

The Story of Mary O'Neill

A Radio Opera for seventeen voices

Sally McInerney (libretto)

Nicola LeFanu (music)

The Story of Mary O'Neill is composed entirely for voices. The part of Mary is sung throughout by a solo soprano; the other voices form a 16 part SATB choir and are used in a number of ways: as soloists taking the parts of individual characters, as members of a community, as narrators, or 'abstractly', as the vocal equivalent of an instrumental ensemble. The opera uses its voices in all their aspects: reading, speaking, chanting, and many kinds of singing. It lasts an hour and a quarter; it was commissioned for the BBC Singers by BBC Radio 3 and is designed for radiophonic transmission, though it has also been successfully staged.

The opera is in three parts; beginning in the nineteenth century and ending in the present, it follows the fortunes of Mary, an Irishwoman, and her descendants.

Part 1 is set in Ireland in 1860, when Mary is a young girl. Poverty after the famine is forcing the O'Neill family to emigrate to South America. Mary says farewell to her grandparents as she prepares to embark with her brother Colin and her widower father Sean.

Part 2 takes place twelve years later in the remote province of Corrientes, in Argentina. Mary is now Maria, a woman caught between two worlds: that of the native 'Indians', and that of the colonial community, people like the English woman Sarah, whose voice opens the scene. Sarah hopes to 'rescue' Maria but her well-intentioned charity is rejected: Maria has an Indian husband and twin sons, and has no wish to return to the 'civilisation' which for her is a memory of deprivation and loss.

Part 3 is in the same Argentinian province, between 1905, the year Mary dies, and now. It opens with a lament for Mary's death, follows the lives of her twin sons Pedro and Teca, and closes as we hear the voice of one of her descendants, another Maria, singing from a shanty town of the present day.

Through the voices of an adventurer, a missionary and an anthropologist we glimpse the passing twentieth century: Pedro trying unsuccessfully to make his way in the city, while Teca clings to a vanishing way of life.

At the close, Mary's voice is heard over the voice of her great-great grand-daughter: 'my dowry was famine, love, exile, dreams...'

Through Mary's story I wanted to illumine the lives of those who, dispossessed, belong in two worlds and are at home in neither. It is a story of affirmation as well as loss: a story repeated countless times as indigenous people try to pick their way out of an imposed colonial past.

In the music I did not wish to be literal in conjuring up past times or peoples, so there is no appropriated traditional music. Instead, for example, I used Guarani tree-names to create a 'forest music' for the 'exotic' world so feared by Sarah, the Victorian Englishwoman, but so relished by the intrepid Mary O'Neill. I tried to capture those things which people share across time and place: wonder, affection, grief, memory.

'The opera is passionate and polemical but never strident. The solo writing is rich in lyrical melismas and set imaginatively over a background supplied entirely by a 16 voice choir. This choral texture ranges from the complex polyphonic lament of the Irish leave-taking to a marvellously vivid evocation of forest sounds.' (The Times)

'A highly original opera for radio.. The story, and even more its setting, exert a powerful sense of place, of feeling and of character through the most economical means, both verbal and musical'. (Daily Telegraph)

Nicola LeFanu (b.1947) has composed over sixty works which have been performed and broadcast world-wide; many are available on CD. She has written for a wide variety of instrumental and vocal media, including six operas: *Dawnpath* (New Opera Company 1977), *The Story of Mary O'Neill* (BBC, 1987), *The Green Children* (Kings Lynn Festival, 1990), *Blood Wedding* (WPT, 1992) *The Wildman* (Aldeburgh Festival, 1995) and most recently *Light Passing* (BBC and NCEM York, 2004). *Light Passing* was an acclaimed and sell-out success:

'a welcome and absorbing addition to Britain's post-Britten chamber operas...it has the equipment to entertain and illuminate for years to come' (The Times)

'an opera that challenges and satisfies in equal measure' (Opera).