Performance reviews

Jennifer Walshe, *Ireland: A Dataset*
National Concert Hall, Dublin, 26 September 2020, broadcast online (*Imagining Ireland Livestream Series*)

Björn Heile

In a possibly (and pleasingly) apocryphal remark, the Irish novelist John McGahern is supposed to have said that "Ireland skipped the twentieth century—it went straight from the nineteenth into the twenty-first." It is this tension between a mythologized past and a promising but uncertain future that forms the basis of Jennifer Walshe's composition. In few other European countries, the premodern past encounters the postindustrial present, represented in this case by tech giants like Apple, Google, and Facebook who made Ireland their European base for tax reasons, quite so starkly; an experience Ireland shares with other postcolonial countries at the periphery of Western modernity. That, like so many Irish artists and intellectuals before her, Walshe is an emigrant and lives mainly in London and Stuttgart may have additionally sharpened her sensitivity for the contradictions peculiar to her birthplace (I am writing this as a German living in Scotland, so I can claim personal insight into the emigrant perspective, although I have no specific knowledge or understanding of Ireland).

Five performers—the vocal ensemble Tonnta (Robbie Blake, Bláthnaid Conroy Murphy, Elizabeth Hilliard, Simon MacHale) and the saxophonist Nick Roth—complemented by a sparsely used pre-recorded tape—perform what Walshe describes as a "radiophonic play." Generically, the result can best be described as "semi-staged" in a way that is familiar from experimental music theater from the 1960s onwards, and not all that different from classical-modernist precursors such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* or Stravinsky's *Histoire du soldat* or *Renard* (although there is no hint at

a continuous narrative or dramatic roles in this case): all performers are miked individually and, with one short exception, remain rooted to their spot. Thus, the delivery is based on concert performance on one level; at the same time, however, the performers enact some of the generic characters, such as present-day American tourists or a gang of Irish criminals targeting the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, who make an appearance through vocal and gestural mimicry ("simple acting" in Michael Kirby's classification of acting types).[1] Instead of scenery or props, a video screen completes the stage. All these elements are used economically: overall, this is a tight concentrated experience, rather than a sensory overload. Tonnta and Roth have to be congratulated on well-judged performances covering all nuances, from neutral through deadpan to full-on (well, almost full-on) panto delivery and back again, all the while executing the music with great precision and aplomb.

Structurally, the work consists of sections focusing on aspects of Irish culture, history, and identity, alternating with interludes composed by artificial intelligence trained on (mostly) Irish musicians—such as Enya, Les Baxter (amusingly transliterated as Leaslaoi Mac A'Bhacstair, although Baxter was born in Detroit), The Dubliners, Riverdance—and on Sean-nós (highly ornamented, unaccompanied traditional Irish song). To what extent the interludes were really composed by AI, and how, remains unclear, but they are very effective parodies of their respective models, faintly reminiscent of Luciano Berio's *Folk Songs* and *Coro*, or, in the more satirical numbers, Mauricio Kagel's *Kantrimiusik*. In particular, the close harmony singing in the Les Baxter number and the clumsy pseudo-folk dancing in the Dubliners parody (the only occasion when the singers move their entire bodies and leave their spot) will stick in the audience's minds. As funny as these sections undoubtedly are, the wider point is the digital simulation, reproduction, and manipulation of ideas of Irishness. Walshe undermines simplistic dualisms between "real" and "fake" or, for that matter, "honest" human craft and digital machine culture, by emphasizing the manufactured and manipulated nature of the models employed. It is worth pointing out that one of Baxter's (or Mac A'Bhacstair's) claims to fame is the invention of the genre of "exotica." Even though the endpoint is Sean-nós (in digitally adulterated form), it would be naïve to assume that the idea is that "authenticity" can be accessed by peeling off the successive layers of representation one by one.

1   Michael Kirby, "On Acting and Not-Acting," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 1 (1972): 6–8.

What the AI interludes suggest about music, the other sections argue about wider culture, including visual culture, using variously spoken, recited, and sung language (apparently written by Walshe herself), and the video screen as media. All the sections share a focus on the creation and reproduction of images and myths of Ireland. The first part is a critical essay on *Man of Aran*, a 1934 "documentary" by Robert J. Flaherty on the premodern life on the Aran Islands that has later been revealed as almost wholly fabricated. The second is a parody of a TV show (or possibly YouTube video) on how to look Irish. After a disquisition on AI and datasets, particularly referencing John Hinde, an English photographer who specialized in nostalgic picture postcards of rural Ireland that aestheticized the reality of grinding poverty, we encounter North American tourists on their visit to the Fort of the Kings on the Hill of Tara, followed, after the AI-produced Les Baxter parody, by a "lecture on the picturesque," which ranges from eighteenth-century landscape painting through nineteenth- and twentieth-century picture postcards to present-day tourist snaps on Instagram. The number on the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition takes the form of a stylized comedy sketch routine involving a presumably fictional raid by the historical Valley Gang on the two rival exhibits representing Ireland—part of the self-representation of the British Empire—one featuring a Donegal village and the other Irish industry, with an incommensurate replica of Blarney Castle. One of the jokes concerns the gang's needing to dress up to "look Irish" in the way depicted by the exhibition to blend in, complete with what must be the tallest hat ever to be conceived but almost certainly never worn. The final number is, perhaps unexpectedly, genuinely moving, narrating a car trip around Ireland, which allows an apparently dying child to see real-world sites he or she only knows from films representing fantasy places, such as Westeros (from the TV series *Game of Thrones*, largely shot in Northern Ireland), Middle Earth (from the film series *Lord of the Rings*, shot mostly in New Zealand, although the Hobbits' "Shire" seems to evoke a leprechaun colony) and the planet Ahch-To (from *Star Wars: Episode VII – The Force Awakens*, shot on Skellig Michael, off the southern coast of Ireland). In the end, the child seems to miraculously recover.

As with many of the elements within this complex artwork, there are several possible interpretations of this ending. To me, the break from the ironic detachment and pervasive parody (whether gentle or malicious), predominant throughout the work, suggested a form of acceptance: for the child, it presumably doesn't matter whether the images or the places they depict are real or not; they are just as beautiful.

If androids dream of electric sheep, maybe Facebook's Dublin-based servers simulate the Stone of Destiny on the nearby Hill of Tara in their downtime. And if, as the late historian Eric Hobsbawm has argued, national identity consists of "invented traditions," Irish identity, Jennifer Walshe retorts, is a dataset of billions of images and sounds that are constantly being re-processed. Artificial intelligence is just the latest form of such re-representations. Yet, crucially, as also becomes clear in her work, these myths were mostly created by *others about* Ireland: the association of the picturesque with the Irish countryside is the work of British colonists who proceeded to refashion the very landscape in accordance with their ideas. The idealization of ancient, Celtic, rural Ireland, with all the trappings of Gaeltacht, mythology, and folk music, literally declared "beyond the pale" by the British (the Pale being the line that separated the lands under direct British control from the rest of Ireland during the Late Middle Ages), is unthinkable without the nationalist reaction against colonization—and, notably, against the American construction of Irishness (itself largely driven by the Irish diaspora intent on idealizing their origin). Again, Facebook etc. are only the latest stage of this particular form of domination. As the text states at one point: "datasets are never neutral." Not that the Irish have consistently refused to be complicit in their own exoticization and mythologization. Over time, some began to see their own country through the eyes of others: *Man of Aran* is an excellent example. Not only is it no longer possible to distinguish between authentic or fake, but also between native and foreign—and perhaps it never was.

Ireland: A Dataset was premiered in late September 2020, broadcast online from an empty National Concert Hall as part of their Imagining Ireland Livestream Series. It was a rare highlight of new work for audiences deprived of live performances and subsisting mostly on a diet of canned art consumed through our screens. This too had to be viewed on a computer screen, but at least it was new and performed live. Frankly, almost anything would have made me happy at that moment. Yet the work proved rich and rewarding way beyond this particular context.

It is created for live performance, not online viewing, but, due presumably to the aforementioned economy of means, it works very well on screen. Still, I would love to see the work live, when it is possible to shift one's attention between the individual performers and between the stage action and the video screen according to one's own—not the video director's— preferences (although they did an excellent job). At the time, it seemed as

if the COVID pandemic might be dying down, and there were hopes for a return to concert halls, theaters, and opera houses. These have been well and truly demolished by the second wave, although we are now holding out for a new dawn brought about by vaccination. It is hoped that *Ireland: A Dataset* will benefit from the promised revival and experience a second life in live performance, instead of remaining forever identified with that strange period that we like to think of as a temporary interruption of our cultural and artistic life although it may yet turn out to be a harbinger of coming realities.

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