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HAMILTON HARTY

1879~1941

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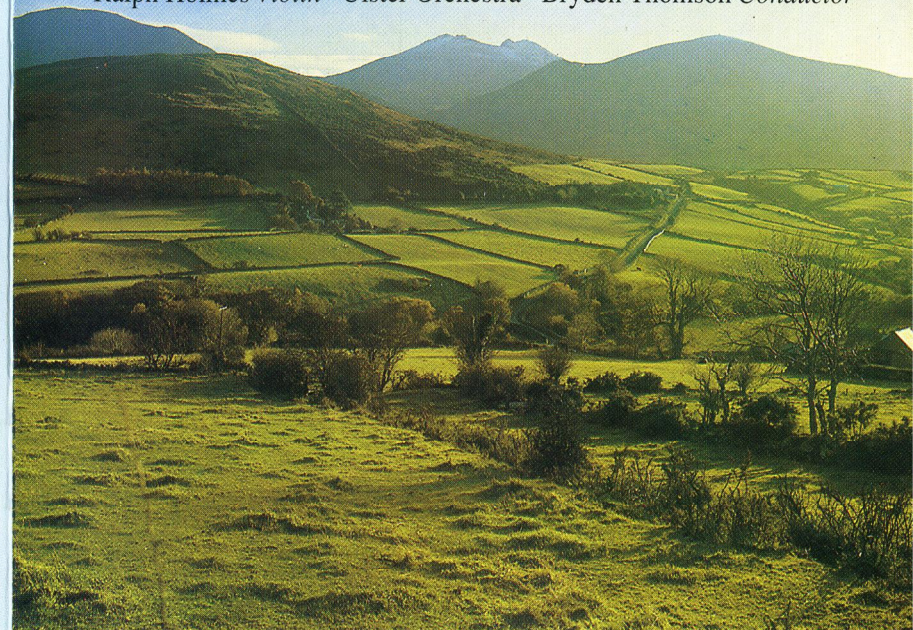
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HAMILTON HARTY

Violin Concerto · Variations on a Dublin Air

Ralph Holmes *Violin* · Ulster Orchestra · Bryden Thomson *Conductor*



HERBERT HAMILTON HARTY was born in Hillsborough, Co. Down, in 1879, the fourth of the ten children of William and Annic Harty. His father was organist of the parish church (a position he held for forty years) and music teacher, and it was from him that Bertie (as he was known in the family) received most of his musical education. Music in his early life consisted of deputising for his father at the organ, accompanying his sister Edith at the 'Grand Concerts' which were a regular feature of village life, and playing chamber music in the family string quartet. As well as the organ and piano he learnt the viola, and it is a happy coincidence that one of the viola players in the Ulster Orchestra plays the instrument that once belonged to Harty. From his father's large collection of music of all kinds he gained his knowledge of the standard repertory, and towards the end of his life he recorded in an unpublished autobiographical Memoir his father's repeated injunction: 'There is most of the greatest music that has been written. Play it through, all of it—everything—and at the end you will have gained a good musical education'.

Harty's *entrée* into professional musical life came through his exceptional gifts as an accompanist. Although he lacked the highly-developed technique to become a great soloist, he was fluent, sensitive, a superb sight-reader, and had an easy-going manner which enabled him to collaborate well with other artists. So it was that when, at the age of sixteen, he moved down to Bray to take up an organist's post, he was soon in great demand in Dublin musical circles, accompanying (among others) Ella Russell when she sang for Queen Victoria during the royal visit in 1900, and the young John McCormack when he made his début at the Dublin music festival, the *Feis Ceoil*. Subsequently he moved to London where, during the first

decade of this century, he established himself as a leading accompanist. One of the singers with whom he performed was the soprano Agnes Nicholls, whom he married in 1904. The period up to the first World War was also his most prolific period as a composer. He had been composing since his boyhood days at Hillsborough—mainly songs and chamber music—and it comes as something of a surprise to discover that one of his most impressive songs, 'Sea-Wrack', was written when he was only sixteen. Several of his early works were written for the composition classes of the *Feis Ceoil*—more, he admitted in his Memoir, for the certainty of a good performance than for any interest in the prize-money, a remark typical of his down-to-earth self-instructing attitude. Songs formed a large part of his output simply because there was a ready demand for such music at the soirées and 'ballad concerts' at which he appeared so often, but there was also a number of substantial orchestral works: the Irish Symphony (a *Feis Ceoil* piece composed in 1904 and subsequently revised several times), the Comedy Overture (1908), the tone-poem *With the Wild Geese* (1910), and the two violin works on this record. Before considering these it may be helpful to complete the brief survey of his career.

During the second decade of the century he became prominent in yet another capacity, that of conductor, a development which culminated in his appointment as conductor of the Hallé Orchestra in 1920. Harty's thirteen years with the Hallé, the extraordinary rapport that he achieved with his players, the finesse and vitality of their performances, notably in the music of Berlioz, a composer whose music he championed in particular—all this is now part of musical legend. In the '30s he consolidated his reputation during a number of tours abroad,

notably in America, where he was hailed as the 'Irish Toscanini'. Inevitably, however, his success at the rostrum meant that he had less time to compose, and in the 1920s and '30s he wrote comparatively little, apart from the Piano Concerto (1922) and several arrangements of music by Handel, of which the *Water Music* is the most famous. Only during his long final illness was he able once more to give all his time to composition, with the tone-poem *The Children of Lir* (1938-39), which was to be his swan-song. He died in February 1941.

We return now to the two violin works. The **Violin Concerto** was composed in 1908 for Joseph Szigeti, who later wrote about it in his autobiography *With Strings Attached* (1949):

"The earliest of my many associations with composers came before I was twenty, with the concerto which Hamilton Harty dedicated 'To Joska Szigeti, in Friendship', and which I suspect set the pattern for my subsequent approach to other such tasks . . . Harty was then—around 1908—England's premier accompanist; and my working at his manuscript concerto, with him at the piano coaxing out of his instrument all the orchestral colour which he had dreamed into his score, was probably decisive in forming what a long-suffering and excellent pianistic partner of mine later on termed my 'expensive tastes' in accompanying."

Many of Harty's works have a strong Irish flavour through the use of Irish tunes (as in the Irish Symphony) or the idioms of folk-music, or through the use of a 'programme' based on historical or legendary events (as in the tone poems). But this Irish influence is much less evident in this concerto, and it would seem that the challenge of writing a work for an

international artist to play on concert tours brought him closer to the main-stream of the European musical tradition, with Dvořák and Brahms as the dominant influences.

The first movement follows the general pattern of sonata form. The introductory bars feature a reiterated fanfare-like motif on the wind which is taken up by the soloist as the point of departure for the main theme. The wistful second subject (much admired by Delius) has a Brahmsian flavour with its drooping thirds and sixths and its restatement in the Recapitulation is especially beautiful. In the second movement, over undulating chords on the low strings, the violin unwinds a long florid melody. Beginning *pp* and in the lowest register of the instrument, it gradually rises in pitch, volume and intensity, and then subsides. There follows a quicker section, with a new melody on the clarinet and bassoon which is developed at some length before the opening theme returns. The finale opens with a rather portentous piece of violin rhetoric, and one's suspicion is that this is not to be taken too seriously is confirmed by the word *Burlescamente* in small print in the score. This leads to a jaunty main theme (in D major) which alternates with one of a more reflective kind. The whole movement shows Harty at his most spontaneous and urbane.

The **Variations on a Dublin Air** was composed in 1912 and first performed in February 1913. Although it certainly makes considerable technical demands on the soloist it is very far from being a mere display piece, and is distinguished by the imaginative way in which Harty characterizes each variation. Another outstanding feature is Harty's orchestration, an aspect of composition in which he had unerring skill.

After an introduction, which features a descending pentatonic motif that recurs in various guises later on, we hear the Theme (D minor) on the solo instrument. This is a traditional melody known as 'The valley lay smiling before me' (or 'The young girl milking her cow') and Harty probably found it in Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*. This is followed by seven variations. *Variation 1*, in the same minor key as the theme, is a scherzando in 9/8 time, rather jig-like in character. In *Variation 2* the bassoons lead the way 'ben ritmico', with touches of bass drum for emphasis. The scoring is delicate and chamber-like. *Variation 3* is a tranquil Andantino in B flat major. There are some striking modulations, and beautiful woodwind scoring in the middle section. *Variation 4* is a Presto in B flat minor in which the glockenspiel adds a steely glint to the restless violin writing. Following this in the unpublished manuscript score there is a central fugato episode for orchestra without the solo instrument. But Harty obviously had doubts about this and marked a cut in the score, which is observed in this performance. *Variation 5* is waltz-like with graceful free-flowing phrases. *Variation 6* (D Major) is distinguished by its delicate and imaginative scoring: the violin line is intertwined with a beautiful countermelody on solo cello, and to this duet the horn and clarinet add their own characteristic touches. *Variation 7*, which forms the finale of the work, begins with an orchestral flourish derived from the pentatonic motif in the Introduction. Thereafter the music proceeds *con brio* culminating in a bravura cadenza. Following this the momentum builds up once more to form a brilliant coda.

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Professor Greer has edited HAMILTON HARTY: HIS LIFE AND MUSIC, published by The Blackstaff Press Ltd, 3 Galway Park, Dundonald BT16 0AN, N. Ireland

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HARTY: VIOLIN CONCERTO - Holmes/Ulster Orchestra/Thomson

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SIR HAMILTON HARTY

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Violin Concerto in D minor (1908)

- 1 I Allegro deciso (12:26)
- 2 II Molto lento (11:08)
- 3 III Allegro con brio (9:35)

4 Variations on a Dublin Air (1912)

for Violin and Orchestra (16:26)

ADD

Ralph Holmes *Violin* · Ulster Orchestra · Bryden Thomson *Conductor*

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which acknowledges the financial assistance of the **Northern Bank Ltd.**



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