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Topicality in the Piano Music of John Ireland: A Performer's Perspective

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Abstract: Leonard Ratner's pioneering work on topic theory in his 1980 book *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style* presented topics as 18th-century meaning-bearing features of musical compositions, embracing types such as dances and marches, and styles such as hunt and pastoral. Amongst other authors, Robert Hatten (1994, 2004), Raymond Monelle (2000, 2006) and Kofi Agawu (2009) have subsequently developed the concept and taken it well outside the confines of the 18th century. Despite this expansion into the 19th- and, to a lesser extent, 20th-century music, the focus of topic theory has tended to stay within the Classical period, and its interaction with performance has remained under-investigated. This article thus addresses the subject of topics in 20th-century piano music and assesses their significance for the performer. Solo piano pieces by the English composer John Ireland (1879–1962) are used as case-studies, and a variety of topics, including pictorial ones, are discovered in his music, most of them not named in a title (such as 'Minuet in G'). Thus pastoral music is found in parts of the Rhapsody and a twentieth-century equivalent of *Empfindsamkeit* in 'In A May Morning' from *Sarnia*. Placing these works and others in the context of Ireland's biography adds extra richness to the investigation. New topics are suggested for the works under consideration, one of which relates to idiomatic piano writing as a generative principle. At the heart of the article is an exploration of topicality in Ireland's music as an aid to a pianist's interpretative decision-making, a process which engages with the composer's perceived codes of meaning and expression, and seeks for ways in which to project these to the listener. The essay is illustrated by video extracts featuring the author's live and studio performances.

Keywords: Topics; John Ireland; Piano; Performance; Interpretation

Theoretical background

All those concerned with topic theory pay tribute to the pioneering work of Leonard Ratner who, in his 1980 book, *Classic Music: Expression Form and Style*, proposed the idea of topics as "subjects for musical discourse" (Ratner, 1980, p. 9). At the time, the author was probably not aware of the musicological flood-gate that he was opening but, since the appearance of his first book, many authors have expanded and developed Ratner's ideas. The appeal no doubt lay in the fact that topic theory provided a seemingly valid system for ascribing meaning to music in a way that had largely eluded previous attempts such as Deryck Cooke's 1959 publication *The Language of Music*. With the appearance of topics in the field of musicology, suddenly a new theory of signification had currency. Thus writers such as Robert Hatten (1994, 2004) and Raymond Monelle (2000, 2006) took the theory down a semiotic path, Monelle expanding Ratner's 18th-century focus to include the Romantic era. In this he has been accompanied by, amongst others, Kofi Agawu (2009) and Janice Dickensheets (2012), the latter adding many new topics to those originally identified by Ratner. And what of 20th- and 21st-century topical presence? Monelle wrote that "the nightmare of modernism made some of us think that musical meaning, in any ordinary sense, was finished. But all that is past" (Monelle 2006, p. 273). He briefly touched on topics in 20th- and 21st-century music, and there is a growing body of writing on the subject of their use in 20th-century compositions by, amongst others, Márta Grabócz (2002), Walter Frisch (2008), and Johanna Frymoyer (2017). Nevertheless, the focal period of most topical theory has remained the 18th century and, significantly, the very substantial Oxford University Press publication, *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (2014), hardly explores any repertoires outside those of the Classical period. Despite the proliferation of literature on the subject of topics as bearers of musical meaning, one area that remains under-investigated is performance. There are just three chapters in the *Handbook of Topic Theory*, all of them

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concerned with interpreting Mozart and, to a much lesser extent, Haydn.[2] It is therefore the aim of this essay further to develop the study of topicality in 20th-century music and, in particular, to assess how performance can interact and engage with its perceived presence. Before proceeding, it would be appropriate to indicate how the term 'topic' is understood as applied to the following discussion on performing John Ireland's piano music. It was noted above that Ratner designated topics as "subjects for musical discourse" and under this banner he included 'types', self-contained compositions such as dances, (for example, minuets and sarabandes) and 'styles', such as hunt music, the singing style and *Empfindsamkeit* – discrete vehicles of musical expression that suitably informed contemporary listeners would recognise as signifying gestures. He suggested that pictorialism (or 'iconism') might also be a topic, a notion that was further developed by Raymond Monelle, and the prime representatives of 19th-century pictorial topics in Monelle's work are the varied musical representations of horses, although he also mentions in passing, waves, clouds and storms (Monelle, 2000, p. 17). More recently, Dickensheets has added fairies (2012), Chia-Yi Wu, spinning wheels (2020) and, in this article on topicality in John Ireland's work, I will be proposing extra categories to add to the growing lexicon of 19th- and 20th-century pictorial topics.

To carry meaning, topics are not only invoked in a composition by the composer but need to be recognised as such by the listener and, in the context of this article, the performer. Michael Klein refers to a topic as "a code of communication" (Klein, 2005, p. 58) and to a code as "a convention of communication" (p. 51), descriptors that may be applied equally to types, styles and pictorial topics. However, he cautions that for a code to be meaningful, there must needs be a reader "whose competency includes that code" (p. 54), and in the present case, 'reader' can be extended to include 'listener' and 'performer'. There is a clear parallel here with topics as subjects for verbal discourse. If, for example, the topic of discussion was black holes and only one of the participants was familiar with the subject, there would be an instant breakdown in communication, similarly with a musical topic – it can only be a code of communication to the initiated.[3] And although, as Klein points out, "the exact constitution of this competent reader [listener/performer] is often vague" (p. 54), in the following discussion I am assuming that there is enough commonality of experience "acquired in commerce with others" (Culler, 1981, pp. 52–3) for the informed musician, be s/he listener or performer, to identify and appreciate topical references in musical works, in the present case, those for solo piano.

Pictorialism

As hinted above, pictorial (or iconic) topics are invoked on more than one occasion in this essay, so it would be worth pausing to consider the subject in a little more depth. Pictorial topics are in reality a subset of style topics in that the means of evocation are stylistic – for example, mimetic rhythms as index to the image of galloping horses or rapid rising-and-falling chromatic scales plus diminished 7th harmonies to signify storms. Nevertheless, their topical status has been questioned. Danuta Mirka largely dismisses pictorialism from the 18th-century topical canon, seemingly because "musical imitation of other music was

[2] Márta Grabócz (2005) has included material on the subject of topics and performance in an article about the *Adagio* movement from Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celeste.*
[3] Monelle requires topics to be "governed by convention and thus by rule" (Monelle, 2000: 17).

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unrelated to pictorialism in the eighteenth century" (Mirka, 2014, p. 33).[4] Clearly Mirka's concerns lie with 18th-century music, but even in this context, one wonders how the Turkish march topic invoked in Mozart's 'Rondo alla Turca' from his piano sonata in A major K331 could be devoid of pictorial associations for those Viennese citizens who were familiar with the sight of a Turkish band (however inauthentic) performing "on summer evenings, weather permitting, in front of the barracks as well as for the changing of the watch" (Bowles, 2006, p. 554). In fact, many topics central to much recent theory, such as the march or the minuet are themselves, as both stand-alone types and references within larger works, not devoid of a pictorial element. Whilst the signified may primarily be the so-called cultural units of militarism and social refinement, images of marching soldiers and elegant dancers form part of those units and cannot easily be ignored. It is perhaps significant that Monelle's chapters on various facets of the hunt, the military and the pastoral in music (2006) are given generic titles which evoke pictures: "Huntsmen", "Soldiers", "Shepherds" – and there are plenty of illustrations to reinforce the pictorial association. Topic theory has progressed well outside the confines of the 18th century and it would therefore be as well to permit it the freedom to embrace a range of stimuli that are capable of signifying and of yielding a musical discourse. Musical imagery has long been a stimulus for the performer – where would we be if pianists had to close their imaginations to the pictorial implications of, say, Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage* or Debussy's *Images*? – so it would be prudent to adopt an empirically-based attitude to what may or may not be considered as topics if their value as interpretative informants is to be fully utilised. Thus, for the rest of this article, I am regarding pictorial topics as fully valid codes of communication and subjects for musical discourse.

Topics in the Piano Music of John Ireland

John Ireland's music, with its expressive ciphers and pictorial associations, has attracted a certain amount of topical analysis (Richards, 2000; Ganske, 2011). The composer's codes of communication are both general and highly specific and some would instantly be recognised by an initiated listener – for example pastoralism – whilst others need to be discovered and contextualised, especially if a fully-informed performance is to occur. Ireland scholar, Fiona Richards (2000) has identified three pairs of oppositional topical fields in Ireland's music: "Anglo-Catholicism and Paganism; Country and City; Love and War" (Richards, 2000, p. 33). These are very broad brush-stroke categories and, for the purposes of this essay, I will, like Richards, be following Robert Hatten (1994, 2014) in regarding them as topical fields, within which specific topics can be found.[5]

The remainder of this essay will be structured around case-studies of four piano compositions which respectively fall into Richards' topical fields of country, war, love and paganism.

'The Island Spell' – water, waves and idio-*topics*

My investigation starts within Richards' topical field of country and the first piece under discussion is 'The Island Spell', the opening movement in a suite of three pieces called *Decorations.* The latter was Ireland's first published piano work and it was composed between 1912 and 1913, publication coming in 1915.

Before investigating the pictorial topic implicit in this piece, it would be worth considering the

[4] In essence, Mirka's view of topics is that, in the 18th-century at least, they gain credibility and purpose when styles and types are referenced within larger musical works.

[5] Topical fields act semiotically as types of which specific topics are tokens.

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music's constructional fabric: the piano writing itself. Eero Tarasti regards idiomatic instrumental figurations as a form of iconicity and he refers to "*Spielfiguren …* A certain musical figure [which] may fit well, say, with the position of a hand on a keyboard; consequently, the composer may choose that figure over another simply because it is more convenient for the player" (Tarasti, 1994, p. 55). When an idiomatic figure is explored at length, as it is in 'The Island Spell', to the extent that it has a generative function, then it seems appropriate to ascribe topical status to it because it yields a musical discourse, surfacing and delineating the music's inner progress through modulations and high points[6] as well as through micro- and macro-structural segments, thereby providing both textural and linear cohesion to the musical journey. Invoking Ratner's original topical paradigm, we are here discussing a style rather than a type. There is also a match with my other criterion for topicality, a code of communication in that, to the pianist-listener, its presence in a composition indexes a certain technical challenge, a way of engaging with the keyboard and a manner of articulation, and this would be the case whether a performance was seen and heard or just heard. In the present instance the idiomatic figure is arpeggiation which is featured in an evolving array of hand-sharing formations, creating a self-referencing pianistic narrative in the process. I will hereafter refer to this feature as an *idio*-topic.

Turning now to the pictorial, the topic here may be identified as water, and this is evidenced on two fronts. For the topic-spotting pianist, Ireland, very helpfully, not only gave most of his piano compositions imaginative titles but also often headed them with a quotation from literature. The score of 'The Island Spell' is headed by the following passage from a poem called *In the Wood of Finvara* by symbolist Arthur Symons:

> I would wash the dust of the world in a soft green flood;
> Here between sea and sea, in the fairy wood,
> I have found a delicate, wave-green solitude.[7]

So here the water referenced by the poem is a mystical sea of cleansing and inner peace. Ireland initially picks up on the soft tone of the quotation but goes on to develop his own scenario, the pianism and structure of which have some affinity with other water pieces such as Liszt's 'Les jeux d'eau a la Villa d'Este' and Ravel's *Jeux d'eau*. However, where the latter works feature glistening, rippling arpeggiations, mostly in the treble part of the keyboard, to represent the play of water as fountains or rivulets, Ireland exploits pianistic wave formations, ripples of sound at first (*Example 1*), increasing to more expansive undulations as the piece progresses (*Example 2*), an effect which is reliant on the generative *idio*-topic of arpeggiation. The writing thus manifests intertextuality with earlier sea/wave pieces such as Ravel's 'Une barque sur l'océan' (from Miroirs, 1904–5) and possibly Liszt's Ballade No. 2 in B minor (1853) rather than those depicting fountains.

[6] Kofi Agawu (2009) regards high points in a work as important musical signifiers.
[7] *Modern British Poetry* ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Brace and Howe, 1920, No. 42)

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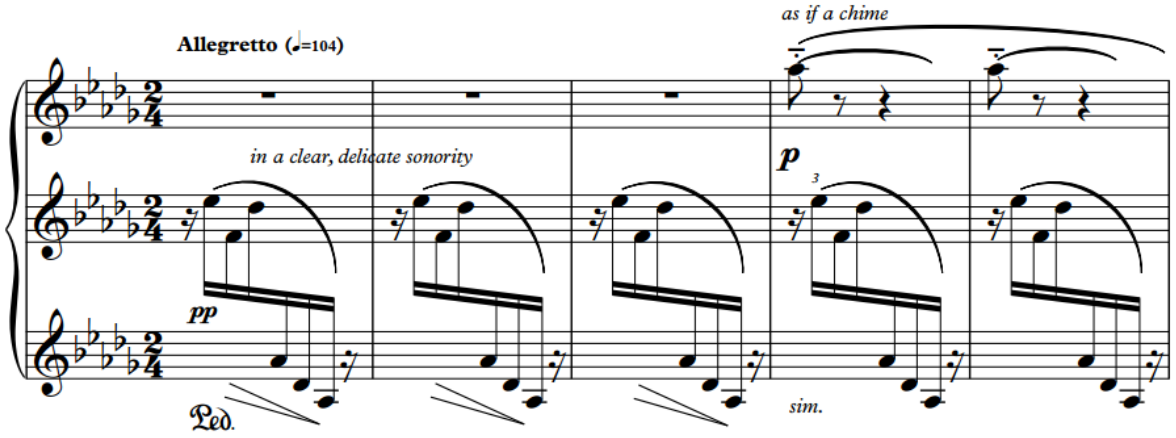
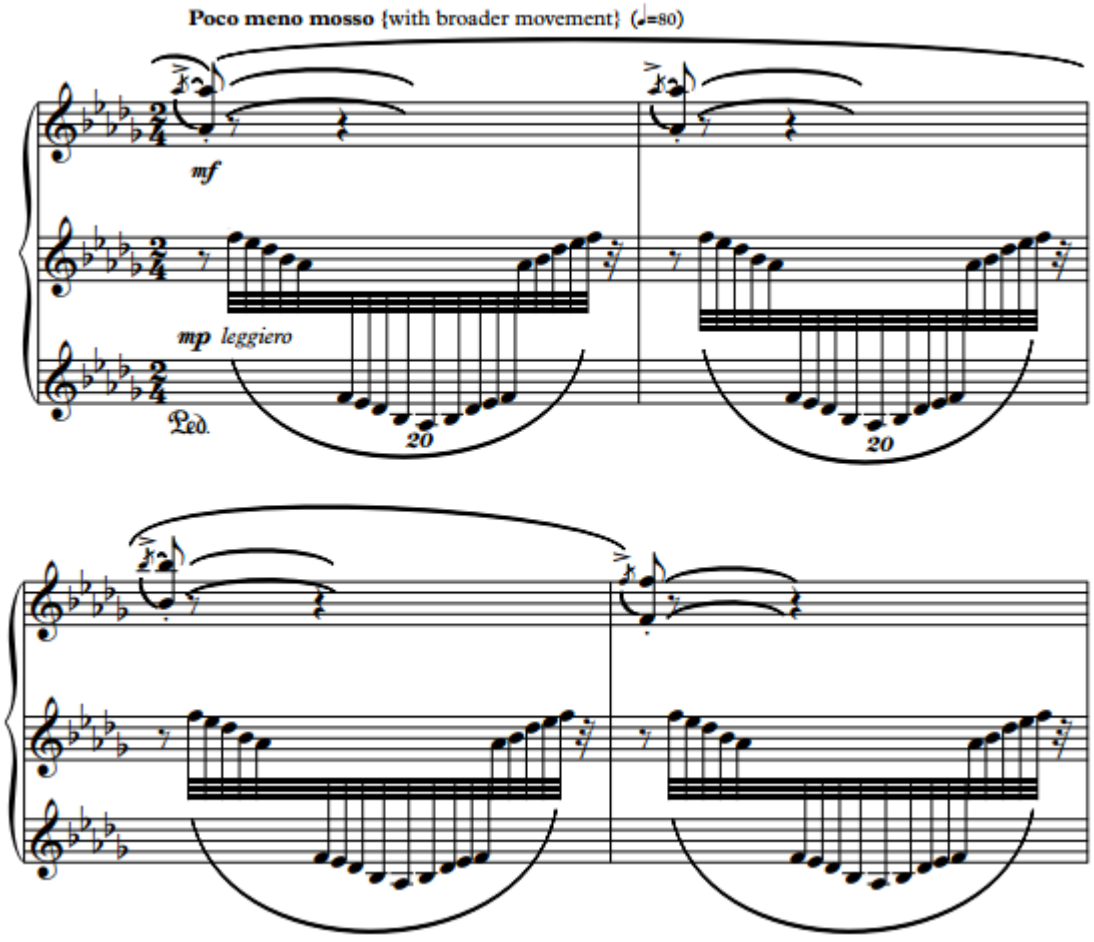


Example 1. '**The Island Spell', bars 1–5.**



Example 2. **'The Island Spell', bars 47–50.**

There is clearly an interdependency between the pianistic *idio*-topic and its hermeneutic as a pictorial wave topic in that the latter is not possible without the former nor would it be

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possible without the history of iconicity in water pieces by Liszt and Ravel; iconic,[8] because a specific pianistic texture, when used generatively, was perceived by certain composers to act as an effective musical metaphor for a particular counterpart in nature, a relationship which can be shown simply in diagrammatic form (*Figure 1*).

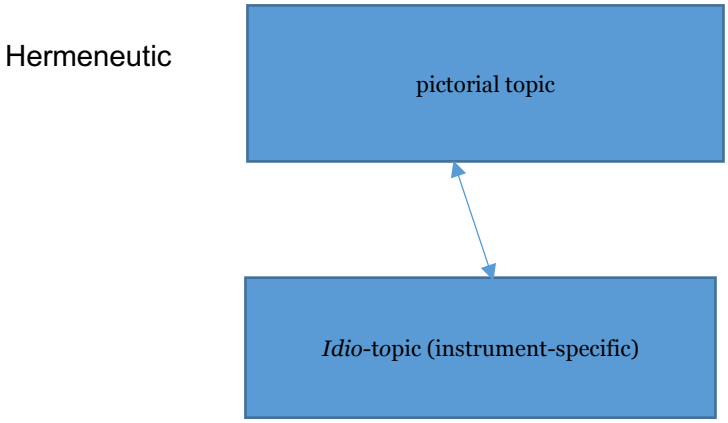

Figure 1. Diagram showing the interrelationship between the *idio*-topic and the pictorial

In preparing a performance, ideally the pianist needs to be aware of both topics (whether or not s/he is familiar with the theory). Mastering the arpeggiated figures, aiming for an even execution and an unhurried effect, is paramount. Speaking from experience, it is very easy to fall into the trap of distorting Ireland's carefully notated rhythm whereby the final right-hand F in bar 47 *et seq*. (see *Example 2*) arrives just before the end of the bar and not at the onset of the fourth quaver. Following the notation here tends to reduce any disturbing sense of agitation that might otherwise emerge.
In terms of the pictorial topic, the point of commonality between the behaviour of water and the piano writing in Ireland's (and other water pieces) is a sense of fluidity and absence of jagged edges. In attempting to convey this in performance, I focus more on lateral than on downward arm motions. Alexandra Pierce, who has studied embodied interpretation, writes of 'open' joints: "imagine brushing crumbs from the table. Open joints are useful for soft, limpid passagework" (Pierce, 2007, p. 128). Before practising 'The Island Spell' I sometimes move my arms smoothly and gently above the keyboard, as if floating, to establish an appropriate choreography. A general emphasis on lateral arm motion for the execution of the arpeggios also permits a more marked downward attack by the right-hand 5th finger which etches out the music's chime-like motive and distinguishes it from the underpinning arpeggiated texture (see *Example 1*) (*Video Example 1,* https://youtu.be/dTw02h6vJ_o).

When the larger wave figurations commence at bar 47, Ireland marks no dynamic inflections into the score, yet application of a subtle *crescendo*/*diminuendo* to the 32nd-note formations further communicates the rising and falling motion of waves to the listener. Pedalling is also

[8] Semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce coined the term 'iconic' to describe signs "which serve to convey ideas of the things they represent simply by imitating them" (Peirce, 1998 [1894], 5). In a musical context, application of the term is clearly metaphorical. Indeed when applied to music, Peirce's three sign categories – icon, index and symbol – form more of a continuum than a set of discrete units, an inter-relationship to which Peirce himself often referred in his writings.

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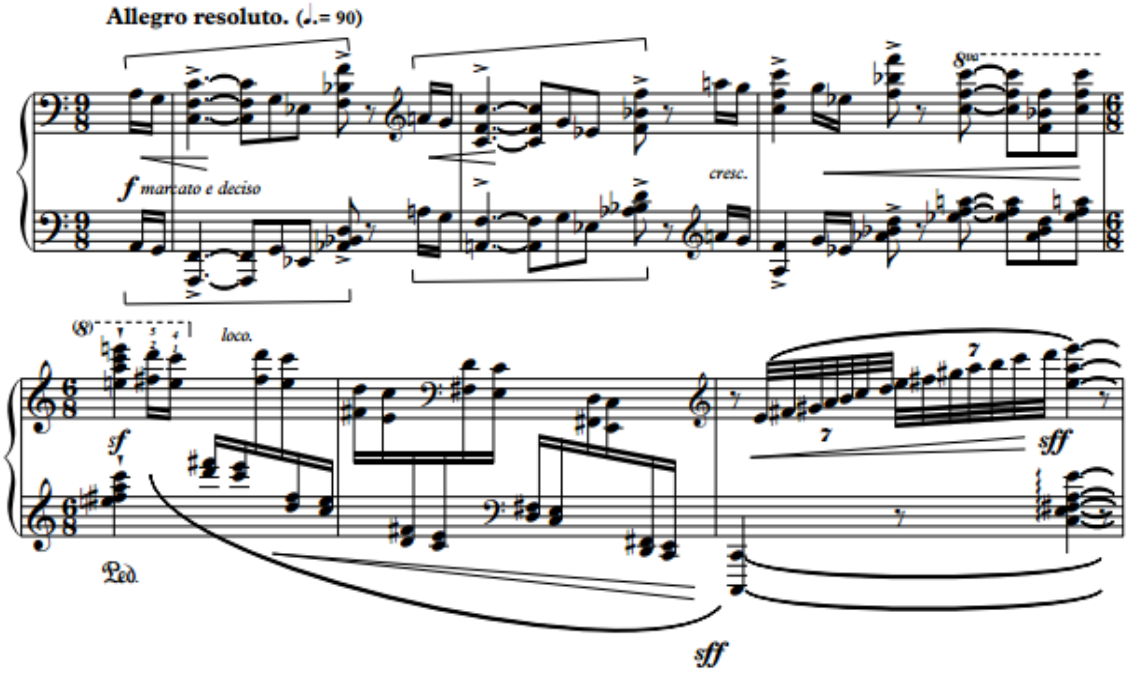
an important consideration. Ireland has helpfully marked pedalling into the score, and it is often very generous, a single pedal sometimes lasting for several bars. This is certainly appropriate: it would surely be a contradiction in metaphorical terms to have a water piece that is texturally dry!

Rhapsody – heroism, pastoralism and conflict

Next, I turn to the Rhapsody which dates from 1915, a few years after *Decorations*. This is an extended work, loosely cast in sonata form, and, like extended works in the Classical period, more than one topic is explored and juxtaposed. Wye Jamison Allanbrook has noted that the inclusion of contrasting topics within the span of a single aria can, through their varied points of reference, add an extra psychological dimension to the stage action (Allanbrook, 1983, p. 27), and Márta Grábocz (2005) has taken the idea further by demonstrating how narrativity in Bártok's music is generated by a succession of diverse and idiosyncratic topics. Fiona Richards (2000) observes the topical fields of war and country at work in Ireland's Rhapsody, and their juxtaposition, contrast and combination in the course of the work do give it a narrative quality that can be projected in performance. The opening gesture (*Example 3*), with its assertive character rising from low to high registers, along with



Example 3, **Rhapsody, bars 1–6**. © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

the performance directives, "Allegro risoluto*"* and "*marcato e deciso"*, can be taken as emblematic of the heroic (if not yet of conflict), especially as another of Ireland's war-time compositions, the second violin sonata, opens in a similarly declamatory fashion. A comparable rhythmic idea is also found in the latter stages of Ireland's Ballade (1929) which, whilst not a war-time composition, may be regarded as symbolic of a personal heroism triumphing over despair. The Rhapsody's opening undoubtedly exemplifies some of the hallmarks of the 19th-century heroic style which, according to Janice Dickensheets, "is most

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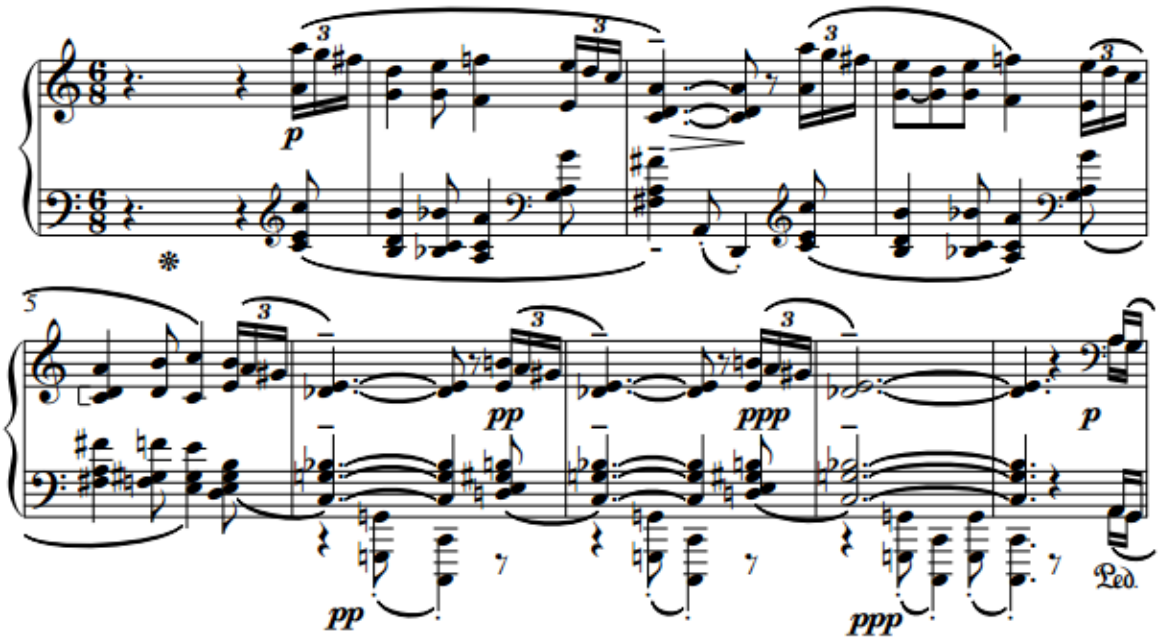
often delivered in a powerful major key. Its fanfare figures often encompass the entire orchestra and are frequently accompanied by timpani and trumpet … in an expansive show of heroism" (Dickensheets, 2012). In pianistic terms, the fanfare figures – what Fiona Richards refers to as "military motives" (Richards, 2000, p. 176) – explore both the bass and treble registers of the piano and the accented downbeats have a percussive force. The passage is emphatically major-key but Ireland nuances the heroism by instantly destabilising the apparent F-major tonality of the opening, and by casting it in 9/8 as opposed to the more usual 4/4, the heroic topic is not presented unequivocally, perhaps reflecting Ireland's personal reaction to war which "sat between the sentiments of patriotism and aversion" (Richards, 2000, p. 177).

The Rhapsody's forceful opening (A^1) is answered by a more yielding response (B^1) which exemplifies some characteristics of the pastoral topic: a lilting 6/8, a hint of F major (a favourite key for pastoral music in earlier periods), and a slight suggestion of a drone[9] at the end of the passage, but there is also tension inherent in the chromaticism and unsettled tonality suggesting that the pastoral topic, like its heroic counterpart, is here an uneasy one (*Example 4*). However, the opening 15 bars present the two principle actants[10] in the



Example 4. **Rhapsody, bars 7–15.** © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Rhapsody's unfolding (heroic vs pastoral/yielding) from which the remaining 200 bars' musical narrative develops. The opening heroic gesture becomes the basis of the first subject (A^2) albeit minus some of its topical characteristics, whilst the second subject proper (B^2), starting at bar 38^6, harks back to the pastoral/yielding material of bar 7 *et seq*. but it

[9] With its bagpipe associations, the drone bass has often been taken to signify the pastoral topic. Monelle characterises it as "the most pervasive signifier" (Monelle, 2006, p. 208).
[10] An actant is a term borrowed from literary theory referring to character roles in a story, often binary opposites, whose interactions create a narrative structure. The theory is usually associated with the Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas.

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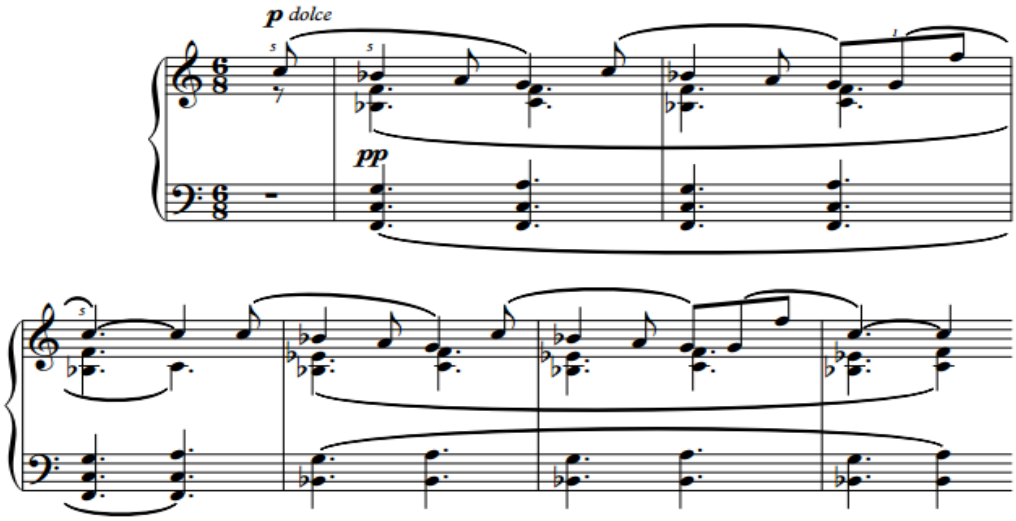
evokes a pastoral topic less equivocally. It is, again, in a lilting 6/8 rhythm, features pedal drones on either the tonic (F) or the subdominant (B-flat) and is cast in a modal F major (more properly F mixolydian) (*Example 5*). But this pastoral music is soon transmogrified by the heroic style, initially retaining the melodic and harmonic structure but with registeral and pianistic pattern alterations, to produce a passage of considerable force, one in which the combination of the two styles yields a hybrid topic of conflict (*Example 6*).



Example 5. **Rhapsody, bars 39–44**. © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

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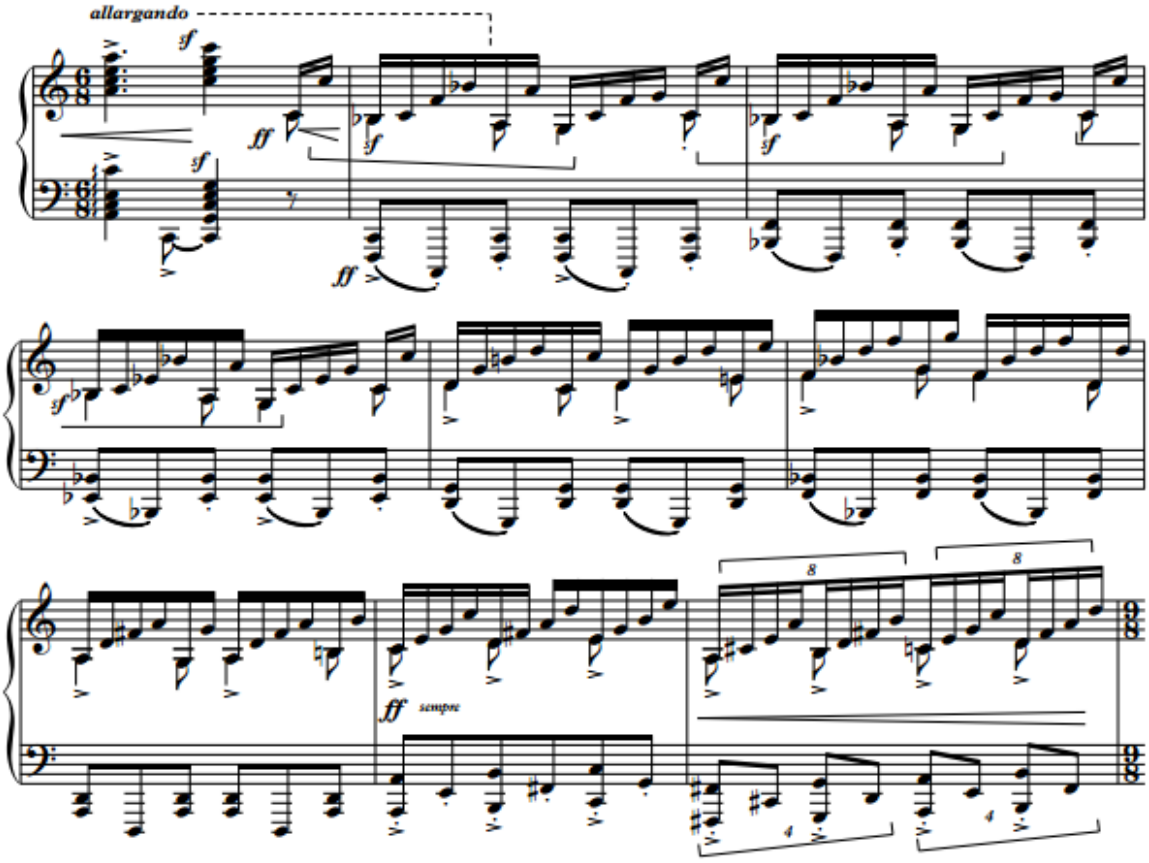

Example 6. **Rhapsody, bars 78–86**. © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Thus, in its exposition, the Rhapsody presents a polarity between the heroic and the pastoral but the styles are also melded, forming a structured musical narrative which I try to communicate in performance. In order to do this, I play the opening heroic music with a strong sense of keyboard attack, accenting the downbeats (as indicated in the score) with the physical focus being very much on downward, rather than lateral, movement of the arms and hands (*Video Example 2,* https://youtu.be/DXVyZU4_J6w).

When the pastoral music starts, there is no indication to slow down, yet the pastoral character seems to demand this. In writing of the pastoral style as manifested in the *Siciliano*, Daniel Gottlob Türk instructs that it should be played “in a caressing manner and in a very moderate tempo” (Türk, 1982 [1789], p. 396), a view that is supported by Heinrich Christoph Koch who wrote of the pastoral’s “simplicity and tenderness” (Koch, 2001 [1802], column 1142). And whilst over 100 years separate Ireland’s Rhapsody from Türk’s and Koch’s treatises, and the topical referent is more likely to be the English countryside of the composer’s living experience than “the idealised world of shepherds” (Allanbrook, 1983, p. 43), the advice seems as pertinent as ever to the performance of music that is so evidently pastoral. So a slower tempo than that of the heroic music allied to a quiet arm and hand motion with the outer fingers of the right hand projecting the melodic line helps to underline topical contrast and provides a structural marker in the process (*Video Example 3,* https://youtu.be/MuYPu9l6H7A).

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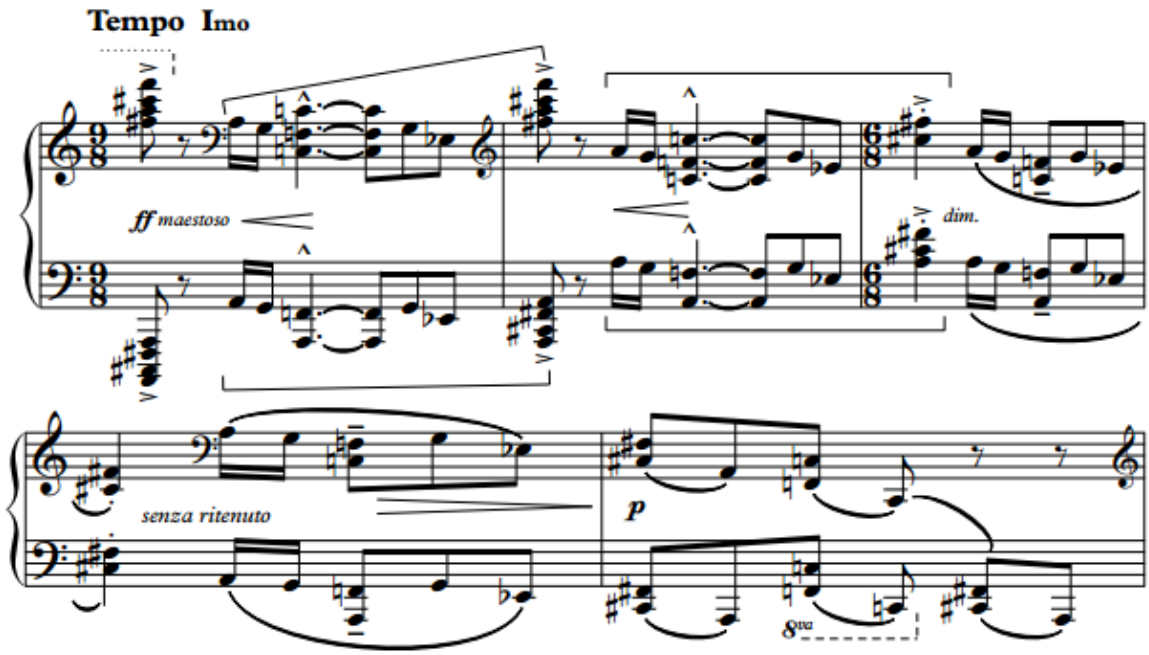
Soon the tempo speeds up and, as noted above, the pastoral topic is antagonised at bar 78[6] by the heroic style (see *Example 6).* To convey this topical hybrid (conflict) and to retain at least something of the music's original pastoral character, its 6/8 lilt can be preserved albeit with much greater force and animation. As the end of the exposition approaches, the conflict music gives way at bar 96 to the heroic music proper, though now with a disturbing bitonality as if it aspires for, but can't quite achieve, triumph. A sense of downward attack into the keyboard, but with some deliberate physical tension to reflect the frustrated heroism, becomes appropriate (*Example 7*) (*Video Example 4,* https://youtu.be/4gVNrvlkdz0).



Example 7. **Rhapsody, bars 96–100**. © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Danuta Mirka has suggested that, with the expansion of topic theory, the concept "has lost its sharp profile" (Mirka, 2014, p. 2) and there is certainly the danger of regarding everything musical in terms of topics whether distinctly present or not. Despite the sharp focus of Ratner's types and styles, he later posited that topics could also include "a plan of action" (Ratner, 1991, p. 615) thereby hinting that an episode or a development section could become a topic in itself.

The central section of Ireland's Rhapsody is a blend of quasi-development and episode, so if one wishes, this blend could be accorded topical status. It is still arguably a forum for musical discourse, but in a very generalised way and, for the pianist, this concept yields no more interpretative information than does an appreciation of the work's overall structure and narrative, its musical lines, low points and high points, and the detailed performance directions in the score. As such, I prefer to regard the passage in question as topically neutral, its very neutrality providing a narrative function with new subsidiary actants taking the music from yielding back to heroic. This throws into sharp relief the extended and

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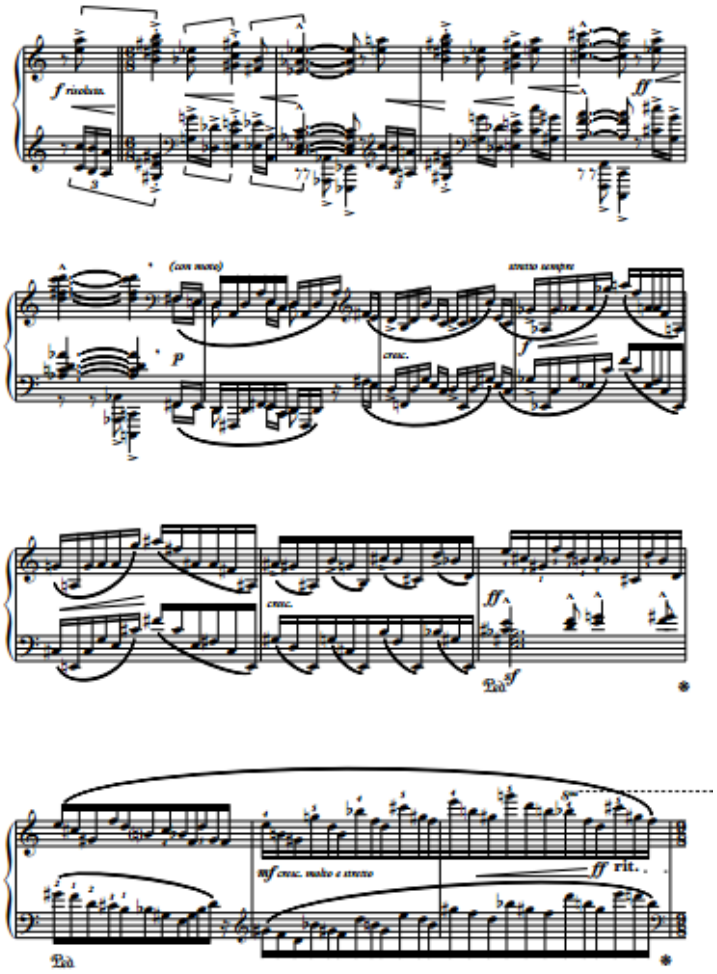
emphatic return of the heroic music when it is recapitulated from bar 167. Of particular interest is the recapitulation of the B^1 material which, it will be recalled, hints at a pastoral topic on its initial presentation (see *Example 4*). When it reappears at bar 177^9, the uneasy elements, also noted earlier, have driven away any suggestion of pastoralism to produce a passage of considerable force which itself is overtaken by a flurry of pianistic fury (*Example 8*). Structurally, this passage forms the climax of the piece and, as such, the hybrid conflict



Example 8. **Rhapsody, bars 177^9–191.** © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

topic needs maximal projection which I aim to achieve by playing as aggressively as tonal rectitude and relevant dynamic gradation permit.

The pastoral music (B^2) is recapitulated at bar 198–205, but in a transfigured presentation, its only links with the topic now being a general feeling of quietude and, after an initial 5/4 bar, a triple-metre time signature. With its instruction "Tranquillo. (*with innermost feeling*)" these bars perhaps evoke the elegiac[11] more than the pastoral (*Example 9*), but the mood

[11] Márta Grábocz (2002) has also identified the elegy as a topic in Bartók's music.

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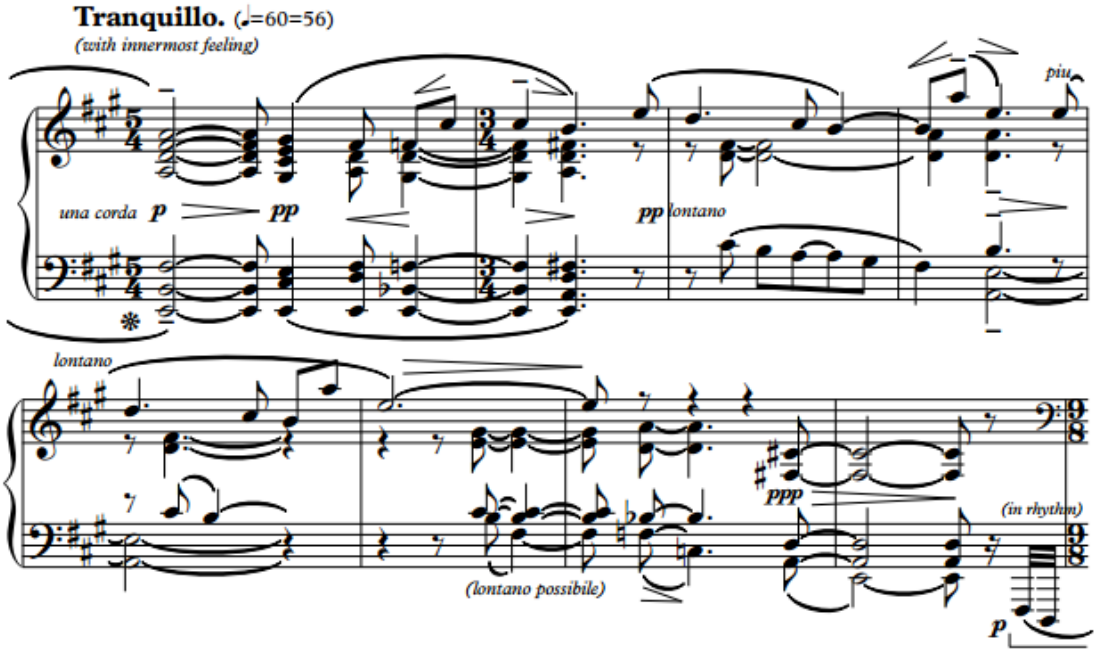

Example 9. **Rhapsody, bars 198–205.** © Copyright 1917 by Winthrop Rogers Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

does not last long, the heroic once more asserting its primacy, and Ireland ends the music triumphantly and emphatically in A major, the narrative outcome being a powerfully positive one. Although the composer instructs "*una corda"* for the elegiac/pastoral bars he also writes "*lontano*" and then "*lontano possible*", so I reserve the use of the *una corda* pedal for the last three bars of the passage to ensure that a *diminuendo al niente*, as the elegy dies away, is as effective as possible. I aim to project the top notes only slightly so as to avoid an overtly 'singing' effect which would be at odds with the inner-reflective character of the passage. By contrast, I play the last seven bars, which not only re-establish the heroic presence but evoke the brilliant style as well, in as extrovert a manner as possible, aiming for clarity and precision of fingerwork to project the brilliance, whilst also applying generous pedal resonance and hefty arm weight to emphasise the concluding message of heroic conquest (*Video Example 5,* https://youtu.be/1DoGXHwp2_M).

'In a May Morning' – yearning and singing

Turning now to the topical field of love, it is necessary to examine aspects of Ireland's biography. The composer's brief marriage in 1926 to one of his students turned out to be a disaster of Tchaikovskian proportions, probably because of the composer's attraction to boys. There is no published evidence that he ever overstepped the bounds of propriety, but this did not prevent an internal longing which he often expressed in his music, usually via some form of private code. The second movement of his piano masterpiece *Sarnia* is called 'In a May Morning', the score of which quotes lines from Victor Hugo's poem *Les travailleurs de la mer*. There are a few references to love in the extracts that Ireland selected but a letter to his friend Kenneth Thompson is far more revealing. During 1939–40, Ireland was sojourning on the island of Guernsey and one of his places of residence was the Birnam Court Hotel in St Peter Port. The proprietors' nine-year-old son, Michael Rayson, caught

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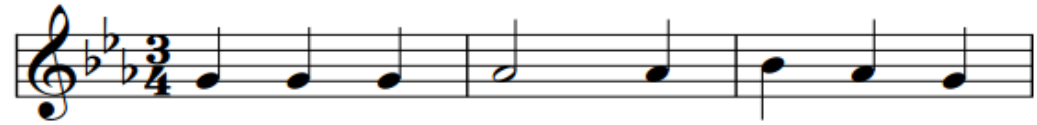
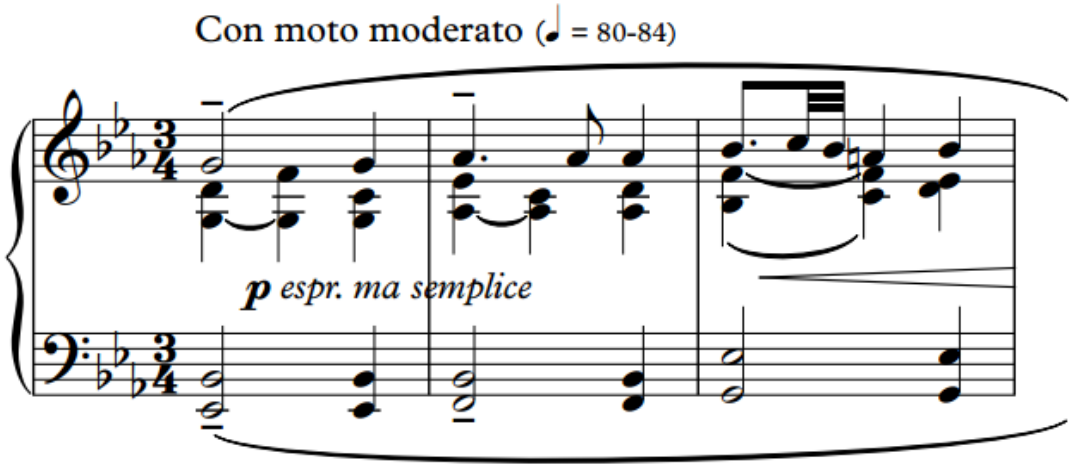
Ireland's eye and he described the boy to Thompson as "beautiful, clever and alert … Not, alas, musical. But lovely long curling eyelashes" (Richards, 2000, p. 169). He went on to explain that Michael was only part of the impact that Guernsey had on him, reporting his experience there as "a whole flood of beauty" (p. 169). Ireland told Thompson that he had expressed some of this in his new piano work, *Sarnia*, which he completed in 1940. The composer's original title for the second movement was 'Boyslove', 'boy's love' being one of the common names for the plant *artemisia abrotanum*, but the double meaning is obvious – so obvious that Ireland changed the name to 'In a May Morning' which, besides expunging the implicit Uranianism from the title, gave it a more universal significance. Nevertheless, the movement is dedicated to Michael, and the resemblance of the principal melody to the love song *Drink to me only with thine eyes* is, according to the pianist Alan Rowlands (Rowlands, 2011, p. 34), probably no coincidence, bearing in mind Ireland's letter extolling Rayson's "lovely long eyelashes" (*Examples 10a and 10b*).



a)



b)

Example 10.
a) *Drink to me only with thine eyes*, bars 1–3
b) 'In A May Morning', bars 1–3. © Copyright 1941 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

So how does all this interface with performance? According to both Alan Rowlands and Eric Parkin, two pianists who knew the composer and recorded his music, Ireland's emphasis was on beauty. To the former Ireland said: "Play it as if you were looking at something so beautiful you could hardly bear it" (p. 34) and to the latter: "you must make it all sound as beautiful as you possibly can" (Parkin, 2011, p. 189).
The movement is in A-B-A form and, with reference to the A sections, maybe the topic here is beauty but, like love, this is still very broad and more a topical field than a discrete topic. Various clues in the music can help the pianist to narrow the field down somewhat. Monelle

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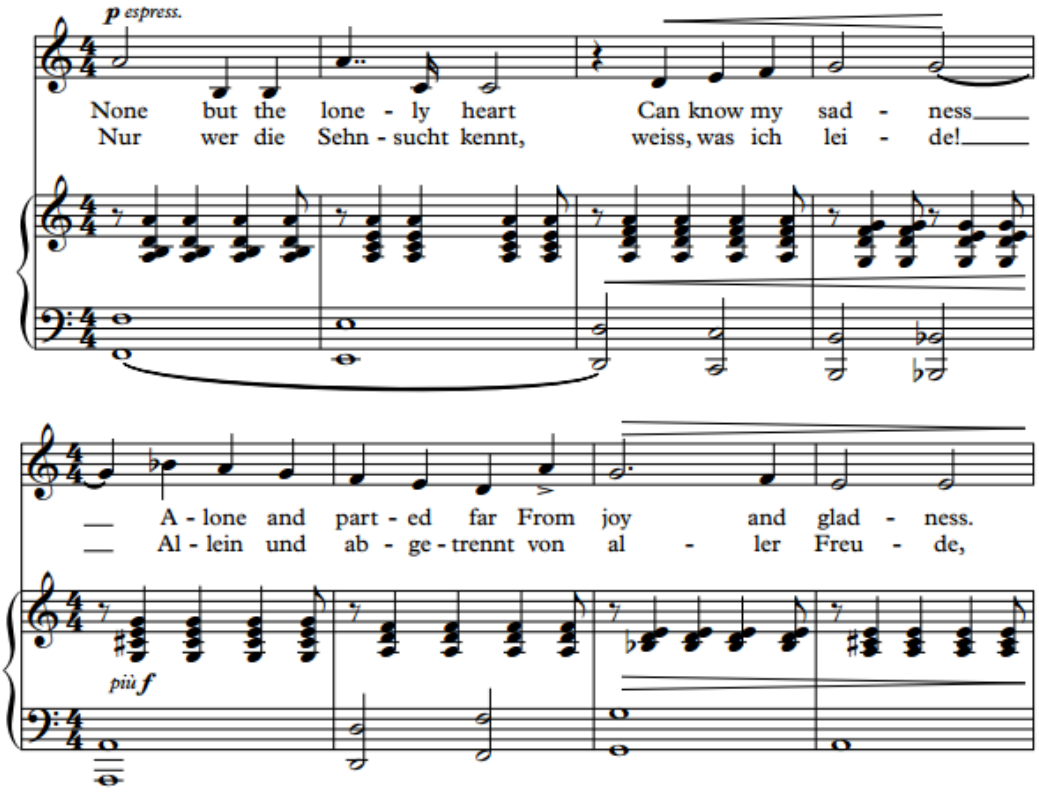
states that the mid-18th-century *Empfindsamkeit* style "is founded largely on the affective appoggiatura" (Monelle, 2000, p. 31) and, whilst there is much more to the style than this alone, we can observe a 20th-century equivalence in the music of 'In a May Morning' which is laced with appoggiaturas, mostly at phrase peaks to give added expressive emphasis. But it is possible to narrow this expressive style down further. Take for example the song 'None but the lonely heart' (from *Six Romances* Op. 6) by Tchaikovsky, a composer by whom Ireland was influenced and about whom he spoke "with lively affection" (*The Times*, 03/08/1959, 2011, p. 415). Here Goethe's text (translated into Russian by Lev Aleksandrovich Mey) adds semantic equivalence to the musical line and substance, the Oxford Lieder website showing the following translation:

> No, only one who has known
> What it is to long for one's beloved
> Can know how I have suffered
> And how I suffer still.[12]

Tchaikovsky's setting features prominent dropping intervals (a minor 7th followed by a major 6th) and then a rising melodic line, followed by a falling one (*Example 11*). Ireland's



Example 11. **'None but the lonely heart', bars 1– 8**

ingredients are in a different order but nevertheless match Tchaikovsky's: a rising melody, a dropping interval (a minor 6th in a similar rhythm to Tchaikovsky's dropping major 6th) and then a falling melody (*Example 12*). Later, the falling intervals (5ths and 4ths) become more of a feature (*Example 13*).

[12] Oxford Lieder, *None but the Lonely Heart*, translation by Philip Ross Bullock. Retrieved from https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/3915,

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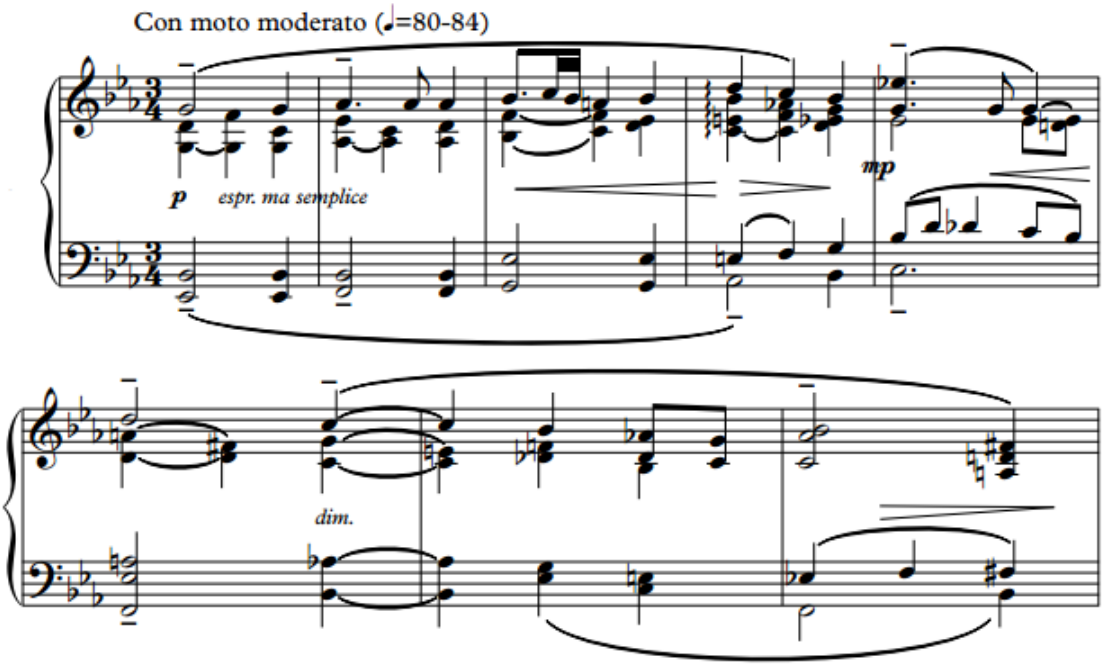
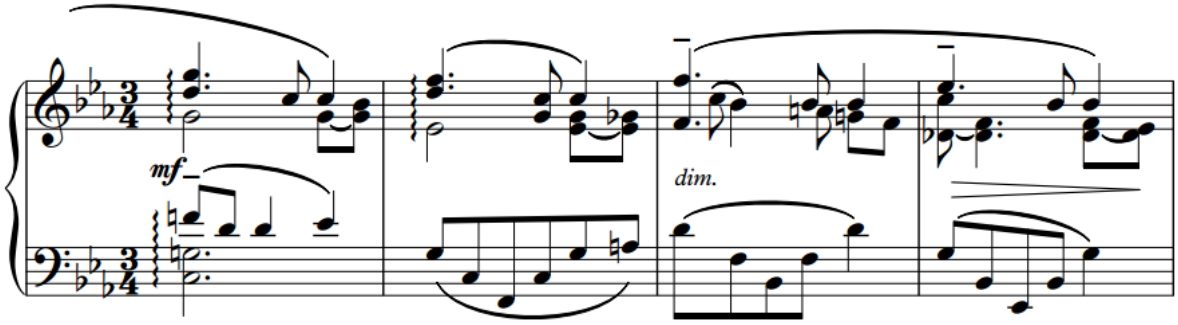


Example 12. **'In a May Morning', bars 1–8.** © Copyright 1941 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.



Example 13. **'In a May Morning', bars 13–16.** © Copyright 1941 by Hawkes & Son (London) Ltd. Reproduced by permission of Boosey & Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd.

Intertextually within Ireland's own *œuvre*, melodies with strategically placed falling 4ths, 5ths and 6ths often in a dotted rhythm, are characteristic of works dedicated to an earlier object of Ireland's affection, Arthur George Miller, appearing in, for example, *On a Birthday Morning* (1922) and *February's Child* (1929). Using these pointers as well as Tchaikovsky's text[13] and the text of *Drink to me only,* which is also infused with longing, the topic – a style rather than a type – can plausibly be regarded as one of yearning, reflecting the composer's own "yearning after the perfection and beauty of youth" (Richards, 2000, p. 168). The expressive appoggiaturas of 'In a May Morning' further bespeak the emotion. Indeed Richards writes of the "many instances of 'yearning' phrases involving weighted melodic appoggiaturas" (p. 33). The performer can thus lead the listener to the phrase peaks and give emphasis to the

[13] Goethe's original title for this poem is '*Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt*', which reinforces the notion of longing or yearning.

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appoggiaturas (*Video Example 6,* https://youtu.be/uFwPN17svqE).

But as with so much 20th-century music, topics do not come singly, and the performer should also be aware of the singing style. In 1802, Koch defined this as "that which can easily be performed by the human voice" and which is "comprehensible" and understandable by "every person" (Day-O'Connell, 2014, p. 241). Although the singing style as applied to Ireland is a descendant of Schumann's and Brahms's *Lied* style, both Koch's maxims nevertheless have relevance: the pitch range is quite narrow and the pace quite slow, and the tonal-melodic nature of the music makes it universally comprehensible. However, since Koch's time the concept of *cantabile* playing as it relates to the modern piano has evolved considerably and is evoked regularly in present-day pedagogy. To achieve a singing quality as it is nowadays commonly understood, a judicious tempo, elegant phrasing which complements the musical contours of the melody, and due attention to the balance between the uppermost line and its accompanying chords are all needed. Ireland's rich harmonic palette should have presence, especially if the appoggiaturas are to achieve their full *sehnsucht* effect, but this will be weakened if the harmonic presence engulfs the melodic line.
Ireland specified a tempo range of crotchet = 80–84 which yields a relaxed pace but one that nonetheless keeps a degree of momentum. This is necessary for the yearning style to be fully conveyed in performance: if the harmonic rhythm is too slow, it is harder for the listener to follow the musical discourse, because 'concatenationism'[14] is hampered. To avoid this I adopt a tempo that stays roughly within the range indicated by the composer – several recorded performance go considerably more slowly – which allows the music its natural flow. Given the presence of the two topics identified, the singing and yearning styles (and there may be others), I believe that both need to be kept in a state of equilibrium for an effective performance to occur (see *Video Example 6*).

'The Scarlet Ceremonies' – flames, dance and incantation
And so finally to the topical field of paganism. The third of the *Decorations* suite, mentioned earlier in connection with 'The Island Spell' is called 'The Scarlet Ceremonies'. A big influence on Ireland was the Welsh supernaturalist writer Arthur Machen (1863–1947). His quartet of short stories collectively called *The House of Souls* (1906) includes 'The White People', essentially a tale of strange countries, supernatural beings and magical practices as told by a young girl. Ireland includes a quotation from 'The White People' at the head of the score: "Then there are the ceremonies which are all of them important, but some are more delightful than others – there are the White Ceremonies and the Green Ceremonies and the Scarlet Ceremonies. The Scarlet Ceremonies are the best …" (Machen, 2012 [1906], p. 49). Machen's text does not inform the reader what happens in these particular ceremonies, but it is full of references to singing, dancing and fire – in fact the final story in *The House of Souls*, 'The Shining Pyramid', concerns a magical pyramid of fire.
In the 'Magic Fire Music' from Act 3 of *Die Walküre* (1856), Wagner used flickering ostinato figurations to represent flames, and the association has remained, particularly with regard to the evocation of ritualistic flames.[15] Where Wagner used oft-repeated rising and falling

[14] According to Levinson's theory, a passage of music is heard as a sequence of interrelated sound bites, and if a performer has a good structural grasp of the music, this "may produce a performance whose specific soundings enable listeners to the synthesis the musical stream is a concatenationist manner more effectively" (Jerrold Levinson, 1999, p. 172).
[15] Raymond Monelle points out that musical representations of fire have been used since the 16th century (Monelle,

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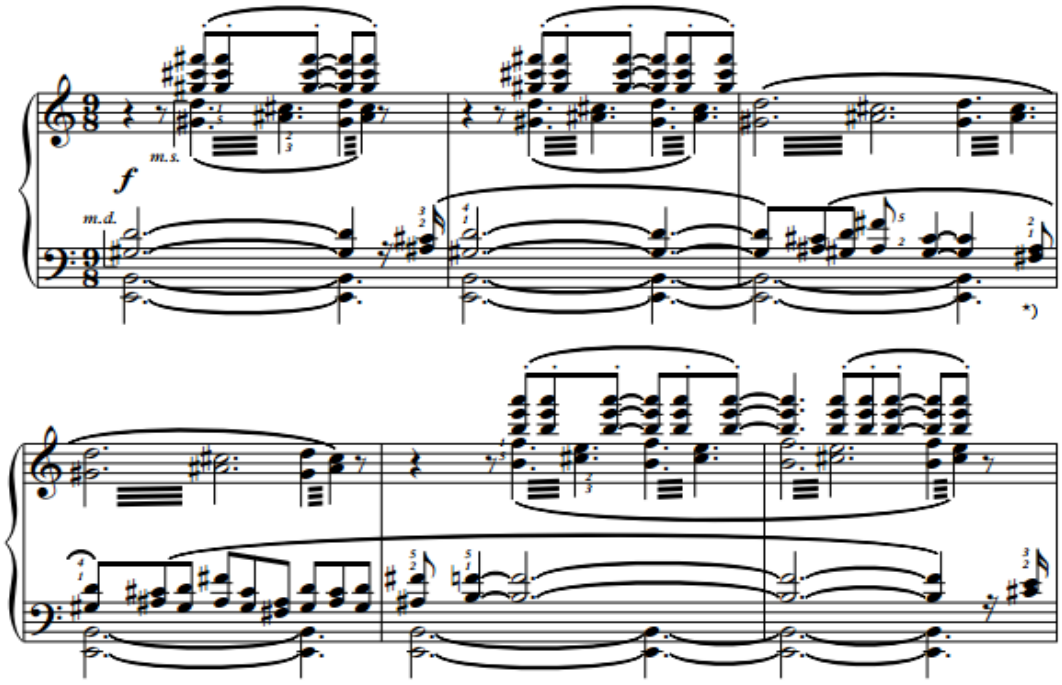
arpeggio figures in the upper strings, harps and flutes, pianistically the device used by Scriabin in his late masterpiece *Vers la flamme* (1914) took the form of tremolos, and Manuel de Falla, in the piano version of 'Ritual Fire Dance' from *El amor brujo* (1914–15), adopted sustained trills (*Examples 14a and 14b*). Ireland's piece came a year or two before these but it is nonetheless easy to relate its obsessive tremolo figurations to the topic of flames (*Example 15*).



a)

2000, p. 20). However, his examples, such as Weelkes' madrigal *Thule the Period of Cosmography*, bear little or no resemblance to the fire topic discussed here which could only have developed out of more recent instrumental practices.

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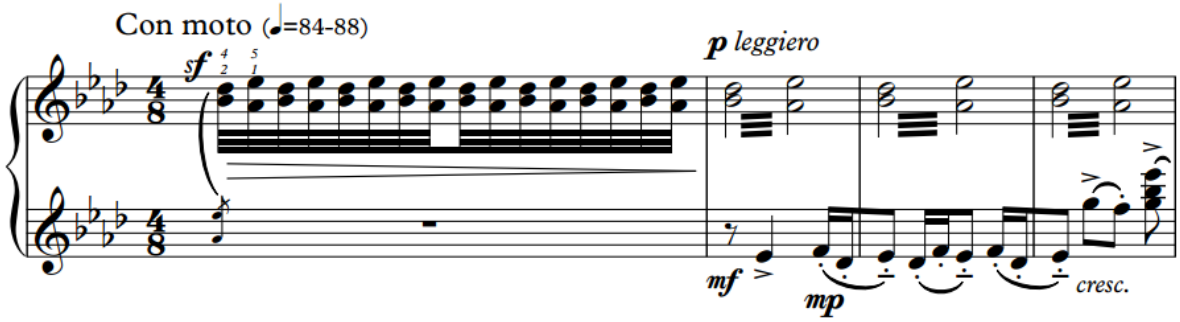
b)

Example 14.
a) *Vers la flamme*, bars 107–112
b) 'Ritual Fire Dance', bars 1–21



Example 15. **'The Scarlet Ceremonies', bars 1–4**. © 1915 Stainer & Bell Ltd, London, UK, www.stainer.co.uk. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Prior to Scriabin and Ireland, piano tremolos, as used in particular by Liszt, were primarily taken to signify sustained orchestral textures, impossible to achieve on the piano by held chords and pedal alone, or, in the case of the Hungarian Rhapsodies, to mimic the tremolo of the cimbalom. However, once the link was made between the ostinato use of tremolos (and to a lesser extent trills) and the pictorial referent of flames, cultural usage has spawned topical status, recognisable by suitably initiated receivers.
In common with 'The Island Spell', 'The Scarlet Ceremonies' thus features an *idio*-topic, a constant double-note tremolo which features throughout the piece in one form or another. The pianist has to master the considerable technical challenges that this generative feature presents, challenges which become all the more fearsome when the hand positions interlock, as in bars 37 and 38 (*Example 16*). But without this mastery at the inherent level it

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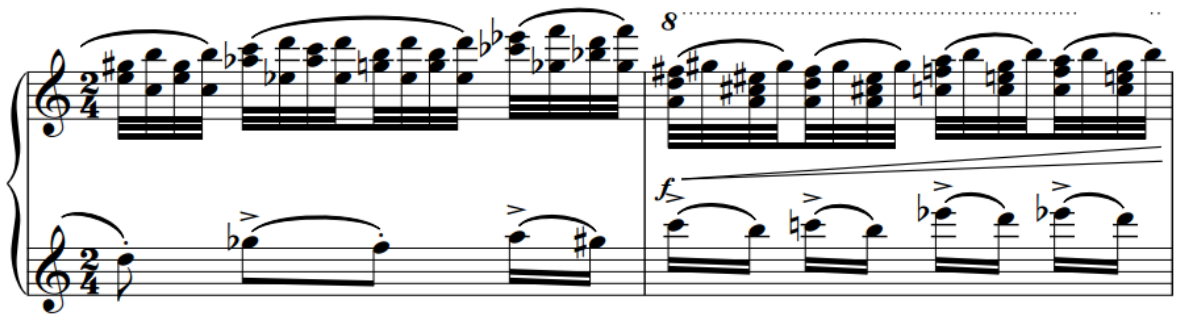
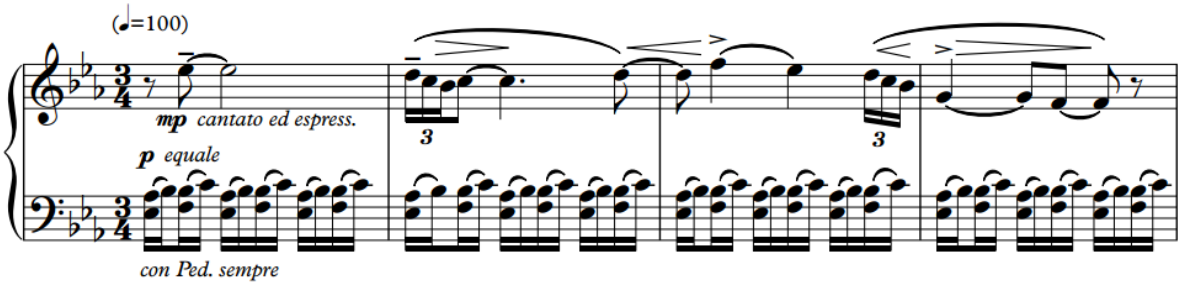


Example 16. **'The Scarlet Ceremonies', bars 37–38.**

is difficult to convey the hermeneutic outcome, the flickering pictorialism of the *idio*-topic, to the listener.

'The Scarlet Ceremonies', as with the 'Ritual Fire Dance', also features singing and dancing topics. The left-hand part presents dance-like figurations, but ones that avoid easy classification such as jig, bourrée or tarantella. The strongly rhythmic character nonetheless presents a musical parallel to the many references to improvised, non-courtly, dancing in Machen's writing. In the middle section, the flame (tremolo) figurations subside into the left hand and a jagged, syncopated melodic line is presented by the right hand (*Example 17*).



Example 17. **'The Scarlet Ceremonies', bars 47–50.**

Ireland's instruction "*cantato*" (as opposed to, say, *cantabile* or *cantando*) is interpreted by Richards as signifying incantation (Richards, 2000, p. 69), and certainly its syncopated and ornamental features have something in common with ritual chant – and it will be recalled that the flames evoked are also ritualistic – suggesting another sub-species of the singing style. So, in terms of performance, these topical considerations lead me to the broad conclusion that brilliance of attack and relative sparsity of pedal are appropriate. The flickering figurations lose clarity if over-pedalled, especially as Ireland has written in the score that the tremolos should be played as notated and not as "a rhythmically indefinite tremolando" (Ireland, 2012 [1915], p. 34) (*Video Example 7,* https://youtu.be/hzvD8pyd4x8). The dance figures in bar 10 *et seq*. lose some of their rhythmic bite if they are presented within a hazy harmonic framework and not crisply defined. Likewise, a generously pedalled central section is liable to make the incantatory melody sound too warm and yielding. Balance is also a consideration here. The need for a sharply-etched melodic line suggests that the

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accompaniment needs to be kept even more out of the way than would be the case in a conventional melody with accompaniment texture (such as is found in a Chopin nocturne), giving the right-hand tone an edgier quality (*Video Example 8,* https://youtu.be/03HQWNDgajU). In performance I also strive to integrate the three topics of flame, dance and incantation into the wider context of both the "Con moto" instruction and the Machen quotation which head the score, not to mention the detailed performance indications supplied by the composer. To achieve its full impact, the piece needs a certain *con fuoco* element – metaphorical fire in performance seemingly being appropriate to a piece that, by a process of ekphrasis, iconises flames.

Conclusion

As is implied in the final statement above, topics are not the only source of interpretative information for the pianist to consider when preparing a performance. There are many others too: the notation itself; a composer's unique style; the general style of the music and the period from which it comes; a work's structure; performance traditions; scored performance directives; the music as sound – to identify just some. The question thus arises as to the place of topics within this array of information, especially with regard to music from more recent times. Within the nexus of relationships implied by such an array of information, topics may assume relative importance in some instances, less in others, and even when they have a prominent presence, this is likely to interact with other interpretative considerations. Such, for example, was the case above where contrasting topics in Ireland's Rhapsody also doubled as structural markers and acted in combination with scored dynamics and other performance feeders at structural high points.

Where topicality advertises itself in a title (such as 'Minuet in G') it is likely to be a prominent interpretative consideration but when it has to be discovered, as in the case-studies presented above, its influence may be more variable from performer to performer. It is also debatable whether, for example, the flame topic in 'The Scarlet Ceremonies' is more apparent in a performance given by a pianist with a strong awareness of this aspect of the piece than in a performance given by one with little or no awareness. In such cases, the topic may be more in the ear of the topically-aware receiver than in the mind and fingers of the pianist. But that is for another article.

To end on a personal note, I learned all of the pieces discussed above without giving much, if any, consideration to topical presence and it was only after I had lived with the pieces as a performer for several months, years in the case of the Rhapsody, that it occurred to me that topic theory might be relevant. Once the idea took hold, it affected my interpretative thinking at quite a deep level. For example, I had always endeavoured to give a lilt to the pastoral section in the Rhapsody (see above), not because I thought of it as pastoral but because it seemed, intuitively, to be an appropriate manner of delivery. It was only after I had recognised its specific pastoralism and started to read around the subject, engaging with authors old and new, that I decided to slow the tempo down to give the topic greater prominence. Likewise, 'The Island Spell', the full signification of which I originally found elusive, took on a new dimension after I had identified the water/wave topic and was thereafter able to shape and develop the pianistic formations according to a fresh insight. Other pianists have no doubt had different experiences with this (and other) music and will continue to do so, but an appreciation of topicality presents itself as a rich interpretative

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resource, one that is worthy of taking its place alongside more established sources. Working with topicality in Ireland's music and that by other 20th- and 21st-century composers will doubtless be an ongoing voyage of discovery for me. Hopefully for others too.

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