



A.J. Potter: New Perspectives and Connections Revealed Through his Life, Words, and Music

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Abstract

This article presents wider perspectives and new insights into the composer A.J. Potter (1918-1980), utilising a hermeneutic approach to his music and the rich archive of his writings. The focus is on his first symphony, the 1968 Sinfonia 'de Profundis', regarded as one of the most significant works within his output and in twentieth-century Irish music. It is an intensely personal work, which he revealed in his programme notes and correspondence. As it is one of a number of works he wrote to address his reactions to suffering, it is possible to create new categories based on these reactions when assessing his output. My process of critically editing the Sinfonia 'de Profundis' in 2017 enabled me to establish connections between it, his life and other works, exploring Potter's psychological processes; those that lay behind the symphony's composition and those he endeavoured to express in the music. As the semiotic interrogation of his music, correspondence and interviews continued, it revealed hitherto unexplored rhythmic, motivic, thematic and biographical connections between a number of his works and St Patrick's Breastplate. This approach, informed by semiotics, interrogates the composer's voice and affirms and expands the evidence intrinsic to the music. It creates new insights into understanding Potter and his music and demonstrates the elevated inherent emotional and musical authority of specific works, exemplifying Kofi Agawu's words: 'The use of similar topics within or between works may provide insights into a work's strategy or larger aspects of a style.'

A unifying feature of **Sarah M. Burn's** varied musical career is communication. This includes the communication of a composer's ideas through typesetting and editing music (previously hand copying), including pioneer work on Ina Boyle and A.J. Potter; through writing programme notes, particularly for RTÉ, Dublin International Piano Competition and Wexford Festival Opera (formerly Publications Editor), and through oboe teaching, particularly at Cork School of Music (1979-2005). She gained her MA from Dundalk Institute of Technology in 2008, on the critical editing of music by A.J. Potter, and was awarded her PhD from Dundalk in 2017, supervised by Eibhlís Farrell and Ita Beausang.

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This article is concerned with interrogating the music, writing, and life of the Irish composer Archibald James Potter ('A.J. Potter' as he generally signed himself professionally¹), taking a semiotic approach in order to reach a fuller understanding of his music and its composition—an approach that may result in the creation of a new way of cataloguing his works. Connections between trauma, creativity, and composition are brought into prominence. A large number of quotations from his writings are included to present his thoughts and ideas as clearly—and as fairly—as possible, and to convey his personality, as Maynard Solomon succeeded in doing in illuminating Beethoven's personality and his beliefs about his art, through interrogating his writings:

Beethoven left no connected writings on aesthetics, but his letters, diary, and conversation books contain a substantial number of comments, pronouncements, and aphoristic expressions which, taken together, offer insight into his views on the nature of art, creativity, and the responsibilities of the artist.²

The Potter Archive, which is privately owned by the author, is the collection of Potter's own files of music manuscripts, correspondence, scripts, reports, and other papers from the working life of a busy professional composer in Ireland during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. A significant feature of his correspondence (which he typed) is that it includes not only the letters he received, but also carbon copies of the letters he sent—something that other collections of correspondence value: 'Publishing collections of one correspondent's letters without responses from the other promotes a "great person" view of history and makes it more difficult for the reader to think in terms of interrelationships.'³

Brief Biography

Biographical details are available from the Contemporary Music Centre in Dublin (www.cmc.ie). As a brief outline, Potter was born in Belfast on 22 September 1918, the youngest of seven in a poor and dysfunctional family whose circumstances descended inexorably until at the age of nine, when he was sent to live with an uncle and aunt in Kent, England. Having being excluded from national school in Belfast because his mother had pawned his boots to buy alcohol, the young boy so benefitted from his aunt's voice training—and was awarded a scholarship in 1929 to one of the most highly regarded choir schools in the country, the 'high Anglican' All Saints Church in Margaret Street, London (where he began to compose). From there, he won an organ scholarship to Clifton College,

¹ Manuscript scores from the early part of his career in the 1950s are signed 'Archie James Potter'.

² Maynard Solomon, *Reason and Imagination: Beethoven's Aesthetic Evolution*, in 'Historical Musicology: Sources, Methods, Interpretations', ed. Stephen A. Crist and Roberta Mountemorra Marvin (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 189.

³ Louise A. DeSalvo, *Lighting the Cave: The Relationship between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, in 'Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society', (University of Chicago Press, Vol. 8 No. 2, Winter 1982), 213.

a public near Bristol, and thence a scholarship to the Royal College of Music (RCM) where he was a composition student of Vaughan Williams.

More poverty and unemployment followed on leaving the RCM in 1938, but when war was declared in 1939, Potter enlisted. After army service in Europe, he was commissioned as a Captain in the Indian Army and spent several years in the Far East. Following post-war employment in Nigeria, he returned to Ireland to try to restart his musical career, concentrating on his voice. He was a professional singer from the age of ten or eleven at All Saints: 'It was the most marvellous musical education you could have had. I just see what other people have had and I realise what it was like to get just every conceivable style there was. And learning it without knowing anything about it.'⁴ He became a Vicar Choral in St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin in 1951, taught singing at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM) where he was later to be Professor of Composition, and developed his career as a composer. He died on 5 July 1980.

Further Reading

There is comparatively little, publicly-available information on Potter and his music. The outstanding source is Patrick Zuk's 2008 unpublished PhD thesis, *A.J. Potter: The career and creative achievement of an Irish composer in social and cultural context* (Durham University). There is the major interview with Potter by the music critic Charles Acton in 1970 for *Éire-Ireland*, the journal of the Irish American Cultural Institute (vol. V, no. 2), and Richard Pine's impressive 2005 book on the history of music in RTÉ: *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland*. Patrick Zuk wrote the excellent entry on Potter in the 2013 *The Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, edited by Harry White and Barra Boydell. The shorter entry on Potter in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edition (2001), edited by Stanley Sadie, is by Seóirse Bodley. The Irish Music Studies collection includes some material on Potter, as do books by Axel Klein, Ruth Fleischmann's history of the Cork International Choral Festival, and Richard Pine's history of the Royal Irish Academy of Music and his biography of Charles Acton. Although Potter does not feature in Aloys Fleischmann's landmark 1952 book, *Music in Ireland: A Symposium*, which was published around the time that Potter moved to Dublin: the volume provides a great deal of authoritative contemporary information about the circumstances and institutions of music in Ireland as experienced by Potter at that period.

Significant Works and Their Personal Connections

Within Potter's large and varied catalogue of works, certain ones stand out—generally because they resulted from a long gestation as the composer processed his response to events and life experiences. He himself recognised the autobiographical, deeply-felt qualities of these works and talked about them in a radio interview for RTÉ with Andy O'Mahony in c.1974. Potter also discussed them with this author and communicated the information to others in letters. In the radio interview with Andy O'Mahony, Potter mentioned specific works and the autobiographical impetus associated with each:

⁴ From interview transcript, Potter interview with Charles Acton for *Éire-Ireland* magazine. 14 January 1970. Potter Archive.

It's the way I feel about all these things. These things are symbolic of the entire human state and that's the way I put them down in music. The fact that I happen to have witnessed some of these horrifying things myself may help me to do it a little bit more, but on the contrary it may not. The *Concerto da Chiesa* expresses what I feel about all wars, and the *Missa Brevis* expresses what I feel about all faiths, and the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* expresses what I feel about personal problems. If you would like to know what I feel about the loss of loved ones, I would suggest the *Elegy for Clarinet and Orchestra*.⁵

The summary and categorisation above is neat, but it also suggests semiotic indicators between Potter's life and his compositions. Although he wrote the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* as a 'thank offering' for recovery from a bout of alcoholism, it is suffused with the horrors of his Second World War experiences and the nightmares he suffered.⁶

The works considered in this article include those he mentioned in the interview with Andy O'Mahony: his first symphony, *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* (1968), the *Concerto da Chiesa* for piano and orchestra (1953), and the *Missa Brevis 'Lorica Sancti Patricii'* (1936/1951), as well as the cantata *The Cornet of Horse* (1975) and works connected with *St Patrick's Breastplate*. These 'Patrick works'⁷ are the *Missa Brevis*; the opera for television, *Patrick* (1961); the cantata *Lúireach Phádraigh* (1965), and the anthem *Clamos Cervi* (1979). Also included is his ecumenical *Mass for Christian Unity 'Missa pro Unitate Christianorum'* (1977) which uses thematic musical material drawn from his life experiences.

Semiotic connections swirl around and between all these works, with his traumatic Second World War experiences to be found at some level within almost each one. Thus, a category is created that includes compositions in different genres, which were written at different periods. They are united by the common factor of their having been mediated through trauma—primarily from his wartime experiences, and from references to his Irish identity and family heritage (particularly in the thematic material in the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*). In one of Kofi Agawu's books on semiotics and music, he states: "The use of similar topics within or between works may provide insights into a work's strategy or larger aspects of style."⁸ This is applicable here.

There were long periods, often of several years, during which Potter processed specific experiences and transformed his response into music, achieving some degree of psychological closure. Usually, this small number of very personal works had to wait to be written down until a performance opportunity presented itself, preferably accompanied by a commission or under the stimulus of a competition.

Career

When Potter settled in Dublin in 1951, it was as a professional singer—a bass Vicar Choral in the choir of St Patrick's Cathedral. His ambitions to be a professional composer were

⁵ Transcribed by the author. Recording available from the Contemporary Music Centre, 'A.J. Potter Interviews'.

⁶ See the author's unpublished PhD thesis: "'Per ardua ad astra': Assessing the sacred and profane in the creation of new perspectives on A.J. Potter's *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* through the process of critical editing." (Dundalk Institute of Technology, 2017).

⁷ Author's description.

⁸ Kofi Agawu, *Music as Discourse: Semiotic Adventures in Romantic Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 44.

assisted by his success in winning composition competitions, including the Festival of Britain choral composition prize for Northern Ireland in 1951 for his *Missa Brevis 'Lorica Sancti Patricii'*, and the second and third Carolan Prizes for composition, organised by Radio Éireann (RÉ) for his orchestral diptych *Overture to a Kitchen Comedy* and *Rhapsody Under a High Sky* in 1951, and *Concerto da Chiesa* for piano and orchestra in 1952.

As a skilful arranger, he was increasingly in demand by RÉ to make orchestral and choral arrangements of Irish traditional music—under a government scheme that began in 1943 to popularise traditional music—then regarded as being little heard. This was to prevent Irish people from losing touch with their heritage: ‘Since the interest in traditional music was very slight, it was important to counter the effects of bad céili music which had predominated.’⁹ It was obviously extremely helpful to a composer to have a ready source of income from making arrangements. However, there were two serious disadvantages: 1) harmonic experiment was not encouraged, and 2) the time spent on arrangements of traditional and popular music prevented more creative composition from being done. Potter commented on this to a friend in America who was involved in the Boston Éire Society, which organised performances of his music:

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 time and energy to doing the tin pan alley and light pop style of orchestrations in order to buy the bread & butter and the time to do more worthwhile music, you do begin to wonder how you should spend the rest of your time.¹⁰

Creativity and the Transformation of Trauma into Art

Ideas from the second half of the twentieth century in editing theory situate the listener as a participant in the creation of a musical work, as Burn stated:

Working from the concept of the edited text as part of a greater entity (referred to as ‘the work’), which also includes the composer and his creativity, the performers, performance (and recording), and reception, it became possible to consider critical editing as both an analytical and a research tool. The various concepts underpinning the symphony, which both precede the composer's written score and proceed from it, range from factors that stimulated the composer's creativity to the reception, preservation and dissemination of a performance.¹¹

However, sometimes the balance seems to have shifted so as to prioritise the reception of a musical work over the composer's ideas and what he seeks to convey. In line with developments in literary theory, it has been argued that the text has no significance beyond what an audience can gain from it. In his article *The Musical Text*, Stanley Boorman appears to support the author's conviction of the primacy of the creativity of the composer. One of Boorman's statements also echoes one made by Potter. Boorman wrote: ‘the historical

⁹ Fachtna Ó hAnnracháin (Director of Music at Radio Éireann 1947–1961) in an interview with Richard Pine, from *Music and Broadcasting in Ireland* (2005).

¹⁰ From a letter from Potter to John Cavanagh, Boston. 7 January 1958. General. 1/1/1957–5/6/58. Potter Archive.

¹¹ Burn, “Per ardua ad astra,” 1.4.i, Critical editing as an analytical and research tool.

performer interpreted the text in order to create a work of music, and thus to give pleasure to others.¹² In 1978, Potter wrote:

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 giving them new pleasures for the next 25, 35, 45 ... 450 years.. he has failed.¹³

Earlier in a 1970 interview with Acton, Potter stated:

I want the audience to listen. What do you paint a picture for? If I were painting pictures, I would paint pictures because I wanted to show people what my idea of such and such a thing is. I write music for the same reason.¹⁴

From his study of Beethoven's writings, Maynard Solomon's opinion is that:

In his later years, Beethoven began to see his creativity as an expression of both subjectivity and desire: "Gradually there comes to us the power to express just what we desire and feel; and to the nobler type of human being this is such an essential need."¹⁵

Informed by the writings of Jean-Jacques Nattiez, this author's view is:

that a work such as the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* (i.e. a work whose notation represents the composer's imagined sounds) is in existence from the time when it is still in the composer's mind and not written down. Even when it is notated, it still exists without being heard: the notated version is simply an efficient, semiotic, way of enabling the composer's creation to be realised in sound by others.¹⁶

For as Nattiez states:

Music represents a super-imposition of two semiological systems. For users of music, composers, performers, and listeners, all participants in a "total musical fact," musical material will establish connections to their lived experience and to the exterior world.¹⁷

There are many statements in Potter's correspondence that provide insights into the way his creativity processed and transformed his lived experiences into musical works. To a correspondent in England who was interested in his music, Potter wrote in 1974:

¹² Stanley Boorman, *The Musical Text*: in 'Rethinking Music', ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 422.

¹³ A.J. Potter, personal communication, 1978.

¹⁴ A.J. Potter, interview with Charles Acton, *Éire-Ireland*, V, 2, Summer 1970 (St Paul, Minnesota: Irish-American Cultural Institute), 127.

¹⁵ Maynard Solomon, *Reason and Imagination: Beethoven's Aesthetic Evolution*, in 'Historical Musicology: Sources, Methods, Interpretations', ed. Stephen A. Crist and Roberta Mountemorra Marvin (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 194. Solomon quotes from a letter from Beethoven to Archduke Rudolph, 1 July 1823.

¹⁶ Burn, "Per ardua ad astra," 1.4.ii, Concept of 'the work'

¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, translated by Carolyn Abbate (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 126.

I don't think that you can really separate the development 'as composer' from that 'as man' ... I do try to make each composition a kind of biographical chapter – to which only I may have the key [...] Since then [the early 1950s] I've been busy, like I said, putting down my recollections of the previous quarter century down into music. When I've finished, I suppose I'll have to go out and 'experience' a bit more ... 7 years a child (just like the Jesuits said). Then 25 years a-growing and learning – 25 years a-writing about it.¹⁸

In answering a questionnaire on composers and creativity in 1976, Potter set down his ideas with copious illustrations from his own life and music history, including:

because I have the talent (no credit to me) ... Even if I don't do it very well, I still compose better than I do anything else! The job-satisfaction is immense ... you hire, you fire – you say who does what, with which, to whom, when, how and where ... You're on your own – to stand or fail ... Also, because I happen to like the sound of what I write, and I don't find it in any other composer's works ... it's 'filling a long-felt need'.¹⁹

Potter also wrote of personal experiences that could be transformed into music which communicated a message to listeners:

I, for instance, have seen more battles than most composers have hot dinners: but because he was a better composer (much), J.S. Bach wrote better combat music than I ever could. He had experienced struggle of some kind – and that's enough for your composer to get on with. Puccini never experienced "questioning" by the notorious Kempeitai of the Japanese Army as so many of us did between '42 and '45 ... But he had experienced anguish of some sort, and that was enough to make the torture scenes from TOSCA so horrifying.²⁰

Acton, when interviewing Potter early in 1970 for *Éire-Ireland*, the magazine of the Irish-American Society, tried to get him to talk about some of his works in which 'from time to time [you would] want to put a message across, not just simply produce an abstract pattern'.²¹ Potter disagreed with the word 'message', but said that it could be called a story and cited the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* as being an example of that type of work, saying: "That's meant to tell you the story of what it's like to be an alcoholic and to have DTs²² and to recover."²³

Potter expressed as a metaphor his underlying preoccupation with the transformation of his life's experiences into his art: 'Given sufficient composing potential in the first place, the

¹⁸ Letter from Potter to Ian Lord (Norwich, England). 23 December 1974. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1972–5. Potter Archive.

¹⁹ From Potter's response to a questionnaire from Rev. Sr Cara Nagle. 2 December 1976. File No. 7. Fan Mail, 1976–June 1977. Potter Archive.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ From transcript of interview, Potter with Charles Acton for *Éire-Ireland* magazine. 14 January 1970. Potter Archive.

²² An abbreviation in general use for *delirium tremens*, a condition resulting from alcoholism.

²³ From transcript of interview, Potter with Charles Acton for *Éire-Ireland* magazine. 14 January 1970. Potter Archive.

smallest personal experience can be the acorn from which could grow the tallest oaks of artistic expression.²⁴

The processing of trauma through creativity is a well-known therapeutic tool, used to help the sufferer make sense of past events. Terry Waite, who was held captive as a hostage in Lebanon from January 1987 to November 1991 knew how much better it was 'If when you have been through a trauma you are able to objectify it, either by talking about it [...] or through writing about the experience.'²⁵ Potter's letters demonstrate his compulsion to tell his story to his unknown correspondents. This serves to inform them about him as a composer (very necessary in that pre-Information period) and reveals his ongoing processing of his own experiences, both detaching himself from and situating himself within his own history.

Maria Cizmic's 2012 book *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* is a leading text in the area of trauma studies. She discusses the effects of trauma on memory:

Fragmented memories return unintentionally through flashbacks and nightmares and blur the distinction between past and present. If an individual's experience of trauma causes a breakdown in the linear nature of personal memory, how might this manifest in aesthetic responses to trauma?²⁶

Potter was fortunate that he had nearly half his lifetime in which to meditate on how he felt about war and suffering in particular, although 'fortunate' was not always the word he would choose, as he wrote:

But as I have said, I have been lucky: after all, I have already lived twice as long as the expectations of life of two-thirds of the world's population ---- although there are times, many times, when I wished I hadn't... and I curse those useless Japanese machine gunners who couldn't even hit me at twenty yards distance.²⁷

His heart-wrenching setting of 'There saw he an old woman's tears, tears, tears, tears, tears.' at the end of his 1975 cantata *The Cornet of Horse* expresses the effect that witnessing such actual scenes had had on him, particularly in Burma and Indonesia during and after the Second World War. Potter's very personal expression of his pity for the suffering in the world is eloquently expressed in his letter in October 1979 to Gerald Priestland, the BBC's Religious Affairs Correspondent, describing some of the human misery he had witnessed throughout his life, including:

... I witnessed the 1943 Bengal famine.. and saw the back blocks of Calcutta before Mother Theresa ever did: when the civil administration had broken down, and not only was the garbage piled in heaps along the Chauringee, but

²⁴ From Potter's response to a questionnaire from Rev. Sr Cara Nagle, Dublin. 2 December 1976. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1976–June 1977. Potter Archive.

²⁵ Transcript of interview with Terry Waite on website of Hope 103.2 radio station in Australia. 24 April 2013. <http://hope1032.com.au/stories/open-house/2013/terry-waite-break-my-body-bend-my-mind-but-my-soul-is-not-yours-to-possess/>

²⁶ Maria Cizmic, *Performing Pain: Music and Trauma in Eastern Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

²⁷ From a letter from Potter to Gerald Priestland, BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent, 20 October 1979. Priestland read from the letter on air. File No. 7. Fanmail, 1979–80. Potter Archive.

when the corpses of the famine victims were thrown on the top of that same garbage. I broke my heart over the sufferings of both sides during the Indonesian war of independence, and later on in West Africa, over those wretched villages where every inhabitant did naught else except sit in disease-ridden half blindness waiting for death ... There is so much evil in this world: hunger, misery, frustration, hunger and suffering from the sadism of so many systems be they black, white, brown, yellow – or any colour of skin you care to name. Which is the reason for my writing to you. Because I have no influence but you have.²⁸

Potter was one amongst hundreds of thousands of post-war survivors in an era of the masculine code of keeping a ‘stiff upper lip’. Most war veterans did not talk about their experiences because they were too distressing to be relived through conversation, and because of the lack of understanding amongst the civilian population. Potter would have experienced post-war incomprehension to a greater degree than many because he came to live and work in Ireland, a country that had been neutral during the Second World War; another instance of his essentially isolated position as an outsider.

Potter was generous with his time and expertise, sending people recordings of his music and writing long and detailed replies to his extensive range of correspondents who turned to him with questions and for advice on music. He was a public figure through his radio talks and teaching, as well as in newspaper features and reviews. Thus, there are a large number of descriptions in his letters about his own compositions and their genesis. This reveals his ongoing re-assessment of them, which contrasts with the customary one-off programme notes from a performance. It also means that variations in remembering may be looked at more closely:

Trauma is often understood, in part, as a disturbance of memory; psychologists even earlier than Freud remarked upon the difficulty their patients had in remembering and narrating the details of traumatic events.²⁹

On the whole, when comparing variations in descriptions of events in his life in Potter’s writings, one realizes that he had the gift of being able to communicate in different ways with different people, suiting his style to his audience. When writing to people outside Ireland about his life as a professional composer in Ireland, he took a more judicious and less jaundiced view of the country than if he were writing within Ireland about his many day-to-day frustrations with RTÉ, as in this letter from 1976 to a Welsh choir director and organist:

In spite of the country [the Republic of Ireland] being so poor etc., the RTE people have really taken over the job of being the musical patrons for the whole country. With a very few exceptions, they have commissioned everything I have ever written ... Hundreds of arrangements, symphony, concerto, dozens of concert pieces, part-share in four ballets, and even commissioned one opera to celebrate the opening of our TV service 14 years ago, and have just

²⁸ From a letter from Potter to Gerald Priestland, BBC Religious Affairs Correspondent, 20 October 1979. Priestland read the letter on air. File No. 7. Fanmail, 1979-80. Potter Archive.

²⁹ Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 93.

commissioned another. They have their faults, of course, but considering that they do this for half a dozen other Irish composers as well, it's an effort which compares very favourably with that of any other radio/TV station that I know of.³⁰

Potter knew that he could deal with his trauma through composition, particularly when the right set of circumstances made it possible. This occurred in 1952 when Radio Éireann's Carolan Competition for the composition of a piano concerto led him to write the *Concerto da Chiesa* in order to 'have another stab at the problem of setting one's reactions to human sufferings – one's own and other people's – to music'.³¹ Later he composed the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* 'as a thank offering for a happy personal issue out of one of those little local difficulties',³² which he had the opportunity to write for an RTÉ commission in 1967.

Potter's creative approaches to dealing with trauma were not completely successful because his Second World War post-traumatic stress disorder, as we would now understand it, was worsened by his hereditary component of alcohol addiction.

Potter composed his *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* as a personal testament and expression of his thanksgiving for having triumphed over his own *de profundis* experience of alcoholism. His use of the psalm title *De profundis* (Psalm 130 in the *Book of Common Prayer*³³) has, occasionally incorrectly been assumed to have some connection with the letter by Oscar Wilde,³⁴ in which Wilde depicted his sufferings and also his transformation and rebirth. Nevertheless, at the experiential level, both Potter and Wilde used their artistry to process their suffering and transform it, so that they could move on in their lives. It is interesting and emotionally engaging to read their own descriptions of their process; both express the view that an artistic creation is the mediated and transformed result of the artist's response to the experience. Potter wrote:

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.³⁵

Wilde wrote:

I cannot put my sufferings into any form they took, I need hardly say. Art only begins where Imitation ends, but something must come into my work, of fuller memory of words perhaps, of richer cadences, of more curious effects, of simpler architectural order, of some aesthetic quality at any rate.³⁶

³⁰ Letter from Potter to Eurfryn John, Swansea. 7 December 1976. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1976–June 1977. Potter Archive.

³¹ Letter from Potter to Fanny Feehan. 26 September 1974. File No. 13, Personal, 1974–75. Potter Archive.

³² From a programme note written by Potter for the first performance of the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*.

³³ The author suggests that by using the Latin titles and numbering of the Psalms from the *Book of Common Prayer*, Potter avoided drawing attention to the denominational differences that are exposed by the varied numberings of the Psalms in different versions of the Bible.

³⁴ The title *De Profundis* was given to Wilde's letter by Robert Ross who published an edited version in 1905 after Wilde's death. Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) wrote the document in prison in 1897.

³⁵ From a short programme note for the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* written by the composer. Potter Archive.

³⁶ From the 1913 edition of *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde (ed. Robert Ross).

Rhythmic Motifs in the Sinfonia “de Profundis” and The Cornet of Horse

In the *Sinfonia “de Profundis”*, Potter objectified DTs (delirium tremens, associated with alcoholism) as ‘Sergeant Death’, and the ‘black dog on the shoulder’ in the rhythmic motif.³⁷ He described the rhythmic motif as ‘that accursed bête noire of a three-note irruption [...] it’s still there as an insidious background’³⁸ (see Example 1). Although he succeeded in objectifying the trauma of his World War II experiences and alcoholism through his music, it was to remain a presence in his life, even after the highly successful first performance of the symphony.



Example 1: Potter: *Sinfonia “de Profundis”*, I, bar 1.



Example 2: Potter, *The Cornet of Horse*, bar 34.

The percussive qualities of a rhythmic motif indicating scenes of battle—whether with guns or against addiction—is used again by Potter in his 1975 cantata *The Cornet of Horse*, a setting of Constantine FitzGibbon’s translation of Rilke’s ballad *Der Fabnenjunker* (which describes war-time experiences in seventeenth-century Austria). Here Potter foregrounds the hoof beats of a galloping horse in this example and its subsequent modifications (see Example 2). Potter’s compositional use of hard, gunfire-like, short, repeated rhythms is an example of the externalisation of internal pain, akin to moving the body to create noise. In her discussion of Galina Ustvolskaya’s Sixth Piano Sonata (1988). Cizmic writes:

The physical aggression that Ustvolskaya calls for from a pianist draws attention to the physical nature of music and raises the possibility that music’s bodily performance – in addition to its composed and sonic attributes – can serve as a way to bear witness to suffering.³⁹

Before the first broadcast performance of *The Cornet of Horse* in June 1977, John O’Donovan’s ‘Music Notes’ in the RTÉ Guide draws attention to:

the dark menace of the repeated figure at the beginning of the ballad⁴⁰ ... for those hoof-beats are a death notice, and death, remarks Dr Potter grimly, is the apotheosis of heroism: ‘And at the end of it all, a woman’s tears, tears, tears. Just like it was in 1683, 1783, 1883 – and still will be in 1983 ... The poet conceived the work in the high noon of 19th-century militarist nationalism: the translator and composer in the remorseful morning after the second half of the 20th: but all three seem to have come to the same conclusion.’⁴¹

³⁷ This author’s opinion.

³⁸ Letter from Potter to Charles Acton. 16 March 1969. Potter Archive.

³⁹ Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 67.

⁴⁰ The text of *Der Fabnenjunker* by Carl Maria Rilke tells of the young Count von Langenau who joined the international army raised to fight the Turks who had invaded Austria in 1683.

⁴¹ From ‘John O’Donovan’s Music Notes’ in the RTÉ Guide for 17 June 1977. Potter Archive.

Writing to a correspondent about his *Concerto da Chiesa* for piano and orchestra, that ‘it had been building up in my mind over many years ... it was simply my way of putting down in music all that I wanted to get off my chest concerning the 1939-45 war’,⁴² Potter likens the composition process and the result to a memoir: ‘there didn’t seem to be any point in competing with the generals in memoir writing – and most of the things I wanted to express would never have been permitted in writing.’⁴³ This is an aspect of Maria Cizmic’s view that ‘Language supplies only one possible communicative mode; music’s nature as performance provides an embodied medium that can access and convey sensations of pain.’⁴⁴

Telling the Story: Visiting the Past and Playing with Signs

Within the narrative of the *Sinfonia “de Profundis”*, the artist is concerned to create his own response to an event or idea, not to ‘write about’ it. This response is the result of his psychological processing of his memories and experiences: ‘As far as I am concerned, music is something that should be mixed in with the rest of life.’⁴⁵

In his programme note, Potter further distanced the *Sinfonia “de Profundis”* from the conventional form and structure of the ‘traditional’ symphony, writing that he used the movements of the symphony to reflect aspects of the psychological foundation of the work. This agrees with Kofi Agawu’s writings on music and semiotics, about using ‘sonata form’ as a topic: ‘Use of a form like sonata, too, may suggest a new awareness that takes the utterance out of a first-level efficacious or natural use to a second-level quotational or marked use.’⁴⁶ Potter described the symphony’s structure in different ways to different people. In a letter to Acton, he described it as one long movement—where the first movement becomes the first group of subjects, the second and third movements become the second and third group of subjects, the fourth movement is the development and the fifth is the recapitulation and coda. To his former music master at Clifton College, the organist Douglas Fox (who had lost his right arm in the World War I), he described it as having a:

Twofold architectural scheme: a set of variations – free fantasias – running through all five movements on the tune of “Remember God’s Goodness, Oh! Thou Man” But ending up with the triumphant metrical tune to NISI QUIA DOMINUS (And please, when listening to it – please regard it as what it was and should be – the Calvinist Te Deum – NOT the Anglican ‘Earth shall be fair’). But apart from this, there’s a note row – you hear it right away in the first violins --- and it supplies everything else to fit around “Remember, Man” ... Like the Bach obbligato to a Chorale. The emotional motivation for writing it is obvious in general, but private property in particular: you probably know enough about that class of thing yourself, anyway.⁴⁷

⁴² Letter from Potter to Rev. Sr Cara Nagle. 2 December 1976. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1976–June 1977. Potter Archive.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 68.

⁴⁵ Letter from Potter to W.A. Newman, 26 July 1969. File No. 1, Miscellaneous, 1969–70. Potter Archive.

⁴⁶ Agawu, *Music as Discourse*, 47.

⁴⁷ Letter from Potter to Douglas Fox. 15 February, 1977. File No. 13, Personal, 1976–7. Potter Archive.

Potter's different descriptions of the structure of the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* are both valid and his interesting openness about the symphony's 'psychological foundation' sheds more light on the symphony and on its composer. The differences may be accounted for by his different correspondents and by the dates, the one to Charles Acton before the symphony's first performance in 1969, which flattered him into understanding the new work; and the other to Douglas Fox, Potter's former school music master and mentor, eight years of reflection later in 1977.

The wealth of notes and words by Potter on his *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* is a rewarding area for semiotic speculation. In programme notes and letters, he described his themes and how he used them. He outlined the construction of the symphony and its development, 'per Ardua ad Astra' (through trouble to the stars)⁴⁸. Potter also expanded on the characteristics of the five movements, such as the nightmare section of the fourth movement: 'which is actually things being played at once that you'd normally hear played one after another. If you think of Joyce's Nighttown⁴⁹ scenes, it'll give you some kind of an idea of what I hope this will sound like'.⁵⁰ He used several compositional devices to depict 'his own experience' of 'the 'per Ardua ad Astra' plot'⁵¹ and this starting point leads one to look within the symphony with fresh eyes and ears. So, for example, Burn writes:

The use of notation to create the frequently changing metre in bars 1–19 indicates that all is not well in this world. The composer is caught in the effects of alcoholism, with the rhythmic motif a constant, menacing reminder of the demons he wishes to escape from, and the precarious precision of the note row becomes another threatening presence. Every note is in its correct place, but the imitative semiquaver note row entries on violins and viola from bar 20 are relentless in their precision, with the militaristic rhythmic motif heard on changing pitches in the cellos and basses, ending on F in bar 26 ... Now, the composer is in the army and it is the trumpet, with its military associations, playing the note row (bar 28), flanked and guarded by the rhythmic motif on the horns. The composer is mocked, as the note row is heard again on the trumpet in bars 30–31, and then pushed around as the note row is played once more, but this time backwards, in the retrograde version, in an 'Alice-through-the-looking-glass' dislocation from normality ...

... The principal theme of the symphony, *Remember, O thou man*, is heard in tentative fragments from bar 34. Into the mental instability comes the dim recollection of an old tune, perhaps representing family heritage, background, security in religious truths, repentance and salvation. It grows stronger and more affirmative, stressing God's goodness (see Example 3):

⁴⁸ 'through trouble to the stars': quoted by Potter in his programme note for the first performance of the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* on 23 March 1969.

⁴⁹ A reference to Episode 15, *Circe*, from *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce. Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom visit Nighttown, Joyce's fictionalised red-light district in Dublin. Their hallucinatory experiences reflect their fears and passions.

⁵⁰ From an RTÉ Radio interview with A.J. Potter in March 1969—a few days before the first performance of the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*. Potter Archive and Contemporary Music Centre.

⁵¹ From Potter's programme note for the first performance.

b.34 Strings

The musical notation shows a treble clef with a key signature of one flat. The melody consists of eighth notes: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. Dynamics include *f*, *mf*, *pp*, *f*, and *sf*. Tempo markings include 'molto'.

Example 3: Potter, *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, I, bars 34–41

The strings repeat the first two bars of *Remember, O thou man*, emphasising the *arsis – thesis – stasis* shape (the final two bars of Example 3). The tension is increased by the violins, who make several entries with the distinctive motif of the last four notes of Example 3: an ascending minor third interval followed by a descending scalar minor third, with its sense of pent-up yearning and suppressed energy.

At rehearsal letter C, bar 50, the woodwind, in harmony, play the first phrase of *Remember, O thou man* complete. Whenever this occurs, the effect is of a woodwind chorale, providing surety and stability for the hearer and a structural element within the symphony. Given Potter's reverence for J.S. Bach and his use of a chorale in the *Concerto da Chiesa*, for example, this chorale-like form is a self-evident choice.⁵²

It is clear that despite his years at Clifton College and at the Royal College of Music, Potter regarded his fundamental musical training as having taken place at All Saints, singing liturgical music by many different composers. It is worth bearing this in mind when considering the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* and *Concerto da Chiesa*, particularly their thematic material. In both these works, which Potter composed after processing traumatic events and memories, he turned to liturgical vocal music for his themes. In the *Concerto da Chiesa*, his theme—which he later described as a 'motto theme'—was a chorale melody: *Herzlich tut mich verlangen* (the origin of the hymn tune *Passion Chorale*, with its Good Friday associations). The work ends with a triumphant coda.

Similar characteristics are found in the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, where the pre-existing theme—the Ravenscroft carol *Remember, O thou man*—is triumphantly transformed at the end into *Old 124th*. This tune is associated with the metrical form of Psalm 124, *Nisi quia Dominus*. The Psalm was regarded by Potter's Ulster Presbyterian forbears as their 'Te Deum of deliverance' ('If the Lord himself had not been on our side')⁵³. The transformation of the themes is brought about by retrograding the end of *Remember, O thou man* so it becomes the beginning of *Nisi quia Dominus*, thus embodying the symbolism of his personal transformation from his 'de profundis' state to 'spiritual recovery and (for the time being of course) triumph over the powers of darkness',⁵⁴ as he described it a few years later. See

⁵² Burn, "Per ardua ad astra."

⁵³ The signing of the National Covenant in Edinburgh on 28 February 1638 provoked the government into imposing a 'Black Oath' upon Presbyterians in Scotland and Ulster who had signed the Covenant. This oath, which led to the nickname 'Blackmouths', required obedience to the king in all matters, including expression of worship. This meant allegiance to the Anglican Church and its episcopal tenets, to which the Presbyterian conscience could not conform. According to the website of the Presbyterian Historical Society of Ireland, <http://www.presbyterianhistoryireland.com/history/the-eagle-wing-1636/> this is the explanation for the term 'Blackmouths' and not 'the fanciful fable of blackberry festooned faces', as the website remarks. A.J. Potter told the author that his ancestors had been known as 'blackmouthed Presbyterians' because of their blackberry-stained faces and the necessity of worshipping in the open air.

⁵⁴ Letter from Potter to Rev. Sr Cara Nagle. 2 December 1976. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1976–June 77. Potter Archive.

Example 4, which also shows the descending tetrad (simply a group of four notes, ‘tetrad’ being Potter’s preferred term for the sequence), fa, me, re, do in the Note row as it and the *Remember, O thou man* theme are reversed to create *Nisi quia Dominus*:

NOTE ROW

fa me re do

REMEMBER, O THOU MAN - ending

fa me re do

NISI QUIA DOMINUS ('OLD 124th') - beginning

do re me fa

Example 4: Potter, *Sinfonia “de Profundis”*, Note row, *Remember, O thou man* (final 4 bars), and *Nisi quia Dominus* (*Old 124th*) (first 4 bars).

The semiotic connotations of Potter’s use of these themes that he knew from his childhood and his Ulster Presbyterian heritage are explored in Burn’s PhD thesis and these ideas are also summarised by Cizmic:

In a world that witnesses the rewriting of historical memory-particularly of traumatic events-the act of quotation seems to lay claim to the idea of a real, authentic past ... the act of quotation itself carries the weight of realism and history.⁵⁵

Jigs and Slip jigs in the Narrative

In the Finale of the *Concerto da Chiesa* the theme is a slip jig (see Example 5), to which he had referred in a letter to Fanny Feehan: ‘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.’⁵⁶ Several years later, when composing the nightmare fourth movement, Scherzo, of the *Sinfonia “de Profundis”*, Potter was to use a jig (Example 6) and slip jig (Example 7) (derived from the *Remember, O thou Man* theme) to create a relentless, disturbing ostinato. A feature of these jig and slip jig melodies in the symphony is the disguised three note rhythmic motif that is heard with the accent reversed so it falls on the third note (see Example 1, the original rhythmic motif with the accent on the first note). Maria Cizmic’s recognition of repetitive patterns as a feature of music written as an outcome of trauma is pertinent here.

⁵⁵ Cizmic, *Performing Pain*, 63.

⁵⁶ Letter from Potter to Fanny Feehan. 26 September 1974. File No. 13, Personal, 1974–75. Potter Archive.

Allegro vivace (♩ = 120)

Example 5: Potter, *Concerto da Chiesa*, IV, Finale, bars 15-23

Example 6: Potter, *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, IV, bars 30-37

The slip jig grows out of the jig, Example 7:

Example 7: Potter, *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, IV, bars 95-99

The jig and slip jig deliberately recall memories of Ireland, but they are unpleasant: hypocritical and endlessly repeating; travelling, but never arriving. Potter writes about his use of a slip jig in the *Concerto da Chiesa* to represent ‘man’s inhumanity to man’ and

That the particular form of this happens to be that of an Irish dance (a slip jig) isn’t inappropriate since we’ve managed through the ages to have our own share of highly unchristian behaviour will, I take it, be not too offensively obvious.⁵⁷

Changes in programme ideas in the ‘Concerto da Chiesa’

The ideas in the ‘programme’ of a musical work may change over time, as Potter’s did for the *Concerto da Chiesa*. His 1966 text relates the *Concerto da Chiesa* to Christ’s Passion, whereas his later writings and radio interview in the early 1970s connect it to his wartime experiences, and emphasise the suffering of World War II.

To Andy O’Mahony, in an RTÉ radio interview in c.1974, Potter described the *Concerto da Chiesa* as expressing his feelings about war. It began as an organ Prelude and Fugue (when he was in his teens), based on the chorale melody *Herzlich tut mich verlangen*—as he ‘had already done various choral prelude types of settings on the same ‘passion’ tune’.⁵⁸ He ran into difficulties with the fugue, for:

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

⁵⁷ From a text by Potter in 1966 about the *Concerto da Chiesa*. Potter Archive.

⁵⁸ Letter from Potter to Fanny Feehan. 26 September 1974. File No. 13, Personal, 1974-75. Potter Archive.

be in one's 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 reaction to human sufferings – one's own and other peoples – to music.⁵⁹

When the subject of the 1953 Carolan Competition was announced as a piano concerto, he realised that this was an opportunity to reimagine his abandoned organ work. As a piano concerto, with an orchestral colouring that he could not achieve on the organ, it won the competition. By then he was describing the concerto as 'an expression in music of his recollections of the troubled decade beginning in 1939',⁶⁰ although, as he pointed out in his typically humorous way: 'With its highly personalised evocations of foreboding, conflict, suffering, love and ultimate triumph, the concerto is obviously a romantic one.'⁶¹

Concealed within the Counterpoint: 'St Patrick's Breastplate', the 'Missa Brevis' and the Hidden Key in the Correspondence

The *Missa Brevis* is another work full of semiotic potential to connect subject matter and thematic motifs with Potter's life. Like the *Concerto da Chiesa*, Potter began the *Missa Brevis* in his teens, laid it aside (although for longer than he might have anticipated, due to the Second World War intervening), and took it up again under the stimulus of a competition in 1951. It is one of Potter's earliest mature compositions, and one in which he used an existing tune with religious or liturgical connotations as part of his thematic material. Potter gave the descriptive appellation to his *Missa Brevis* of 'Lorica Sancti Patricii' or 'St Patrick's Breastplate'. It is for a cappella six-part chorus (SSATBB), with a five-part semi-chorus (SSATB), plus soloists drawn from the semi-chorus. The 'St Patrick's Breastplate' appellation has caused some puzzlement because the well-known hymn tune *St Patrick's Breastplate* (Irish traditional, arranged by Charles Villiers Stanford) for the hymn known as *The Breastplate of St Patrick*, is not used as a traditional cantus firmus in the *Missa Brevis*, but in fragments within the Credo, Kyrie, and Agnus Dei, as indicated by the bracketed sections in Example 8.⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ From Potter's programme note for the *Concerto da Chiesa*. Potter Archive.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Example 8 is the melody and text of the first verse of 'St Patrick's Breastplate' (transposed up a tone into the Aeolian mode). *Church Hymnal*, The Standing Committee of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 592 (no. 322).

used in *Credo*
1
I bind un - to - my - self to - day the strong name

6 used in *Credo* used in *Kyrie*
of the Tri - ni - ty, by in - vo - ca - tion of the

12 used in *Agnus Dei*
same the Three in One and One in Three.

Example 8: Irish traditional, arr. Stanford: 'St Patrick's Breastplate'

Potter adapted the traditional form of the cantus firmus by breaking it up amongst the voices (as had been done by many composers, particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), almost concealing it within the counterpoint. Although he did not indicate it in the score, there is a letter in the Potter Archive to a correspondent in North Wales in which Potter wrote about the *Missa Brevis* and described how and where he used the tune *St Patrick's Breastplate* in the Mass:

It's the last example of the old large-scale Tridentine Mass – before the revision of the liturgy following Vatican II [...] I won't say anything about the idiom except that I do use in it the old tune to – what's known in English as “St. Patrick's Breastplate” ... in bits & pieces as part of the contrapuntal strands – notably in the middle section of the KYRIE ... (“Christe Eleison”).. the ‘Et Resurrexit’ of the CREDO ... and the Dona Nobis Pacem part of the AGNUS DEI.⁶³

To date, this is the only evidence and explanation that has been found in the Potter Archive of his use of the tune *St Patrick's Breastplate* in the *Missa Brevis*. The following musical examples—9, 10 and 11—illustrate Potter's transformations of his original fragmented theme (see Example 8) in the *Missa Brevis*:

Credo
80 Soprano
Et res - ur - rex - it ter - ti - a

84
di - e se - cum - dum scrip - tur - as -

Example 9: Potter, 'Missa Brevis', 'Credo', bars 80–88 (see Example 8, bars 1–8)

⁶³ Letter from Potter to Martin Apeldoorn, Corwen, North Wales. 2 September 1977. File No. 7, Fan Mail. Potter Archive.

Kyrie

64 Alto (soli)

Chris - te - e - le - i

Example 10: Potter, *Missa Brevis*, 'Kyrie eleison', bars 64–67 (see Example 8, bars 8–10)

Agnus Dei

42 Soprano

Do - na - no - bis pa - cem.

Example 11: Potter, *Missa Brevis*, 'Agnus Dei', bars 42–46 (see Example 8, bars 12–17)

Nationalism and Traditional Music

Potter's use of the tune *St Patrick's Breastplate* is fragmentary and fleeting in the *Missa Brevis*, but the fact that he used it at all opens up an interesting field for speculation. He began to compose the *Missa Brevis* whilst studying with Vaughan Williams at the Royal College of Music (1936–38), and so it is possible that it was at Vaughan Williams's suggestion that he used an Irish traditional air—given Vaughan Williams's status as a collector of folk-music and one who was steeped in the sound and atmosphere of the native music of Britain and Ireland:

V W of course, he insisted that as an 'Irishman, you must learn your own country's music' which I did – what I didn't know already... But my concern then was mainly with simultaneous sounds – which folk music doesn't really help with... I don't think I really took on much of the V W technique – certainly not the orchestration which I could have taught him about anyway ... But one did learn how to learn, if you know what I mean. He really did make you follow the technique of blocking out a whole Bach cantata each week, and then writing one to the same pattern.⁶⁴

St Patrick's Breastplate is perhaps the most iconic Irish tune Potter could have chosen as the foundation of his Mass and is particularly suitable for a religious work. It also affirms its national symbolism and asserts Potter's identity as an Irishman. Potter referred to Vaughan Williams in a letter in 1960 to a friend in America involved in a production of Vaughan Williams' opera *Riders to the Sea*:

Congratulations on 'Riders to the Sea'. I was actually studying under VW at the RCM when it was first produced there. You know, that man was more Celt than English whatever they may say. He had a great understanding of things Irish.⁶⁵

Michael Bowles had been music director and conductor at Radio Éireann in the 1940s and possessed an international vision for the way the RÉ Orchestra and public concerts could

⁶⁴ Letter from Potter to Ian Lord (Norwich, England). 23 December. 1974. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1972–5. Potter Archive.

⁶⁵ Letter from Potter to John P. Cavanagh. 19 April 1960. General file, 1/1/60–31/12/61. Potter Archive.

be improved and developed. He wrote to Potter in 1958 from Indiana, where he lectured and conducted, advising him not to be:

too much affected by the local pressures 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, whatever it is. In Irish music, any consideration of style and trends is useless and, indeed, harmful unless it comes after the music has been written. Vaughan Williams was always deeply interested in folk-music but we must remember that when it came to writing extended works, he certainly owes more to Ravel than to Cecil Sharp. 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 with no originality of chording or instrumentation, 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 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. A thorough understanding of them may lead to a solution of some of those problems left unsolved when they adopted the facile compromise of Equal Temperament at the beginning of the eighteenth century.⁶⁶

Potter was always very clear that he would use whatever style was best suited for the work in hand, and he expressed his thoughts on traditional music and on his harmonic techniques in a letter to Walter Piston at Harvard University in 1958:

I have also tried (and I think this is one of the most important aspects) to bring the melodic idiom of folk tunes into some kind of relationship with modern harmonic thought – or perhaps better say to evolve from the particular nuances of folk idiom an harmonic structure both appropriate in it and derived from it which can then be applied to original composition [...] I have managed to find a most satisfactory relationship between the pentatonic scale and the principal [*sic*] of the superposed chords of the fourths: the result is that folk tunes can now be harmonised in a way that shews them to be as keyless as they really are.⁶⁷

Far-flung Musical Memories Brought Together in the ‘Mass for Christian Unity’

Potter composed the *Missa pro Unitate Christianorum* (Mass for Christian Unity) in 1977 at the instigation of Dom Paul McDonnell, OSB of Glenstal Abbey, County Limerick. It was for an ecumenical service in Dublin to mark the beginning of Christian Unity Week on 22 January 1978 and was performed in the Dominican Church of St Saviour, Dominic Street by a united Dublin choir: a combination of the choirs of St Bartholomew’s Church, Clyde Road (Church of Ireland) and St Mary’s Church, Haddington Road (Roman Catholic).

⁶⁶ Letter from Michael Bowles to Potter. 17 July 1958. General file, 8/6/58–30/12/59. Potter Archive.

⁶⁷ Letter from Potter to Walter Piston. 30 December 1958. Potter Archive.

Potter was lukewarm in his enthusiasm for the ‘new’ form of the Mass in English, which tended to be written in a musically simple style and performed by flexible forces. In a letter to Rev. Sr Cara Nagle,⁶⁸ he wrote: ‘the simplified resources of the churches have been getting to be such that they don’t provide the opportunity for any seriously-inclined composer to do justice to either himself or the Holy Ghost.’⁶⁹ In a letter to Dom McDonnell in April 1971, telling him of a forthcoming broadcast of the *Missa Brevis*, Potter stressed that this was the kind of work in which he could do justice to himself and the Holy Ghost:

[The *Missa Brevis*] is a rather ancient work and I began it when I was 18 and still a student: furthermore, it does rather represent an attitude to church music that is a bit out of date. However, it does still give an idea of the kind of thing I would like to write if there were ever a chance to find the right sort of choir etc.⁷⁰

He obviously felt that even though it had to be a musically much simpler setting than his *Missa Brevis*,⁷¹ it was appropriate that the musical themes in the *Mass for Christian Unity* should have some connection with church music of earlier times. Semiotically, he may also have thought it was even more important that his musical themes in the new Mass should convey the pain experienced by others and the sufferings he had witnessed, thus making a very real connection between the music, words and spirit of the Mass.

In India, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia during World War II, and during his post-war work in Nigeria, Potter had taken the opportunity to learn all he could of the local languages and music. The horrors he had witnessed during the War—particularly the brutality of the Japanese, and the suffering of so many people, combined with the local music he had heard—sometimes inspired the music he was to write years later; an indication of the deep impression such experiences had on him, and of his mental processing.

In a letter to Maureen Drake, Potter went into detail about his inspiration for the music of the *Mass for Christian Unity*:

For that ‘Christian Unity’ Mass I used some pretty far flung musical memories... The ‘Our Father’ was ‘inspired’ by the old Lutheran Chorale they used for the ‘Vater Unser’ in Germany The ‘Gloria’ by some themes from the Burgundian ‘Chanson d’Agincourt’ (it’s the old tradition of the polyphonic & earlier composers to use all sorts of themes – religious .. and even very secular ones like ‘L’Homme armé’) The Eucharistic antiphon and some other parts are what I remember of an Ibo song they used to sing all night in M’bawsi⁷² called – “ ‘n ‘m unya mahla ‘ngwahya ‘n’ma” – or that’s as near as you can get to it in Roman lettering .. and for the Agnus, I used an old beggar’s chant that

⁶⁸ Letter from Potter to Rev. Sr Cara Nagle. 2 December 1976. File No. 7, Fan Mail, 1976–June 1977. Potter Archive.

⁶⁹ Probably a reference to the changes to the Roman Catholic liturgy following the Second Vatican Council (1962–5).

⁷⁰ Letter from Potter to Rev. Dom Paul McDonnell OSB, 5 April 1971. File No. 13, Personal, 1969–73. Potter Archive.

⁷¹ His *Missa Brevis Lorica Sancti Patricii*, a traditional Tridentine Latin Mass, won the 1951 Festival of Britain (Northern Ireland) prize for composition. It was regarded as being too difficult by several choirs in Northern Ireland, possibly because when he wrote it, he had in mind the standard of his former Choir of All Saints’ Church.

⁷² When he worked for the United Africa Company in Nigeria after the Second World War.

used to drive me up the walls when I was lying in the base hospital in Ranchi ...
It stuck in my mind though.⁷³

The Agnus Dei in the *Mass for Christian Unity*, inspired by the beggar's chant whilst he was in hospital with hepatitis in Ranchi, India in 1943, is Example 12:

3 **Slowly** (♩ = c. 72)



Lamb of God you take a-way the sins of the world: havemer-cy on us.

Lamb of God you take a-way the sins of the world: havemer-cy on us.

Lamb of God, you take a - way the sins of the world:

Grant us peace.

Example 12: Potter, *Missa pro Unitate Christianorum*, 'Agnus Dei', bars 3–22

In a letter to Valerie Trimble⁷⁴ written in February 1978, Potter described the same circumstances thirty-five years earlier:

it was while convalescing from infective hepatitis contracted on that cursed Goppe Bazar front in early '43 that I heard the Indian beggar intoning the tune which I used earlier in the year [i.e. the current year, 1978] for the Agnus of that Unity Mass.⁷⁵

Potter mentioned this incident in response to Valerie's news that her husband John Williams⁷⁶ (a boyhood friend of Potter's and a fellow chorister at All Saints) had been ill with hepatitis. By his next remark to Valerie: 'I hope that John's [hepatitis] won't take 35 years to pay off!',⁷⁷ Potter implies that out of his own sufferings from hepatitis in 1943, something good had finally come in the inspiration for part of his new Mass.

⁷³ Letter from Potter to Maureen Drake. 30 October 1977. File No. 13, Personal, 1976–77. Potter Archive.

⁷⁴ Potter knew Valerie Trimble (1917–1980) and her sister Joan (1915–2000), who were from Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh, when all three were students at the Royal College of Music. The Trimble Sisters were an internationally known piano duo and Joan was also a distinguished composer.

⁷⁵ Letter from Potter to Valerie Trimble. 7 February 1978. File No. 13, Personal, 1978–80. Potter Archive.

⁷⁶ John Williams (1920–2002). Previously an assistant to Herbert Howells at St John's College, Cambridge, Williams was Master of Music at the Chapel Royal of St Peter ad Vincula in the Tower of London from 1966 to 1988.

⁷⁷ Letter from Potter to Valerie Trimble. 7 February 1978. File No. 13, Personal, 1978–80. Potter Archive.

After the 'Missa Brevis': Three Unrelated Yet Connected 'Patrick' works'

In 1965, Potter set an Irish translation of the 'Deer's Cry' section of the *St Patrick's Breastplate* text as *Lúireach Phádraigh*, a cantata for male voice choir and orchestra, commissioned to celebrate the opening of a new concert hall in the male-only St Patrick's Training College in Dublin. The work features distinctive elements of Potter's harmonic style such as bi-tonalism and modal harmonies, which are heard in some of his other works of the period, particularly in the *Hail Mary* (1966) and *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* (1968).

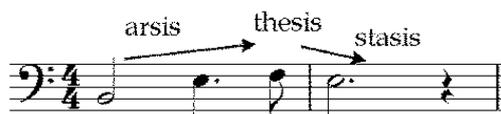
His penultimate work was a 1979 commission from the Dublin Organ Festival for an anthem for the choir and organ of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin—to be sung at the Festal Evensong service in the cathedral, where Potter had sung professionally as a bass Vicar Choral in the early 1950s. He wrote *Clamos Cervi*, 'The Deer's Cry', for choir and organ, setting his own Latin translation of the section of 'St Patrick's Breastplate' that begins 'Christ be with me', using a melodic motif from *Lúireach Phádraigh* created from the *St Patrick's Breastplate* melody. Written for SATB choir and organ—with the soprano and alto parts sung by boy choristers— *Clamos Cervi* exploits the antiphonal resources of the choir and the cathedral by dividing the music between the decani and cantoris sides of the choir, as is traditional in Anglican cathedral anthems. His intimate knowledge of the organ and the building meant that he could write specifically for the unique acoustic of the cathedral. Potter was present at the service when *Clamos Cervi* was sung by the Choir of St Patrick's Cathedral, six days before his death.

Both *Lúireach Phádraigh* and *Clamos Cervi* have harmonic similarities and begin with a rising perfect fourth, as in the 'St Patrick's Breastplate' melody (Example 8). See Example 13:



Example 13: Potter, *Lúireach Phádraigh* and *Clamos Cervi*, melodic motif.

Like the first two bars of the *Remember, O thou man* theme (Example 15) in the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, the melodic motif in Example 13 also demonstrates the three-part narrative of *arsis – thesis – stasis* (see Example 14). The effect of the *thesis* is heightened by the dotted crotchet-quaver rhythm, as in *Remember, O thou man*.



Example 14: Potter, *Lúireach Phádraigh* and *Clamos Cervi*, melodic motif, *arsis – thesis – stasis* qualities

The melodic motif derived from the *Remember, O thou man* theme in the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"* is laden with such semiotic references as tension, release, Irishness, longing and homecoming (see Example 15). This way of creating and heightening emotional growth, and tension and release in music is an aspect of Potter's writing that lies at the heart of his musical language. His writing would have been developed by his training as a young chorister, but probably originated in his family home in Belfast and from his familiarity with

the plangency of traditional Irish airs; a plangency made more evocative by singing, for the voice (unlike a piano) has the ability to vary the emotional intensity of a note.



Example 15: Potter, *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, *Remember, O thou man*, melodic motif, *arsis – thesis – stasis* qualities.

In *Patrick*,⁷⁸ Potter's 1962 opera, commissioned for television to a libretto by Donagh MacDonagh,⁷⁹ there are marked similarities with *Lúireach Phádraigh* and *Clamos Cervi* in the melodic motifs and even in the setting of 'Christ then be with me, Christ within me' at the end of the opera. The libretto tells of Patrick, a baby of the British Blitz, evacuated to Ireland where he grows up. In a reversal of the historical story of St Patrick, this modern-day Patrick returns to Britain to re-convert the people to Christianity and nearly gets lynched. 'The Cry of the Deer' at the end of the opera is another reversal, using an historical text to draw eras and peoples together. Potter played an inner game in this opera, mirror-imaging characters and their stories between the fifth and twentieth centuries, and transferring the historical text of 'St Patrick's Breastplate' and its message to the twentieth century. Six years later in the *Sinfonia "de Profundis"*, he expressed—through transformation and metamorphosis in the music—a reversal that had taken place in his own life, his own 'de profundis' experience, ('from out of the depths').

Coda

The author's interest in a semiotic and hermeneutic approach to the works discussed here, and in Kaupapa Māori research methodology, in which the researcher has to be part of the research, to be involved in it as a partner, is particularly suited to the ongoing assessment and cataloguing of Potter's music and correspondence in order to create a holistic, nuanced account of the music and its creator. The following quotation on Kaupapa Māori research:

In any research project the biggest 'gadget' in your research toolkit is you – your experiences of the world, the way you look at things and understand them, the relationships you have with people, and the connectedness you have with your world.⁸⁰

has much in common with Nicholas Cook's support for personal involvement in a piece of music: 'I think that the emphasis many analysts place on objectivity and impartiality can only discourage the personal involvement [of the music listener or practitioner] that is, after all, the only sensible reason for anyone being interested in music.'⁸¹ He develops his ideas:

⁷⁸ For a detailed account of the genesis and production of *Patrick*, see: Patrick Zuk, *Translating national identity into music: representations of 'Traditional Ireland' in A.J. Potter's television opera Patrick*. (Etudes irlandaises, 35, no. 2, 2010). 81–97. Deposited in Durham Research Online, Durham University.

⁷⁹ Donagh MacDonagh (1912–1968) wrote the scenario for Potter's very successful ballet *Careless Love*, premiered in 1960 by the National Ballet Company.

⁸⁰ <https://www.katoa.net.nz/kaupapa-maori/beginning-a-research-project>

⁸¹ Nicholas Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 3.

But none of this happens if you make a strictly ‘scientific’ analysis of a score – analysing the distribution of intervals in terms of set theory, say, or by means of statistical comparisons. [...] This is the musical equivalent of trying to analyse Shakespeare by counting the letters on the page and working out their distribution. Consequently, if you analyse a given composition this way, your analysis may be scientific in the sense of having an explicit methodology, but it will not be at all scientific in the sense of having any meaningful or predictable relationship to the music’s physical or psychological reality – that is, to the noise it makes or the effect it has on people.⁸²

Here, Cook has championed the importance and significance of the sound of music and of the reality of its ability to affect people both physically and emotionally. Thus, he demonstrates the same truths that Potter exemplified in and through his music—by drawing on his life—and which he expressed through his writings, stating that his aim was to write music that could be both immediately understood by the audience and would continue to reveal new truths.

⁸² Cook, *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, 227.

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