

# KEVIN O'CONNELL'S *NORTH*: MODERNISM, SIBELIUS, AND IDENTITY

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## Abstract

The influence of Jean Sibelius and Scandinavian modernism can show up in unexpected quarters: the Northern Irish composer Kevin O'Connell (b. 1958) names the Finnish great as one of his crucial influences, particularly evident in the composition *North*. Having grown up under the shadows of the Northern Irish Troubles since the late 1960s, O'Connell's music can be read as a way to engage with this specific identity crisis. Another northern influence on this piece, albeit non-musical in topic, includes Seamus Heaney's collection of poetry of the same title and structure, with Heaney also hailing from Derry in Northern Ireland.

Alongside such issues of identity, this article will assess the determinacy of Kevin O'Connell's orchestral composition, entitled *North* (1997–98), on Sibelius's Symphony No. 4. *North* displays motivic transformation as a significant element of O'Connell's orchestral style and the central element utilized to construct an extended and coherent piece of music. His processes rely upon the continuous development of a small number of motivic cells that appear in increasing degrees of variation and sophistication, within an overarching formal structure. Despite a heightened awareness of form, his treatment of the thematic motifs includes extremely little direct repetition and extensive intricate variations. The opening of *North* borrows that of Sibelius's Symphony No. 4 and, given the aforementioned compositional technique, the consequent treatment of this phrase illustrates the significance of Sibelius's influence upon O'Connell's music.

Sibelius's influence is not only musical however, but also relates to issues of identity, in his position as a composer from northern Europe negotiating a path between nationalist political movements and the productive engagement with the central European artistic tradition, in the process laying claim to full membership of the exclusive club of European composers – all of which contribute to 'Conceptualizing the North'.

**Keywords:** *Kevin O'Connell; North; Ireland; Identity; Jean Sibelius; Modernism*

## Kevin O'Connell: Education and Career

Kevin O'Connell was born in 1958 in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland. His education was the British curriculum provided by Catholic schools.<sup>1</sup> To further his education O'Connell moved to the Republic of Ireland on being accepted to Trinity College, Dublin (1978–82) where he completed a Bachelor of Music undergraduate

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<sup>1</sup> He took composition, piano, and organ lessons with organist Michael Hoeg and studied composition with Redmond Friel (1909–1979) at St. Columb's College – his secondary/grammar school.

degree.<sup>2</sup> On completing this degree O'Connell moved back to Northern Ireland where he had several teaching positions but after a while returned to Dublin, teaching in Trinity College, Dublin, where he also completed a Master's in Anglo-Irish Literature.<sup>3</sup> O'Connell then came to his current position of head of composition at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, Dublin.<sup>4</sup> During this time O'Connell completed a Doctorate in composition. He has maintained his academic interests alongside composing, resulting in numerous conference presentations and publications. A broad sweep of topics ranging between Stravinsky, Berg, and Stanford to poetry have received O'Connell's attention, with contributions made to *The Musical Times* and *Contemporary Psychoanalytic Explorations*. O'Connell is a member of Aosdána, Ireland's state-sponsored academy of creative artists.

### **O'Connell the composer**

O'Connell began composing at the age of twelve and was granted his first commission at the age of twenty-five, from BBC Radio 3.<sup>5</sup> To date he has composed for many genres, including opera, orchestral, solo, and chamber ensembles. A complete list of his compositions is available on the Contemporary Music Centre's website.<sup>6</sup> He has only written one piece under the category of electro-acoustic and mixed media,<sup>7</sup> illustrating his perhaps traditionalist preference for acoustic instruments.

The 1990s were dominated by opera, with three chamber operas, but orchestral pieces are consistent throughout O'Connell's compositional timeline, appearing at the start of his career as a composer in the 1980s with *From the Besieged City*, again in the 1990s with *North* (the work upon which this article will focus), the 2000s with *Four Orchestral Pieces*, the symphony premièred in 2011, and the more recent première of *Early Music* in July 2015.

### **Social context**

Hailing from Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, O'Connell grew up during the Troubles. This was when a divided society in Northern Ireland with a 'Catholic' minority accounting for approximately one third of the population led to tensions between them and the predominantly Unionist government, escalating sharply with the emergence of the civil rights movement's campaign (Connolly 2007, 4-5). The

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<sup>2</sup> During this time, O'Connell was proactive in student performances of contemporary music. He won the composition prize of the RTÉ Young Musician of the Year competition – this was beneficial in introducing him and his music to more influential composers of the time. A continuing interest in music education and writing for young players has been the result of these experiences.

<sup>3</sup> The Master's in Anglo-Irish Literature focused his attention on Heaney and Beckett.

<sup>4</sup> In this he has composed works for many of the RIAM's soloists and ensembles.

<sup>5</sup> A number of commissions followed, including *String Trio* (a work which has received some 50 professional performances) *Saxophone Sonata*, *Einzeichnung* for large ensemble, and *Fáilte don Éan* for choir. The BBC Radio 3 piece is entitled *Concertino for 12 players (1985)*

<sup>6</sup> Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin, Kevin O'Connell biography [www.cmc.ie/composers/kevin-oconnell](http://www.cmc.ie/composers/kevin-oconnell)

<sup>7</sup> *Apollo and Marsyas* (2003) is the only work for which O'Connell has used tape. It is, however, used along with live performers

deployment of British troops in 1969 to halt major civil strife on the streets of Derry and Belfast is commonly cited as the start of the Troubles although it could be argued that they started

in 1169 with the arrival of Strongbow, or with the Plantation in the seventeenth century, or with the partition of Ireland in 1920. Theoretically one could start with the arrival of the Celts in Ireland and the consequent dislocation of Ireland's first inhabitants (Hennessy 2005, ix).

It is difficult to contest that the Troubles have caused much grievance to all of the people of Northern Ireland and it is a sensitive topic for most to talk about. Extensive interviews as well as the scores and other secondary sources indicate that extra-musical influences related to the composer's Catholic Northern Irish identity play a part in his musical thinking as is evidenced particularly in the first two orchestral compositions, *From the Besieged City* and *North*, with their non-generic titles and quasi-programmatic content. Combining the purely musical features with extra-musical issues, such as his interest in Anglo-Irish literature and arising identity issues, provides enhanced insight into and understanding of O'Connell's music.

While a simplistic understanding of the society often reduces the conflict of Northern Ireland to a binary Catholic-Protestant division, this ignores the sub-categories of Loyalist, Nationalist, Republican, and Unionist, and it completely fails to consider the ways in which such traditions can combine. O'Connell frequently refers to a quality of 'Ulsterness', by which he means the combination of Irish and British influences that the people of Northern Ireland<sup>8</sup> uniquely experience. Such a label suggests an alternative identity to describe the people as products of the situation into which they were born, neither solely Irish nor British despite what they might choose as their nationality – perhaps some similarities with which Sibelius could also identify come to mind as during his lifetime he experienced changes in nationality and politics, as well as the Second World War.

### **Musical identity**

In his PhD dissertation, O'Connell stated: 'I have at times had the reputation of being both a populist and a difficult modernist.' (O'Connell 2007, 8) Musical, as well as social, identity then comes to play in this discussion, with O'Connell's own writings proving the best place to start as they express not only where his interests lie but also his views on them. His academic writings cover a wide range of topics, with most being published in *The Musical Times*. His article from 2005 entitled 'Stanford and the Gods of Modern Music' is the most relevant to this article as O'Connell's interest in Charles Villiers Stanford, more particularly as a teacher rather than as a composer, could reflect how he considers his own position as a senior lecturer in Composition at the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), Dublin, whilst being an active composer and member

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<sup>8</sup> There is a loose use of the term Ulster here with a lack of distinction between the six counties of Northern Ireland that are under the rule of the United Kingdom and the nine counties that form the geographical province of Ulster on the island of Ireland.

of Aosdána. In considering his position as similar to Stanford's, through his position as lecturer in the RIAM where his teaching impacts the next generation of Irish composers, O'Connell notes Stanford's lasting influence provided by his publication *Musical Composition: A Short Treatise for Students* (1911). A shared viewpoint between these composers relates to colour:

But of what use is colour if the drawing be bad? It may conceal deficiency, but it will not hide it from the keen eye; such an art as sculpture cannot depend on it for a single detail. Wealth of language cannot hide the fault of a poor poem. Magnificence of decoration cannot glorify an ill-constructed building. Colour, the god of modern music, is in itself the inferior of rhythmic and melodic invention, although it will always remain one of its most important servants. Fine clothes will not make a bad figure good. (Stanford 1911, 53–54)

O'Connell often refers to Stravinsky in his own teaching, and how good compositional technique is revealed if a piece can be reduced to a piano score and still make musical sense; there is no dependency upon colour to maintain the interest (O'Connell, 2005). The thorough working of his motivic material that is presented later in this article supports O'Connell's adherence to such practice, however, through the orchestration he then adds a further dimension.

A point of conflict between the two composers arises in Stanford's objections to modernism. O'Connell summarises them thus:

(1) Its connection with the literary and dramatic. This offended Stanford's radically conservative idea of music as a self-contained language. The title alone of the chapter dealing with this subject expresses Stanford's objections: 'Extraneous influences in instrumental music.' (2) Its allegiance to 'colour'. Stanford says on this subject: 'No painter who relied on colour alone has survived the test of time.' The modernists elevated this secondary quality to a primary one. Allied to his suspicion of colour is Stanford's dislike of what he calls 'apparatus', in other words the huge late-Romantic orchestra. (Stanford often quotes Richter's remark: the greater the number of staves, the fewer the ideas.) (3) Chromaticism and the whole-tone scale. Stanford's dislike of these expansions of the language was obviously a matter of personal taste. His prejudice against them rests primarily on their tendency to obscure line. 'Chromatics are, as their name implies, colour and not drawing.' But he tried to anchor his prejudice in the supposed acoustical impossibility of an equal-tempered scale, which he regarded as an unhappy compromise dictated by the needs of keyboard instruments. (O'Connell 2005, 35)

O'Connell is a notable offender in this area; by using titles such as *North* and *From the Besieged City*, his employment of a large orchestra, albeit with a traditional orchestration with no experimental performance techniques, and the non-tonal harmonic language utilized. In saying that, O'Connell has perhaps returned to an aesthetic more to Stanford's liking through later works such as a small work for string orchestra entitled

*Suite in C* where he uses C major and traditional forms somewhat as a technical exercise to help when composing the larger work that followed, his symphony.

In assessing the idea of development, however, O'Connell notes that this might have been a 'weakness in his [Stanford's] practice' (O'Connell 2005, 40), continuing with quite a telling remark: 'Perhaps the Irishman in him [Stanford] responded more to the conversational mode of the concerto form than to the abstract rigours of the symphony. (I think this holds true for modern Irish composers, among whose orchestral works concertos figure prominently).' (O'Connell 2005, 41) This may be interpreted as an adverse observation, and with O'Connell's actions and the results of in-depth study of his larger scale orchestral works (O'Connell 2005, 41), this is not a brush with which he wants to be tarred. This leads back to the debate about his identity and his rigorous Ulster upbringing with an emphasis on technique: 'That's what we bring [...] you see this in people like Heaney or Mahon, or Longley [...] their poetry has a very Irish flavour, but when you read it there is sense of organisation that for want of a better word I can only describe as very Ulster.' (D. O'Connell 2010, 75) Kevin O'Connell does not directly refer to his own issues in his article, but such remarks from Ulster artists bring an air of mutual experience, perhaps an understanding of Stanford's position. On a broader musical European spectrum, 'Stanford's identification with Brahms is also that of a self-made provincial. [...] Forced unto the defensive, the provincial makes the plea for "eternal" values, generally a sure sign that the immediate battle has been lost' (D. O'Connell 2010, 43-44). Perhaps it is in similar ways that Kevin O'Connell reaches to European composers from abroad for his own inspiration rather than towards that of his fellow composers of Ireland. In the blog entry entitled 'On Torsten Rasch' O'Connell comments upon this search:

The broader implications of this sprawling work [orchestral song-cycle *Mein Herz Brennt*] and of what academics drearily call its 'reception' are interesting to think out. Rasch was praised by some of the British critics for plastering a big 'shut down for good' sign across the whole modernist project in music. This is the kind of mis-aimed praise that should make a composer careful of the friends he picks up. As a composer, I could not suppress a pang of annoyed envy. Here is a German of my age who needs only to dip into the ancestral note-board for everyone to fall over him in Mahlerian faints and ecstasies. When you have spent 25 years in search of your own language, sifting, rejecting, including, and then sifting again (as I suppose an Irish composer has to), it can seem like a rum deal. (O'Connell 2011a)

### **O'Connell's North**

*North* was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 in 1997 and premièred by the Ulster Orchestra, under the baton of Robert Houlihan, at the BBC Invitation Concert 'Sonorities' on 15 May 1998, in Belfast.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent performances have been in the

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<sup>9</sup> 'Sonorities Festival' according to the CMC website, but 'BBC Invitation Concerts 1998' according to the programme.

National Concert Hall, Dublin, by the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra (RTÉ NSO), first in 2001 (20 February) with Colman Pearce conducting and then in 2003 (21 November) under the baton of Gerhard Markson.<sup>10</sup>

*North* was O'Connell's first orchestral commission after moving out of the North of Ireland following several teaching positions there after his university studies. The choice of title for this music was borrowed from fellow Derry-man Seamus Heaney's first publication following his own move out of 'the North'. The twenty-minute orchestral piece has a very clear break in the middle creating two ten-minute sections, or movements. This structural divide combined with the title *North* will be considered as a reference to the divided society of Northern Ireland, notwithstanding O'Connell's claims that this work is not programmatic, as will be discussed later in this article.

O'Connell found the writings of Schoenberg to be influential; for example on unity, Schoenberg has written:

Music in its primal condition consists of most primitive repetitions; and the element which functions as a unifying factor in the higher forms to which it has developed, the element which guarantees that one may be able to relate all the sections to each other – the motive – can manifest its presence only through repetition. (Schoenberg 1975, 265)

This is in keeping with O'Connell's manipulation of motivic content to construct his works. This creative process has been associated with modernism, of which Elliott Carter identified the following features:

The use of equally intense melodic shapes, often broken up into short, dramatic fragments, joins with a very varied rubato rhythmic technique to produce a new kind of what might be called instrumental recitative. The rapid increases and decreases of harmonic tension, quick changes of register, and fragmented, non-imitative counterpoint are also worthy of note. (Carter 1997, 207)

Such features can be identified in O'Connell's music, with the use of short motifs as the main musical construction, his employment of rhythmic features, and the challenging of tonal harmonies with extreme contrasts in register.

This is relevant to the variations and derivations in O'Connell's manipulation of his compositional motifs that will be discussed later in this article. Definitions of motifs offered by Schoenberg and Réti are not too dissimilar:

Schoenberg:

The features of a motive are intervals and rhythms, combined to produce a memorable shape or contour which usually implies an inherent harmony. Inasmuch as almost every figure within a piece reveals some relationship to it,

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<sup>10</sup> Pre-concert talks were given by O'Connell before both National Concert Hall performances; the 2003 programme also toured to Mullingar, Galway, Limerick, Cork, and Waterford.

the basic motive is often considered the 'germ' of the idea. (Schoenberg 1967, 8)

Reti:

We call motif any musical element, be it a melodic phrase or fragment or even only a rhythmical or dynamic feature which, by being constantly repeated and varied throughout a work or a section, assumes a role in the compositional design. (Réti 1951, 11)

Due to such appropriateness, 'motif' is the most applicable term to be used in this assessment.

The source of O'Connell's motifs is also telling regarding his influences and admirations. His admiration of Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4* (1911) is evident from the following answers to parts of a questionnaire that the Contemporary Music Centre, Dublin, circulated to numerous Irish composers in 2003:

CMC Q. 9: What is your greatest ambition?

O'Connell: To write something as good as Sibelius's Fourth Symphony, or better.

CMC Q. 16: What is your concept of heaven?

O'Connell: Writing a piece as good as Sibelius 4. (O'Connell in association with CMC 2003)

He also presented his findings of an analysis of the symphony at the annual conference of the Society for Musicology in Ireland in 2006. It was entitled 'The law of the nearest way: polyphonic aspects of the first movement of Sibelius's Fourth Symphony', illustrating that O'Connell came to know this work in great detail through such research. In correspondence about this matter O'Connell has written:

Considering that Sibelius is possibly my favourite symphonist, I'm amazed at how little of him is in my own symphony. He's just impossible to imitate. [...] Maybe the truth is that we all borrow, and in the act of trying to cover our traces we become composers.' (O'Connell 2011b)

O'Connell might find Sibelius impossible to imitate and so simply made a direct quotation; the opening motif of *North* is a quotation of Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4*, easily seen in extracts from the opening of the two scores:

#### Sibelius's Symphony No. 4, bar 1

Bassoon  
Violoncello  
Double Bass



The image shows a musical score for the first bar of Sibelius's Symphony No. 4. It features three staves: Bassoon, Violoncello, and Double Bass. The music is in the bass clef with a common time signature (C). The notes are: Bassoon (G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3), Violoncello (G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3), and Double Bass (G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3). The notes are connected by a long slur, indicating a continuous melodic line.

**North, Part I, bar 1**

The image shows a musical score for the first bar of 'North, Part I'. It consists of two staves: Viola (top) and Violoncello (bottom). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The Viola part begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, an eighth note B4, and a half note C5. The Violoncello part begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G3, an eighth note A3, an eighth note B3, and a half note C4. Both parts have a fermata over the final note.

The notes of C, D and F# are identical, but are pitched an octave higher. The low sustained note that enters in the double basses (in bar 2) following the viola and violoncello motif of *North* maintains an element of Sibelius's original character. There is some rhythmic alteration with the note values of the Sibelius motif halved, but the proportions and the effect remain the same, with a shorter note value to springboard to two longer note values. Sibelius's treatment of this motif is somewhat similar to that of O'Connell's *North*, in that it is developed and occurs throughout the symphony – and is not confined to one movement.<sup>11</sup> Hence O'Connell may have also been influenced by Sibelius's techniques of motivic development alongside his borrowing.

The four main motifs that significantly contribute to the construction of *North* are the 'repeated pitch' motif, the 'bacchius' gesture (the step-leap 'bacchius' gesture is defined by the weak-strong-strong rhythm), the 'chorale-like' homophonic texture, and the 'alternating' gesture. Other secondary motifs include clusters, trill and tremolo effects, scalic passages, and a 'bouncing ball' rhythmic gesture. Some of these may be seen as effects rather than motifs, and some have a much stronger presence than others.

**Example 1: North, Part I, bar 1**

Opening motif

This image is identical to the previous musical score but includes annotations. The note G4 in the Viola part is marked with '1a' above it. The note G3 in the Violoncello part is marked with '1a' above it. The annotations highlight the starting notes of the motifs in both parts.

The intervals and rhythmic gestures of Example 1's motifs are manipulated throughout the entire work. Note the imitatory strands presented by viola and cello, both commencing with the melodic intervals of two semitones followed by a larger leap; the viola ascending through four semitones followed by the cello descending through six. Similarly the more sustained harmonic tension created in Example 2 by four solo violins recurs throughout *North* with the small intervals of two, three, and four semitones being exploited.

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4*, see Tawaststjerna 1986 (vol. 2, 128).



**Example 3: *North*, Part II, bars 1–3**

Variation of motifs 1a and 2a in the opening of Part II

The musical score for Example 3 shows three staves: Violin 1, Violin 2, and Viola. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. Motif 2a is indicated above the violin staves, showing a sequence of notes with a dynamic marking of *p*. Motif 1a is indicated below the viola staff, showing a sequence of notes with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The violins play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, while the viola plays a more complex rhythmic pattern with some rests.

Example 3 illustrates that the first bars of Part II combine the major second interval of motif 2a with the rhythmical leap of motif 1a moving through the interval of a minor third (a variation of motif 2b). In this example, however, instead of ascending through four semitones, the leap in the viola has been reduced to three semitones. A similar intervallic manipulation is seen in Example 4 in which the violins' intervals of four semitones (from motif 2b) are reduced to three in bars 4–6 of Part II, creating an interplay between major and minor thirds:

**Example 4: *North*, Part II, bars 4–6**

Variation of motifs 2a and 2b

The musical score for Example 4 shows a single staff for 2 Flute. The key signature has one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The flute part consists of a sequence of notes with a dynamic marking of *p*. The notes are: G4, A4, Bb4, C5, Bb4, A4, G4.

These are particularly evident upon listening to the opening of *North's* Part II (O'Connell 2014). Not only does O'Connell use intervallic variation but he also develops rhythmical and accompaniment motifs, initially presented in the first part and then varied in the subsequent second part of *North*. Example 5 illustrates the first presentation of a rhythmically repeated chordal idea, and Example 6 shows the establishment of an accompaniment pattern alternating between two voices. Both figures also utilize the upbeat semiquaver from the opening idea (motif 1a) with Example 6 displaying the alternating nature seen previously in Example 3.

**Example 5: *North*, Part I: Bars 39–42**

Rhythmically repeated chords

The musical score for Example 5 shows two staves: 2 Oboe and 2 Trumpet in Bb. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. Motif 5a is indicated above the oboe staff, showing a sequence of chords with a dynamic marking of *p*. Motif 1a is indicated above the trumpet staff, showing a sequence of notes with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The oboe part consists of a sequence of chords, while the trumpet part consists of a sequence of notes.

**Example 6: *North*, Part I: Bars 93–94**

Alternating accompaniment pattern idea based on motif 1a

The musical score for Example 6 shows two staves: Oboe and Clarinet in Bb. The Oboe staff has a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a repeating pattern of chords labeled '6a' with dynamics *p* and *f*. The Clarinet in Bb staff has a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. It features a repeating pattern of eighth notes with dynamics *p* and *f*.

These features are then varied in Part II: Example 7 displays motif 5a's repeated chord idea in the flutes, rhythmically augmented on this occasion (hemiola effect). Motif 2a's harmonic colouring has been widened from a major second to a minor third in the violins, and the manipulation of motif 1a's rhythmical ascending leap of four semitones is in the viola. Also the alternating accompaniment pattern of motif 6a is suggested by the violin and pviola relationship here:

**Example 7: *North*, Part II, bars 7–10**

Combination of motifs 1a, 2b and 5a with inference of motif 6a

The musical score for Example 7 shows four staves: Flute, Violin 1, Violin 2, and Viola. The Flute staff has a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. It features a repeated chord idea labeled '2b and 5a' with dynamics *p*, *mp*, and *p*. The Violin 1 and Violin 2 staves have a treble clef and a 3/4 time signature. They feature a repeated chord idea labeled '2b' with dynamics *p* and *mf*. The Viola staff has a bass clef and a 3/4 time signature. It features a repeated chord idea labeled '1a' with dynamics *mf*.

These examples represent the first occurrences of the thematic material in each section but many variations of the motifs are found throughout *North*.

The correlation of *North*'s main thematic material between the two halves of the piece proves the thematic unity of this music as well as highlighting the significance of Sibelius's contribution to the work through O'Connell's borrowing and manipulation of the opening line of *Symphony No. 4*. The subsequent presentations of this opening motif are for example not exact reproductions but variations and developments, as Example 8 demonstrates:

**Example 8: *North*, Part I, bar 1**

Subsequent presentations of motif 1a in bars 5–6 and 8

The image shows a musical score for Viola and Violoncello. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three measures. The first measure is labeled '1' and shows the initial presentation of motif 1a. The second measure is labeled '5' and shows a subsequent presentation of the motif. The third measure is labeled '8 (Horns)' and shows a third presentation of the motif. The Viola part is written in treble clef and the Violoncello part is written in bass clef. The motif 1a is a sequence of notes: a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a half note C5. The rhythm is characterized by quaver syncopation, with the first note starting on the second beat of the measure.

In bar 5, the viola line begins the same way as in bar 1 but the cello's response is altered; contrary to the previous a to b movement, on this occasion it begins on b and moves to a.<sup>12</sup> The cello's descent is then extended from where it previously stopped on the f down to e flat then c sharp before ascending a semitone and resting on d. Quaver syncopation dominates the rhythm and is also subjected to the variation process with the displacement of entries; for example in bar 5 the cello enters a quaver value earlier than in the original presentation in bar 1. Longer durations are given to the e flat, c sharp and d than those of the foundational three notes of the motif. These longer notes provide balance and contrast against the shorter note values at the original stem of the motif, but where the initial statement faded in dynamics this one increases to a sustained *fortissimo* throughout bar 7 before a rest of one beat and the third presentation of this motif in bar 8. On this third presentation the motif commences on the second beat, that is, without an upbeat, yet the semiquaver value of the first note is preserved. (This rhythmical displacement is further utilized in bars 47 and 48 but is yet again varied.) Bar 8 sees the motif rhythmically displaced to commence on the beat in contrast to the previous semiquaver upbeat. This is the first note of thematic material to be heard on a beat without an upbeat; it is not until bar 39 that thematic material commences on the downbeat with the first hearing of the repeated chord motif 5a, featured in Example 5. Despite supporting chords articulating the downbeats of bars 2 and 17, a sense of metre or pulse is greatly blurred through the avoidance of downbeats and whole beat articulations.

Depending on the listener, such minute motivic variations may or may not be apparent on the first listening of *North*, but what is apparent is the degree to which the work is unified, with continually present threads of familiarity in a constantly changing soundscape. This analysis displays how O'Connell achieves such cohesion: through smaller units rather than a longer memorable component simply being repeated.

***North*: Sibelius**

Sibelius's influence is not only musical, however, but also relates to issues of identity, in his position as a composer from northern Europe negotiating a path between nationalist political movements and the productive engagement with the central

<sup>12</sup> Helmholtz Pitch Notation is employed throughout this article with middle c being c', an octave higher being c'' and octave lower being c.

European artistic tradition, in the process laying claim to full membership of the exclusive club of 'European' composers.

Sibelius composed his *Symphony No. 4* during a difficult time with a number of distractions taking his attention away from his writing and causing periods of depression. Reflections on death had followed his recent operations to remove a tumour in his throat. He also faced huge financial difficulties and worried that, following his more classical *Symphony No. 3* (1907), his contemporaries saw his writing as outdated: 'With the third symphony he becomes more international, a "European-Classical" composer' (Tawaststjerna 1971). Following the 'national Romanticism' of his first two symphonies and then the classicism of the third, Sibelius considers (in his diary) 'A change of style?' before embarking on the fourth (Tawaststjerna 1986, 128). With a new style of course comes the risk of how it might be received. O'Connell might have identified with such a pressure of recognition, considering that upon leaving Northern Ireland he received a commission from the BBC. Finances also tend to be an issue in trying to succeed as a composer in Ireland, with many turning to alternative occupations such as teaching for a secure source of income.

At the time of composing this symphony, the political climate in Finland was still an annoyance to Sibelius, despite his withdrawal from political awareness; he expresses it as such in correspondence during the composition of *Symphony No. 4*: 'Politics can drive me to despair but have up to the present had little effect on my work. [...] I can't help matters or affect them in any way other than by continuing to compose "for King and Country".' (Tawaststjerna 1986, 144) This lack of direct engagement with the issue is evident through a response he gave in a newspaper interview in Norway when asked about the situation in Finland – where legislation had just been introduced so that all important matters involving Finnish affairs were to be decided in the Russian Duma. "Everything is fine. We dance, drink and make merry" – a response that raised a few eyebrows in Norway and in his own country!' (Tawaststjerna 1986, 144) He was obviously avoiding a true engagement with the issue. In another interview when Sibelius was asked if he thought that the understanding of music was related to one's ethnic origin, he answered affirmatively: 'But as far as inspiration is concerned, I think that nature and landscape play a greater part than national origins.' (Tawaststjerna 1986, 145)

An extra-musical programme for Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4* was proposed by critics following the première but Sibelius himself responded, in writing, in rejection of the idea: 'Your correspondent's assertions about a programme for my new symphony are quite inaccurate.' (Tawaststjerna 1986, 171) Despite this denial a link seems to be present considering his statement in relation to nature and landscape and the seeds of the work being planted whilst being immersed in the natural environment.<sup>13</sup> A similar debate is seen with O'Connell's statement that *North* is 'a title, not a description' (O'Connell 2010 [quoting Joe Kondo]) but the various norths that unfold in connection to his piece suggest otherwise.

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<sup>13</sup> More information on the debate surrounding the suggested programme of Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4* is available in Tawaststjerna 1986, 132, 170–171, 197.

The environments that these composers experienced may not be intentionally expressed in their music, but they are present. With O'Connell's familiarity with such political upheaval through growing up in the divided community and the Troubles of Northern Ireland, another connection between the composers emerges: both share issues of identity that arise from political situations. Sibelius was born when Finland was under the Russian rule that followed the centuries-long Swedish occupation. At this time Swedish was still the language of the upper class and a number of Sibelius's songs are in Swedish (Tawaststjerna 1986, 134). O'Connell grew up under a British education system and United Kingdom government in Northern Ireland (a young state established in 1920) but has lived in the Republic of Ireland for longer. Therefore their nationalities and musical influences are mixed, with Sibelius having Swedish-Finnish and Russian connections and O'Connell having Irish-British (McCay 2014).

Through O'Connell's motivic references to Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4* he not only infers the admiration he has for this piece and brings a European north into the equation to complement Heaney's north of Ireland, O'Connell also connects the circumstances surrounding its composition with both personal and political troubles leading to issues of identity. These issues relate to the recognition and acceptance of each composer's work by their audiences and contemporaries, as well as to issues of nationality which is consequently influential on their work – albeit without either composer taking a strong nationalist slant but rather through the extra-musical inferences in their pieces.

### **North: Identity**

The dilemma of being labelled Irish or British, without the consideration of Northern Irish, ignores the fact that through cultural and social experience, Northern Ireland is very different from both the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain.<sup>14</sup> This is considered in O'Connell's reference to Seamus Heaney through his composition *North*. In relation to the artist from Northern Ireland commenting on its political situation in their art, opinion on Heaney notes that

there was a sense in which the writers in Northern Ireland were expected to respond to the conflict in their work: 'a simple-minded pressure also to speak up for their own side' (Donnelly, 1977: 60), and clearly this pressure was felt by Heaney who said that it would 'wrench the rhythms' of his writing procedures to 'start squaring up to contemporary events with more will than ways to deal with them' (O'Brien 2005, 21).

In saying 'more will than ways to deal with them', Heaney acknowledges that the situation in Northern Ireland affected everyone, but it is in not knowing how to deal with it that creates the problem of addressing it. This relates to the popular music at the time of the Troubles with The Undertones creating escapism for their audience rather than a way of addressing the difficulties at hand. (Indeed, other popular music tried to

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<sup>14</sup> Note that the United Kingdom consists of Great Britain (which is England, Scotland and Wales) and Northern Ireland. The full name of the nation state is The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

address the situation but did not gain the following and popularity of *The Undertones*.) O'Connell's music could be seen to act in such a way, that without knowing how to deal with contemporary events, he immersed himself in music, following his dreams more intensely because it was perhaps easier than coping with what reality brought him.

The use of a non-generic title raises the question of to what O'Connell is referring. A venture down this path initially brings O'Connell's birthplace of Northern Ireland to mind. In an interview O'Connell was asked why he chose the title *North* and he mentioned Heaney's *North*; a collection of poems that was Heaney's first publication on leaving Northern Ireland.<sup>15</sup> O'Connell then found himself in the same situation, with a commission from the BBC, the broadcasting company of the place he had just left. O'Connell mentioned the two-part structure of Heaney's collection but said that this parallel was a later realization and not a conscious choice at the time of composition. His aim was simply to borrow the title (O'Connell 2010). This might have been O'Connell's intention, but the use of such a title cannot escape certain connotations, especially as it attaches this work to his birthplace of Northern Ireland. O'Connell's literary study of Heaney's work alongside his manipulation of a musical structure similar to this collection of poems strongly suggests that this particular title is more than just a title.

O'Connell's essay entitled 'Representing Violence: Irony, The Symbolic Order and Seamus Heaney's *North*' is prefaced with a quote from Heaney:

The two halves of the book constitute two different types of utterance, each of which arose out of necessity to shape and give palpable linguistic form to two kinds of urgency – one symbolic, one explicit. I don't know whether it succeeded, but I am pleased that it appeased and hardened out into words some complex need in me (Heaney 1987, 71 quoted in O'Connell 1993, 1).

This quotation is of greater value than is initially apparent in relation to O'Connell and his own work. Indeed the initial division of the book into two relates to that of O'Connell's *North*, but the second sentence seems somewhat redundant in relation to an assessment of the poetry; it rather informs the reader of Heaney's reaction to his work. The 'some complex need' in him was expressed through writing this work, and perhaps with O'Connell's same birthplace and similar upbringing, O'Connell can identify with this in his own *North*. As O'Connell states in the essay, '[t]he poet is not only gazing but has become aware of the gaze' (O'Connell 1993, 6).

O'Connell's essay is generally of a philosophical nature, referring to epistemology, Foucault, and Hegel, as well as Lacan's theory of the symbolic. He focuses heavily upon the term 'representation' and the ability of language to effectively represent 'violence':

The question then remains: what is language doing in the realm of violence?  
The inadequacy of language points to revenge as the only possible perpetuation

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<sup>15</sup> Heaney moved to the Republic of Ireland in 1972 and his collection of poems entitled *North* was published in 1975 by Faber and Faber.

of violence. This may be the very dynamic of revenge. [...] Violence, being linguistically irreducible, reduces us to tautology: the only language of violence is violence. (O'Connell 1993, 6)

A great deal of reflection is apparent from O'Connell's consideration of Heaney's work, making it a platform upon which he can voice such deliberations. Having read the context of O'Connell's upbringing in Northern Ireland, it is not surprising that such a topic grabs his attention. Further engagement with the statement above could be to assess the representation of violence in O'Connell's *North*, but as he has deemed this to be difficult to conclude from Heaney's work that has text, it would be quite tentative to approach his work with this objective as it is without text.<sup>16</sup> O'Connell's cautionary distance to contemporary events is similar to that of Sibelius.

The two parts of Heaney's collection are not of an equal length, like O'Connell's two ten-minute sections, but a clear divide is present. Unlike O'Connell, Heaney uses the medium of words to address specific subject matters, and his views on them, allowing readers to ascertain a clear divide in the content of the two parts of his collection. According to Eugene O'Brien the first part is 'broadly mythic in theme and tone' and the other deals 'with issues of a more contemporary nature' (O'Brien 2005, 32). Heaney's 'Part I', as he calls it, consists of poems using his personal 'digging' and 'bogland' motifs, referring to his birthplace in 'the North' of Ireland in County Derry where he grew up experiencing farm and country life (O'Brien 2005, 31). In 'Part II', Heaney turns his attention to more contemporary times, particularly of when this work was published in 1975. As Heaney stated in an interview with Denis O'Driscoll, 'they come out of the "matter of the North" of Ireland' (O'Driscoll 2008, 179). By this he is referring to what is now commonly called the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. In 1979 Heaney made the point that his leaving of Northern Ireland in 1972 was viewed in some quarters with a 'sense of almost betrayal', adding that the political situation had generated 'a great energy and group loyalty' as well as a 'defensiveness about its own verities' (O'Brien 2005, 16). This displays the underlying conflict between Northern and Southern Ireland. It is not simply a change of address, but moving between these areas results in a change of country and was interpreted as a political statement by some.

Given O'Connell's familiarity with Heaney's *North* and the intention of the two sections of his *North* being contrasting in character, the correlation between his *North* and Heaney's is strengthened. Another link between Heaney and O'Connell is the commissioned piece for string quartet on the occasion of Heaney's seventieth birthday in 2009, entitled 'Where Should This Music Be?' In the programme to RTÉ's 'Heaney at 70' celebrations O'Connell described Heaney as 'a beacon especially for anyone who, like him, grew up in Derry', highlighting the importance of this affiliation to O'Connell (RTÉ, 2009). The composer might attribute no particular significance to the title, but once again one can argue that the decisive use of such a title rather than a more generic functional title would suggest otherwise, especially when one takes into account

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<sup>16</sup> Literary assessments of Heaney's *North* that O'Connell referred to for this essay include Longley 1979, Longley 1985, and Morrison 1982.

the biographical facts of O'Connell's relationship with this place and his close engagement with Heaney's work.

Heaney's influence on O'Connell's *North* thus goes beyond the title, and it might also be responsible for the structure of the work. These associations also evoke a further connection of O'Connell's *North* to his birthplace of Northern Ireland. Heaney's contrasting angles on the theme of north, however, together with O'Connell's reference to another north bring an alternative perspective to the piece. This alternative supports the idea of two 'norths' and so is in keeping with Heaney's presentation of the theme.

Similarly, in an essay by Seamus Deane (poet, novelist, and professor of Irish studies who is also from Derry), entitled 'The Artist and the Troubles', he opens with a discussion on the impact of a crisis on the artist: 'Artists can often be more troubled by the idea that they should be troubled by a crisis than they are by the crisis itself.' (Deane 1984, 42) The essay offers both general and specific references to the visual and literary artists of Ireland during the twentieth century, with some assessment on the development of 'A new Ireland or a new idea of Ireland' being 'created by artists and politicians, military leaders and poets' (Deane 1984, 42). His discussion of the artist in Northern Ireland, however, is more related to this article:

The Northern troubles have developed in a world in which the anti-imperialist ethos has weakened and been replaced by an anxiety to preserve established institutions and systems, precisely because they appeared to have reached a point of exhaustion which it was terrifying to contemplate. (Deane 1984, 43)

Deane's conclusion is that despite the artist of Northern Ireland not engaging with the same 'heroic commitments of the past, it is none the less a dedication to the idea that an [artist] has a function in society even though it may not be as consolatory as the society would like it to be' (Deane 1984, 49). Artists have perhaps not felt as willing or able to engage as directly with the Troubles, as for example their counterparts did during the formation of the 'new state' in the Republic, but in considering that even today, more than thirty years after Deane's essay was written, the peace in Northern Ireland is not stable, there is perhaps good reason for their reluctance.

The issue of identity for the artist in Northern Ireland is also raised in Deane's essay: 'Ulster's peculiar fate - to be neither Irish nor British while also being both - gave to its regional art a characteristic blend of stridency and indecision which ominously prefigured the regional politics of later decades.' (Deane 1984, 44-45) His reference to Ulster, as an alternative to Irish or British, resonates with O'Connell's similar separation, as does the idea of this region's art being different.

## **Conclusion**

The deliberations of the musical analysis, in conjunction with the cultural issues and their significance, address influences upon a Northern-Irish-born composer and his work *North*. The manipulation of the motif from Sibelius's *Symphony No. 4* and the manner in which it was processed highlight the significance of this composer on the young O'Connell's developing compositional style. Furthermore, the political and



geographical circumstances in these countries at the time of both pieces' composition strengthen their parallels. Finally, the title brings inferences to O'Connell's birthplace as well as to the European north with which he associates.

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