter's arguments as trivial. With regard to Potter's misprision of folk music 'experts', he simply pointed out that there are charlatans and poseurs in every profession, which does not mean that genuine experts do not

¹³ Relevant correspondance in 'RÉ '55 - '60', PA.

¹⁴ Francis MacManus to AJP, 23 September 1958 ('RÉ '55 - '60', PA)

¹⁵ AJP to Francis MacManus, 25 September 1958 ('RÉ '55 - '60', PA)

¹⁶ Brian Boydell to AJP, 8 January 1959 ('Scripts '54 - '59', PA)

also exist. He went on to observe that the transcription of folk music inevitably necessitates considerable compromises and that written records can only give a very incomplete idea of how it sounds — a view which would find universal agreement nowadays. As far as arrangements were concerned, he stated that he had no particular objection to them provided no false claims were made on their behalf. On the other hand, he contended, arrangers should accept that some people prefer to hear folk music in its original form, and do not find arrangements very much to their taste — again, a view that would be widely shared today. A note of testiness creeps into the closing paragraphs of Ó Tuama's riposte, which suggests that he had been angered by what he perceived as Potter's tactless remarks about Irish country people and his condescending attitude towards a beleaguered performance tradition that seemed in imminent danger of disappearing. He provocatively intimates that Irish folk music is simply too sophisticated for the primitive and debased tastes of listeners who prefer arrangements:

Folk tunes, though, are works of art, and should not be meddled with by irresponsible quacks. They are so well constructed that he would be a brave man who would dare to tamper with their integrity. An arrangement is for those who have not the sophistication of being able to listen with intelligent appreciation to a single melody... Of course there could be extra intrinsic beauty in a folk tune sung by someone who has learned to call hogs, but whose ear (and intuition) have not been contaminated by the academies, rather than by someone, who, though having learned to sing, yet has all his sense of time and tonality framed in a pattern which took a kind of rigid casting towards the end of the seventeenth century.

And it is not a question of a tune becoming better because 'it is wheezed out by some asthmatic ould besom from Kerry' (a remark unworthy of Dr Potter, I think). It is rather that it loses all what I shall call its 'tweedy' folk quality when it is sung in arrangement even by such a fine singer as Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. ... Wireless is not long enough here to have any serious effect on the sources yet. However, I quite agree that with time and with the ruthless disregard of pseudo-folk-specialists for integrity, the sources will stand in imminent danger of being poisoned permanently.

Dr Potter, then, will cease to indulge in horse-laugh, but will weep when even the shade of that which once was great has passed away.¹⁷

Denis Donoghue's contribution widened the scope of the debate considerably to address the issue of whether it was even desirable for Irish composers to make use of folk music in their work any longer. Donoghue, a young academic who subsequently went on to develop an international reputation as a literary critic, had a keen amateur interest in music and served for a time as music critic for the *Irish Times*, in which capacity he quickly gained notoriety. To judge from correspondence in the Potter Archive, several prominent Irish musicians, including Aloys Fleischmann, considered that he was exerting a baneful influence and feared that his notices might discourage audiences from attending concerts. This prompted Fleischmann to contribute a series of forceful articles on the subject of music criticism to the *Irish Times* in 1954, which, *inter alia*, were clearly intended to convey a critique of what he regarded as Donoghue's shortcomings.¹⁸ Donoghue resigned his position later that year (he was initially replaced by Potter), but continued to write intermittently on musical subjects. The following year, he published an article 'The Future of Irish Music' in the Jesuit periodical *Studies*, in which he largely dismissed the productions of native composers — most of whom, he contended, could 'only be discussed on a trivial level'.¹⁹ The only Irish composer whom Donoghue appeared to regard in any way seriously was Boydell: Potter is not mentioned in his essay; May, he intimates, has written himself out; and interestingly, he passes over the work of Fleischmann in silence, presumably out of pique at his criticisms. Contending that 'there is in Ireland to-day no composer whose works an intelligent European musician *must* know', Donoghue proceeds to blame this state of affairs on the fact that Irish composers 'have fallen into the folk-music trap' and are dooming themselves to continued irrelevance by persisting in the employment of idioms that are stylistically outmoded. His article, which is replete with glib, fatuous

¹⁷ Seán Ó Tuama, 'The Lore of the Folk and the Laugh of the Horse' (copy in 'Scripts '54 – '59', PA)

¹⁸ For an account of this episode, see Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin, 2006), 109-112.

¹⁹ Denis Donoghue, 'The Future of Irish Music', *Studies*, 44 (1955), 109-14, 110

pronouncements and all manner of questionable assumptions, is undeserving of serious consideration as a survey of Irish composition during these years; and it is frankly astonishing to find the views expressed in it quoted deferentially and uncritically by recent writers on twentieth-century Irish music.²⁰ Nonetheless, it is undoubtedly important in one respect, in that it is a manifestation of the change in critical climate previously referred to, in which composers found themselves under increasing pressure to appear up to date with modernist stylistic currents if they did not wish to forfeit respectful attention to their work.

For a composer like Potter, who made a living by arranging folk music and composing light music based on it, this was clearly an issue of considerable importance: potentially, views of this nature called his credibility and standing as a so-called 'serious' composer into question. Various mordant remarks about Dublin musicians scattered throughout Potter's correspondence from this period suggest that they had become prevalent enough to cause him concern. Writing to Frederick May in 1955 *a propos* of his recently-composed orchestral work *Variations on a Popular Tune*, he commented waspishly, '[As] I have not copied either the rhythms of Bartók or the scale systems of Messaien, the piece may be regarded from the point of view of the Dublin intelligentsia as completely without cultural or any other significance.'²¹ The same 'intelligentsia', he told another correspondent, regularly intimated that his music was 'redolent of nothing but "shamrock and shillelagh"'.²² Four years later he complained to his American acquaintance John Cavanagh:

I don't know whether you know it, but there is a considerable section of the musical world here in Ireland which believes that this arranging of national music is the merest hackwork. [Any] time an arrangement is broadcast in a symphony concert it is invariably dismissed by the critics as not worth paying any attention to. This is

²⁰ As Séamas de Barra has remarked, 'one can only assume that the writers are overawed into abandoning objective assessment by Donoghue's subsequent prestige as a literary critic.' For a discussion of Donoghue's article; see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 112.

²¹ AJP to Frederick May, 22 January 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA).

²² AJP to unidentified correspondent 'Professor Delargy', 9 January 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA)

extremely exasperating for me in particular, because in my position as a teacher, I know that we have got to build up some kind of technique of our own to suit our own needs and I treat all my arrangements as technical experiments to see what kind of harmony, rhythm and so on can really be distilled from our own national stuff: when this is ignored in favour of so-called Irish music that is merely copying what has — perfectly justifiably — been done in the way of twelve-tone stuff etc. in other countries, it would make you despair — or it would if you let it! ... [Not] that I've anything against people writing what they want: I just want to be allowed to write what I want as well.²³

As has already been remarked, Potter's technical experimentation with folk music, so far as it went, was far less sustained than these remarks might suggest.²⁴ Nonetheless, the anxiety revealed in this letter about being perceived as *passé* or insufficiently 'modern' was entirely genuine. Denis Donoghue's stance as articulated in the résumé he prepared for the radio debate can have done little to allay Potter's fears. Although, like Ó Tuama, Donoghue professed that there was nothing the matter with arrangements in principle, he made no secret of his hostility to styles based on folk music, contending that they were a historical anachronism:

What is wrong with arrangements? Answer: nothing at all; it's a free country and the material isn't protected by any copyright. A composer is free to play the stuff backwards if he likes. But the audience and the critics are entitled to query the product: they might point out, for instance, in certain cases a gross disrelation between the root-tune and the density or 'severity' of its arranged orchestration. Clearly there would be such a disrelation if the root-tune 'Úna Bhán' were to be rendered with the orchestration of, say, Pierre Boulez. ...

²³ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 23 April 1958 ('General 1/1/1957 – 5/6/58', PA)

²⁴ When interpreting Potter's pronouncements on various subjects, it is always important to bear in mind that they may have been calculated to produce a certain impression on the recipient: this letter was addressed to an influential American sponsor of rather conservative musical tastes who was an enthusiastic advocate of 'national music', and it was consequently in Potter's interest to present himself as an Irish counterpart to nationalist composers elsewhere. Potter's correspondence reveals him to have been not without guile in this regard.

My general line on the matter is something like this. Folk music and art music (let's call it that, even though it's unfair) are two things, quite separate. They don't benefit by cross-breeding. If a twentieth-century composer chooses to fiddle around with a folk-song ... he is free to do so and it may be a pleasant diversion, but it has nothing to do with the development of twentieth-century music. For these reasons:

- a) The folk music bears no relation to twentieth-century experience. The composer's essential job is to explore his own experience as a thinking man of his own time through the medium of musical sound. Anything else is a diversion, hence irrelevant.
- b) The only value folk music can be to a serious modern composer is to show him ways, other than his own and those of his time, in which commanding musical forms have been arrived at — like history or myth to a twentieth-century writer.
- c) Folk music arises from its own time and its own place. It bears a relation to its own time and place; an exploratory and interpretative relation which it does not bear to experience of three hundred years thereafter. As such, it may be used by a serious twentieth-century composer, in a serious composition, only as a touching means of expressing nostalgia — as Eliot used a line from Spenser in *The Waste Land*; to evoke, with its appropriate overtones, a certain expressive phase in human history and feeling; and to place this beside twentieth-century facts, with a view to implicit evaluation, or as an essay in nostalgia. But a twentieth-century composition drawn exclusively from such material could be, at best, a graceful and limited tribute to a past moment. Arthur Duff's²⁵ eighteenth-century work is graceful pastiche in this way: but it has nothing to do with the exploration of new, twentieth-century experience.²⁶

As will be readily apparent, Donoghue's arguments are deeply flawed, being based on naïve historicist and evolutionary premises. His notion that anyone might want to arrange an Irish folk tune in the style of Pierre Boulez — of all people — seems quite bizarre. Many readers would undoubtedly take exception to his implicit denigration of folk music as a 'primitive' art that has been superseded by 'advanced'

²⁵ Arthur Duff (1889-1956) was an Irish composer best known for his light orchestral works. Donoghue is referring to his *Echoes of Georgian Dublin* (1955).

²⁶ Document entitled 'Denis Donoghue: His Counterblast' (copy in 'Scripts '54 - '59', PA)

European art music. They might also find his assertion that it 'bears no relation to twentieth-century experience' to be deeply questionable. Clearly, many major creative figures did not — Stravinsky, Bartók, Szymanowski, Vaughan Williams and Britten amongst them. Donoghue's failure to allude to this obvious fact leads one to wonder how wide his listening experience and general knowledge actually was, or how well equipped he might have been to write about music in a professional capacity, let alone make authoritative pronouncements on complex issues of this nature.

Although we have no record of what the participants actually said when the debate took place, Donoghue does not seem to have made a particularly favourable impression, to judge from a letter Fleischmann sent to Potter the following day:

Though I missed all but the end of last night's broadcast, I got a detailed description of the debate, and I would like (I am sure with you) to see D. D. hanged, drawn and quartered. Unlike the Hanslick type (who was at least a knowledgeable musician) our friend is a dilettante in the worst know-all tradition, postulates his ridiculous theories, and expects composers and composition to kow-tow. I remember his attempt to polish off Brian Boydell's violin concerto because it did not conform to his ideas of what a violin concerto should be. And he seems to have a particularly thick skin, to come along with the same venomous attitude, after the dressing-down which Monk Gibbon gave him in the 'Virtually Dead' controversy in the *Irish Times* — did you follow this? I suppose he represents in an extreme form that kind of malicious reaction to creative work which one finds everywhere, and which it is a composer's duty to ignore.²⁷

These were fighting words, but as Fleischmann and Potter were to discover, the critical climate in Ireland from the late 1950s onwards became increasingly hostile to styles based on folk music, while works employing modernist or *avant-garde* compositional idioms were much more likely to receive a respectful hearing. In Fleischmann's case, these circumstances eventually precipitated a crisis in the late

²⁷ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 1 February 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

1960s during which he experienced a protracted period of creative uncertainty.²⁸ Potter, too, felt compelled to come to an accommodation with 'progressive' musical idioms in his work — a process that was to cause him considerable anxiety.

3.3 Potter's attitudes to musical modernism and the post-1945 *avant-garde*

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Potter sought to keep abreast of contemporary musical developments after settling in Dublin. One assumes that he would have been largely reliant on the radio to hear new music, as scores and recordings would have been difficult to obtain in Ireland at the period and live performances of new music were rare. Disappointingly, there are only one or two isolated references to contemporary music in his correspondence from these years: in 1955, for example, he wrote to *The Score* seeking information on Messiaen's so-called modes of limited transposition.²⁹ He could scarcely have failed to be aware of the rapidly growing prestige of serialism throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. As we have seen, he had encountered music by the Second Viennese School while a student at the RCM, but it had not aroused his interest. His attitude to it remained ambivalent, even though he eventually adopted a highly modified form of serial technique in certain works of the 1960s. Another radio script, probably dating from 1954, 'The Unimportance of Schoenberg', gives some indication of his responses to the Austrian composer and his epigones.³⁰ Despite the talk's provocative title, Potter speaks of Schoenberg in highly respectful terms, emphasising that he entertained no doubts either about the quality of his mind or his fundamental sincerity as an artist. He is also prepared to grant that 'many able and sincere people' admire Schoenberg's music, even if he himself remained unpersuaded. Nonetheless, he allows himself to wonder, without arriving at any definite conclusions, whether

²⁸ See de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 127ff.

²⁹ AJP to David Drew, 31 January 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA)

³⁰ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 4 September 1954 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 – 31/12/55', PA), in which he mentions having sketched four scripts 'dealing respectively with the Unimportance of Baroque, Critics, Music, and Musicians.' To judge from the contents of 'Scripts etc. 54 – 59', PA, the file in which Potter kept copies of various radio scripts and lectures he gave in the mid to late 1950s, his ideas for the lectures changed and one became 'The Unimportance of Schoenberg'.

Schoenberg's achievement is, in fact, quite as impressive as his admirers maintain. Potter contends that while erudition, contrapuntal skill and a highly developed craftsmanship — qualities that Schoenberg patently possessed in no small measure — are of incontestable importance, the possession of these qualities is of itself no guarantee that a composer's music will have interest or vitality. Neither, in his view, is 'originality' or 'modernity' of itself a proof of enduring excellence — Bach, he reminds us, was regarded as being old-fashioned in his lifetime. He also expresses his concern that dodecaphony seemed incompatible with beauty of sound and that serial composers appeared to disdain melody, commenting wryly that 'if you mention the word "tunes" in our classier musical circles, you'll get the same kind of reception as you would if you said 'trousers' to Queen Victoria'. For him and for many listeners, he contends, these qualities are an indispensable component of the pleasure that music provides. He goes on to point out that a composer such as Gounod continues to appeal in spite of all his deficiencies of technique and taste, and the unpretentious songs of Stephen Foster are still performed when much more ambitious music by his contemporaries has been long forgotten.

His faith in Schoenberg's musicianship and integrity did not extend to serialism's academic exponents, however, some of whom he clearly regarded as fatuous in the extreme:

You can find a good example of the kind of futility to which the ... type descend in a controversy that had been going on recently in the rarefied altitudes of the musical press. A couple of learned gentlemen have been having a very cordial argument on the number of different chords of varying quantities that can be got out of the twelve-tone scale. One gent say 42 four-note chords and the other gent says no, 43: then the first gent allows that's right and playfully remarks that the chord he'd forgotten was the diminished seventh and doesn't that just show you how wonderfully modern he is. They seem to agree that there are 80 different six-note chords and 66 seven-note chords, one twelve-note chord and one no-note chord (this last must be a bit of a relief, you'd think). And so on and so forth. There is a great deal made of the 'symmetry' of their tables and a lot about 'tropes', 'mirrors',

'aspects' and what have you. But the thing which sticks out like a sore thumb is that not once in all the thousands of words does either party have anything to say about what these chords sound like. And I'm sorry, but you know, music is something you hear — not that you look at. All the nicest printing in the world won't make it sound good, will it?

This sort of nonsense is typical of the sort of the two kinds of nuisance who are, and always have been, the curse of music. The first are the ones with minds so limited that they must have a written constitution: they are perpetually trying to reduce music to a set of formulae and to describe in words what it should sound like, instead of letting it sound for itself: throughout history, they have never been able to do anything except badger their fellow musicians into blindly following the regulations set in turn by Fux, Rameau, Cherubini, the whole tribe of 'picking-out-the-fifths' theorists of the nineteenth century - and now, the dodecaphonists. The other sort are like chefs — they're professional musicians mostly, and their palates get jaded with unending repetition of the masterpieces they know backwards. The result is that their musical appetites need constant stimulation with 'piquant' sauces and 'interesting' dishes before they can be tempted to eat: the thought of a good wholesome cut of the joint and two veg brings them out in a cold sweat. What they forget is that the ordinary public (that's the people who pay the piper and should, if democracy means anything, call the tune) — ordinary folk haven't had their appetites ruined, and they don't need musical caviar and goulash before they can take a musical bite.

The best cure for either of these menaces is to quit practicing music altogether for a spell, and drive buses or dig holes in the road, or tot up other people's money from 9 to 5 instead. That might make them realise what it is they're missing and get their minds back to a few first principles.

At this remove, it is difficult not to sympathise with Potter's expressions of exasperation with the alembicated pedantry, the doctrinaire attitudes and pretentiousness obscurantism that were often attendant on new music in the decades after the Second World War. Ivory towers were evidently not for him, and he doubted the validity of modernist styles that alienated such a large proportion of a

composer's potential audience. This was a matter of considerable moment in an Irish context: the listenership for classical music was already small, and for composers to adopt a *recherché* contemporary idiom meant that he risked placing his contact with it in jeopardy, perpetuating the marginalisation to which he was subject. Fleischmann had confronted precisely this dilemma some twenty years previously on returning home to Ireland from his studies in Germany, arguing in one of his early articles that it would be counterproductive for the contemporary young composer to 'plunge into the principles of Schoenberg or Milhaud and let loose a series of atonal or polytonal profundities upon the astonished ears of a public acclimatised to Moore [i.e. Thomas Moore's Irish Melodies].'³¹

One of Potter's central concerns in this radio script was to plead for a greater measure of stylistic openness and for an acceptance of the validity of other modes of creative expression, including music in a lighter vein. This issue was clearly very much on his mind in the mid-1950s, as he struggled to evolve a compositional style that would command critical respect, yet enable him to write music that audiences might enjoy. In 1955, he sent a letter to Sir Thomas Beecham expounding his predicament at some length, having read with interest an article in the *Sunday Times* in which the eminent English conductor had stated his views on the problematic nature of the relationship between the contemporary composer and his audience:

I most heartily agree with you that 'our musicians are now writing in an uncanny species of vacuum' and that with all that you go on to say. But do you, sir, from your point of eminence realise what happens to those musicians who do NOT write in this 'uncanny species of vacuum'? My own first commissioned work (effects for a nativity play) was written some twenty-five years ago when I was eleven or twelve. Since then, apart from the usual adolescent divagations into dodecaphonics etc., I have tried, as you so rightly say we must, to address myself 'persuasively to the public of today, such as it is.' The net result may be judged by the fact that you, in

³¹ Aloys Fleischmann, 'Composition and the Irish Folk Idiom', *Ireland To-Day*, 1, 6 (1936), 37–44, 40. For a detailed discussion of Fleischmann's views, see de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 56ff.

common with most of the rest of the musical world, have never heard of either me or my music.

I am not so entirely unfortunate as might seem from this, however, for the authorities here do make fairly strenuous efforts to support Irish composers regardless of their musical alignment: and I must admit that since I gave up attempting to storm the BBC bastions and came home, I have managed to secure one or two performances of each and every work which I have written. But even here, it is the fate of any composer who does not write up to the very *dernier cri* to be dismissed as a mere 'imitator' of this, that, or the other household name in accordance with the taste, learning, or lack of it of each individual critic. Now I myself (and from what you have written, I gather you agree with me), I feel that if you are to reach understanding with your audience, it must be by means of a musical language which they understand. In other words, your composer must use an idiom largely inherited by both himself and his audience to express his original thoughts to that audience in a manner comprehensible to them. But he can still be entirely original albeit in a familiar idiom just as Beethoven was original in the familiar 'Viennese' idiom or Dukas used the Wagnerian idiom in which to say most un-Wagnerian things in *L'apprenti sorcier*.

But the musical powers that be — the corporation selection committees and the contemporary music societies — they won't let you do this: you have to write in 'an uncanny species of vacuum' or your scores will be fired back at you with polite remarks about being 'not quite suitable for the kind of purpose we have in mind' etc. etc. The only men who dare write either a common chord or a tune are V[aughan] W[illiams] and Sibelius — and that is only because they are too big to stop. Not only that, but if you are lucky and your works do reach the stage of performance, what is the upshot? No-one minds adverse criticism (especially when one has done one's own stint in the rag-trade), but any work which is written in a familiar idiom will not be criticised: it will merely be contemptuously dismissed as second-hand so-and-so. Added to which, if your composer, like myself, has been unwise enough to acquire a musical doctorate, he will automatically be stigmatised as 'academic', whatever he may write, be it neo-Stainer or Schoenberg with knobs on.³²

³² AJP to Thomas Beecham, 14 August 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA)

Potter returned to the subject several years later in another radio talk entitled 'The Gap', which appears to have been written around 1959, the 'gap' in question being the one that he perceived to separate the contemporary composer from his audience.³³ In this, he presented a rather more elaborate account of his views, and articulated his sense of the impossible predicaments confronted by composers of his generation. He opens by acknowledging that the audience for complex musical works has always been very small, contending that to imagine otherwise is to indulge in unwarranted romantic idealisation of the past: there has always been a 'gap', in that sense, between the composer and his public. Nonetheless, he suggests that the position of the composer has undergone a dramatic transformation since the development of mass media, which have caused this gap to widen into a yawning chasm. His argument runs as follows. Modern composers have generally lost their aristocratic patrons and previously select audience. Their new patrons are the 'monolithic masses of the state radio networks or the giant record companies – either of which disposes of more power, and may use it more arbitrarily than the most tyrannical potentate-patron of classical times.' These organisations are generally run as businesses to make a profit, and to do so, must appeal to the tastes of 'men-in-the-street subject to every condition of mob-psychology'. Insofar as these have any interest in classical musical at all, their tastes are generally conservative and do not extend to new music. This appears to place the composer in a hopeless position, since - artistic considerations aside – he must contend with the problem of making a living under these conditions, selling a product that very few people seem to want to buy.

From a strictly statistical and business viewpoint, the demand for good serious music can be met for the next hundred years from existing stocks, as it were, without a single note of new music being written. And you can't blame the powers that be – directors of this, managers of that, chairmen of the other – if they take a strictly statistical and businesslike view. After all, in these democratic days, our affairs are;

³³ A copy of this script is contained in 'Scripts '54 – '59', PA.

in the end, ordered by the counting of heads. And if some of those heads happen to be empty, well, that's just too bad, isn't it? Take Beethoven's Razumovsky quartets: in the long run, they were paid for by the slave labour on Count Razumovsky's estates. But supposing those slaves had been asked their opinion in a nice respectable democratic way, which do you think they'd have voted for? Chamber music from Mr Beethoven — or bigger pensions for superannuated slaves?

He goes on to point out that composers who can secure posts in radio stations, university music departments or conservatoires are often better placed to secure performances of their work, and that some of them exploit their positions shamelessly to this end. Composers who are not so fortunate must make shift as best they can. Programmers, conductors and other performers are inundated with requests to play new music. Under these conditions, Potter claims, composers have recourse to desperate expedients in order to attract attention to themselves, writing music that is wilfully *outré* in the hope of appealing to the rarefied tastes of influential figures in the contemporary music world who might help them advance their careers. These new works may have a certain shock value, but are possessed of little intrinsic merit, and leave audiences indifferent. Potter goes on to suggest that there is an unhealthy climate of intellectual intimidation surrounding new music, which prevents many intelligent commentators from speaking out frankly and condemning much of this work as pretentious rubbish, for fear of attracting opprobrium and being perceived as obscurantist:

The unfortunate public gets another belting of cacophony — while the wretched critics who do know what they're at get driven up the walls, because though every instinct tells them that what they're listening to is drivel, they daren't say so for fear that the *avant-garde* ... will write to their editors complaining that they're obstructing progress.

From the script's conclusion, it becomes clear that he could not bring himself to adopt an aggressively 'contemporary' idiom in a cynical ploy to win critical approval and write in styles in which he did not believe, despite the risk that this entailed.

However much one might disagree with Potter's appraisal of the contemporary music scene in the 1950s and 1960s, one can only admire his integrity in this regard. He was unwilling, however, to stop writing altogether and he was, moreover, dependent on his pen for a living. This left him with no alternative but to adapt as best he could to conditions in Ireland. This meant that he had to resign himself to writing arrangements and light music for which he knew there was a demand, hoping that opportunities would occasionally arise that allowed him to compose music of a more serious nature. The rather poignant closing paragraphs of 'The Gap' were undoubtedly written with his own circumstances in mind: writing to the radio critic G. A. Olden to notify him about the talk, Potter informed him that it might help explain 'why Irish composers didn't write more original music instead of endless arrangements' — a question which Olden had apparently raised in print.³⁴

[If] your man is the kind who just has to have his stuff performed, and can't write without, then he will condition himself to put on paper whatever it is he is certain will be performed — traditional arrangements, Tin Pan Alley, school music, sweet sugar for ladies' choirs — anything there's a steady demand for and will get performed pronto... It may be a perversion of talent — like a plant that grows crooked to grow around some obstacle — but it does give some satisfaction to the composer himself. But it still doesn't solve the problem of the gap between his own serious music and the people he wants to hear it. In fact, it may even exacerbate it: because if he has to hold his technique in check in order to write the kind of music that will be performed, then once he is free to write his own serious music, he's liable, in reaction, to break out beyond the receptive capacity of his audience, and so we're back in our vicious circle again.

There is considerable evidence to suggest that precisely these apparently irreconcilable tensions had induced a crisis of self-confidence by the time 'The Gap' came to be written. Potter became acutely sensitive to the manner in which he was perceived by critics and professional colleagues, and feared that he was not being

³⁴ See AJP to G. A. Olden, 9 May 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA). I have not succeeded in locating the relevant newspaper article by Olden.

accorded the recognition that he felt was his due. (As we shall see in the last chapter, these anxieties appear to have been particularly acute in the period when he was working on the television opera *Patrick* in the early 1960s). Part of the problem, in his view, was that for all the pious aspirations that Ireland would in time produce a commanding creative figure comparable in stature to Vaughan Williams or Sibelius, the Dublin musical intelligentsia, such as it was, tended to regard the work of native composers with condescension. It was deemed inferior simply by virtue of being Irish, while music by foreign composers, no matter how poor, would automatically be guaranteed a respectful hearing. Attitudes of this nature almost certainly existed and, indeed, held sway in other domains of Irish social and cultural life apart from music. Some six decades previously, in a lecture 'On the Necessity for de-Anglicizing Ireland', the eminent Gaelic scholar Douglas Hyde had excoriated his countrymen's tendency to ape British manners and fashions and undervalue, or even to disparage, everything that was Irish. Potter believed that this mentality persisted as a pernicious legacy of colonial occupation, and held that it was particularly in evidence amongst members of the former Protestant ascendancy class, although by no means confined to them. He would undoubtedly have ascribed Denis Donoghue's sweeping dismissal of Irish composition to this cause; and he detected it in Charles Acton's reviews for the *Irish Times*, traditionally the organ of Irish Protestant opinion. In a letter of 1962, he identified the essential characteristics of this mentality as follows:

Another attitude which one has to fight is the 'ascendancy' one — particularly apparent, I need hardly say, in one particular morning newspaper [i.e. the *Irish Times*]. It is rather subtle, and it goes like this. The Irish are peasants or (like me) lower-class proletarians from Belfast. Now, in the gospel of the ascendancy, only the English, and the upper-class public-school-and-university ones at that, are capable of the finer feelings necessary to the production of works of art. Therefore, if any Irish peasant, or lower class proletarian from Belfast does have the temerity to try and ape his betters and write 'serious' music, he must be taught a sharp lesson at once and made to understand that such things are not for the likes of him. Hence the lying prejudiced notices of anything Irish and the lauding to heaven of anything foreign,

no matter what its intrinsic worth. ... But also hence something else... Granted that the peasantry mustn't be allowed to get above themselves and imagine they can write 'art music'... But they must be permitted — nay, encouraged — to indulge in their own quaint folk music. So any musician who is content to play with his pipes and his bones [i.e. *the percussion instrument used in Irish traditional music*] and his fiddles and the rest, he will be graciously permitted to amuse his betters with his quaint rustic antics and get praised accordingly... But, as I say, let any peasant or proletarian try to get above himself and do what those other proletarian peasants such as Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, Verdi and the rest did — and lady, he's for it. If you don't believe me, read your papers...³⁵

In Potter's analysis, the Irish composer appeared to be caught in a set of impossible double-binds. If folk influences were not in evidence in his work, he risked being perceived in certain quarters as insufficiently 'Irish'. If they were in evidence, he incurred the sneering censure of critics like Donoghue who would condemn his music by this token as provincial, deeming it insufficiently 'modern' or 'cosmopolitan'. But if his work was based on Irish folk music, it would automatically be undervalued because of the lingering colonial attitudes that Potter describes, since traditional music, like the Irish language, was regarded in some quarters with misprision as the product of a backward peasant society: compositions that were based on it somehow partook of qualities associated with that culture which, in the minds of many Dubliners, were a source of embarrassment. Works of this kind, however, provided critics with a welcome opportunity to feel superior and sustain the self-flattering illusion of being intellectually sophisticated. If, on the other hand, the composer attempted to write anything more ambitious, the same mentality would cause the critics to regard it with condescension, since they secretly did not believe that the work of any Irish composer could ever amount to much — and could certainly never bear favourable comparison with the work of composers from other countries.

³⁵ AJP to Anne Wallace, 24 February 1962 ('General 1/1/62 – 63', PA)

Since prejudices of this kind are, by their very nature, seldom articulated with complete explicitness, and are often held unconsciously, it is difficult to determine how widespread they were or whether they exerted as much influence as Potter claimed. Apart from Donoghue's article in *Studies*, there is little evidence of pejorative attitudes towards Irish composition in other documentary sources. This does not necessarily mean that they did not exist, however, and Potter may have sensed them in the course of his professional encounters with other Irish musicians. One can certainly understand why the tone and content of Charles Acton's notices might have proved a source of irritation, however, although it would be unwise to infer that Acton fully shared the attitudes that Potter described. A few of his reviews certainly do strike one as condescending and dismissive. Reviewing Potter's *Rhapsody under a High Sky* in 1955, he averred that it would make 'excellent film music for, say, a pastoral documentary about summer in Co. Meath, complete with larks ascending and the usual trappings. But, like really competent film music, it is not memorable.'³⁶ Writing *a propos* of *Variations on a Popular Tune* three years later, he commented:

English composers (especially Malcolm Arnold) seem adept at turning out colourful but unmemorable bits of froth, but in this vein A. J. Potter seems to do it rather better. Last night showed me that his joke on 'The Wild Colonial Boy' is wearing very well, provided it is not heard too often.³⁷

These remarks are clearly inane, and someone less sensitive than Potter might have brushed them off. Nonetheless, the decidedly back-handed compliment — that Potter was even more adept at being unmemorable than some of his prominent English contemporaries — sounds an unnecessarily wounding and sarcastic note. Comments of this nature convey how low an estimate of Potter's talents Acton entertained at this period, regarding him as a purveyor of derivative, undistinguished music that was devoid of substance.

³⁶ Charles Acton, 'Autumn "Prom" at Olympia', *Irish Times*, 7 November 1955. This notice contains a printer's error, which caused one line to be transposed during the passage quoted.

³⁷ Charles Acton, 'Chose Strange Hour of Music', *Irish Times*, 13 September 1958.

Acton's attitude would later change after the premiere of the television opera *Patrick* in 1965: in his review, he admitted that it was the first serious work from the composer's pen which had made a wholly favourable impression on him.³⁸ The reason for his change of heart, I would suggest, can be directly attributed to the marked change in Potter's style which came about in the intervening period. In several works written between 1959 and 1965, Potter made a concerted effort to develop an unmistakably 'modern' idiom, sometimes employing a highly modified form of dodecaphonic procedures, as well as astringent bitonality and polytonality. And as the surface of his music became more dissonant, Acton began to treat him with greater respect, presumably satisfied that he was now sufficiently 'up-to-date'.

An interesting exchange of correspondence between Potter and Fleischmann a few years later confirms that composers had come to feel these critical pressures acutely and regarded them as a professional hazard. In 1967, Fleischmann contacted Potter to ask if he would accept a commission to write a work for the Seminar in Contemporary Choral Music at the Cork International Choral Festival the following year. The older composer, who shared Potter's scepticism about the productions of the *avant-garde*³⁹, confided to his colleague that, in his view, the Seminar had suffered in recent years from a surfeit of rather dreary works issuing from the pens of what he described as 'navel-gazing' composers. Writing to indicate his acceptance, Potter assured his colleague that he would come up with something lively for the occasion.⁴⁰ On receiving this reply, Fleischmann quickly had second thoughts: he evidently feared that if Potter wrote a piece that was too accessible in idiom for the event, it would almost certainly elicit censorious comments from Acton for being stylistically conservative. He wrote back hastily to clarify:

³⁸ See Chapter 6 for a discussion of Acton's response to the work.

³⁹ See de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann*, 131-2.

⁴⁰ See Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 15 and 23 June 1967, and AJP to Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 16 June 1967 (all in 'Nº1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA).

It has just occurred to me that while stressing the need to impress and please our audiences, I failed to make clear that the needs of the Seminar work in quite the opposite direction! ... What I am trying to get at is this, that if you are good enough to write a fairly popular work, under pressure from us, and if from the Seminar point of view this is less interesting, we shall have Charlie Acton denouncing us in the *Irish Times* again as placing the Irish composer in an unhappy position, and indeed with justice. So do you think you could steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of the situation, and write something which will work both ways?⁴¹

To an extent, Potter managed to respond in a genuinely creative manner to these critical pressures, which caused him to break new ground stylistically, particularly in the ballets *Gamble*, *No Gamble* and *Full Moon for the Bride*. Nonetheless, he was only willing to proceed so far in this direction. Although he was certainly interested up to a point in exploring various modernist compositional styles, he remained deeply sceptical about the ultimate value of much contemporary experimentation. He felt many younger composers lacked the rudiments of a compositional technique ('The present-day composers are so incompetent that us old ones don't have to fear the slightest competition when it comes to doing a real job of work', he remarked waspishly in one letter⁴²), but that contemporary styles allowed their musical deficiencies and the incoherence of their compositions to go undetected. The prevailing climate, in his view, was one that encouraged charlatanism — a state of affairs for which he held influential figures such as William Glock largely responsible. He made no secret of his antipathy to Glock's artistic policies during his period with the BBC, describing him 'as the greatest disaster to English music since Oliver Cromwell smashed the organs'.⁴³ When asked in 1966 to submit a confidential assessment of the capabilities of a student composer who was being considered for an award, his remarks testify to the extent of his cynicism about the current state of contemporary music:

⁴¹ Aloys Fleischmann to AJP, 3 July 1967 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

⁴² Letter from AJP to Desmond Drake of 28 June 1974 ('Personal 1974-5', PA).

⁴³ AJP to Charles Kennedy, 25 November 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66, PA)

As a composer and a musician, I should class [X] as definitely second-rate were the standards of unadulterated musicianship and know-how which I apply to myself and my better pupils to receive general application. ... It is safe to say, however, that as long as the guidance of musical affairs in general continues to remain in the hands of such people as (say) Mr William Glock of the BBC or the like, then [X's] future can confidently be predicted as likely to be very sound indeed — perhaps even brilliant.⁴⁴

In a letter of the following year, he formulated his views in an even more provocative fashion:

We are often called upon to pity the poor composers of totalitarian states who cry all the way to their state-supplied dachas at not being allowed to be 'modern' and 'experimental' like their lucky western contemporaries, and have to keep churning out music that's actually comprehensible to their hearers... But does anyone spare a tear for those unfortunate of the western world who would love — Oh! how they would love it — to write all the nice tunes they could turn out: nice tunes that the errand boys could whistle and with harmonies that you would know in a moment if anything was wrong... Only, of course, they daren't... Mr You-Know-Who and his pals in the committees and press rooms are so busy proving themselves up-to-date, 'with-it', and above all, no longer 'Auntie', that it is artistic death for any 'serious' composer to write anything less than earcracking.

Here in Ireland, of course, things are not all that bad — not as far as RTÉ are concerned, anyway: they (and, to be just, most of their fellow patrons) do allow the composer to write what he thinks he should, and how he thinks he should. The same cannot be said, though, of the 'intellectual' audience and such of the press as is content to be their 'running dog'... A piece of solid workman-like entertainment will be sneered at as "the kind of thing Harty did years ago". On the other hand, you get the charlatans' choice of the 'experimental' bits. They may have the professionals who are called upon to cope with their inept unplayability hooting with helpless laughter. But they will still be reported as "the most interesting work of the... year

⁴⁴ AJP to Mary Kingston, 9 May 1966 ('General correspondence from Dec. '65 to Dec. '66', PA)

— decade — century — country” (season to taste and suit yourself) and, of course, “We must be allowed another chance to hear this most etc. etc. etc.”⁴⁵

Potter’s fatuous comments about composers living under totalitarian regimes suggest an alarming degree of naivety on his part, but he makes an interesting point nonetheless: namely, that in the current critical climate, there seemed to be no place for well-crafted, unpretentious music that simply set out to divert and entertain, offering an uncomplicated aesthetic pleasure. The same letter contains an interesting paragraph which clearly suggests that Potter’s own estimate of his talents was decidedly modest: he saw himself primarily as a purveyor of what one might describe as well-crafted musical journalism, which aspired neither to durability nor profundity. Writing a propos of the composer’s freedom to write as he wished, on which modernists of all stripes set so high a store, he asked rhetorically:

Free, though? What do you mean by that? The speculation is not so unworldedly [*sic.*] philosophical as it might seem... We all know about the wretched hack who has to grind out journalese when he’d rather be writing the novel of the century... But what about the converse? What about all those novelists who would be so much happier (and more fittingly employed) if they were only able to spend their time writing journalese — good journalese — instead of wasting it on bad novels?⁴⁶

Eventually, his inhibiting self-consciousness about the style of his music seems to have lessened, and his attitude to these questions increasingly became one of ironical detachment. Accompanying these changes was the realisation that he could only write the sort of music which he had it in him to write, and believed to be a valid form of artistic expression. Perhaps the clearest formulation of the position he ultimately adopted is found in another letter of 1966 to a British music student who had contacted him looking for information about his compositions. The manner in which Potter discusses his musical style seems indicative of a newly-won self-confidence:

⁴⁵ AJP to Venetia O’Sullivan, 18 November 1968 (‘Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9’, PA)

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

I began composing when I was about 10 and continued really on my own to all intents and purposes until I came to Vaughan Williams at the RCM. But I did not follow in his particular line of country. If you want to know what my approach would be, it is that I have studied all the developments of the last hundred years and consider them to be all possibilities for developing one's own style. You might put me down as 'eclectic' provided you don't think that that's a dirty word musically. When I was about 17, I did write some exclusively serial music, but grew out of it along with pimples and the illusion that you could make any changes in this world by changing governments.

I do use serial techniques now, but in my own special way. [...] I use it whenever it would seem to suit my convenience. I could not possibly tolerate the academic pedagogy [sic.] of the like of Schoenberg, Berg & co. Being told that you have to be consistent with note rows is about as useful to me as being told that you couldn't use consecutive fifths.

Like everyone else of my generation, I was mortally scared in my young days of being old-fashioned and 'unoriginal'. Now that I have written my share of music that, whatever else it may be, is certainly neither 'old-fashioned' nor considered to be 'unoriginal', I have the great relief of feeling free to do exactly as I please: if I want to sport with a note row, then I do so. And if I want to write a nice piece in C major, then I do that too. I have learnt that originality is not to be found in this, that, or the other system, but rather in what you do with whatever system you happen to choose.

Candidly, my view is that we have had enough of experimentation over the last hundred years. It is now time to digest some of our experiments, and this is what I am doing with my compositions — or at least, trying to. [...] One of the things that I remember Vaughan Williams saying is that 'There's still a lot of juice to be squeezed out of the diatonic lemon'. I've always felt that he was right.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ AJP to Deirdre McHugh, 18 March 1966 ('General Correspondence from Dec. 1965 to Dec. 1966', PA)

As these remarks might suggest, by the mid-1960s Potter's music was notable for its increasing stylistic diversity. Apart from occasional forays into popular styles, he composed considerable quantities of light music, some of it based on Irish folk music. His serious compositions continued to evince the neo-Romantic or modal harmonic language of his earlier music, though making more extensive use of bitonality and polytonality, as well as serial elements. Each of these had its place in his stylistic armoury, and could be brought into prominence or not as the occasion required. Potter seems to have revelled in these chameleon-like mutations, which almost make him seem a proto-postmodernist. As he told a correspondent,

[I] reiterate my belief that there are only the two kinds of music — good and bad... whether it be written in the scale of C, or modal, or chromatic, or atonal, or serial, or electronic, or whatever — no matter. If it's good, it's good, and if it ain't, it ain't. ... Regarding the various technical possibilities open to one — serialism, modalism, bitonality [*sic.*], etc. etc. ... My opinion is that any self-respecting composer ought to be able to handle them all — and also be able to decide for himself which is the most suitable for his purpose in hand.⁴⁸

This attitude is also in evidence in his responses to a questionnaire sent to him in 1968 by a German musicologist wishing to elicit information about his work. Under the heading 'Disciple of', he entered 'No-one'; and under 'Style and Tendency', he wrote 'uses whatever technique seems most suitable to the work in question', appending a lengthy list by way of illustration that was almost certainly composed tongue-in-cheek:

- A. Serialism: in the ballets *Caitlín Bhocht & Gamble, No Gamble*
- B. Neo-romantic hyper-chromaticism: in *Concerto da chiesa* and opera *Patrick*
- C. Modernised diatonic naturalism: in cantatas *The Classiad, Ten Epigrams by Hillaire Belloc*
- D. Neo-modalism: in some hundreds of works in the 'National' category, ... arrangements of Irish airs, etc.

⁴⁸ AJP to Sarah Burn, 26 January 1978 ('Nº7: Fan Mail July 1977 – 8 + FIN', PA)

- E. Experimental sounds — cum — electronic [*sic.*]: in incidental music such as *The Baron in Hell*, *Voices of Shem* etc.
- F. Eclectic combination of several styles as given above: *Sinfonia de Profundis*, ballets *Careless Love*, *Full Moon for the Bride*
- G. Development of commercial 'pop': Musical play *The Scatterin'*
- H. Popularised refining of twentieth-century tendencies into many works for theatre orchestra including concertinos for every orchestral instrument.⁴⁹

Such stylistic eclecticism was not without its dangers, however, particularly when Potter employed heterogeneous idioms in one and the same work. As we shall see in Chapter 6, Potter's two operas present interesting test cases in this respect. His first opera *Patrick* juxtaposes recondite 'serious' idioms with popular styles, but with rather unhappy results. In his second opera, *The Wedding*, the fusion of disparate styles is notably more successful, however, resulting in a kind of polystylism that is employed to telling ironic effect.

3.4 Potter as a composer of light music

As we have seen, one of the consequences of the restricted nature of the performance opportunities available to Potter in the 1950s and 1960s was that a considerable proportion of his output consisted of light orchestral music. Despite his remarks in 'The Gap' about the compromises that composers sometimes find themselves compelled to adopt in order to survive, it would be wrong to conclude that Potter composed light music reluctantly. Although he would probably have preferred to compose a greater quantity of serious works, he maintained that there was also a place in the repertoire for unpretentious compositions which aimed to do no more than offer pleasure. Potter saw his task as a composer in a wholly uncomplicated way: he simply wished to communicate with audiences as directly as possible and write music that they would enjoy hearing. In one of his most characteristic pronouncements on this subject, he remarked:

⁴⁹ AJP to Hans Ulrich Schumann, 23 July 1968 ('№1: Miscellaneous 1967-8', PA)

I do not believe in ivory towers, and if anything I write does not make itself immediately understood by the audience — and then go on to keep on giving them new pleasures ... [I] have failed.⁵⁰

This attitude naturally predisposed him towards writing light music, which he regarded as providing a valuable opportunity for the contemporary composer to remain in contact with his audience. He was much exercised by the fact that critics tended to adopt a superior attitude towards this repertory and dismiss it out of hand. He was equally dismayed by the fact that it progressively disappeared from the airwaves in the 1960s, which, in his view, made the gulf between the contemporary composer and his potential audience appear more unbridgeable than ever. As he complained to one correspondent:

One of the most distressful things about this most distressful country of ours is the way in which, since winning independence from England, the powers that be have slavishly copied everything that is worst in the English way of life. In music, this means that they have accepted hook, line and sinker the wholly fallacious English delusion that there are only two kinds of music: serious — or good... and light — or bad. ... It follows, therefore, that the most inane outpourings of some wet-behind-the-ears undergraduate composer — who doesn't know he's alive yet will be taken in all seriousness — provided he gives it a solemn title — like *Salute to Nkrumah*⁵¹ or *Cosmos IV*. While the work of a master like Sullivan or Edward German will be sneered at and spurned merely because it happens to be 'light'.⁵²

He also contended that the idioms of *avant-garde* music precluded the expression of humour and a sense of *joie de vivre*. In the post-war musical climate, these attributes were now regarded as suspect, while critics seemed willing to lend automatic credence to any manifestation of pretentious obscurity:

⁵⁰ AJP to Sarah Burn, 26 January 1978 ('Nº7: Fan Mail July 1977 – 8 + FIN', PA)

⁵¹ Presumably a reference to Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the founder, and later President of Ghana, and one of the most influential pan-Africanists of the twentieth century.

⁵² AJP to Anne Wallace, 24 February 1962 ('General 1/1/62 – 63', PA)

If some college kid sits on his fanny contemplating his navel and giving us the benefit of his observations on the infinite, everyone always thinks how wonderfully profound it all is. But if you write anything, however 'serious' musically it may be, that suggests that there might be some fun in life after all, you're straightway classed with the red-nosed vaudeville comedians.⁵³

These attitudes, incidentally, were very much in keeping with his own musical tastes, which appear to have been fairly catholic. To judge from a lecture he delivered in 1956 to the University Philosophical Society of Trinity College, Dublin, he had a keen appreciation of jazz and blues, contending that 'for those of eclectic tastes and willing to make the effort required, this music can be a source of interest and satisfaction.'⁵⁴ He was also quite free of intellectual snobbery when it came to popular music, telling one composer of pop songs who had sought his opinion of his work:

Re the question of the artistic and/or cultural merit of various varieties of music, my attitude to these things is that it takes all kinds to make a world. You get good symphonies — and bad ones, and you get good songs — and bad ones. I never take it from the egg-headed intellectuals that they're necessarily right. Your song ... was a good one, and as such, is in my mind much more entitled to be called of 'artistic/cultural merit' than much of the so-called progressive drivel that you hear at 'twentieth-century festivals' — or 'prom' concerts.⁵⁵

Indeed, Potter himself had briefly considered trying to write pop songs, presumably as a means of earning some extra money - in 1956, he contacted the General Secretary of the British Songwriters' Guild to ask for advice about agents who might help him obtain work in this domain.⁵⁶ Although he does not seem to have pursued his explorations any further at this time, he continued to arrange occasional pieces of pop music if asked to do so, and a few years later would even try his hand at writing

⁵³ AJP to Patrick Mahony, 25 July 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

⁵⁴ Undated script, 'The Development of Negroid American Folk Music' ('General 1956', PA)

⁵⁵ AJP to Derry Lindsay, 14 April 1972 ('N^o 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)', PA)

⁵⁶ AJP to General Secretary, Songwriter's Guild, 7 December 1956 ('General 1956', PA)

some numbers in rock-and-roll style as part of his incidental music to *The Scatterin'*, a play by the Irish sculptor James McKenna which was staged during the 1960 Dublin Theatre Festival. In the context of Potter's output as a whole, his involvement with popular music is of very minor significance, but it is interesting nonetheless for the light that it sheds on his creative personality.

It is also worth noting that during the first phase of his professional career in the 1950s, Potter seems to have regarded himself principally as an arranger and composer of light music, rather than as a 'serious' composer. Shortly after the two men began to correspond, he informed John Cavanagh in response to an enquiry about his work that 'the vast majority of what I do is "arrangements" for orchestra, choirs, etc. etc., of traditional music.'⁵⁷ And, if one examines Potter's catalogue of works during the 1950s, this is not by any means an inaccurate description: most of his output consists of 'National Music' - arrangements and light music based on folk music. His ambition to write 'serious' music seems only to have asserted itself intermittently. Indeed, one has the distinct impression that, had he managed to establish himself in Britain or Germany, where there were far bigger audiences for light music, he would have been quite happy to devote himself to it altogether. The demand for his services from Radio Éireann evidently led him to hope that he could carve out a niche for himself as a kind of Irish counterpart to Eric Coates, and to judge from the contents of other letters to Cavanagh, if it came to a choice between writing light music which could find an appreciative audience or 'serious' music that would most likely be greeted with incomprehension and lack of interest, there was no question as to which he would prefer. In a letter of 1959, he confided to his American acquaintance how troubling he found the marginalised position of the Irish composer — a circumstance that was only exacerbated by the fact that audiences seemed generally indifferent to music written in the kind of modernist idioms espoused by some of his contemporaries (Potter seems to have been referring especially to Brian Boydell, whom he once described to Cavanagh with more than a

⁵⁷ AJP to John Cavanagh 22 July 1957 ('General 1/1/1957 – 5/6/58', PA)

faint whiff of irony as '[going] all out for the long-haired stuff'⁵⁸). As he told his correspondent,

In that gap which exists between the folksy-folksy dyed-in-the-wool Gaels and the stratospheric upper reaches of the higher intelligentsia, there appears to be only me as present: and it is a worrying thought.⁵⁹

The best solution, in his view, was for Irish composers to make more of an effort to reach out to their predominantly middlebrow audiences by writing attractive and well-crafted light music, as he himself was trying to do. In this way, 'a repertoire of the genre' could be built up which 'would enable series of concerts to be given with that particular audience in mind'.⁶⁰ He went on to mention that he had begun to compose a series of short concertante works which he was hoping to have performed during a new series of popular music programmes given by the RÉ Light Orchestra – a venture that Potter regarded as 'something to be encouraged'. And although he continued to write a considerable quantity of light music, in the long run the profound changes in listening habits and in musical fashions during the 1960s and 70s meant that his ambitions to achieve popularity in this vein were fated to remain largely unrealised.

One wonders too if, in directing so much of his energies towards the field of light music, Potter was motivated by a conviction that this was where his talents ultimately lay – during this period at least. Certainly others thought so, and seem to have found the few works he had written in a more serious vein to be less convincing. In 1958, he received a rather amusing letter from the Dublin critic and journalist John O'Donovan on the subject of his plans for various ambitious works, in which his correspondent gently suggested that he might be in danger of going against the grain of his creative personality:

⁵⁸ AJP to John Cavanagh, 23 April 1958 ('General 1/1/1957 – 5/6/58', PA)

⁵⁹ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 24 March 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

Dear AJP,

If that infernal pipping hadn't cut us short this morning I would have gone on to suggest to you that you are yourself falling into the danger of being what you term 'a bit English' in so strictly segregating your play-music and your work-music. The way you spoke of your Piano Concerto (in reverent capitals) and your Mass in six real parts leads me to fear the worst — i.e. that you have deliberately kept your natural good humour out of them. If you have done this, then you have sinned against your nature: sinned grievously, and I hereby call you to repentance. It's no use trying to set up as a humourless composer and eschewing musical puns like the very devil. It's no use, Potter. Even a mile off, you can be seen for the sunny chap you are. True, a cloud may now and then drift across your beaming countenance, but those jovial creases soon deepen into your habitual broad smile and the sun breaks out again and all's right with the world. Write a Mass if you must, but if I were you I wouldn't unless someone were dangling a fat cheque under my nose. And then it must be a Haydn Mass, not a Bach Mass or even a Beethoven: it must brim over with your natural ebullience and high spirits. Go to the *Nelson Mass*, or the *St Cecilia Mass*, and learn wisdom.

But failing the fat cheque, forget about a mass in six solemn parts, or sixty-six for that matter. As like or not you will only be encumbering the world with another batch of valueless or almost valueless crotchets and quavers. The composition of a mass nowadays springs from a desire to perform a technical exercise, not from inner compulsions, and if you want technical exercises there are many more ways of indulging yourself. But why bother about technical exercises when there's much more you could be about? Your obvious talent for humorous variations suggests at once a symphonic poem in the *Till Eulenspiegel* manner. There are a score of Irish mythological heroes whose adventures are simply shrieking out for musical chronicling. I can never remember their names because they were drummed into me at school and anything that was drummed into me in the hell-hole I suffered in for ten years I have resolutely forgotten. But any Gael will give you all the dope if you don't already know it.

Then there's the matter of a piano concerto, or violin concerto, or what-have-you concerto. Why shouldn't a piano concerto be light-hearted? Frivolous, even? Mozart took popular songs of the day and worked them into his finales without a by-your-leave; and what about that frightful but fascinating public house tune that the bassoon and the soloist share in the finale of the Beethoven violin concerto? There are delicious little tunes, just the very thing for quasi-symphonic treatment, to be found in that series of penny or tuppenny sheets that [An] Claisceadal ... publish.⁶¹ ... I daresay this may all strike you as coming close to teaching grandma to suck eggs, but I really feel your hankering after six-part masses spells danger not only to yourself, but also to the unfortunate critic who may have to sit them out and torment himself in finding some formula for insulting you civilly and even amusingly. So now, grab pen and paper and get down your ideas for a wickedly witty concerto. Prokofiev is dead! Long live Potter!! A fulsome dedication on the title page will greatly oblige

Yours satanically,
John O' Donovan⁶²

In the event, Potter demonstrated that he was a composer of considerably wider range than O'Donovan had been prepared to credit, and, in a few works at least, had shown himself capable of exploring a dark and unsettling emotional world. Nonetheless, the fact remains that much of his music is much less earnest in character, and even his more serious works can at times display characteristics more usually associated with light music, such as straightforward melodic invention and an evident concern for surface appeal, with the result that the boundary between these domains of his creative activity is somewhat fluid.

⁶¹ O'Donovan is referring to a contemporary series of published folksong arrangements, to which Michael Bowles, amongst others, contributed.

⁶² John O'Donovan to AJP, 21 August 1958 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

Part 2: Survey of Potter's later orchestral compositions

3.5 Preliminary remarks

Having outlined the salient features of Potter's compositional aesthetic in the preceding sections, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to a consideration of individual works in the light of what has been ascertained. While this survey presents an account of every major orchestral composition, it is not exhaustive, and neither is every score discussed in comparable detail. Unfortunately, there is no escaping the fact that Potter's later output is very uneven. To what extent this can be attributed to his alcoholism is anybody's guess, but there can be little doubt that prolonged periods of extremely heavy drinking impaired his artistic judgement — at least during certain periods of his life — to the detriment of his work. This is much to be regretted, for while some of his later orchestral works contain vivid material, many of them are flawed by structural miscalculations and other technical deficiencies which are often serious enough to render the scores in question unviable. For this reason, I have chosen to concentrate in the discussion that follows on those scores that seem to me to possess genuine merit, and avoid dwelling at length on pieces that manifestly have little to commend them. Thus, the first symphony, *Sinfonia de Profundis*, is considered in detail, while Symphony No. 2, which is a much weaker work, is dealt with more briefly, as is *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur*. Of the concertante works, I have singled out for discussion the *Caprice* for 'cello and orchestra of 1964, and the *Scherzo concertante* for violin, piano and orchestra of 1966, as they seem to me the most interesting and will suffice to give an impression of his general approach to the medium of solo instrument and orchestra. For practical reasons, I have chosen to discuss only two of his numerous arrangements of Irish folk music, *Fantasia Gaelach No. 1* and *Finnegan's Wake*, which are amongst the most successful of them. Throughout this section, therefore, the focus is firmly on those works of Potter's which constitute his finest achievements and therefore have an enduring claim on our attention.

3.6 Two arrangements: *Fantasia Gaelach No. 1* and *Finnegan's Wake*

As we have seen, as part of its efforts to build up a repertoire of home-grown light music in the early 1950s, the Radio Éireann Music Department not only commissioned Potter to produce arrangements, but also encouraged him to write slightly more substantial works for the RÉ Light Orchestra in the 'National Music' vein. The *Fantasia Gaelach No. 1* was the first in a series of such scores, in which Potter attempted to devise more sustained concert pieces based on traditional airs. The rhapsody based on folk song was an obvious genre for him to explore. This had, of course, been popularised in the previous century by Liszt, whose Hungarian Rhapsodies inspired many imitations. Later composers — Enescu and Kodály are notable examples that come to mind — raised the genre to a rather more sophisticated level, in which the folk tunes were subjected to extensive elaboration and presented in a virtuosic orchestral embodiment. Potter's immediate model was much more straightforward than the rhapsodies of either of these composers — the *Fantasia on Greensleeves* of his former teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams, the material for which had originally been composed for the opera *Sir John in Love* (1929) and was later issued as an independent concert piece. In this work, the British composer had wrought a simple ternary structure from two traditional melodies that are contrasted in tempo and character, *Greensleeves* and *Lovely Joan*.⁶³ These are presented more or less in their familiar guise and their integrity as tunes is preserved throughout. They are not subjected to development, and apart from some simple introductory and linking material, nothing is added to them.

Potter's first *Fantasia Gaelach* follows this design closely. The opening section is based on a brooding slow melody in the Mixolydian mode known as *My Lagan Love*, which had achieved wide popularity in a celebrated arrangement by Hamilton

⁶³ In the opera, the instrumental version of the *Greensleeves* tune occurs between Scenes 1 and 2 of Act IV. The harmonisation is exactly the same as in the *Fantasia*, and the scoring is nearly so. The *Lovely Joan* tune is introduced as part of the music between Scenes 1 and 2 of Act II. The *Fantasia* simply brings these stretches of music together.

Harty.⁶⁴ It is preceded by a brief introduction that adumbrates motifs from this tune, featuring a rhapsodic descending flute solo that strongly recalls the *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. The supporting harmonies, which are provided by harp arpeggios, amplify certain modal inflexions in the tune by means of chords such as the flat submediant, the minor dominant and the triad built on the flattened leading note (♭VII), as well as introducing a hint of colouristic bitonality with the fleeting appearance of an A major seventh in bars 6-7 (see Ex. 3.1). *My Lagan Love* is then intoned on the cor anglais against slow-moving string chords, this texture changing to flowing quaver figurations in an ethereal treble register for the final phrase.⁶⁵ A brief transition effects a tonal shift to G major and establishes a quicker *Allegretto* tempo. The central section is based on the graceful tune *An Páistín Fionn* [‘The Fair-haired Child’]⁶⁶, which is stated in the Dorian mode on E and supplied with a light pizzicato accompaniment. This is announced on solo winds before being restated a fifth higher in the dominant on violas and ‘cellos with descants in the upper strings – a texture that once again recalls the *Fantasia on Greensleeves*. It reverts briefly to the initial scoring of solo winds and pizzicato strings before rising to a third, climactic statement of the melody at the original pitch played in sonorous unison by the violins, violas and ‘cellos. An abbreviated restatement of the introductory material serves as a link to the recapitulation of *My Lagan Love*, the first two phrases of which are also stated on unison strings with harp and woodwind accompaniment.

⁶⁴ The Harty arrangement was published by Boosey and Hawkes in 1905 as the second of *Three Traditional Ulster Airs*. Harty had taken the melody from the collection *Songs of Uladh*, published by Herbert Hughes in 1904.

⁶⁵ There are minor differences in scoring between the version of this work held in the archive of the Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin, and the version recorded by the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland on the CD of Potter’s orchestral works issued in 2001 by Marco Polo (8.225158). It has not been possible for me to examine the score of the latter version, or to establish when it was made. It may be identical with what Potter describes as an ‘expanded version’ that he appears to have prepared for the Irish conductor Dermot O’Hara to perform with South West German Radio Kaiserslautern Orchestra in 1956: see AJP to Frederick May, 9 January 1958 (‘General 1/1/57 – 5/6/58’, PA).

⁶⁶ According to Aloys Fleischmann’s *Sources of Irish Traditional Music: An Annotated Catalogue of Prints and Manuscripts 1583-1855* (New York, 1998), *An Páistín Fionn* first appeared in James Aird’s six-volume collection *A Selection of Scotch, English, Irish and Foreign Airs* (Glasgow, 1790-97). This version is somewhat different from the better-known variant used by Potter (given as No. 4117, *The Pausteen Faun*, in Fleischmann’s collection), which first appeared in O’Farrell’s *Pocket Companion to the Irish or Union Pipes* (London, 1804-16, 4 vols.). Interestingly, this is notated in Dorian on E.

Ex. 3.1: *Fantasia Gaelach*, opening

Adagio

Flute

Cor Anglais

Harp

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Contrabass

Fl.

C. A.

Harp

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

f *mf* *mf* *mf* *sostenuto molto e con espress.*

mf *s* *arpeggiando sempre* *mp* *mp* *mp* *mp*

con sord. *p* *divisi*

con sord. *p*

con sord. *p* *divisi*

con sord. *p*

con sord. *p*

p

The second two phrases are given to the cor anglais, with a simple homophonic string accompaniment as at the opening. There follows a brief, but highly atmospheric coda in which flute arabesques sound Dorian D flats and G flats against a sustained chord of E flat major in upper strings, while the harp contributes piquant A naturals.

The piece is wholly unpretentious in its aims and scope, but is realised with complete success. The combination of the two Irish folk tunes is well-judged and the contrasting sections are suitably balanced in mood and character. Potter's harmonic language, with its discreet bitonality, is entirely appropriate to the material, and the instrumentation, though simple, is nonetheless continuously interesting. While the influence of Vaughan Williams is very apparent, down to the appropriation of certain characteristic mannerisms (such as the employment of block choral sonorities), the work does not strike one as merely derivative, and has considerable individuality and charm.

A more exuberant side to Potter's creative personality is fully in evidence in his arrangement of *Finnegan's Wake*, which is far removed in sensibility from the introspective lyricism of the *Fantasia Gaelach*. During his lifetime, this coruscating *jeu d'esprit* became one of his best-known pieces, if not the single most popular work that he ever composed. In its original version, it was scored for winds only: as Potter explained to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin when he submitted the score to the RÉ Music Department in January 1957, he had hoped it might make an unusual novelty item for the programmes of 'National Music' broadcast by the RÉ Light Orchestra, which tended to feature a great many arrangements for strings.⁶⁷ He subsequently made at least seven further versions of the piece for different forces, including one for standard symphony orchestra and three for military, brass and concert bands, as well as another for the somewhat unlikely combination of ten pianos, twenty hands,

⁶⁷ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 29 January 1957 ('RÉ '55 – '60', PA)

which appears to have been commissioned by the Dutch piano manufacturer Rippen Pianofabriek.⁶⁸

Finnegan's Wake is not entirely typical of Potter's orchestral arrangements of Irish folk music, which generally present the folk tunes in a very straightforward manner and include little, if any, extraneous material other than the simplest of links between recurrent statements and perhaps a brief introduction. In this instance, the melody forms the basis for a relatively sophisticated small-scale set of variations, using procedures of decorative elaboration reminiscent of nineteenth-century works such as Glinka's *Kamarinskaya*. This rollicking tune is not, in fact, Irish, but seems to have originated as a street ballad in America in the 1860s⁶⁹, although it has obviously acquired strong literary associations for native audiences through having inspired the title of James Joyce's celebrated novel. The song recounts the story of one Tim Finnegan, an Irish labourer with a pronounced fondness for whiskey, who falls off a ladder one day at work and is assumed to have been killed outright. His family and friends organise a traditional wake in his honour, which quickly degenerates into a drunken brawl. As the fighting reaches its climax, one of the participants hurls a noggin of whiskey at an opponent, but misses. The 'corpse' is unceremoniously doused with the contents, whereupon Tim miraculously revives and rounds on the assembled company for needlessly wasting good liquor.

The ballad is cast as a sequence of eight-line verses set to a two-phrase melody that is twice repeated, interspersed with a four-line refrain that is set to a closely related, but slightly different melody (see Ex. 3.2, in which these are labelled A and B,

⁶⁸ The different versions are detailed in Mark Cronin, 'A. J. Potter (1918-80): An Annotated Catalogue of Works', MA Thesis, Cork Institute of Technology (Cork, 2005). The previous year, in 1956, Potter had made an arrangement of the ballad for the RÉ Singers, perhaps for one of the programmes of Irish ballads presented by Donagh MacDonagh. For an account of the first performance of the version for ten pianos, see 'Piano-Industrie Slaat Vleugels Uit: Piet Hein Rippen verovert Shannon Taxfree Airport', *Haagsche Courant*, 11 July 1961. This article intimates that the piece was composed for Rippen.

⁶⁹ According to Hugh Kenner, it was published in New York in 1864: see his *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (London, 1983), 221.

respectively). In his arrangement, Potter intercalates a modified version of

Ex. 3.2: *Finnegan's Wake* (traditional ballad)



A between these two strains, the even legato quavers of which provide just enough contrast with the energetic rhythmic character of the initial A to enable the tune to bear rather more repetition than it might otherwise have done. These three units are elaborated into a short set of variations, being presented throughout in varied harmonic and textural guises. This plan, though simple, works well; and there is just enough of a suggestion of recapitulation (signalled by a repetition of a gurgling clarinet motif in trills) to create a satisfactorily balanced ternary structure. Potter shows considerable resourcefulness in varying the restatements of the material by means of colourful harmonisations and scoring, making witty use at a later stage of the device of augmentation. The technique and spirit of the arrangement seem to owe very little, if anything, to Vaughan Williams, apart from the employment of the British composer's technique of doubling simultaneous lines in block triads (notably in works such as the *Pastoral Symphony*, for example) – although the sonorities that result are rather more reminiscent of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Slight though the piece is, *Finnegan's Wake* is of considerable importance in Potter's earlier output, in that it is one of the first works in which he subjects material of this kind to ironic treatment. Here, the resultant humour is merely brash and high-spirited, but Potter's later scores (the *Sinfonia de Profundis* and *The Wedding* being good cases in point) explore expressive effects of a decidedly disturbing and even sinister nature from deliberate vulgarisations of folk material.

3.7 Variations on a Popular Tune

As has previously been recounted, *Variations on a Popular Tune* was commissioned by Radio Éireann for its 1955 season of Spring Promenade Concerts and was first performed by the RÉ Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Milan Horvat on 6 February of that year. As a conception for a musical work, this score must rank as one of the oddest ever committed to paper by an Irish composer. The 'popular tune' in question is a traditional ballad of hair-raising banality entitled 'The Wild Colonial Boy', a mawkishly sentimental effusion detailing the adventures of one Jack Duggan (or Donahue), an Irish emigrant to Australia who, in the best Robin Hood tradition, turned bandit and reputedly robbed the rich to give to the poor. The song, the opening of which is shown in Ex. 3.3, is apparently of nineteenth-century Australian provenance, but quickly became a popular favourite in America and Ireland.⁷⁰ As Potter was perfectly well aware, the tune was generally associated with street

Ex. 3.3: *The Wild Colonial Boy* (traditional ballad)

[Allegretto]

There was a wild co - lo - nial boy, Jack Dug-gan_ was his name. He was
born and bred in Ire - land, in a place called Cas - tle - maine. He was his fa - ther's
on - ly son, his mo-ther's pride and joy, And dear - ly did his par - ents love the
wild co - lo - nial boy.

musicians and drunks: he informed a French correspondent that it was 'extremely popular in places of refreshment all over Ireland, becoming more and more so as the evening wears on.'⁷¹ In view of this, his decision to employ it as the basis for a set of variations is surely puzzling. If his object was simply to enliven an otherwise

⁷⁰ See Bill Scott, 'Traditional Ballad Verse in Australia', *Folklore*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (October, 2000), 309-313, 310.

⁷¹ AJP to Esther van Loo, 26 October 1955 ('General 1/1/55 - 31/12/55', PA)

straight-laced prom concert with a contribution informed by a rather off-beat sense of humour, then he undoubtedly succeeded, for the opening statement of the theme drew titters from what one reviewer described as ‘a surprised and highly amused audience’.⁷² Matters do not appear to have been quite so straightforward, however. In a letter to the composer Frederick May, who wrote the programme notes for the RÉSO’s concerts at this period, Potter declared that this had not, in fact, been his intention:

For your information, I should add that the piece, although it may seem funny-ha-ha on the surface, is, as far as I am concerned, dead serious. Like *The Song of the Flea*, in fact. I have had three main objects in writing it. [Firstly], to experiment with some aspects of variation writing technically. Secondly, to see if one can try and ‘purify’ a theme like this, which has been debased by bad usage and worse arrangements. ... Lastly, and most importantly of all, to write an acceptable concert piece of seven or eight minutes duration.⁷³

When one actually listens to the work, Potter’s insistence on its fundamental seriousness seems frankly implausible. Nor is it likely that any treatment of the ballad could mitigate its innate vulgarity or dispel its dubious associations in the minds of most listeners, notwithstanding his bizarre assertion in the programme note for the first performance that ‘there is no connection between [the] Variations and the ballad usually associated with the tune.’⁷⁴ Not content with this, Potter later seems to have put into circulation another claim about the score which equally stretches credibility — namely, that it was the first work by an Irish composer to employ dodecaphonic techniques. This is doubly curious, as there is no reference whatsoever to serial procedures in the fairly detailed accounts of the piece that Potter sent to Frederick May and Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin shortly after its composition.⁷⁵

⁷² Unsigned review ‘*Wild Colonial Boy* at “Prom” Concert’, *Evening Herald*, 7 February 1955

⁷³ AJP to Frederick May, 22 January 1955 (‘General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55’, PA). This letter is dated 1954, but obviously in error.

⁷⁴ I have been unable to locate a programme for this concert. This sentence is quoted in an unsigned review ‘Laughter at the prom’, *Evening Herald*, 7 February 1955.

⁷⁵ See AJP to Frederick May, 22 January 1955 (‘General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55’, PA) and AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 2 January 1955 (‘RÉ from 27/3/54 – 31/12/55’, PA).

The first reference in print to this putative feature of the score's musical organisation appeared five years later in 1960, in an unsigned feature article on Irish composers which appeared in the *Irish Times*: its author (whom Richard Pine identifies as the newspaper's chief music critic, Charles Acton⁷⁶) informed readers that 'the fairly broad comedy of the *Wild Colonial Boy* variations masks a serious purport — and Ireland's first home-produced serialism.'⁷⁷ Two years later, Acton expressed himself with rather more circumspection on this matter: reviewing a performance of the work in 1962, he wrote:

If I have understood Dr Potter rightly, one of the variations is the first essay of any Irish composer in the 12-note technique — a fact which most listeners and critics have failed to hear. I must report that carefree [*sic.*] listening last night did not reveal a glimmer of a note-row, which (if it exists) must be so well concealed as to exculpate us from blame.⁷⁸

On this occasion, Acton was sufficiently emboldened as to express polite scepticism about the extent to which listeners could be expected to regard the work in a serious light. Nonetheless, Potter not only continued to lament the fact that listeners failed to credit the score's intrinsic seriousness, but persisted in making exaggerated claims about its supposedly landmark significance in the annals not just of Irish music, but of the entire western art music tradition. Writing to a Cork music student who had written to him to request information about his work, he told her:

My *Variations on a Popular Tune* ... are at long last being recognised as the first piece to introduce serialism into Ireland and the first development in variation writing since Diabelli. But of course, at first, they were considered to be a practical joke because it is just not possible for your true blue Englishman (or his Irish carbon copy) to believe that laughter can be scholarly. It has to be red-nosed for them!⁷⁹

⁷⁶ See Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, 244

⁷⁷ Unsigned article 'Music Makers', *Irish Times*, 2 February 1960

⁷⁸ *Irish Times*, 28 February 1962

⁷⁹ AJP to Anne Wallace, 24 February 1962 ('General 1/1/62 – 63', PA)

Notwithstanding Acton's cautious equivocations on the subject subsequent to his 1960 feature article, the notion that the *Variations* are, in fact, serial has proved remarkable durable, and has been restated in a number of publications dealing with twentieth-century Irish composition. In an essay of 2003, Axel Klein states that it was 'the first Irish composition using a twelve-note row'⁸⁰, and this assertion is repeated uncritically in Richard Pine's recent book *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*.⁸¹ One wonders how closely either commentator has examined the score — or Acton himself, for that matter, even though he had several opportunities to hear the work. Even the most casual inspection confirms that the piece is unambiguously tonal from start to finish and that there is no evidence whatsoever of any recourse to serialism even in its most relaxed forms, let alone in its stricter applications. Indeed, one is hard pressed to identify anything that bears even the faintest resemblance to a note-row. In his 1962 review, Acton refers to just one of the variations being serial, rather than the entire work. In terms of the overall level of surface dissonance, the only likely candidate is the second variation — but while this is certainly quite dissonant for a few bars here and there, its harmonic language is indebted to the music of Hindemith rather than that of Schoenberg, and there is no indication that its construction is informed by serial techniques.

In short, it seems clear that the supposedly 'serial' nature of the *Variations* — in whole or in part — was an elaborate piece of Potter bull. The question naturally arises as to why he would have wished to perpetrate a spoof of this kind. I would suggest that the answer can be found in the last sentence of the letter he sent about to the work to Frederick May, to which allusion has already been made. This runs:

[Strictly] for your own ears, as I have not copied either the rhythms of Bartók or the scale systems of Messiaen, the piece may be regarded from the point of view of the

⁸⁰ Axel Klein, 'Roots and directions in twentieth-century Irish art music', in Gareth Cox and Alex Klein (eds.), *Irish Musical Studies 7: Irish Music in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, 2003), 168-182, 180

⁸¹ See Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), 243.

Dublin intelligentsia as completely without cultural or any other significance. *Verb sap.*⁸²

One has the impression from Potter's stray comments on the Dublin musical scene — such as this one — that he found some of its prominent figures to be rather pretentious and prone to adopting the kinds of gratuitously condescending or dismissive attitudes which seem to have been an unpleasant feature of the city's artistic life at least since the time of Yeats and his contemporaries. Potter undoubtedly regarded Charles Acton in this light. As we have seen in the first part of this chapter, Acton had made a number of rather disparaging remarks which suggested that he did not rate him very highly — much to Potter's chagrin. For his part, while he seems not to have taken Acton terribly seriously on an intellectual level, he still had to contend with him as a persistent occupational hazard: he was, after all, the music critic in the country's leading national daily newspaper. Acton seems to have been the first person to allude to the score's 'serial' construction and this 'fact' could only have been communicated to him by Potter: given the nature of the work in question, it would scarcely have occurred to Acton unprompted. In doing this, I would suggest that Potter was simply amusing himself at the critic's expense, lending what was essentially a piece of light music a deceptive allure of arcane technical complexity, in the full confidence that he lacked the necessary technical knowledge to verify the facts for himself. And while Acton may have come to smell a rat — the very idea of a set of serial variations on a trite tune such as *The Wild Colonial Boy* is intrinsically ludicrous — the fact remains that he was incapable of declaring outright that what was supposedly the first dodecaphonic work by an Irish composer was nothing of the kind. Potter doubtlessly relished this private revenge and would probably have been much amused to find that commentators persist in describing the score as serial after an elapse of fifty years.

⁸² AJP to Frederick May, 22 January 1955 ('General 1/1/55 – 31/12/55', PA). '*Verb sap.*' is a contraction of the Latin phrase *verbum sapienti sat est* - 'a word is sufficient to a wise person'.

Insofar as *Variations on a Popular Tune* bears a resemblance to the work of any of Potter's contemporaries, it is closest in style to the music of Malcolm Arnold, a composer who appeared to be comparably free of inhibitions in employing musical material of the most banal nature. Certainly, any similarities with the music of Vaughan Williams which had previously been in evidence are now virtually absent. From a formal point of view, the score is of some interest, as Potter attempts a fusion of variation and rondo form. There are seven variations in total: the odd-numbered variations employ the theme in a readily recognisable guise, while the even-numbered variations derive from it in a far less obvious manner, resulting in an ABACADA structure.⁸³ The work opens with a brief introduction, establishing the tonality of G major with a series of emphatic *tutti* chords, which fade quickly to *pianissimo* in syncopated reiterations. The theme is stated on solo violin, replete with slithering glissandi that suggest a rendition by a somewhat intoxicated street musician. The harmonisation, with its crude bitonal combinations and glaring 'wrong notes', reinforces the impression of clumsy ineptitude [Ex. 3.4]. The first variation restates the theme more or less unaltered as an energetic waltz, with careering counterpoints in the upper strings that employ successions of multiple appoggiaturas to the prevailing harmonies in a manner recalling Ravel's harmonic procedures in *La Valse*, in which the French composer derives a variety of colouristic effects from the superposition of triads (or other chords) sounded a semitone apart. The second variation elaborates a four-note chromatic cadential figure from the preceding variation into agitated string and wind figurations, which are interspersed by a march-like idea on the brass featuring harmonies built from superimposed fourths – a sonority that recalls the music of Hindemith. A brief central episode makes play with a new fleet theme enunciated on woodwinds that is also built from fourths and which seems to relate to the contour of the second phrase of the original theme. The third variation features a restatement of the latter, recast as a virtuosic trumpet solo and replete with gaudy ornamentation that creates an impression of

⁸³ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 2 January 1955 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 – 31/12/55', PA), in which he describes this plan.

Ex. 3.4: Variations on a Popular Tune, bar 6ff.

The musical score consists of four systems, each with a violin part and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The first system includes the following markings: [vln solo], gliss., gliss., gliss., (sim.), mf, and p. The piano part is marked [archi pizz.]. The second system continues the accompaniment. The third system shows the violin part with a fermata over the final note. The fourth system concludes with the violin part and a piano part marked [arco].

calculated vulgarity. The succeeding variation transforms the trumpet's final cadential figure — a rising arpeggio in triplets decorated with chromatic neighbour notes — into a gently undulating accompaniment figure given to multi-divided upper strings, under which a long-breathed cantilena unfolds in the violas and 'cellos. This reproduces the contours of the original theme quite closely, and is supported by simple triadic harmonies in the horns and trombones. The fifth variation restates the theme on solo violin, more or less as it was heard at the very opening, but this time stated in B flat major rather than G major. It is accompanied by mechanically reiterated 'wrong note' harmonies in the woodwinds. The relentless

tonic-dominant ostinato bass that features throughout is taken up in the next variation, a ponderous march that rises to a strenuous and discordant climax. The seventh variation largely consists of a restatement of material from the first variation, rising to a boisterous conclusion after a last brief snatch of the theme on solo violin.

A score such as *Variations on a Popular Tune* will inevitably raise somewhat conflicting responses in listeners, depending on the extent to which they are responsive to Potter's idiosyncratic humour. Even if one is not in sympathy with its rather unsettling emotional world — the work strikes the present writer as having an uncomfortably manic quality — certain aspects of the score are undeniably well-crafted and effective. The scoring is imaginative, and the even-numbered variations display considerable ingenuity in transforming the theme. They are also well-shaped and have a good sense of continuity. On the other hand, one is inclined to wonder if the third and the fifth variations are not something of a miscalculation — particularly the latter — as they are obvious restatements of a theme that has a very limited capacity to bear repetition and which has already been heard on a solo instrument. On the other hand, the work is quite short — a mere nine minutes or so — and in a spirited live performance this shortcoming would probably be less evident.

3.8 *Overture to an Irish Occasion [Tóstal Overture]*

As we have seen, this work was commissioned by the RÉ Music Department in 1955 for performance during the national festival An Tóstal the following year. To judge from Potter's correspondence with Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin about the project, he clearly wished to make the most of this rare opportunity and proposed to write a work of fairly substantial proportions employing large orchestral forces — being no doubt anxious to impress on audiences and critics that he was not merely an arranger or a composer of light music, but also continued to harbour ambitions as a 'serious' composer.⁸⁴ The title of the work was changed several times: Potter

⁸⁴ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 21 October 1955, and Ó h-Annracháin to AJP, 1 November 1955 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA).

originally proposed *Overture to an Occasion*⁸⁵, but the programme for the premiere on lists it simply as *Tóstal Overture*. No doubt feeling that this designation would be meaningless to anyone from outside Ireland, Potter seems subsequently to have adopted *Overture to an Irish Occasion* as his preferred title.⁸⁶ The work received its first broadcast performance on the 24 May 1955⁸⁷ under the young Irish conductor Sydney Bryans and its concert premiere on 11 November of the same year. Neither account of Potter's technically challenging score seems to have been very satisfactory, and the embarrassingly inadequate recording in the Potter Archive provides damning evidence not only of the limitations of the Radio Éireann's sound engineers, but also of the technical shortcomings of the Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra at this period.⁸⁸ Unfortunately for the composer, the work never seems to have received another performance.

In a letter to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, Potter described the work as being cast in the form of an Italian overture from the Baroque period.⁸⁹ It comprises three linked but essentially discrete sections, each of which lasts about four minutes. The overture opens with a fairly lengthy introduction, which obliquely establishes the tonality of the first *Allegro*, D major. The latter presents two principal ideas, a martial theme featuring Scotch snaps which is initially stated on the brass [Ex. 3.5], and an energetic figure with a Phrygian colouration that is given to the strings [Ex. 3.6]. After a reprise of the introductory material, the martial theme is restated in F before reverting to D major, rounding out a straightforward ternary structure. The *Larghetto* that follows would appear to owe something to the sound-world of Vaughan William's *Serenade to Music* and is not wholly dissimilar in conception to the lyrical

⁸⁵ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin 14 February 1955 ('RÉ '55-'60', PA).

⁸⁶ On the copy of the score housed in the library of the National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland, the designation 'Tóstal Overture' has been crossed out and replaced with this new title in Potter's hand.

⁸⁷ This date is given the programme for the concert premiere.

⁸⁸ Two of the critics who reviewed the concert intimated that the performance of Potter's overture had been lacklustre and somewhat tentative: see 'Conductor's "Prom" Concert Debut', *Irish Independent*, 12 November 1956 and 'Last night's Prom concert', *Evening Press*, 12 November 1956.

⁸⁹ See AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 21 October 1955 ('RÉ from 27/3/54 to 31/12/55', PA).

Ex. 3.5: Overture to an Irish Occasion, from rehearsal letter B

[Allegro]

f [fiati] *sf*

Ex. 3.6: Overture to an Irish Occasion, from rehearsal letter D

f [vlins] *sf* *sf*

fourth variation from *Variations on a Popular Tune*, with a sonorous viola and 'cello melody set against rocking string figurations. This section, which establishes a modal E flat minor as the central tonality, also has a tripartite structure, with the main idea being restated after an impassioned central episode. A further recurrence of the material from the introduction serves to effect a transition to the final section, which is marked *Vivace* and is a kind of *moto perpetuo* based on the rhythm of an Irish reel. This is virtually monothematic, relying solely on varied restatements of a single theme shown in Ex. 3.7. As it rises to its culmination, the martial tune from the first

Ex. 3.7: Overture to an Irish Occasion, from rehearsal letter L

Vivace

p [clars]

section is re-introduced to form a climax for the work as a whole. The overture

concludes with a brief coda, in which the semiquaver figurations that have predominated through the preceding section are worked up to an even greater pitch of excitement.

In view of the fact that four years had elapsed since the completion of his last major orchestral works — the revised versions of *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and the *Concerto da chiesa* — one might reasonably have expected this new overture to demonstrate a greater degree of technical assurance than either of these scores, since Potter had by now acquired considerably more experience. Unfortunately, it must be admitted that the *Overture to an Irish Occasion* is frankly disappointing, although it is not altogether devoid of merit. Potter evidently took considerable care over its instrumentation and was largely successful in his efforts to achieve orchestral brilliance, a few curious lapses notwithstanding, such as a persistent tendency to write for the upper woodwind in subdued registers that prevent them from making an effective contribution in fully-scored contexts. The relative proportions of the constituent sections are well-judged and casting the work as an Italian overture was potentially an interesting formal experiment. The adoption of this structure, moreover, helped to obviate one of the principal faults of the *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* — to wit, *longueurs* caused by excessive repetition of material.

Nonetheless, the score suffers from a number of pronounced defects. First of all, the thematic ideas are simply not as distinguished or memorable as in Potter's earlier orchestral works, and the quality of invention is frankly poor. The themes tend to be short-winded and have an extremely four-square phrase structure. To make matters worse, all too often their constituent phrases culminate on a long note, a feature that not only vitiates their rhythmic interest, but also militates against the attainment of musical continuity on a phrase to phrase basis. Moreover, Potter tends to rely excessively on the repetition of a single idea which is not offset by supplementary material capable of providing contrast or relief. This fault is particularly noticeable in the final *Vivace*. Admittedly, Potter does attempt to vary the pitch levels at which the material is stated by means of abrupt shifts of key; but these are often crudely

handled and serve merely to emphasise the sectionality of the movement's design rather than provide the variety that he had presumably intended. While one might be prepared to make allowances for these kinds of elementary technical inadequacies in the work of a neophyte composer, they are nonetheless serious and would need to be addressed. It is consequently disconcerting to find that Potter scarcely seems to be aware of them, or of how much they mar his work, despite having written a considerable quantity of music in the intervening period.

The nondescript nature of the musical invention also results in structural confusion, as it is sometimes unclear which ideas are intended to constitute the principal thematic material, and which ones have a subsidiary role. The very opening of the work provides a perfect instance in point. The lengthy introduction is quite static harmonically, consisting of little more than a lengthily prolonged dominant eleventh, and for all the brilliant woodwind trills and rushing semiquaver figurations in the strings, it consequently generates little sense of forward motion or tension. The first idea to be announced is a lumbering fanfare-like phrase in the bass, which is presented four times before it rises to a climax. This is abruptly interrupted by a syncopated idea in the winds, which seems too short-lived and nondescript to be a significant theme, despite the portentous manner in which it is introduced. The fanfare motif and the sonority of the dominant eleventh now resume, and are worked up to an ever bigger climax. Finally, after some forty-three bars in a moderate *Allegro* tempo, the martial theme quoted above (Ex. 3.5) is introduced — but by this point, the listener has altogether lost his bearings and is quite unsure of the function of this new idea. The effect, to borrow Tovey's celebrated criticism of Liszt's symphonic poem *Ce qu'on entend sur la montagne*, is of too many 'introductions to introductions'. This kind of structural muddle pervades the entire work. Taken as a whole, one is inclined to wonder whether the overture sounds more like a three-movement suite than a genuinely integrated tripartite structure, and whether the reintroduction of the martial idea in the last movement is sufficient to create a sense of satisfying formal unity. In any case, this restatement is a dramatic miscalculation, as the plodding crotchet movement of this theme and its accompaniment completely

dissipate any sense of momentum that has been generated by the preceding semiquaver activity. From this point onwards, the movement struggles to recapture the sense of excitement and abandon that Potter had evidently wished to evoke.

3.9 Concertante works

Between 1959 and 1978 Potter composed numerous short concertante works for every standard orchestral instrument with the exception of the bassoon. This group of compositions also includes two works for piano and orchestra, as well as several for two or more instruments and orchestra. A list of these works and their dates of composition are given below:

- 1959 *Fantasie concertante* [sic.] for violin, 'cello and orchestra
- 1963 *Rapsóid Gaelach* for violin and orchestra
Concertino for viola and orchestra
Capriccio concertante for piano and orchestra
- 1964 *Fantasy* for clarinet and orchestra
Hunter's Holiday: Concertino for horn and orchestra
Concertino for trumpet and orchestra
Caprice for 'cello and orchestra
- 1965 *Sound the Sackbuts: Concertino* for three trombones and orchestra
Spanish Point: Concertino for guitar and orchestra
- 1966 *Tuama an Dragúinín: Concertino* for double-bass and orchestra
Rapsóid Deireadh Lae for violin and orchestra
Scherzo concertante for violin, piano and orchestra
- 1967 *Rapsóid Éireannaighe* [sic.]: *Concertino* for flute and orchestra

Concerto Benino for trumpet and orchestra

Dance Fantasia for piano and orchestra

Binneadán Béil: Concertino for harmonica and orchestra

1968 *Dhá Fhliúiteanna* [sic.]: Concertinetto [sic.] for two flutes and orchestra

Ceithre Fichid Lá concertino for 'cello and orchestra

1976 *Tubaistí Cánach*: Concertino for tuba and orchestra

1977 *Lasc and Feadóg* [sic.]: Concertino for piccolo and orchestra

Madra Liath na Mara: Concertino for cor anglais and orchestra

1978 *An Trumba Mór*: Concertino for trombone and orchestra

Potter's productivity in this particular genre peaked during the mid-1960s, but the idea of writing a series of concertinos had occurred to him quite a number of years before. As we have seen, he informed John Cavanagh in 1959 that he was planning to compose some short pieces of light music featuring a solo instrumentalist for a new series presented by the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra.⁹⁰ Although he did not say so to Cavanagh, he may have been motivated to write these because RÉ seemed to display little interest in performing anything of a more serious nature. In the same month, he sent the score of the first of these concertante works, the *Fantasia concertante* [sic.] for violin, 'cello and orchestra, to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin with a covering letter expressing the hope that it would prove suitable for inclusion in the RÉ Light Orchestra's repertoire. This concluded:

As I expect you will notice, the solo parts are written with a view to the maximum of display compatible with a minimum of technical ability and the orchestral parts are

⁹⁰ AJP to John P. Cavanagh, 24 March 1959 ('General 8/6/58 – 30/12/59', PA)

designed to require as little rehearsal as possible. I would stress again that the piece is intended for the light music audience.⁹¹

The subtext of this delicately worded note was clear: the work was designed to be completely undemanding from a musical and technical point of view, being expressly tailored to the limited capacities of the RÉ Light Orchestra and scored in such a way that it could be put together with an absolute minimum of rehearsal – considerations that Potter clearly felt would be uppermost in Ó h-Annracháin's mind when deliberating whether or not to programme it. The Music Director agreed to purchase the score and it was duly performed in January 1960. For the time being, however, the opportunity does not seem to have arisen for Potter to write further works of a similar nature. A few years later, however, the RÉ Music Department evidently agreed to allow him compose a series of concertinos as a means of providing each of the RÉLO's lead players with a solo spot in the orchestra's regular radio programmes. Potter wrote no less than eighteen such works between 1963 and 1968. All of them fall into the category of light music and were generally executed along similar lines to the *Fantasia concertante* – a tripartite fast-slow-fast design, the three sections of which replicated the structure of the standard Classical or Romantic concerto in miniature, but played without a break. Potter described them to the conductor of the BBC Northern Ireland Light Orchestra Terence Lovett as

solo works which give the player a chance to show off a good technique, but don't make the demands on either the time or the attention of an audience which would be required by a full-scale concerto. At the same time, they are complete works in themselves and I hope I would be right in describing them as of the best type of modern 'light classical' music. ... With the exception of [*Fantasia concertante*] which goes on for some 12-14 minutes, all of these are in the 5-10 minute range. They are all at the technical level demanded of a good orchestral section leader The orchestra required in every case is [a] small, adaptable one.⁹²

⁹¹ AJP to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 21 March 1959 ('RÉ '55 – '60', PA)

⁹² AJP to Terence Lovett, 8 May 1965 ('Odds and Ends from 1963', PA)

To some of these pieces, Potter gave whimsical macaronic titles employing arcane puns. Thus, the title of the double bass concertino, *Tuama an Dragúinín*, translates literally from the Irish as ‘Tomb of the Little Dragon’ and is presumably intended as a mock-homage to the memory of the celebrated Italian double bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846), in a manner ironically reminiscent of Ravel’s piano suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. The title of the tuba concertino, *Tubaistí Cánach*, is even more obscure. *Tubaistí* is the plural of *tubaiste*, meaning a calamity or an accident; while *cánach* is an adjective deriving from Irish word for ‘tax’. This verbal juxtaposition makes no sense whatsoever. Potter supplied the work with the alternative title ‘Tubal Cain’, which suggests that the Irish title is a phonetic pun on the name of one of the descendants of Cain listed in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis — Tubal-cain, who is described as ‘an instructor [*sic.*] of every artificer in brass and iron’ in the King James translation. Tubal-cain’s brother Jubal was ‘the father of all such as handle the harp and organ’, and Potter, in a particularly extravagant flight of fancy, no doubt imagined this biblical metalworker making a few brass instruments for his kindred, and perhaps even a tuba or two.

Potter seems to have dispatched these commissions without much ado, regarding them simply as a job of work. A rather ironic explanatory note prefacing the score of the *Fantasy for Clarinet and Orchestra* suggests that he was under no illusions about their intrinsic musical interest:

This was one of a series of concertinos covering all the instruments of the orchestra and designed to give each lead player a solo spot. They were designed to fit the capacities of the various people occupying the posts at the time, and this one was for a clarinettist with a beautiful tone — even if there were other aspects of his playing not quite so satisfactory. ... [As] the thing was for the [RÉ] Light Orchestra, it doesn’t (by intention) put too much strain on the intellect.⁹³

⁹³ Quoted in Mark Cronin, *A. J. Potter (1918-80): An Annotated Catalogue of Works*, MA Thesis, Cork Institute of Technology, 2005, 139.

Writing to the Irish violist John Vallery in 1977, he made no secret of the fact that he thought this series of concertinos was uneven, telling his correspondent that he considered some of them to be good, but 'some not quite so [*sic.*].'⁹⁴ Quite a few of them evidently had to be written in extreme haste. In July 1966, for example, one of the Music Department's producers, Jane Carty, contacted Potter to ask if he could compose a concertante work for violin and piano before the end of August.⁹⁵ The following year, she requested no less than two further scores to be delivered to similarly tight deadlines: in mid-April she commissioned a trumpet concertino which was required by 'about the third week in May'; and a few weeks later on 5 May she invited him to compose a piano concertino, proposing that he deliver the score before 1 July.⁹⁶ Letters such as these create the distinct impression that the RTÉ Music Department operated in a perpetual state of more or less chronic disorganisation, its personnel often leaving it to the eleventh hour to finalise the details of programmes. Potter somehow managed to accommodate these ridiculously pressured deadlines — which cannot have been easy, given the extent of his other professional commitments — but while he invariably managed to deliver these scores on time, it was almost inevitable that the quality of the finished product would suffer. These working conditions meant that he simply had no choice but to commit to paper the first ideas that came into his head, irrespective of whether or not they were any good. There was seldom an opportunity to mull over the project, or refine his first thoughts. In consequence, these concertinos suffer from all the defects of Potter's weakest music: poor melodic invention, excessively predictable phrase structure, routine harmonisations and orchestration, a lack of textural inventiveness and rhythmic flaccidity. In one case at least, that of the piano concertino alluded to above (to which he gave the title *Dance Fantasia* [*sic.*]), he obviously was under such pressure for time that he did not even attempt to devise original material, but resorted instead to recycling a pre-existing work, his ballet *Full Moon for the Bride*, which had been completed in piano score in 1963 but had never been orchestrated as a projected staging failed to materialise. Potter simply transcribed the opening ten

⁹⁴ AJP to John Vallery, 25 July 1977 ('№9: PERF-PROM 77-8-9', PA)

⁹⁵ See Jane Carty to AJP, 8 July 1966 ('№3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9', PA).

⁹⁶ See Jane Carty to AJP, 14 April 1967 and 5 May 1967 ('№3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9', PA).

minutes of this, dividing out the material between the piano and orchestra. As opening scenes of the ballet present the work's principal musical ideas in succession, without much repetition or elaboration to speak of, the *Dance Fantasia* is completely unsatisfactory from a structural point of view and makes the impression of a diffuse improvisation. A significant proportion of the other concertante works suffer from a similar structural incoherence. Overall, one has the impression that Potter was simply going through the motions in fulfilling these commissions, contenting himself with stock gestures and clichés.

Potter's concertinos draw principally on three facets of his mature compositional idiom as it consolidated during the 1960s. The first of these has a recognisable kinship to styles of popular music prevalent in Britain and the United States. The melodic material *Fantasia concertante*, for example, recalls Noel Coward and Ivor Novello, while a work such as *Concerto Benino* employs Latin American dance rhythms such as the *paso doble*. A second category of concertante works, which includes the *Rapsóid Gaelach* for violin and the *Rapsóid Éireannaighe* [sic.] for flute, resemble the kind of 'National Music' (such as the various pieces entitled *Fantasia Gaelach*) that he had composed for the RÉLO during the 1950s. The remaining scores are somewhat harder to classify, but exhibit similarities with the work of contemporary British composers such as Eric Coates or Ronald Binge in their employment of 'tuneful' material and their generally straightforward harmonic idiom. This variety of light music very much depends for its success on the composer's ability to devise attractive melodic ideas and his orchestral and harmonic resourcefulness. Despite his avowed interest in contributing to this repertory, however, Potter's concertante works in this vein do not emerge well from a comparison with the best light music of his British contemporaries, which is generally slicker, better crafted and altogether more distinguished.

These compositions add little to Potter's stature and a detailed description of each of them would be rather repetitious, making for unnecessarily tedious reading. Although they were composed over a period of almost twenty years, Potter scarcely

bothers to ring the changes on the same handful of formulae: the later pieces break no new ground, stylistically, technically or in terms of their expressive import. I have consequently chosen to give a brief account of just two of them that seem to me to be rather better than the others, the first of which is the *Caprice for 'Cello and Orchestra*, which dates from 1964. Unfortunately it has not been possible to establish when the Radio Éireann Light Orchestra gave the premiere of this work or to identify the soloist⁹⁷, but it appears to have been performed in the United States in May of the following year by Martin Hohermann, the principal 'cellist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, with Arthur Fiedler conducting the Boston Pops Orchestra.⁹⁸

The work is organised along almost identical lines to the *Fantasia concertante*, being three linked sections with two outer fast episodes framing a slower central one. It opens with an introduction of 29 bars, which adumbrates the main theme of the *Allegro* that follows. The soloist enters with a series of impassioned recitative-like phrases after an initial flurry of semiquavers in the strings harmonised by parallel six-four-two chords. These, together with half-diminished seventh chords, are a pervasive harmonic sonority throughout this section. After a tense build-up in the brass that subsides into ethereal successions of parallel seventh chords in the winds and strings, the soloist announces the section's principal thematic idea, which ranges widely and restlessly throughout the instrument's compass and is faintly reminiscent of the opening of the Saint-Saëns 'Cello Concerto in A minor [Ex. 3.8]. This is then fragmented and its constituent motifs subjected to what appears to be free development. It is never restated in its original form and is tonally elusive, though it tends to hover around an implied D major/minor. The total length of this section is 53 bars. Towards its close, orchestra and soloist come to rest on a lengthily

⁹⁷ No documentation has come to light in the Potter Archive in connection with either the commissioning or premiere of this score and it does not feature in the list of orchestral works by Irish composers performed by the RTÉSO and RTÉLO between 1959 and 1968 given by Richard Pine in his *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, 456-459. (This list, incidentally, appears to be very incomplete, as Pine omits to mention the premieres of most of Potter's concertante works that were performed during this period, as well as his *Overture to an Irish Occasion*).

⁹⁸ See AJP to Kevin McCourt, 13 April 1965 ('RE – TÉ 1/1/61 – ', PA). See also AJP to Frank Murphy, 19 April 1965 (also in 'RE – TÉ 1/1/61 – ', PA), concerning the appalling standard of the orchestral parts for this work prepared by the RTÉ copyists.

Ex. 3.8: *Caprice for 'cello and orchestra, from rehearsal letter B*

[Allegro]

prolonged dominant seventh chord on C (with multiple passing notes), which established the tonality of the central slow section — a gentle six-eight *siciliano* in F minor. For the most part, this is very lightly scored, the soloist being accompanied predominantly by harp arpeggios and muted strings, with *divisi* violins providing a halo of diaphanous tremolando chords. This section is 75 bars long and has a simple ternary structure. Once again, the soloist announces the main melodic idea, which is harmonised by juxtapositions of remotely related triads such as F minor, D minor and B flat minor [Ex. 3.9]. This idea is restated after a central episode which touches

Ex. 3.9: *Caprice for 'cello and orchestra, from 6 bars after rehearsal letter F*

Andante, non troppo lento
[vc solo]

[vlns, con sord]

[hp]

on the remoter tonal areas of A flat minor and A major, with the 'cellist being assigned the lion's share of the material throughout.

The final section of the work is a spirited *Vivace* in C major. This is quite brief, comprising only 140 bars in two-four metre. A 25-bar introduction which unfolds over persistent pedal Cs serves to dispel the introspective mood of the preceding section, and reintroduces the colourful sonority of consecutive diatonic seventh chords. The section is monothematic, and features a variant of a celebrated Irish reel that appears in printed sources as early as the late eighteenth century under the names 'The Devil's Dream' and 'The Devil amongst the Taylors', and which is shown in Ex. 3.10.⁹⁹ Potter's uses essentially the same procedures here as in the last section

Ex. 3.10: Caprice for 'cello and orchestra, from rehearsal letter L

The image shows two staves of musical notation in bass clef, 2/4 time. The first staff begins with the tempo marking [Vivace] and the dynamic marking *p* [vc solo]. It contains a series of eighth-note patterns with slurs, characteristic of a cello solo. The second staff continues the pattern and ends with a dynamic marking *sf*.

of his *Overture to an Irish Occasion*, elaborating this idea into a *moto perpetuo* and attempting to maintain interest by means of abrupt shifts of tonal centre. After an episode in which the material is restated in A major, the key reverts to C for a final appearance of the theme. A brief coda combines the hectic semiquavers of this idea with the perky scalic figures of the opening, before an emphatic culmination on a series of forceful C major *tutti* chords.

One's task in attempting to assess Potter's orchestral works is made considerably more difficult by the fact that the performances recorded by RTÉ are generally so inadequate as to impair whatever chances these pieces have of communicating

⁹⁹ These are listed in Fleischmann's *Sources of Irish Traditional Music* as 2294 and 3789 respectively. 'The Devil's Dream' was first published in E. Rhames, *Three Fashionable Country Dances* (MS, National Library of Ireland; c. 1790); 'The Devil amongst the Taylors' in Edmund Lee, *E. Lee's Collection of Country Dances for This Present Year 1801* (Dublin, 1801).

effectively. The performance of the *Caprice* is no exception, with its excruciating intonation, poor ensemble, insensitive phrasing and general lack of finesse. In an accurate and intelligently shaped rendering, this score might just be viable, although it is still marred by Potter's characteristic weaknesses. The slack rhythmic organisation of the theme of the slow movement, in which every phrase ends on a long note, is a particularly glaring defect, and the somewhat incoherent structure of the first movement, with its disproportionately long introduction, being another.

The second work discussed in this section, the *Scherzo concertante* for violin, piano and orchestra (1966), has better material than the *Caprice*, but is marred by its rather unsatisfactory overall structure. Once again, it comprises three linked sections, this time constituting a large-scale ternary form. The first section is marked *Presto scherzando* and is prefaced by a fairly substantial introduction featuring dramatic interchanges between the two solo instruments, in which a capricious syncopated idea in the violin alternates with brilliant cascades of arpeggios in the piano that range over the entire compass of the instrument. Much use is made of a pentatonic aggregate built up of superimposed fourths, which is heard at the very outset in the piano and orchestra. The principal theme of this section, which opens in three-eight time, bears a clear resemblance to motifs announced in the introduction, and is harmonised with parallel six-four-two chords — one of Potter's favourite sonorities [Ex. 3.11]. A new idea in two-four time, a modal melody announced on the piano presented with the hands a double octave apart, provides effective contrast from the whirling successions of parallel ninths that preceded it. This is restated on the solo violin in thirds, joined later by the piano. A curtailed reprise of the three-eight material returns, culminating in an impassioned violin recitative that serves as a transition to the central slow section. This is an *Andante* in three-four time, featuring rich piano textures that are reminiscent of the lush keyboard writing in the slow movement of the *Concerto da chiesa*. The violin introduces a languorous theme in a modal F minor with chromatic inflexions [Ex. 3.12]. This is one of Potter's single most memorable flights of lyrical invention: the melody unfolds seamlessly, achieving an impressive continuity. It is restated in sonorous unison on the strings,

Ex. 3.11: *Scherzo concertante*, from rehearsal letter B

Presto scherzando
[vln solo]

p
p, leggiero
[pf solo]
una corda

Ex. 3.12: *Scherzo concertante*, from rehearsal letter K

Andante
[vln solo]

mf, molto con tenerezza

with the violin soloist providing impassioned reinforcement at the octave above. This intensity subsides, and via another brooding recitative on the G string, the opening A section returns. Regrettably, at this point Potter makes a serious miscalculation which mars the effectiveness of the piece as a whole. After a shortened reprise of the material from the introduction (which lasts for only 44 bars of three-eight time), Potter passes immediately to a climactic restatement of the subsidiary two-four idea, omitting the principal three-eight altogether. As a result, the closing section of the work is far too short: the final climax seems inadequately prepared and insufficiently justified by the context, and the overall proportions of

the work thus strike the listener as being unbalanced. It is difficult to credit that Potter would have been unaware of this shortcoming and one wonders whether he simply ran out of time when writing the piece, or else was afraid that if he wrote a more extended final section, it would be too long for its intended place in the radio programme. Whatever the reason, it is a great pity that he never revised the work and sought to bring it into a more satisfactory form.

3.10 *Concerto for Orchestra*

Apart from these concertinos, Potter wrote no orchestral works of any substance in the ten years following the completion of the *Overture to an Irish Occasion* in 1956. In part, this can be explained by the fact that he was engaged in other large-scale projects that consumed much of his creative energies, including four substantial ballet scores and a television opera *Patrick*, all of which were composed between 1959 and 1964. Although we know comparatively little about the circumstances of Potter's personal life during much of this period, it is clear that he drank increasingly to excess and that his alcoholism steadily worsened — a fact which no doubt goes a long way towards explaining the routine nature of most of the concertante works and the very uneven workmanship in evidence in two of his four ballets, *Careless Love* and *Caitlín Bhocht*. One of the remaining ballets scores, *Gamble, No Gamble*, in which he experimented with serial procedures, seemed to open up new expressive possibilities (as we shall see in Chapter V), but these were to remain unexplored for some time yet — probably because by the mid-1960s, Potter was only intermittently capable of the kind of sustained intellectual effort required for artistic creation at a high level. As we have seen, at some point in 1966 he seems to have acknowledged the severity of his condition and made efforts to stop drinking, eventually seeking professional help. As far as one can tell, he remained on the dry for at least two years, during which time he wrote two significant orchestral works, the *Concerto for Orchestra* and the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, which are of indisputably finer quality than much of the music he had composed since the start of the decade.

The *Concerto for Orchestra*, which was completed in January 1967¹⁰⁰, was first performed by the RTÉSO under the baton of Tibor Paul in the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin on 13 March of the same year. Paul had been responsible for commissioning the score in his capacity as Director of Music: in July 1966, he contacted Potter to ask if he would write a work of between fifteen and twenty minutes' duration for symphony orchestra without soloists for performance some time in March 1967. This was the first commission for a substantial orchestral work that the composer had received from RTÉ since the *Overture to an Irish Occasion*, and as we have seen in the first chapter, there is some reason to believe that Paul had offered it to him rather grudgingly. Potter readily assented to the proposal nonetheless and agreed on the provisional title of *Concerto for Orchestra*.¹⁰¹ In the event, the work was somewhat shorter than originally envisaged: the reel-to-reel recording in the Potter Archive lasts just under fourteen minutes. Paul's tempi are excessively cautious, however, and in a better-realised performance this timing would probably be reduced to about twelve minutes. Potter made the conventional polite noises of appreciation to the conductor after the premiere¹⁰², but one wonders what he privately thought on re-listening to this thoroughly lacklustre account of his score, with its ragged ensemble and persistently poor intonation: the strings are particularly culpable in the latter respect, their tuning being so approximate as to obscure completely the distinctness of the harmonic progressions in many passages, particularly in complex *divisi* textures. The piece would undoubtedly make a far more vivid impression in a performance of better quality.

Contrary to what one might have expected, the *Concerto for Orchestra* was not conceived as a virtuosic orchestral showpiece, as are the similarly titled works by composers such as Kodály (1939–40), Bartók (1943), Tippett (1962–3) and Gerhard (1965). Indeed, its technical demands are comparatively modest, and although the work features some important solos, Potter does not attempt to bring the members of

¹⁰⁰ Richard Pine incorrectly gives the date of completion as 1966 in his *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*. The last page of Potter's autograph score bears the date 15 January 1967.

¹⁰¹ See AJP to Tibor Paul, 21 July 1966 ('Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA).

¹⁰² See AJP to Tibor Paul, 13 March 1967 ('Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA).

every instrumental section into prominence in a systematic fashion: instead, he makes far greater use of blended orchestral colours. Nor does the work display any of the characteristics of a *concerto grosso*, although the main theme of the last movement, which seems to allude unmistakably to the finale of Bach's third Brandenburg Concerto, suggests that this Baroque model may have informed his conception. The work is in three movements. The first of these, which is marked *Alla Marcia*, is quite brief, lasting a mere 100 bars. It opens with an 18-bar introduction, which introduces an energetic fanfare motif accompanied by pungent bitonal superpositions of triadic formations — a sonority that pervades much of the score. The A section presents a vigorous march idea that is shared antiphonally between divided strings and winds [Ex. 3.13]. It commences in B minor, but is

Ex. 3.13: Concerto for Orchestra I: from rehearsal letter A



tonally labile, featuring abrupt harmonic shifts at cadence points that are reminiscent of Prokofiev. The statement of this idea occupies 13 bars, with a single bar — an emphatic unison B in the heavy brass and timpani — serving to effect a transition to the B section. This is dominated by a jaunty triplet idea in the horns that features the interval of a fourth prominently [Ex. 3.14] and which is restated in fuller scoring

Ex. 3.14: Concerto for Orchestra I: from rehearsal letter B



on the upper strings, forming a paragraph 28 bars in length. It too is tonally unstable, ranging through a variety of regions before culminating on an emphatic F sharp major seventh chord in the lower brass, against which the trumpets enunciate shrill C major fanfares. This signals the return of the material from the A section which is heard once again in B minor, but in much fuller scoring. The closing 15 bars

of the movement reintroduce fanfare figures of the introduction, elaborating them into a coda which concludes unexpectedly in A major. One is left with the impression of a neat, deftly executed movement, with a clear formal design that affords a welcome contrast to the diffuse organisation of so many of the concertante works.

The slow movement of the *Concerto for Orchestra* is an *Adagio* which is also just over a hundred bars in length, making it the most substantial movement of the three. In the context of Potter's work to date it explores new expressive territory, its dark intensity prefiguring the sound-world of the *Sinfonia de Profundis*. It too has a ternary form, though with a number of features of structural interest. The opening A section presents three distinct ideas in succession: a brooding melody in the violins, accompanied by restless chromatic harmonies; a plaintive figure enunciated by the flutes in thirds against gently undulating semiquavers in the clarinets; and a wan idea presented in parallel fourths on two bassoons against a light tremolando accompaniment. A short transition, punctuated by a hypnotic rhythmic figure on muted trumpets, serves as link to the central B section. In contrast to the first section, with its succession of fragmentary statements, this features a single idea, a long-breathed melody first heard on the horn, which builds to an impassioned climax based on a subsidiary motif in urgent dotted rhythms. This material is then restated by the full orchestra, building to a second and even more powerful climax. After a brief silence, a curtailed restatement of the material from the A section follows, but this time with its three constituent ideas presented in reverse, so as to end with the opening string cantilena. The closing bars expand its final cadence into a short, but highly expressive coda, in which the harmonies finally come to rest on an ethereal A flat major triad that suggests a resolution of the preceding tensions.

Unfortunately, the finale of the *Concerto for Orchestra* is greatly inferior in quality to the other two movements. One should add, however, it is particularly difficult to form an estimate of it from the RTÉSO recording, which is so poor as to border on a travesty. Apart from being marred to an even greater extent by lapses in intonation

and tone production, the performance is utterly lacking in energy and rhythmic precision, being much too slow. Moreover, Paul fails completely to realise Potter's intentions in the closing pages. Here, the composer effects a transition from two-four to six-eight time, which is meant to create a sudden upsurge in rhythmic excitement. Paul inexplicably slackens the tempo at this point, perversely ignoring Potter's indications and consequently destroying the effect. Be that as it may, the fact remains that this finale suffers from some of the habitual shortcomings of Potter's weaker work. Its thematic material is nondescript, and cannot really bear the amount of repetition to which it is subjected. These faults could be redeemed at least to some extent, however, in a good performance.

This movement is also in ternary form. It opens with a six-bar introduction, which, after a series of pungent dissonances, culminates on a radiant C sharp major triad. It then breaks into an *Allegro*, presenting a vigorous *martelé* idea in the strings with a decidedly Baroque flavour [Ex. 3.15]. Like the principal theme of the first movement,

Ex. 3.15: Concerto for Orchestra III: bars 7ff.

Allegro
[vlns]

f, sempre martelé *p* *f* *p*

cresc. *ff*

it employs colourful triadic doublings and unexpected harmonic diversions from the prevailing tonality, D minor. Together with subsidiary material, this idea is elaborated into a paragraph of just under 70 bars. In the B section, the metre changes to three-four, and the woodwinds introduce a nimble semiquaver idea with fairly obvious motivic relationships to material that has been heard previously. Much of this section, which lasts for 32 bars, is delicately scored for wind and brass without strings, affording a measure of relief from the full textures that have tended to prevail heretofore. The A section returns, and after a dramatically curtailed restatement of the opening material, it is presented in a varied guise in six-eight. At

this point, one of the subsidiary ideas is reintroduced and developed in a coda. This culminates in a series of emphatic E major chords which produce a rather incongruous impression, sounding almost like a parody of the triumphant closing pages of Tchaikovsky's Fourth or Fifth Symphonies. Bizarre though it might sound, Potter was fully conscious of the effect of these excessively emphatic cadences and even wrote them on purpose. He once told the Irish composer Séamas de Barra that he considered it most inadvisable to end works in a quiet or indeterminate fashion, his logic being that musically unsophisticated audience members would not realise when the piece was over, or even if they did, would feel inhibited from breaking the silence and responding enthusiastically. He claimed that, in his experience, unfamiliar works with quiet endings were almost guaranteed to receive a lukewarm reception from Irish concertgoers, and consequently deemed it safer to provide unambiguous, rousing conclusions to his scores, leaving the audience in no doubt whatsoever as to when they were supposed to applaud. De Barra recalls that these remarks appeared to be made in complete earnestness, without any trace of irony.¹⁰³ This lapse of artistic judgement is surely rather odd.

On the whole, the *Concerto for Orchestra* is an interesting score, even if it is not perfectly realised in all its details, and one would certainly be curious to find out what impression it would make in a good live performance. The central *Adagio* is particularly impressive, and is undoubtedly one of the single finest movements that Potter had written to date. It evinces a notably greater depth of feeling than much of his previous work, and marks the beginnings of the belated creative maturation of which the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was perhaps the finest product.

¹⁰³ Personal communication to author, 14 November 2007

3.11 *Sinfonia de Profundis*

The *Sinfonia de Profundis* is generally held to be one of Potter's finest achievements and is undoubtedly a work of considerable importance in the annals of Irish composition in the twentieth century. In the first place, it was one of the very few noteworthy contributions to the symphonic literature in Ireland up to this point; and secondly, it was rapturously received on the occasion of its first performance in Dublin on 23 March 1969, enjoying a success that was perhaps unprecedented for a 'serious' work by a modern Irish composer. Not only were the music critics of the various Irish dailies unanimous in their praise, but shortly afterwards Potter was also presented with a prestigious award in recognition of his accomplishment. In view of these facts, it is clearly necessary to consider the work in some detail here.

Potter's first symphony came into being as a result of a fortuitously-timed commission from Radio Telefís Éireann. In June 1967, the Director of Music, Gerard Victory, enquired if he would be interested in writing a substantial orchestral work of up to forty minutes' duration for the RTÉSO's 1968-69 season.¹⁰⁴ Potter accepted with alacrity, telling Victory that he had 'for the past couple of years been mulling over a long symphonic-type work in my head, wondering when there would ever be a chance to write — and perform — it'.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, when one considers the extreme haste in which so many of his works were composed, the gestation of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was unusually protracted, and one has the distinct impression that Potter took what was for him exceptional care over its composition. He sent the movements to RTÉ in a piecemeal fashion, submitting the first two at the end of April the following year.¹⁰⁶ The third movement was not completed until 22 July; the

¹⁰⁴ Gerard Victory to AJP, 28 June 1967 ('Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA)

¹⁰⁵ AJP to Gerard Victory, 29 June 1967 ('Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA). As has been previously mentioned in Chapter I Part 2, there is no reason to credit Richard Pine's assertion that Potter commenced work on the *Sinfonia de Profundis* in the mid-1950s: see Pine, *Music and Broadcasting*, 249.

¹⁰⁶ See AJP to Gerard Victory, 25 April 1968 ('Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA).

fourth was dispatched to the copyist on 29 September, followed by the fifth on 21 October.¹⁰⁷

Potter evidently appreciated this long-awaited opportunity to compose a symphony: various comments scattered throughout his letters at this period suggest that the reason he had not attempted to write any orchestral works on an ambitious scale over the last decade was because the previous Director of Music, Tibor Paul, had been unwilling to commission or perform them. He confided to Charles Acton that he had been mulling over the idea of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* for 'quite a few years', but 'there didn't seem much point in committing it to paper under the ancient regime, if you know what I mean.'¹⁰⁸ Writing to a more intimate acquaintance, Cyprian Fahey, after the work's triumphant premiere, he was even more forthright, explicitly identifying Paul as someone who had hindered his career. This letter to Fahey is of considerable interest, as it reveals that he found the experience of writing the work and having it performed to be an unusually positive and even pleasant one, and he was deeply gratified by the evident care taken over it in rehearsals by the RTÉSO's talented new principal conductor, Albert Rosen:

[The premiere] was a memorable occasion, not just for the work itself, but because for the very first time as far as this kind of thing was concerned, we had the experience of everything going right. To begin with, I had been mulling over the thing for several years, but didn't want to commit it to paper whilst Irish music was still undergoing the eighth century of foreign domination (the Dermot MacMurroughs being in the music business [at] this time): then when Gerry Victory became Director of Music in succession to Tibor (Statute of Kilkenny) Paul, he asked me whether I would like to compose a large-scale work. [I] finished it about last October Then it got handed to a good copyist so that the players would have something like notes to play off — not the usual collection of assorted fly-droppings and spider-trails. Then we got a good conductor (the new one at RTÉ who is really

¹⁰⁷ See Memo to Librarian of RTÉSO, 22 July 1968, AJP to Gerard Victory, 29 September 1968, and Memo to Director of Music, RTÉ, 21 October 1968 (all in 'Nº3 RÉ/BBC 1966 – 7 – 8 – 9', PA).

¹⁰⁸ AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('Nº1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

interested in new works — Irish ones, that is). He had six rehearsal sessions in which to prepare the *S[infonia] d[e] P[rofundis]*, the Brahms [First Symphony] and the Ginastera [Harp Concerto]. The first two sessions were spent entirely on the SDP. Then I went to the next session — so that was half the rehearsal time spent on the new work. Then on the fourth one, they gave the Brahms a run through — and back to the SDP. Then on the fifth, they spent half of the time on the Brahms and the Ginastera — and then back to the SDP with me there. The sixth one was the last one with the harp soloist there, so there was only the time for the final touch-ups of the SDP. By that time, they [i.e. *the orchestra*] knew it! (Shades of the days when the Irish work got one run-through to see if the parts were right and the rest of the time [was] spent on the Tchaikovsky!) ... Then there had been a fair bit of pre-publicity — which did help to make up a good full-house audience. ... I'm just very glad and very thankful that at long last, I have really had an opportunity to do something really worthwhile with the talents that Somebody saw fit to give me, and that some people worked very hard to develop.¹⁰⁹

Potter's concluding remarks indicate very clearly that the process of writing the *Sinfonia de Profundis* brought with it a sense of fulfilment and a feeling that he had at last realised his potential as a composer. The score also had a deeply personal significance for him: from the outset, he made no secret of the fact that it was autobiographical in nature, depicting his struggle to overcome his inner demons and conquer his alcoholism. As the title of the symphony might suggest, with its allusion to the opening line of Psalm 129, *De profundis clamavi ad te Domine* ['Out of the depths I cried unto thee, O Lord'] and perhaps also to Wilde's posthumously published *De Profundis*, it is an attempt to portray his personal experiences of mental anguish. His first attempt at drafting a programme note reads:

There comes a time in most people's lives when the bottom of hell falls out and you drop through it. When it's all safely over, you will, if you are in the creative business try to put it down in words, shapes or notes. This symphony is such a record.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ AJP to Cyprian Fahey, 9 April 1969 ('Nº1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

¹¹⁰ See programme notes accompanying letter from AJP to J. A. Quigley, 4 February 1969 ('Nº1: Misc. 1969-70', PA).

To another correspondent, he described the work as 'a musical account of one man's own progress from despair over a particular circumstance in his life to spiritual recovery and (for the time being, of course) triumph over the powers of darkness'.¹¹¹ While Potter stopped short of making explicit reference to his alcoholism in the final version of the programme note, he was quite frank about its relevance when discussing the work in private. He told Charles Acton:

As to the programmatic background of the work — well, we're on a little shaky ground here. As, of course, you'll have guessed, it is strictly autobiographical. I'm all for frankness in these things, but at the same time, other people aren't, and I don't want to hurt the feelings or cause any embarrassment of or to those nearest and dearest to me. But you'll have noticed that however nicely and tunefully and everything-else the various movements start, they always end up being rent apart by the accursed *bête noire* of a three-note irruption: and even if they aren't rent dynamically by the noise, it's still there as an insidious background. You'll also notice that the fourth movement ... looks like a nightmare. It's meant to — only an organised nightmare, I hope. I could write you a thesis on this particular variety. And, of course, we have a happy ending with the trumpets sounding on the other side... Well, it has been, so far.¹¹²

In conversation with Séamas de Barra, he volunteered the information that the 'nightmare' in question depicted his terrifying experiences of *delirium tremens*, with its attendant hallucinations and anxiety attacks.¹¹³ Amongst his papers, there is also a rather moving letter of thanks that he sent to his medical consultant J. N. P. Moore who had treated him in St Patrick's Hospital, Dublin some time previously, acknowledging the role that he and his colleagues had played in his recovery, and consequently, in making possible the composition of the symphony:

¹¹¹ AJP to Rev. Sr. Cora Nagle, 2 December 1976 ('№7: Fan Mail 1976 – June '77', PA)

¹¹² AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('№1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

¹¹³ Séamas de Barra, personal communication to author, 15 November 2007

In the course of one of our interviews some years ago, you said that one of the consolations of your work was that it enabled the likes of me to get on with mine. I thought therefore that you might like to see the enclosed press cuttings. Please read them. Not for the sake of the hyperbole — one has learnt not to pay all that amount of attention to such things — but because they do in their own way tell the story of what it has all been about. It occurs to me that you and your colleagues ought to take a few bows as well — but I suppose that etiquette prevents it. But it does not prevent me from saying thank-you. Which I do, rather inadequately, since words are not my trade.¹¹⁴

He had every reason to be gratified by the reception of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* at its premiere. Rosen's meticulous preparation in rehearsal enabled him to secure a performance of great conviction which made a considerable impression on the audience. And for once, the critics vied with one another in their praise of the new work, to an extent that seems genuinely to have surprised him:

It was a humdinger of a performance, but the orchestral ensemble was nothing compared to the critical togetherness that took place the next day. I'm sure that you know that these Dublin ones are notoriously amongst the most vitriolic in the world when it takes them, so a united rave from all five of them is most definitely one for the book. Funny, isn't it? You sit down sometimes and write some scintillatingly brilliant little piece designed to do nothing but enchant and amuse your darling public — and the so-and-sos sit on their hands like mutes at a funeral. And then you pen a solemnly cogitative piece that spends the time in gloomy reflections about the mortality of man and suchlike cheerless subjects, dress it up in the most austere and recondite musical idiom you can think of — and the audience proceeds to raise the ruddy roof!¹¹⁵

Potter was not exaggerating. The tone of all the reviews, without exception, was effusive almost to the point of being embarrassing. Robert Johnston, writing in the

¹¹⁴ AJP to Dr J. N. P. Moore, 27 March 1969 ('Nº13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

¹¹⁵ AJP to Maureen Drake, 26 March 1969 ('Nº13: Personal 1969 – 70 – 1 – 2 – 3', PA)

Irish Press, described the performance as 'a shattering experience'; recklessly mixing metaphors in his enthusiasm, he went on to declare:

It is difficult to write rationally whilst still under its emotional spell, but the overall impression remains of an explosive fund of artistic energy superbly controlled carving out a masterpiece of living sound. ... This is undoubtedly a work that will eventually take its place in the repertoire of international orchestras and should establish Archie Potter internationally.¹¹⁶

Mary MacGoris, the critic for the *Irish Independent*, also reached for superlatives, proclaiming the *Sinfonia de Profundis* to be 'the major work so far of our major composer.' She averred that Potter's score was 'contemporary yet timeless in its expression of personal yet universal humanity', and went so far as to draw an explicit comparison with the music of Beethoven on account of the *Sinfonia's* 'revelations of the strength of the spirit of man' during its affirmative closing pages.¹¹⁷ Nor did Charles Acton allow himself to be outdone in hyperbole, even if his review is not free from his habitual equivocations:

After an overwhelming musical experience words seem even more inadequate and harder to find than usual. I am writing after such an experience, the first performance of A. J. Potter's symphony, and am seething with thoughts and feelings and the conviction that this was a major national event. ...

Operas should make their impression at first hearing: concert works are entitled to await familiarity and study of the score. Having had the honour and the privilege (and it has been those) of reading the score, I was thinking that the enormous effect the performance was having on me might partly come from that; but the quality of the audience's applause showed that the work made its own immediate impact. ...

One might have thought it a mistake to place the work first in the programme. In fact, it speaks so clearly and compellingly and gathers one up so completely that it is

¹¹⁶ *Irish Press*, 24 March 1969

¹¹⁷ *Irish Independent*, 24 March 1969

better coming without any other musical mood having been established. This is not the place to discuss its details: its impact is too powerful. It may be recalled that Beethoven headed the score of his *Missa Solemnis* 'From the heart, may it go to the heart.' Dr Potter might have said the same. It did.¹¹⁸

The following day, Acton sent Potter a decidedly curious communication, intimating that the *Sinfonia de Profundis* had struck him as being comparable in stature to the Brahms symphony performed in the second half of the concert, but that he had felt inhibited about saying so in his review:

Dear Archie,

I have seldom felt more inadequate than when trying to write a notice of your symphony last night. But I was slightly consoled by having been part of that audience last night, the fervour of whose applause should have left you in no doubt (I hope) that the symphony had gone right to all of our hearts. I would have liked to have written, as I was feeling, that it and the Brahms balanced each other symmetrically round that trivial concerto in the middle; that while listening to the Brahms I repeatedly found myself recalling the experience of yours balancing the two works on equal terms. I did not write anything like that because I could find no way of doing it that would not have seemed excessive to the ordinary reader, thereby weakening rather than strengthening the impression I would like to convey. ... However, the real purpose of this letter is to thank you most warmly for the experience and praise you for having given it to us.¹¹⁹

It is difficult to know what to make of this letter and one wonders what prompted the critic to send it. Although Potter doubtlessly appreciated Acton's favourable response to the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, most composers, no matter how egocentric, would be deeply embarrassed by suggestions that their music could bear favourable comparison with that of Brahms, and would consider them ludicrous. In any case, this fawning missive does not appear to have gone down well: Potter acknowledged

¹¹⁸ *Irish Times*, 24 March 1969

¹¹⁹ Charles Acton to AJP, 24 March 1969 ('AJP Miscellaneous 1978-80', PA)

the letter politely, but its contents rankled.¹²⁰ He not only kept it, as was his wont with most of his correspondence, but took the trouble to make several photocopies which are also preserved amongst his papers — a fact which suggests that he attached considerable significance to it, and probably circulated copies of it to friends.

In addition to these accolades, the new work also elicited warm letters of congratulation from his fellow composers, including James Wilson and Gerard Victory.¹²¹ Potter can hardly have failed to be touched by these tributes; but the chorus of praise had not yet reached its climax. Later that year, in mid-November, he was notified that he had been nominated for a Jacob's Award in recognition of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* 'as an original work which [had] made a significant contribution to serious modern music in Ireland'.¹²² These awards, which were sponsored by the Dublin biscuit-manufacturing firm of W. & R. Jacob & Co. Ltd., had been inaugurated in 1962¹²³ and were considered a notable honour. They were originally presented to individuals deemed to have made outstanding contributions to Irish television, but range of awards was subsequently expanded to take in radio. The recipients were chosen by Irish radio and television critics, who seem to have been permitted a considerable degree of flexibility in making their choices.¹²⁴ Most of the awards went to programme makers or presenters, but a few were given to classical musicians. The awards ceremony itself seems to have been a rather grand affair and was held at the Jacob's premises in Bishop Street with an invited audience in attendance. In 1969, it took place in the presence of the Taoiseach Jack Lynch, with

¹²⁰ AJP to Charles Acton, 31 March 1969 ('Personal 1978-80', PA). The photocopies of Acton's original letter are in the same folder. According to Sarah Burn, Acton's apparent timidity had irritated Potter intensely and confirmed his low estimate of him.

¹²¹ James Wilson to AJP, 26 March 1969 ('№1: Misc. 1969-70', PA); Gerard Victory to AJP, 24 March 1969 ('№3: RÉ/BBC 1966-7-8-9', PA)

¹²² Frankie Byrne to AJP, 17 November 1969 ('№1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

¹²³ See 'Firm to Sponsor TV awards', *Irish Times*, 7 March 1962.

¹²⁴ See 'Jacob's Television Awards', *Irish Times*, 12 October 1965.

the distinguished actor and theatre director Hilton Edwards presiding as Master of Ceremonies.¹²⁵

In the context of Irish musical life at this period, this level of recognition for a 'serious' composer was truly remarkable, modest though it may seem in comparison with the ways in which creative artists are often honoured in other countries. It is not altogether easy to explain why the *Sinfonia de Profundis* scored such a popular and critical success, while other works by Potter and his contemporaries which represent comparable accomplishments did not. As far as the general concertgoer was concerned, the obviously programmatic basis of the work would have made it easier to assimilate, and its appeal was probably heightened further by the overtly theatrical character of the music. These qualities undoubtedly influenced the responses of the critics, all of whom allude to the underlying programme and the emotive nature of the score in their reviews. In addition, one suspects that they flattered themselves on seeming to get to grips with a forbidding and 'difficult' modern score — one which used serial techniques to boot - and discovering that they could not only make sense of it, but actually liked it. Given the Dublin music critics' preoccupation with not appearing provincial, this experience no doubt provided welcome reassurance of their sophistication. Not that their reviews were notably more perceptive on this occasion; indeed, it does not seem to have struck any of them just how strange a work the *Sinfonia de Profundis* actually is.

For one thing, the style and gestural language of this symphony are deeply curious. On the face of it, Potter's much-advertised recourse to serialism would seem to suggest an increased determination to engage with 'modern' idioms, even if by the late 1960s classical dodecaphony was starting to be considered *passé*. To describe the work as serial, however, would be a misnomer: for while it is partially based on a note-row, Potter makes use of this in a rather relaxed manner, principally to generate thematic material (much as he had done in *Gamble, No Gamble* seven years

¹²⁵ See programme of events attached to Frankie Byrne to AJP, 4 December 1969 ('Nº 1 Miscellaneous 1971-72-73-74. 1975 – (June + Finish)', PA).

previously) and to some limited extent as a means of harmonic organisation. This 'dodecaphonic' material is used to portray spiritual darkness and psychological disorientation, and is contrasted throughout with diatonic material deriving from two hymn tunes, which Potter clearly intends to represent sanity and hope. Throughout the work, these ideas contend for dominance, until at last the disruptive 'atonal' material is resolved in the triumphant and firmly tonal coda of the finale. As Potter told Acton:

By the time we get to the end, things are reduced back to basic diatonics. You could describe the whole symphony as a progression from serialism back to diatonics — and the whole process is epitomised in the epilogue itself.¹²⁶

'Orthodox' twelve-tone composers would no doubt have considered Potter's procedure to constitute a perversion of dodecaphonic technique and an egregious contravention of the radical modernist aesthetic that informed it: one thinks of the controversy aroused by Leonard Bernstein's *Kaddish* Symphony, in which the American composer had similarly used serialism to portray emotional disturbance.¹²⁷ To judge from Potter's remarks about serialism that have already been quoted, one imagines that he would not have been unduly perturbed by such criticisms. Moreover, it is not difficult to think of other twentieth-century composers who occasionally employed serial procedures in a similarly loose manner, such as Walton and Britten, or the prominent Scandinavian symphonists Joonas Kokkonen and Aulis Sallinen; Potter's approach is consequently not as wayward as it might first appear.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that for all of his employment of an ostensibly 'modernist' compositional idiom, the musical rhetoric and the entire conception of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* are very much of the nineteenth century. It is clearly indebted to the arch-Romantic genre of confessional works in which the artist details his inner torments or spiritual struggle, such as Byron's *Manfred* or Rousseau's *Confessions*. In its emotional progression from despondency to radiant affirmation, it

¹²⁶ AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

¹²⁷ See Joan Peyser, *Leonard Bernstein* (London, 1988), 296-7.

evinces an equally obvious debt to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or to Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. It further recalls both of the latter works in its employment of a motto theme. The finale, which culminates in a triumphant statement of a hymn tune known to Anglicans as the Old 124th, features the venerable nineteenth-century device of employing a chorale melody to form the climax of an entire work, signalling the transcendence of the preceding conflicts: one thinks of the finale of the Mendelssohn C minor piano trio, Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony* and, of course, several of the Bruckner symphonies.

The single strongest influence on the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, however, is the Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*. Apart from the fact that both works are autobiographical in nature, Potter's score recalls the Berlioz in other ways. It too is cast in five movements. It employs an *idée fixe* — in this case, a note row — which recurs in a very obvious manner from movement to movement. The second movement of both symphonies is a waltz, with Potter's sounding almost like an ironic comment on the Berlioz, haunted as it is by despair. The closing bars of the Potter's slow movement, during which the *idée fixe* is heard on the oboe, is distinctly reminiscent of the plaintive cor anglais recitative with which the *Scène aux champs* concludes. The idea of depicting an alcohol-induced waking nightmare in the *Scherzo-Phantasma* of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was undoubtedly inspired by the supposedly opium-induced visions of the *Marche au supplice* and the *Songe d'une nuit de sabbat*. The endings of the two works are very different, however, as Potter's finale is intended to portray a resolution of the preceding conflicts and convey a sense of optimism — although one could still draw a parallel between Berlioz' employment of ecclesiastical chant (in his case, the *Dies Irae*) and Potter's use of a hymn tune, even if to very different expressive effect.

As will be evident from the preceding discussion, the unabashedly Romantic sensibility informing the *Sinfonia de Profundis* is far removed from that of the post-war continental *avant-garde*. This, together with its comparatively conservative musical language, would probably have caused the work to be dismissed out of

hand as stylistically anachronistic if it had been performed outside of Ireland in the 1970s. From a contemporary critical perspective, however, it is interesting to note that the score has a number of features - such as its intermittent employment of a neo-Romantic idiom, its extensive use of borrowed material and its utilisation of parody - that can be accommodated much more easily within a postmodernist aesthetic. It is not the only work of Potter's to display such traits: they are also present in several of his later works, including his posthumously performed opera *The Wedding*, as we shall see in due course.

From a technical point of view, the *Sinfonia de Profundis* must be accounted the most successful of Potter's later large-scale compositions, particularly with regard to its overall structural organisation. A detailed examination of the score reveals that it is constructed with considerable subtlety, evincing a notable concern to achieve thematic and motivic cohesion. Potter attempts to ensure the unity of the symphony as a whole by means of musical ideas that pervade all of the movements. The first of these, of which mention has already been made, is a note-row shown in Ex. 3.16. Apart from being used to generate melodic contours, Potter makes much use of

Ex. 3.16: *Sinfonia de Profundis*, basic form of note-row



three four-note chords obtained by superimposing its constituent pitches four notes at a time. The second idea is a terse rhythmic motto, a dactylic figure of two semiquavers followed by a quaver that tends to irrupt into the texture at moments of high dramatic tension. This can be seen in Ex. 3.17, a reproduction of a page of musical manuscript on which the symphony's principal thematic ideas are set down in Potter's hand.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ This manuscript is in the possession of Séamas de Barra: it was given to him by Potter, who jotted down these musical ideas while discussing the *Sinfonia de Profundis* in the course of an interview in 1978.

Ex. 3.17: Potter's jottings for basic material of *Sinfonia de Profundis*

Handwritten musical manuscript for "Sinfonia de Profundis". The manuscript includes three staves of music with notes and fingerings. The top staff has a red "RETRO" label and a sequence of numbers 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The middle staff has a red "RETRO" label and a sequence of numbers 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The bottom staff has a "Tutti lentissimo" marking and some rhythmic notation. Below the staves, there are handwritten notes in Italian: "Chorale "Remember God's Goodness, O Thou Man" (Mvt 1, 3, 4)" and '"Nisi Quia Dominus" - historical version last movement'.

The remaining ideas are derived from borrowed material – two hymns that would have been readily familiar to Anglican congregations during Potter's youth. Particularly extensive use is made of the first of these, *Remember, O Thou Man*¹²⁹ – a seventeenth-century Christmas carol generally attributed to Thomas Ravenscroft (?1592 – 1635), which is shown in Ex. 3.18.¹³⁰ The opening stanzas of the text

Ex. 3.18: *Remember, O Thou Man* (attr. Thomas Ravenscroft)

Musical score for "Remember, O Thou Man". The score shows two staves of music in G major and 3/4 time. The first staff has the lyrics: "Re-mem-ber, O thou man, O thou man, O thou man, Re-mem-ber, O thou man, Thy time is spent:". The second staff has the lyrics: "Re-mem-ber, O thou man, How thou art dead and gone, And I did what I can; There-fore re-pent!".

¹²⁹ Potter gives the title incorrectly as *Remember God's Goodness, O Thou Man*: these lines open the third verse rather than the first.

¹³⁰ It is not known whether the melody of this carol is traditional or of Ravenscroft's invention: see the discussion in Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott eds., *The New Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford, 1998), 149-150.

meditate on man’s sinful nature and his need of divine redemption – a theme that may have had obvious resonances for Potter after his recent experiences, even if one suspects that he would have understood these Christian concepts in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense. The second hymn tune is a sturdy melody which, according to the 1933 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, originated in the 1551 Genevan Psalter [Ex. 3.19]. Anglicans church musicians refer to this melody as the ‘Old 124th’; but Potter would have known it from his Presbyterian upbringing as the metrical psalm *Nisi Dominus*, which he described to Acton as ‘our *Te Deum* of deliverance’.¹³¹

Ex. 3.19: Old 124th (harmonisation from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1933)



Like the text of the Ravenscroft carol, this psalm (126 in the Latin Vulgate or 127 in the King James Bible) emphasises man’s complete dependence on God. The opening lines run:

Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant eam nisi
 Dominus custodierit civitatem frustra vigilavit qui custodit.

Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD
 keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. [King James translation]

¹³¹ AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('№1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

This melody is only introduced at the triumphant climax of the symphony's last movement, at which point Potter makes explicit a covert motivic connection between both hymn tunes and the note row. In the passage leading up to this climax, a motif deriving from the concluding phrase of *Remember, O Thou Man* which outlines a stepwise descent through a perfect fourth (marked *x* in Ex. 3.18) is gradually heard to emerge from a contour outlined by the higher pitches of the row: and this figure, if played in retrograde, yields the opening notes of the *Nisi Dominus* melody (see Ex. 3.19). The relationships of these contours to the original note row are shown in Ex. 3.20, below. This symbolic enactment of reversal is of course completely apposite at this juncture, as it constitutes the symphony's emotional turning point. A deeper

Ex. 3.20: relationship between note-row and motif *x*



symbolism is undoubtedly operative here too: the stepwise ascent of a fourth has already been heard in earlier movements arising from the retrograde form of the row. The capacity for hope, as it were, is embedded in the atonal material but is not realised until the finale, through the agency of the hymn-tune. Potter's handling of these motivic interconnections is notably skilful. There is no question but that he was fully conscious of them, incidentally, as he drew Acton's attention to their existence in a letter written shortly before the work's premiere.¹³²

Potter displays comparable resourcefulness in other aspects of the work's construction. Virtually all of the main musical material in the first four movements (and in much of the fifth) is derived either from the note row or from *Remember, O Thou Man*. In a draft for a programme note, Potter described the symphony as comprising 'an extended set of variations' on the latter, adding,

¹³² See AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

The variations do not occur all in one movement, but are spread through all five. Nor can they be numbered I, II, III, IV and so on, since at times the working-out is more on the lines of a free fantasia. In fact, to put it another way, the entire work could be described as a free fantasia on the tune. ...

The five movements do not fall into the pattern of the classical symphony, but serve to reflect each a different aspect of the psychological foundation of the work. None is formally speaking sufficient unto itself, but each contains its own quota of statement, growth, return and so on. The total growth of the symphony is from the beginning of the first movement to the end of the last.¹³³

In the letter to Charles Acton alluded to above, he was also at pains to emphasise the close integration of the symphony's formal design, and offered a rather different conceptualisation of this, likening the work to a vast sonata structure in one movement 'with pauses for breath and coughs at various points':

The first movement ... becomes not only the introduction but the 'first group of subjects' as well. ... The second and third movements (the waltz and the adagio) are in this light the 'second group of subjects'. The fourth, scherzo, is the 'development' and the fifth (epilogue) is the 'recapitulation' cum coda. Roughly speaking, of course.¹³⁴

This description of the work is rather dubious, however, as the material comprising the putative 'second group of subjects' is not restated at any point, making the notional 'recapitulation' in the fifth movement appear implausible. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the motivic and thematic connections between the five movements are both extensive and intimate.

The symphony's first movement proceeds at a predominantly moderate tempo and is 169 bars in length, lasting about six minutes in performance. While it does not

¹³³ Undated programme note accompanying AJP to J. A. Quigley, 4 February 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA).

¹³⁴ AJP to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA)

bear an immediately obvious resemblance to traditional forms, it could perhaps be construed as a modified sonata form in which the development and recapitulation are conflated. It opens in a dark and menacing mood [Ex. 3.21], with the spasmodic

Ex. 3.21: Sinfonia de Profundis I, opening

Moderato ♩ = 76

Bass Clarinet in Bb
 Violin I
 Violin II
 Viola
 Violoncello
 Double Bass

B. Cl.
 Vln. I
 Vln. II
 Vla.
 Vc.
 Db.

B. Cl.
 Vln. I
 Vln. II
 Vla.
 Vc.
 Db.

rhythmic figure alluded to earlier introduced on the lower strings. This is initially announced on the pitch A. A few bars later it is restated, this time punctuated by persistent interjections of the pitch E flat on the bass clarinet, establishing a tritonal opposition that pervades the rest of the movement. The 'first subject' consists of an agitated fragment enunciated on the first violins, which writhes sinuously in semiquavers within the span of a diminished octave. This derives in a very obvious manner from the basic form of the note-row, and is accompanied by *tremolando* chords in the divided second violins and violas which consist of a superposition of its constituent pitches. The first paragraph consists of insistent reiterations of these ideas: the semiquaver fragment is presented at closer rhythmic intervals, and finally in imitation at a crotchet's distance — a texture that culminates in an emphatic twelve-note chord. During this passage, the bass line falls by semitones to E and the imitative texture is broken off abruptly by an E major chord with an added minor sixth (C natural), presented on the brass and lower winds: against this, the first trumpet enunciates the note-row 'theme' in darting semiquavers, still at its original pitch. The arrival at E major — the tonality, incidentally, in which the work eventually concludes — suggests that the tritone A — E-flat (alias D sharp) functioned in this context as an incomplete dominant seventh, its constituent notes resolving outward by step to G sharp and E respectively. This paragraph leads seamlessly into the next, which introduces the 'second subject'. Against the persistent sonority of an E major chord with added minor sixth, melodic fragments deriving from *Remember, O Thou Man* insinuate themselves into the texture, played *pianissimo* on the strings in an ethereal treble register [Ex. 3.22]. This prepares for a statement on the woodwinds of the first two phrases of the hymn, harmonised in block chords moving in parallel motion.

The presentation of these ideas occupies exactly 70 bars. At this point, a new phase commences which appears to correspond to an orthodox development section. The E natural pedal in the bass, which has persisted for over 40 bars, now shifts abruptly to B flat, the pitch a tritone away. The logic of this move can be explained as an implied alternative resolution of the A - E flat tritone heard at the opening, this time

Ex. 3.22: *Sinfonia de Profundis I*, bars 39ff.

Cor Anglais

2 Clarinets in Bb

Bass Clarinet in Bb

2 Bassoons

Contrabassoon

Horns I, II in F

Horns III, IV in F

Trumpet I in Bb

Trumpets II, III in Bb

2 Tenor Trombones

Bass Trombone & Tuba

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Double Bass

understood as constituent pitches of an incomplete dominant seventh on F that close inward to B flat and D respectively. This establishes a tense bitonal opposition to the E major that has prevailed heretofore, as the trumpets continue to intone phrases from *Remember, O Thou Man* in that key against the new bass note and note-row

semiquaver idea, now sounded up a perfect fourth so that it commences on F, the dominant of B flat. The intensity subsides briefly, as the passage breaks off for a sombre unaccompanied 'cello recitative in a low register, which is based on the pitches of the row in its original form. This closes on G, the row's concluding note, which is intermittently reiterated in the bass as a pedal, over which further fragments of *Remember, O Thou Man* are presented antiphonally on winds and divided strings, restated at the same pitch as in the 'exposition'. The serenity of this passage is abruptly shattered by a *fortississimo* injection of the dactylic rhythmic figure on the pedal G in the timpani, which inaugurates the closing phase of the movement, a span of 60 bars in a faster *Allegro* tempo. It largely consists of a forceful *fortissimo* restatement of *Remember, O Thou Man* in its entirety on the trumpets and trombones in a clearly identifiable B minor, against whirling semiquaver figurations in the strings based on the three four-note chords deriving from the original form of the row. The entire passage, incidentally, is organised over the bass notes C, C sharp and D — the lowest pitches of these chords as they were constituted in Potter's initial arrangement of them, at the very opening of the movement. This superimposition of the movement's principal ideas could plausibly be interpreted as a conflated recapitulation of both of them. The stepwise descent of a fourth at the final cadence of the hymn is presented in augmentation against brilliant scale rushes, with a brief interruption just as the supertonic is about to move to the tonic by the motto rhythm on the timpani, this time on the note F — again at the remove of a tritone. The movement closes with a series of emphatic B major chords, sounded against frenetic reiterations of the semiquaver note-row theme in the strings at its original pitch. Interestingly, in the context of this tonality, it becomes apparent that the basic form of the row is organised in such a way as to suggest a succession of three chords relating to it — the tonic chord itself, B major with an added C natural, the supertonic chromatic chord C sharp major with an added minor sixth (a similar chord formation on E was used extensively for the first statement of the *Remember, O Thou Man* material); and, with some enharmonic respelling, an incomplete dominant seventh chord, A sharp, C sharp and E, with an added D natural [see Ex. 3.23]. F

natural obtrudes for the last time on timpani before the last, long-sustained B major triad.

Ex. 3.23: 'tonal reinterpretation' of note-row chords

(i) 'row' chords, original form (ii) 'tonal' reinterpretation

'tonic' 'supertonic chromatic' 'dominant'

('inessential tones' indicated with smaller note heads)

The image shows a musical staff with two parts. Part (i) shows three chords: a triad of G4, B4, D5; a triad of A4, C5, E5; and a triad of B4, D5, F#5. Part (ii) shows three chords: a triad of G4, B4, D5; a triad of A4, C5, E5; and a triad of B4, D5, F#5. In part (ii), the notes G4, B4, and D5 are larger, while A4, C5, and E5 are smaller. Labels below part (ii) identify the larger notes as 'tonic', 'supertonic chromatic', and 'dominant' respectively. A note in parentheses below the third chord indicates 'inessential tones'.

As will be evident from the foregoing account, the use of the term 'serial' to describe this movement would be quite misleading. For one thing, a sense of tonal centre is never obscured for long, and the movement articulates a clear progression from E major to B major. Secondly, as even the most casual inspection of the score will confirm, the note-row is employed in a rather primitive manner. Neither it nor its derivatives undergo a great deal of transposition, and it is used simply to generate a few melodic and harmonic ideas that are constantly restated at the same pitch. Potter's procedure consequently has very little to do with classical dodecaphonic technique.

Rather more extensive use of the row is made in the second movement, in which the *Remember, O Thou Man* material does not appear at all. This takes the form of a straightforward rondo of the type A - B - A¹ - B¹ - A² - Coda. The material of the A section is based on a transformation of the row in its original form, accompanied once again by its chordal derivatives that featured in the first movement [Ex. 3.24]. The music exudes a strange atmosphere of listlessness and melancholy, a mood reinforced by the pallid scoring. The B section introduces a contrasting idea that strongly recalls a waltz in Potter's ballet *Gamble, No Gamble*. The first strain is presented on the horn [Ex. 3.25], and employs the row in inverted form; while the impassioned contrasting strain, which is given to violas and 'cellos in unison, makes use of it in retrograde inversion. The second A section is practically identical to the first; but when the B section returns, the material is presented in reverse order and

Ex. 3.24: *Sinfonia de Profundis II*, bars 6ff.

Tempo di valse lento

[winds and harp omitted]

Ex. 3.25: *Sinfonia de Profundis II*, bars 21ff.

(employs inversion of note-row)

rescored, the contrasting strain now being assigned to violins, violas and 'cellos in unison, and the horn idea to clarinets playing in thirds. In the final repeat of the A, the melody is given to divided first and second violins playing in parallel six-four-two chords - a procedure reminiscent of the simultaneous polytonal doublings employed by Ravel in his *Boléro*. This restatement is brusquely interrupted by the motto rhythm pounded out on the timpani. The waltz melody attempts to reassert itself: the tempo quickens and it rises to a frenzied climax before being cut short once more in a similar fashion. A tenebrous coda in a much slower tempo follows: to the mysterious accompaniment of divided violas playing in trills, the contrabassoon intones fragments of the waltz, culminating on a low B flat. The semiquaver note-row idea from the first movement is reintroduced, now transposed to commence on an E, over throbbing repeated Es in the bass enunciated in the motto rhythm. The pitches of E and B flat vie for dominance: the woodwinds sound repeated B flat major chords in trills, while the strings build up the semiquaver idea in close imitation, insistently asserting the note E. This too rises to a strenuous climax before being brought to a shuddering halt by the motto rhythm, now hammered out on an emphatic open fifth, B flat and F, which settles the matter decisively: a lingering

sustained B flat in the bass clarinet and bassoons is terminated abruptly by a unison *pizzicato* B flat in the strings.

At almost nine minutes, the central *Adagio* is by far the longest of the symphony's five movements. It is quite straightforward in design, having a simple two-part structure. The A section presents a solemn idea in slow-moving harmonies on the strings which bears a distinct similarity to the material heard at the opening of the corresponding movement in the *Concerto for Orchestra*, with which it shares a similarly spectral atmosphere and mood of brooding intensity. This idea, which is shown in Ex. 3.26, is derived from an inversion of the note-row. A reminiscence of

Ex. 3.26: *Sinfonia de Profundis* III, opening

Adagio
[archi - other parts omitted]

(vln I melody based on inversion of row)

the first phrase of *Remember, O Thou Man* follows, which pits the tonality of C sharp minor against sustained chords of B flat in the brass. This pair of ideas is restated three times in varied guises. The second restatement is given to the horn, which plays a melody deriving from the retrograde inversion of the row to a chorale-like string accompaniment. This closes onto a triad of F major, against which the phrase from *Remember, O Thou Man* once again seeks to establish C sharp minor. The third restatement elaborates the opening string theme into an imitative texture, using counterpoints further derived from the row, and cadencing onto a luminous five-four chord on C in the winds and harp. The fourth is once again given to the strings, but is even more intricate, employing the same string melody in counterpoint against itself in inversion and by diminution. The hymn-tune fragment duly follows in E minor, this time concluding on a five-four chord on A. The second part of the movement introduces a wholly new idea, an expansive cantilena played on all the violins in unison, featuring the interval of a fourth prominently [Ex. 3.27]. It is spun out in four very lengthy phrases, the third of which rises to a searing climax on a

Ex. 3.28: *Sinfonia de Profundis IV*, bars 30ff.

[Vivace]
[vlins]

p. stacc. molto *sf*
cresc.

Ex. 3.29: *Sinfonia de Profundis IV*, bars 47ff.

Bruscamente
[tbns]

sf f *sf* *sf* *sf* *ff* *f* *sf*
sf *sff* *sf*

the second is accompanied by the descending scalar figure occurring at its final cadence. This section lasts 49 bars; at this point, the material of the introduction supervenes, effecting a link to the second A section.

This is based on the same material as the first A, but is greatly expanded and altered. Extensive use is made of montage techniques of a kind encountered in much music written around this period - the later works of Michael Tippett afford some notable examples, including the Third and Fourth Symphonies, and the Triple Concerto. Here, over the course of the next fifty or so bars, Potter creates a highly complex orchestral texture by superimposing four musical ideas in various combinations. The first of these is the jig tune, now presented on strings employing multiple *divisi* and placed in widely separated registers. The tune itself is played simultaneously in the keys of E flat, G, B flat and D flat, while the supporting harmonies feature other polytonal aggregates (the opening of this passage is shown in Ex. 3.30). This string texture remains a constant background presence throughout the passage,

Ex. 3.30: *Sinfonia de Profundis* IV, bars 95ff.

[winds omitted]

functioning as a kind of ostinato. Against it, the brass and lower woodwinds play a variant of the jazzy tune heard previously, over a bass line that outlines stepwise ascents and descents through a perfect fourth, as before. Next, the note-row makes an appearance, first of all on the trumpet, in a transposition of its inverted form; and then in its original form, played twice by the lower brass in successively longer note values. The last element in the montage is *Remember, O Thou Man*, which is played in its entirety on the woodwinds. Apart from the fact that this procedure enabled him to produce the kind of peculiar atmosphere he had in mind, Potter also seems to have adopted it as a way of circumventing the kinds of developmental processes encountered in the nineteenth-century symphonic literature, to judge from remarks in a programme note that he drafted not long before the premiere:

Bearing in mind that audiences have by now heard a lot of symphonising, the composer has condensed much of what used to be called 'development' and by

means of musical 'montage' has caused things to be heard instead at one and the same time.¹³⁵

In its context, the passage is conspicuously successful, creating an effect that is quite unique in the modern Irish orchestral literature. As in the waltz, the progress of the music is forcibly arrested by a thunderous statement of the motto rhythm on the timpani; in this case, however, the movement manages to maintain its momentum, and the section merges fluidly into a coda. This consists of two parts. In the first, the brass and woodwind ceaselessly reiterate the motif of a stepwise descent through a perfect fourth against slow-moving syncopated string chords formed by harmonising a transposed mirror form of the row with remotely related triads (a similar technique, it will be recalled, had been employed in the slow movement). The motto theme erupts once more on the timpani, leading to a final *Più Mosso* in which the note-row is declaimed forcefully on *martelé* strings against repetitions of the descending fourth motif on unison winds, before the entire orchestra cadences on an open fifth, C sharp and G sharp.

The last movement of the symphony bears the inscription *Epilogue* — a designation which is perhaps a little misleading, as the *dénouement* of the entire work is yet to come. Potter's use of the term, one suspects, was probably prompted by its employment in symphonies by Bax and Vaughan Williams. This is also a bipartite structure, the second section being somewhat shorter than the first. It opens in a *Moderato* tempo; over a persistent E pedal articulated in the motto rhythm, scurrying fragments of the semiquaver note-row theme from the first movement are heard on the violas. Gradually, the woodwinds pick out the topmost pitches of the row, emphasising the contour of a stepwise descent through a fourth and establishing the relationship shown in Ex. 3.20. The passage rises slowly to a climax, which is cut short by a violent interjection of the motto rhythm on the timpani. A motif from *Remember, O Thou Man* is taken up by the woodwinds; after which the descending

¹³⁵ Undated programme note accompanying AJP to J. A. Quigley, 4 February 1969 ('No1: Misc. 1969-70', PA).

scalic figures resume and rise to a second climax, during which reiterated unison Es in the strings contend with B flat major triads in the brass, reviving the tritonal opposition familiar from the first movement. From this point onwards, the scalic figures proceed in the opposite direction to outline ascending fourths - marking the onset of a dramatic enantiodromia. These ascending figures are stated with greater confidence and emphasis, rising to a climactic unison B. At this juncture, there is a two-bar *fortissimo* cadenza for timpani and unpitched percussion — the latter making their first appearance in the work. The last section of the movement follows on directly — a jubilant *tutti* statement of the *Nisi Dominus* melody in a radiant E major. Initially, dissonant brass fanfares intervene at the cadence points, but these disappear as the hymn proceeds, and the movement concludes with a series of emphatic E major chords which are presumably intended to convey a sense of exhilaration and spiritual uplift.

Although it is an undeniably strange work, the *Sinfonia de Profundis* is undoubtedly the most satisfactory of Potter's large-scale compositions and represents a notable achievement. The five movements constitute a well-balanced structure, and the work as a whole is free to a much greater extent of the shortcomings that mar much of its composer's other music. The musical invention is sufficiently vivid to hold the listener's attention from start to finish, and the work gives the impression of being informed by an underlying creative impulse of considerable urgency. Certain aspects of the work may not be to everyone's taste — particularly the finale's concluding peroration, which may strike some listeners as bombastic — but there is no question but that it is genuinely and sincerely felt. The *Sinfonia de Profundis* is also a score of considerable historical importance in an Irish context, because very few Irish composers had attempted to write symphonies up to this point. If one excepts those of Stanford and Harty, both of whose careers were largely in Britain, the only contributions of note had been made by Selina Boyle (1889-1967), an Irish student of Vaughan Williams who wrote three symphonies between 1927 and 1951, and three composers of a younger generation, Seóirse Bodley (b. 1933), James Wilson (1922-2005) and Gerard Victory (1921-1995), whose first symphonies were completed

in 1959, 1960 and 1961 respectively. The *Sinfonia de Profundis* seems to have received only four performances during Potter's lifetime, and although it received an equally rapturous reception when given during the Dublin Festival of Twentieth Century Music in January 1978, on which occasion it was given a standing ovation¹³⁶, it does not appear to have been programmed in a symphony concert since Potter's death. In spite of the unprecedented level of critical and popular acclaim that the work received, even that was not sufficient to establish it in the indigenous musical repertoire — a somewhat depressing indicator of the extent to which music by Irish composers is still undervalued in its country of origin.

3.12 *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* and Symphony No. 2

Unfortunately for Potter, the triumph over personal difficulties that he had celebrated in the *Sinfonia de Profundis* proved short-lived and by 1971 he was again drinking so heavily that he had to be hospitalised. In the last decade of his life he was not very productive of large-scale serious works; and he completed only two significant compositions for orchestra, the symphonic suite *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* (1974) and his second symphony (1976). Sadly, neither of these is very distinguished and both suffer to a very marked degree from all the faults of Potter's weakest music. It would consequently be unkind and unnecessary to subject them to detailed critical scrutiny, and the account that follows will be confined to a brief description of each of them and of the circumstances surrounding their composition.

The idea for *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* seems to have taken shape in Potter's mind early in 1971. During the previous decade, he had holidayed regularly in France: he had a keen appreciation of the country's scenery and climate, as well as its varied cuisine. Given his pronounced francophilia, it was perhaps inevitable that he would eventually seek to memorialise his impressions in a musical work. In April of that year, he sent Gerard Victory a brief description of the sort of thing he had in mind and asked if it might be possible to organise a commission.

¹³⁶ AJP to Sydney Bell, 23 April 1978 ('AJP Miscellaneous 1978-80', PA)

[There] has been generating another idea for an orchestral work at the back of my mind, and — don't be depressed — it's another symphony, but NOT a soul-searching gut-wrenching job like the *de Profundis*... (One of those in a lifetime is enough for me!) No, this is intended as a very light-hearted evocation of all the happy times I have spent on the Côte d'Azur, and apart from anything else, would be considerably shorter than the *de Profundis* one... It has only three movements for a start, but it is still a symphony. Would you be interested in giving the go-ahead for this to get started on? I feel that it was high time I was doing something else from television documentaries...¹³⁷

Supportive as ever, Victory sent him a courteous response expressing interest in the project.¹³⁸ Shortly afterwards, Potter wrote to him again to explain that, having started to sketch the piece, he now felt that it could more aptly be described as a 'symphonic suite' rather than a symphony.¹³⁹ Curiously, in spite of Victory's encouragement, and his own professed eagerness to compose a substantial orchestral work to follow up the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, Potter did not pursue that project any further at this point. He only seems to have resumed work on the score when Victory contacted him again in December 1973 to ask if he would write a new work of between twenty and thirty minutes duration for the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra.¹⁴⁰ *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* (or *Sodaz*, as Potter used to refer to it) was eventually completed in full score on 17 September 1974. It received its first performance on 13 January 1976, on which occasion the RTÉSO was conducted by Albert Rosen.

In principle, the idea of writing an extended piece of light music presenting a series of vignettes of the Côte d'Azur could have worked well and would have been ideally suited to the gifts of composers such as Jean Françaix or Jacques Ibert. *Souvenir de la Côte d'Azur* could therefore be understood as owing something to a French genre of concert works evoking experiences of foreign travel which includes Bizet's *Roma*,

¹³⁷ AJP to Gerard Victory, 29 April 1971 ('No3: RTÉ + BBC 1970 – 71 – 72', PA)

¹³⁸ Gerard Victory to AJP, 27 May 1971 ('No3: RTÉ + BBC 1970 – 71 – 72', PA)

¹³⁹ AJP to Gerard Victory, 26 May 1971 ('No3: RTÉ + BBC 1970 – 71 – 72', PA)

¹⁴⁰ Gerard Victory to AJP, 31 December 1971 ('No3: RTÉ + BBC 1970 – 71 – 72', PA)

Saint-Saëns' *Suite algérienne* and *Souvenir d'Ismailia*, Massenet's *Scènes pittoresques* and Ravel's *Rapsodie espagnole*. Potter may well have had some such model in mind, to judge from the rather jaded generically 'French' harmonic and textural clichés that pervade his score, although it has none of Françaix or Ibert's deftness and ironic wit. The suite comprises three movements, 'Jour de fête' (*Allegro marcato*), a central slow movement, *Larghetto sognante* and a concluding *Allegro*. In addition to evoking the folk music of Provence, Potter makes extensive use of borrowed material - including popular songs such as 'The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo' and two arias from Bizet's *Carmen*, *La fleur que tu m'avais jetée* and the celebrated *Habanera* - to rather less than felicitous effect. From a structural point of view, the score makes a completely incoherent impression. Each of the movements presents a jumble of ill-assorted fragments in no apparent order; and all of them seem just to stop at some arbitrarily chosen point rather than conclude in accordance with the dictates of an underlying formal logic. And although the work has occasional effective moments, it gives the impression of having been composed with only intermittent attention.

Potter's Symphony No.2 is not quite so flawed a score, but the flaccid quality of its musical invention makes it scarcely more viable. It seems to have come into being at the instigation of Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, who was President for Ireland for a period of slightly less than two years between 1974 and 1976. The circumstances are somewhat unclear, but Ó Dálaigh apparently suggested at some point that Potter should write a work commemorating the career of his recently deceased predecessor, the Irish political leader Éamon de Valera (1882-1975), who had remained in office until 1973.¹⁴¹ Ó Dálaigh seems to have arranged for Potter to be commissioned by the Irish-American Cultural Institute, an organisation founded in 1962 with the aim of 'promoting an intelligent appreciation of Ireland and the role and contributions of the Irish in America', and which exists to this day.¹⁴² On the 19 December 1975, Potter received a telegram from the Institute's president Eoin McKiernan formally

¹⁴¹ See AJP to Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh, 5 August 1976 ('Nº25: Sym in memo E. de V., 1976 - 7 - 4', PA), in which Potter alludes to Ó Dálaigh's role.

¹⁴² IACI website, <http://www.iaci-usa.org/aboutus.html> (accessed 26 November 2007).

offering him a commission for a 'major work in memoriam Éamon de Valera'.¹⁴³ Financial matters were subsequently arranged to his satisfaction and he duly completed the score at the end of the following July. The correspondence about this work that has been preserved in the Potter Archive reveals that McKiernan tried unsuccessfully to interest several prominent American conductors in performing it (including Leonard Bernstein and André Kostelanetz¹⁴⁴), but to no avail. By the time of Potter's death in 1980, matters had not advanced any further. The symphony was eventually premiered on 11 December 1981 in Springfield, Massachusetts by the Springfield Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Robert Gutter. Gutter performed the work for a second time in Dublin on 29 June 1983 with the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra, but it does not appear to have been revived since.

In the course of a rather incoherent argument about the influence of nationalist ideologies on modern Irish composition in his recent book *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, Richard Pine suggests that this score is indicative of the constraints that Irish nationalism placed on Irish composition and intimates that it can be compared to propaganda works penned by Soviet composers.¹⁴⁵ These remarks make little sense: although the work could perhaps be described as a semi-official commission, it is surely fatuous to suggest that a symphony commemorating de Valera can be likened to an ode in praise of Stalin, or that it was produced under circumstances even remotely comparable to those that obtained in the former USSR. In any case, although Potter punctiliously filled the pages of manuscript and delivered the score efficiently, he does not seem to have approached the task with much enthusiasm: there can be little doubt but that he undertook it solely for money. This impression is confirmed by the fact that the symphony is laid on exactly the same lines as the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, and that Potter did not even trouble to rethink his approach. Both symphonies are in five movements, the tempo and character of which correspond almost exactly. Symphony No.2 similarly features both a note-row and a

¹⁴³ Copy in 'Nº25: Sym in memo E. de V., 1976 - 7 - 4', PA.

¹⁴⁴ See Eoin McKiernan to AJP, 30 September 1977 and André Kostelanetz to Eoin McKiernan, 2 March 1978 ('Nº25: Sym in memo E. de V., 1976 - 7 - 4', PA).

¹⁴⁵ See Richard Pine, *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*, 26-7.

rousing hymn, in this case a traditional Irish one, *Dóchas linn Naomh Pádraig* ['St Patrick is Our Hope'], which is presented in full orchestral garb at the work's triumphant conclusion.¹⁴⁶ The second movement of Symphony No. 2 is also a waltz, and the fourth is what Potter describes as a '*Scherzo nero*', which subjects Irish dances tunes to similar parodic treatment as in the *Scherzo-Phantasma* of the previous work. Most tellingly, perhaps, Potter spared himself the labour of writing a new slow movement, and instead recycled the *Elegy* for clarinet and strings that he had written twenty years before in 1956. These facts would hardly seem to indicate any great degree of engagement with the project on his part, or suggest that he had any particular desire to write another symphony. The score is altogether lacking in the vividness and intensity of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* and Potter's inability to invent interesting thematic material becomes painfully apparent as the work proceeds. In fulfilling this commission, it is evident that he was doing no more than going through the motions. Sadly, it was to prove his last major orchestral work, and the promise of a new creative departure suggested by the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was fated to remain unfulfilled, at least as far as his contributions to this medium were concerned.

¹⁴⁶ The opening stanzas of the hymn run:

*Dóchas linn Naomh Pádraig,
Aspal mór na hÉireann,
Ainm oirirc gléigeal,
Solas mór an tsaoil é.*

St. Patrick is our hope
The great apostle of Ireland
A bright and splendid name
He is the great light of the world.

*'Sé a chloigh na draoithe,
Croithe dúra gan aon mhaith.
D'ísligh dream an díomais
Trí neart Dé ár dtréan-fhlaith.*

He conquered the druids,
Whose hard hearts were empty of good.
He brought down the proud
Through the might of God, our powerful Lord.

