

Potter, Archibald James ('Archie')

by Bridget Hourican

Potter, Archibald James ('Archie') (1918–80), composer, was born 22 September 1918 in Belfast, youngest among seven children of Arthur George Potter, piano tuner and sometime organist with Fisherwick presbyterian church, and his wife. Although the Potters were presbyterians, Archie (as he was called) was born on the largely catholic Falls Road. His childhood was wretched; in later life he summed up its privations: 'My father was blind, but he was also a complete bloody fool . . . my mother was a raving alcoholic . . . The form her alcoholism took was sadism. And she liked knocking the kids about' (*Éire–Ireland*, 116). Social workers were apparently called to the family home but did nothing; Archie escaped when he was taken out of the national school on Ballynafie Road, Ballymena, aged 10, and sent to his father's sister in London. Both parents died when he was in his mid teens, and he later commented, with regard to their deaths, on the relief of 'knowing that you were safe. Life has never since been quite as bad as it was then' (*ibid.*, 120).

His aunt taught singing, though without qualifications, and she coached him for entry to the choir school at the high All Saints church, Margaret St., London, where he studied (1929–33) on a scholarship. It was one of the world's leading anglican choirs, but the atmosphere was brutal, with the boys frequently flogged; however, the school helped with his tuition fees for Clifton College, Bristol, where he proceeded on an organ scholarship. Potter felt later that he should have concentrated on composition in Clifton rather than the organ, since he felt he could not play fast enough to be any good, but he had sufficient talent to get a place at the Royal College of Music (1936–8), where he studied composition under Vaughan Williams, and won the Cobbett prize for chamber music.

On leaving school he could get no employment in music, so worked for a time with London fruit merchants, and as a travelling salesman. While living with an Italian family in Soho, he got jobs playing the piano in restaurants and bars. His old school, All Saints, then secured him a job in Hamlyn's, an optical lens factory. When war broke out, he tried to get into the French Foreign Legion and the British army as a bandsman. He was told he had a weak heart, due to a bout of scarlet fever, but was eventually accepted into the Territorials. He served with the London Irish Rifles in Norway and with the Indian army in Burma and Java. When the war ended he got a job with Unilever in West Africa, but after three years decided to return to music. He studied singing at the Birmingham College of Music, and c.1951 joined the choir of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, as a bass-baritone. The salary was small but he wanted to return to Ireland, and spent the rest of his life in Dublin. Of his time in England he remarked: 'I'm an Irishman. I got a far better musical education than anybody else on this island has got. In return, I gave them six years of my life. We're all square' (*Éire–Ireland*, 126).

He remained with St Patrick's for three-and-a-half years, but found it undisciplined and lax compared to choirs in England. He was beginning to be known for his compositions, and received the Feis Ceoil prizes for chamber music (1950, 1951), the Oireachtas prize for chamber music (1951), and the Festival of Britain Northern Ireland prize for choral works (1951) for his 'Missa Brevis'. After approaching RTÉ he was invited to make arrangements for folk songs and other works. One of his first arrangements, 'Variations on a popular tune ['The wild colonial boy']' was termed, by Axel Klein, the first Irish composition to use a twelve-note scale. By 1962 he had made about 1,500 arrangements, from orchestral to harp solo. His own composition 'Rhapsody under a high sky' (performed 17 June 1952) showed the influence of Vaughan Williams's pastoral style and was lively and accessible. It won Potter a Carolan prize from Radio Éireann in 1952 (in 1979 it was used for a documentary on Paul Henry (qv)). In 1953 he won another Carolan prize for 'Concerto da Chiesa', and was awarded his doctorate in music from Dublin University. Two years later (1955) he was made professor of composition and allied subjects at the Royal Irish Academy of Music, and held this post till 1973.

As teacher he was energetic and generous, with an ability to draw the best from students without forcing any particular style on them. As a result his students, who included Brian Beckett, and John Gibson, had notably different compositional styles. As composer he was prolific; his eclectic approach encompassed a wide range of techniques, used to suit the style of a work to its purpose. He had a well-founded reputation for professionalism, and never got carried away with a commission; he delivered on deadline and did not extend the range beyond what was asked for. Practical and a determined realist, he knew the economic, financial, legal, and organisational realities of getting a musical project off the ground, and adopted a cautious approach. This, together with his caustic demeanour, saw him accused occasionally of cynicism, but his pragmatism meant he was a brilliant administrator.

Potter had a long face with a wide brow, large round spectacles, and a wry, mournful expression. Though he described himself as religious, he gave up Christianity, and was also against set political attitudes. Called 'an extraordinary mixture of brashness, sense, cynicism, sheer entertainment, and understanding' (*Ir. Times*, 7 July 1980), he antagonised some, but many who dealt with him came to appreciate his sensitivity, concern for justice, humour, and honesty. He once crossed the room to the composer George D. Hodnett (1918–90) to shake his hand warmly and tell him how bloody awful his music was. When he had given time or trouble to someone, 'he nearly kicked them in the teeth to avoid being thanked' (*Ir. Times*, 11 July 1980), but he himself habitually wrote to thank musicians for their performances of his work.

His overt skills were in orchestration, evoking atmosphere, and humour. He wanted his music to reflect his country and felt that in Ireland black humour was always side by side with serious things. His opera 'Patrick' (screened on St Patrick's day 1965), about an Irish labourer in Birmingham, was commissioned by RTÉ to a libretto by

Donagh MacDonagh (qv). Potter tailored his music to MacDonagh's words, and in answer to criticism said that you had to run the risk of being considered sentimental and vulgar. It was characteristic that he made the saint a navvy. His own favourite among his works was the ballet 'Careless love' (1961), one of four he composed for Joan Denise Moriarty (qv) and the National Ballet, but the work that has received most critical acclaim is his 'Sinfonia de profundis', performed March 1969 at the Gaiety Theatre by the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra. The *Irish Times* (24 Mar. 1969) noted its rousing reception and called the event the most important musical first night in Dublin since Handel's (qv) 'Messiah'. The piece dealt with alcoholism and was written after a stint in St John of God Hospital, which helped Potter to stay 'dry' for seven years; but his return to drink was a factor in his unexpected and relatively early death, aged 61, at home in Greystones, Co. Wicklow, on 5 July 1980. He was survived by his fiancée, Sarah Burn, and buried in Redfern cemetery. His opera 'The wedding' received its first public performance in Dublin a year after his death. Many of his major works were re-recorded twenty years later, at the start of the new millennium.

Potter was wont to turn his caustic humour on himself, writing to a friend: 'My own compositions are respectably mediocre, modern enough not to be stigmatised as "academic" but not too avant-garde for the performers not to know whether they are on the right note or not' (quoted in Pine, 249). Critics have been kinder: Richard Pine has called the 'Sinfonia', 'Rhapsody under a high sky', and 'The wedding' works of outstanding achievement on an international scale. Assessing Potter's character, Charles Acton (qv) felt that 'under the tough, astringent coating there is a soft centre, of idealism, of love for his neighbour, of love of music. Come to think of it, that rather describes his music too' (*Éire–Ireland*, 139).

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*Ir. Times*, 23 Feb. 1952, 24 Mar. 1969, 7, 10, 11 July 1980; Charles Acton, 'Interview with A. J. Potter', *Éire–Ireland*, ii (summer 1970), 115–40; Edgar M. Deale, *A catalogue of contemporary Irish composers* (1973); *Ir. Independent*, 11 Aug. 1981; *The new Grove dictionary of music and musicians*, xx (2001); Gareth Cox and Axel Klein, *Irish music in the twentieth century* (2003); Richard Pine, *Music and broadcasting in Ireland* (2005)