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## **The representation of violence in Irish opera:**

### **Ian Wilson's *Hamelin***

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[L]o, as they reached the mountain's side,  
A wondrous portal opened wide,  
As if a cavern was suddenly hollowed;  
And the Piper advanced and the children followed,  
And when all were in to the very last,  
The door in the mountain side shut fast.  
Did I say, all? No! One was lame,  
And could not dance the whole of the way;  
And in after years, if you would blame  
His sadness, he was used to say,—  
“ It's dull in our town since my playmates left!  
“ I can't forget that I'm bereft  
“ Of all the pleasant sights they see,  
“ Which the Piper also promised me.” (Browning, ll. 226-239)

In Robert Browning's poem *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*, perhaps the most famous retelling of the myth, we hear of a city ravaged by vermin, an angry populace and a powerless municipality—powerless, that is, until the arrival of the eponymous musician, who strikes a bargain with the desperate councillors to rid Hamelin of its rats for the trifling sum of a thousand guilders. The sad story of the Mayor's retraction (in the end he offers just fifty guilders) and the Piper's revenge is framed by Browning as a simple cautionary tale appropriate for its young dedicatee, 'W. M. the younger'.<sup>1</sup> The straightforward moral—that one should always keep one's promises—is expressed in the inspired rhyme of the penultimate couplet: 'So, Willy, let you and me be wipers / Of scores out with all men—especially pipers'.

Ian Wilson's chamber opera, *Hamelin* (first performed by the Schleswig-Holsteinisches Landestheater and by Opera Theatre

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<sup>1</sup> W[illiam] M[acready] the younger was the son of Browning's friend, actor William Macready.

Company of Dublin in 2003),<sup>2</sup> relates a much darker history, one set against a vague but threatening background of war and disease. The Piper has apparently been and gone; we are faced with a lame child, left behind, alone, outside the town, lamenting her fate: ‘O Piper’, she sings, ‘pray look back at this poor maid’ (Act 1, scene 1, bb. 47-56). She is joined by two men, the Mayor and a Doctor, whose very first remarks hint menacingly at a much more violent tale than the one we know from Browning: ‘She can’t go far [...] she won’t escape [...] she’s simple and naïve [...] who knows what nonsense that young fool believes!’ (Act 1, scene 1, bb. 206-21). As in Browning, the other children are definitely gone, done away with by some mysterious power, which explains the men’s uncomfortably predatory interest in the Girl—or, rather, in her future importance for the community: both refer again and again to her vital role in re-establishing the population after its tragic losses. What does seem progressively less clear in the first scenes of the opera is exactly who (or what) is to blame for those losses: while the Girl sings of nothing but the Piper and his captivating music, the men mention food shortages, a conflict that has lasted decades, plague-ridden vermin overrunning the city and stores of grain that have gone bad, infected with fungus.

For the characters, the main motivation is thus explanation: what exactly, among Hamelin’s many recent misfortunes, has resulted in the disappearance of the children and the present appalling trauma? The rationalizations offered by the two men represent the violence done to Hamelin in a plausible, prosaic way; the Girl’s lament hints at a more mysterious crime, a kind of rape—in which music itself may somehow have been complicit. For the composer, indeed, exposing this crime is a meta-compositional project, requiring a musical language capable of speaking about—testifying against—another, quite different, music. And not just any music: one powerful enough to have wreaked legendary devastation upon Hamelin and its

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<sup>2</sup> The productions were directed by Christian Marten-Molnár (Flensburg, Schleswig, Rendsburg) and Gavin Quinn (Sligo, Dublin, Belfast) respectively.

inhabitants. As the work unfolds, the sound of the pipe remains tantalizingly distant, but music's power is nonetheless manifestly at work, moving seductively back and forth between narrative object, descriptive agent and poetic trope.

### **Music about music**

Historically opera has relished opportunities for reflexivity, especially in the form of stage-songs: Cherubino's 'Voi che sapete' in *Le nozze di Figaro* and the Duke's 'La donna è mobile' in *Rigoletto* are only a couple of the most famous examples of what was a common feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works.<sup>3</sup> There are also a number of canonic operatic scenes involving diegetic instrumental music—including that played on pipes: the shepherd's tune that Tristan sings about so movingly as he lies wounded is perhaps the best-known instance.<sup>4</sup> The first ever surviving work in the genre, indeed, Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo*, shows the eponymous mythical musician very much in action in his professional capacity, using his virtuoso playing of the lyre to lull Charon to sleep and thus gain access to Hades and his beloved Eurydice.<sup>5</sup>

The compositional challenge of a music so mesmerizing that it is capable of controlling the actions of a whole population of children, however, is something else again, and it comes as no surprise that Ian Wilson chose to represent this magic melody at one remove. We experience the music initially only through the Girl's desire to find it in other plausible sounds; Example 1 is from the beginning of Act 1, scene 2:

[Example 1]

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<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), Act 2; Giuseppe Verdi, *Rigoletto* (1851), Act 3.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), Act 3.

<sup>5</sup> Claudio Monteverdi, 'Possente spirto' in Act 3 of *L'Orfeo* (1607).

Ian Wilson, *Hamelin*, Act 1, scene 2, bb. 406-16. © Copyright 2002 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

As the opera goes on, though the parts of the score intended to evoke the Piper's playing are obvious enough, always cued by references in the text and always involving the flute, it becomes just as obvious that they are to be understood as somehow emanating from the lame Girl herself rather than directly from the mythical pipe: they stand not for the music but for her desperate—and unsuccessful—attempts to recall it.

Meanwhile, the lame Girl has refused the entreaties of the two men, who want her to come back to the city with them; they decide that a night in the open will soon bring her to her senses. Act 1, scene 2 is split between her obsessive apostrophizing of the Piper, which little by little resolves itself into a kind of erotic fixation, and the conversation of the Mayor and the Doctor, notionally set in the latter's library, from which we begin to learn more of the terrible goings-on in Hamelin. The music is similarly split into two distinct vocal languages. In contrast to the free chromaticism of the Girl's line, each of the men has a deliberately circumscribed range of expression: the tenor playing the role of the Mayor sings substantially within octatonic scales, and the part of the bass playing the Doctor is largely whole-tone.<sup>6</sup>

### [Example 2]

Octatonic and whole-tone scales in the versions used in Example 3 below.

Mayor: e, f, g, a, a# (or bb), c, c# (or db), d# (or eb)

Doctor: a, b, c# (or db), d# (or eb), f, g

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<sup>6</sup> The octatonic scale, a regular alternation of tones and semitones, was exploited by some nineteenth-century composers, notably Liszt, but is most often discussed in relation to the music of Messiaen, Bartók and (especially) Stravinsky; the whole-tone scale is found in a great deal of late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian and French music, particularly that of Debussy.

This musical characterization emerges as an expressive metaphor as we gather that the men see their position as carrying with it the responsibility to hold everything together: they need clear structures in order to function properly. As they put it later in the scene, their duty is to ‘steer things through. / The town would fall apart without us two’ (Act 1, scene 2, bb. 671-5). A further expression of this conviction is that they frequently sing together in rhythmic unison. The ostensible need for this united front is hinted at in the following catalogue of Hamelin’s woes, beginning ‘The war has ravaged us for thirty years’:

[Example 3]

*Hamelin*, Act 1, scene 2, bb. 498-527. © Copyright 2002 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

But there is also a musical clue to the repressed violence of Hamelin’s recent history: the flute/clarinet sonority and characteristic rising semiquaver flourishes heard at the beginning of Example 1 and the end of Example 3 (also just before Example 3; see Act 1, scene 2, bb. 490-92). This passage functions as a kind of leitmotif: it is heard at moments almost throughout the length of the opera, always apparently eliciting a response from the characters on stage. If in Example 1 it could conceivably be construed as ‘real’ sound—the Girl hears something, listens, doesn’t hear it again but *does* hear an owl, realistically quoted by flutter-tongued flute, and concludes she must have mistaken—a little later in the scene (Example 3) it seems to function more abstractly, as a metaphor for the men’s anxiety, forcing them to justify themselves. Its representative status is therefore ambiguous: given that it is apparently in some sense ‘audible’ in the operatic world of the work (and given its suggestive woodwind scoring) it would appear to stand for some kind of echo, real or remembered, of the famous pipe; its insistent repetition subsequently points rather to a more complicated significance. While the Girl, who passionately

wants to experience the ecstasy of the Piper's music again, cannot recall it, the men cannot avoid it. For them it obviously means something very different.

Sure enough, later in the scene the Doctor gives a lengthy explanation of one particular misfortune suffered by the town: ergotism, a condition brought on by eating bread made from grain infected with the fungus ergot (Act 1, scene 2, bb. 602-52). Although, as he explains, citing various early scientific authorities, the fungus does have medicinal uses, for example to treat haemorrhaging in childbirth, it is very dangerous. In fact ergot is the naturally-occurring source of lysergic acid: as the Mayor puts it, interrupting his companion, 'The rye will send you mad' (Act 1, scene 2, bb. 656-7). The Doctor and the Mayor congratulate themselves on the soundness of their own food supplies—they 'remain in health'—but the precise result of this outbreak of madness remains suspiciously unidentified, not least because the Doctor says, in reply to the Mayor, 'Indeed, my friend, it's a convincing line' (Act 1, scene 2, bb. 659-60). Towards the end of Act 1 this ambiguity is further stressed by the Doctor's trying to drown out the (by this stage increasingly frequent and insistent) 'pipe' motif:

[Example 4]

*Hamelin*, Act 1, scene 2, bb. 703-9. © Copyright 2002 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

### **Music about myth (and myths about music)**

The librettist of the opera, Lavinia Greenlaw, has written that *Hamelin* is an exploration of how myths are made, and certainly the text skilfully keeps elements of more-or-less plausible explanations of the trauma in question circling anxiously about until almost the very last moment. Its dark, violent centre, hinted at a number of times but never made explicit, is contained within the ominous line 'And in a bowl of stew, a tiny hand that could have been...' (Act 1, scene 2, bb.

518-23 and 714-9). Not surprisingly, the authority figures in the drama constantly turn away from this terrible explanation of what happened to their children, by emphasizing that *their* food supplies were untainted—that they themselves were not victims of any temporary madness—and by evasively breaking into what becomes a familiar chorus of head-shaking and excuses: ‘I’ve/We’ve seen such sights, such suffering, such crimes’ (Act 1, scene 2, bb. 496-8 and 661-3; Act 2, scene 1, bb. 141-3, 258-60, etc). Their aim, which becomes increasingly definite following their first encounter with the Girl, is to get their story straight—without initially seeming to be able either to confront what really happened or understand quite how any of the less damning alternative narratives might be made to seem coherent. Their one certainty, given the appalling secrets they share, is that they must stick together—sing from the same hymn-sheet, as it were.

Thus the opera, just like the real-life aftermath of major acts of violence, becomes a collection of competing narratives, with the men trying to find the least incriminating. The Girl, whose grief-stricken wailing about the Piper is that of the distressed survivor, quite naturally engages with the tragedy in a much less structured, not to say hysterical, way. But over the course of the central part of the opera, a process of ordering is nonetheless at work as she develops her imagined love affair with, and rejection by, the Piper into a story of self-determination. She spends Act 1, scene 2 and Act 2, scene 1 gradually getting over her sense of loss, so successfully as to arrive eventually at a point where she is able to take possession of the story: ‘the clue to freedom is not him but me’, she concludes in the final scene (Act 2, scene 2, bb. 726-30). The position of the one who has lived to tell the tale is, as she now realizes, an empowered one.

The director of the Opera Theatre Company production of *Hamelin*, Gavin Quinn, placed strong emphasis on this aspect of the work as a story in the process of construction. The performers are portrayed as if in a workshop situation (complete with fag-breaks and



tidying up after scenes), engaged in the process of devising the work we are watching. As Example 5 shows, the conductor and the instrumental ensemble are clearly visible, representing in physical space that this is a story built around music—or rather a certain poetic idea of music, one eminently suited to the making of legend.

[Example 5]

Conductor David Brophy with Eugene Ginty, John Milne and Natalie Raybould; also Michael d'Arcy (violin), Maeve Sheil (double bass), Cliona Doris (harp), Susan Doyle (bass/alto flute), Conor Sheil (clarinet), Michael O'Toole (guitar), Bernard Reilly (percussion). The illustration shows part of the performance at the Factory Space, Sligo on 5 September 2003, production design by Andrew Clancy, costumes and lighting by Aedin Cosgrove.

And, finally, it is the music that effects the eventual establishment of a common version of events. The men begin to see how the Girl's fantastic Pied Piper story could represent the solution to their problem, and accordingly they gradually assimilate it. The rigid rhythmic ensemble of the Mayor and the Doctor wins the day, though, and by the final scene of the opera the Girl has been drawn into the mantra and is singing along with them. Not only does she sing the same words, in fact, there are even passages in *melodic* unison (unexpected, given the independence of line usual in contemporary opera), so nearly have the narratives converged.

[Example 6]

*Hamelin*, Act 2, scene 2, bb. 465-7, repeated bb. 745-7. © Copyright 2002 by Universal Edition (London) Ltd., London. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.

Similarly, the disorientating chromaticism of the opening scenes of the work has disappeared, to be replaced by a much more stable harmonic language. After some disturbing revelations and some uncomfortable music to match, it would seem that the opera has,

after all, rejoined the more straightforward (and much less disconcerting) version of the tale favoured by Browning. Even if its more troubling aspects remain unresolved, each of the characters in the opera seems to find solace in a common survivor narrative which, if not necessarily the whole truth, is no less tragic. For Browning too, this straightforwardness is both the key to and, crucially, the *result of* being in a position to pass the story on:

[O]pposite the place of the cavern  
They wrote the story on a column,  
And on the Great Church Window painted  
The same, to make the world acquainted  
How their children were stolen away;  
And there it stands to this very day (ll. 283-8).

For the nineteenth-century poet, untroubled by the obligation to represent the sound of the pipe except via the lame child's vision of the 'pleasant sights' it conjured up, music could remain in its habitual position: mysterious and unknowable, but magically vital—an appealing metaphor for poetry itself, in fact.<sup>7</sup> For the twenty-first-century composer, however, music's complicity in the tragedy is an issue that cannot be ducked. In the end Wilson expresses it not so much by gestures towards the unrepresentable music of the Piper (though some of those gestures *are* to be heard in the course of the opera), but, far more insidiously, by the legitimacy lent to his legend, when it is at last in a version that everyone can agree on, by an inexorable and entirely musical progression towards stability and resolution. It is in this way—rather than through any self-consciously 'enchanted' tune to represent the Piper's seductive appeal—that

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<sup>7</sup> In this context it seems worth noting that this nineteenth-century music-poetry identification was nowhere more cultivated than in Ireland; see Harry White, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Wilson renders the coercion, the act of musical violence, lying at the heart of the story.

Wilson's *Hamelin* is an opera about the representation of violence, yet no violence is staged. More importantly, it is also an opera about the representation of music, in which the expressive ambiguity of leitmotivic procedure is fully exploited: the flute and clarinet passages heard at key moments in the score are *about* the Piper's music rather than actually *being* that music. This is all the more appropriate because, as becomes more and more clear as the opera goes on, the Piper's Pipe (like certain other weapons of mass destruction) may not have ever really existed.

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