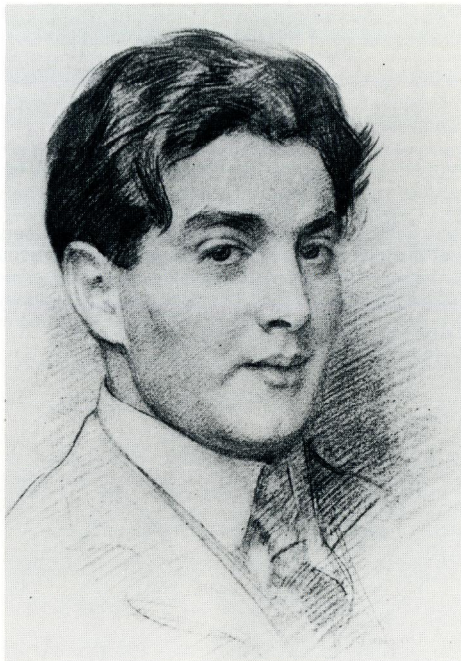


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Drawing of Harty by Harold Speed, 1905.

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DIGITAL

HAMILTON HARTY

The Children of Lir
Ode to a Nightingale

HEATHER HARPER
soprano

ULSTER ORCHESTRA

BRYDEN THOMSON
conductor



**THE CHILDREN OF LIR,
Poem for Orchestra**

One of the *Three Tragic Stories of Erin* tells how the four children of King Lir – Finola and her three brothers – had a spell cast upon them by their jealous stepmother, and were changed into white swans, doomed to wander over Irish waters for a thousand years. Not until they heard the sound of the first Christian bell would they return to their old shape. Eventually they came to the Sea of Moyle, off the north Antrim coast, and there they spent most of their sentence, Finola always protecting and caring for her brothers. A thousand years passed, and one morning they heard the sound of a bell from a little church on the cliff top. At once they were changed back into human form, but incredibly old. They were taken by the coast people to the church and baptized, and as they were received into the Christian faith they died. They were buried in the churchyard overlooking the sea, within the sound of the bell that had brought their suffering to an end.

In the summer of 1936 Sir Hamilton Harty spent his holidays on the Antrim coast, and he was reminded of this tale when he visited the old school house at the Giant's Causeway and saw in the entrance hall the *bas-relief* by Rosamund Praeger depicting Finola and her brothers. Two years later he composed this tone poem; by now he was himself mortally ill, and one can only speculate on the significance that the story had for him. Despite his illness he was able to conduct the first performance on 1 March 1939, with Isobel Baillie as the

soloist. The following notes on the work are adapted from his own programme note written for that occasion.

'The introduction illustrates the thoughts of one who stands on the Antrim cliffs on a day of storm and tempest, and recalls the sorrowful story of the enchanted children of Lir, while gazing down on the turbulent Sea of Moyle. In imagination he sees these four children in all their grace and dignity changed by an evil spell into the shape of swans, but facing their tragic future with bravery and defiance. Two themes, with their stormy accompaniment, gradually increase in intensity until they merge into a rallying-call, twice repeated, followed immediately by the next section – *Allegro brioso ed animato* – the principal theme of which typifies the free open sea. This appears frequently during the course of the work.

'Eventually a more personal mood is introduced with a theme which embodies the passionate and sorrowful feelings of the swan-children as they remember the scenes from which they have been banished. But, as the story tells, they were not always sorrowful, nor was the sea always rough and tempestuous, and the music gradually assumes a lighter and more playful character, telling of calmer seas and bluer skies. This scherzando section is combined with the previous theme and the music rises to a climax of passion and defiance. The passages of a recitative-like character which follow suggest the approach of evening, and to a gently rising and falling accompaniment Finola is heard (in the soprano solo)

singing her plaintive song of weariness and of longing for the day of release.

'This short section is followed by a resumption of the principal *Allegro* with its theme of the open sea. The music follows its former course, but with a new note of urgency, for this is the last day of the children in their "swan" life, and though they are not actually aware of this they are conscious of something impending. Finola becomes increasingly exalted and finally breaks into snatches of her song. At the climax there is a loud cry from Finola, the orchestra breaks off suddenly, and the clang of a church bell is heard. Immediately they are changed back into their human form again, "noble and beautiful as ever, but incredibly old".

'The last section depicts the children being taken to the church, where they die as they are baptized. The music returns to the mood of the introduction. The last few pages are in the nature of a meditation on the sorrowful story by one who stands in the little church enclosure, and hears the far-away murmur of the sea and the bells softly tolling. Finola's song is heard once more in the orchestra, and the poem ends softly, except for a sudden outburst in the last bars – a last glance at the raging Moyle, foaming and heaving far down below the cliff.'

ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE, for soprano and orchestra

When the 21-year old Harty moved to London in 1901 he made his living as an accompanist, playing for singers and instrumentalists at 'ballad concerts' and soirées. It was not long before he was introduced to Agnes Nicholls, one of the leading young sopranos of the day. Two years older than Harty, she had already made her mark in the musical world, as Anne Page in the first English-language production of *Falstaff*, and the Dewman in the 1901 Covent Garden production of *Hansel and Gretel*. One of her admirers was Queen Victoria, to whom she had sung privately on several occasions.

In old age, Agnes recalled her first impressions of Harty's musicianship: 'He came to my mother's house a few days later. I must say I was most surprised with his playing. He had a lovely tone, great facility, seemed able to read anything at sight with the greatest ease . . . He gave me the feeling of great musicianship and understanding of music.' Soon he was a regular visitor, rehearsing with Agnes and supplementing his meagre lodgings fare with the generous helpings provided at the Nicholls's table. In 1904 they married, and in the ensuing years they became a well-known musical partnership.

Ode to a Nightingale is an eloquent memorial to that partnership. Harty dedicated it to Agnes, and she was the soloist in its first performance at the Cardiff Festival in 1907. A continuous movement lasting some 20 minutes, it falls into several contrasting sections corresponding to the

changing moods and imagery of Keats's poem. Like all Harty's music it is warm-hearted and spontaneous, the soaring vocal phrases generously supported by the rich sonorities of his orchestral writing.

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My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thy happiness, –
That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O for a draught of vintage, that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep delvèd earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth;
That I might drink and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what sweet incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;

And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery land forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self.
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fated to do, deceiving elf,

Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: – do I wake or sleep?

JOHN KEATS

Recording producer: Brian Couzens
Sound engineer: Ralph Couzens
Recorded in the Ulster Hall, Belfast, October 3 & 4, 1981
following a Gallaher concert

Front cover picture: Rosamund Praeger's *bas-relief* of Finola and her
brothers, by courtesy of Reginald Watson
Sleeve design: Clare Osborn

The Ulster Orchestral Society acknowledges the financial assistance of
The Friends of the Ulster Orchestra in making this recording.



Page from the original manuscript of *Ode to a Nightingale*.

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HARTY: THE CHILDREN OF LIR etc — Ulster Orch/Thomson • Chandos CHAN 8387

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HAMILTON HARTY

(1879-1941)

1 **The Children of Lir**
Poem for Orchestra

31:42

2 **Ode to a Nightingale**
for soprano and orchestra

22:22

HEATHER HARPER
soprano

ULSTER ORCHESTRA
Leader, Richard Howarth

BRYDEN THOMSON
conductor

DDD

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