

Report on Waterford Healing Arts Trust arts residency June – December 2018.

In June 2018 a notice appeared in the local press in Waterford inviting composers and writers to apply for a joint arts residency of six months at University Hospital Waterford. Waterford Healing Arts Trust (WHAT) had a well established record of using mainly visual artists but now wished, as part of WHAT's 25th anniversary, to expand the project to include other creative art forms. After discussions with writer Edward Denniston we submitted a joint proposal which included the following aspiration

“Our residency (would begin) with a series of interviews with patients to see if they might contribute a song, poem or similar matter from their ‘stored memory’. The resulting material (that we gathered) would form the basis of a series of poems by Edward Denniston that I would subsequently set to music for four-part choir with piano accompaniment. This suite of five choral movements we would alternate with four ‘Interludes’ on prerecorded tape that used some of the contributions from patients together with various ‘hospital voices’ such as staff announcements, information to visitors and interviews with various members of the hospital staff.”

During my composing life I had always set music by various writers such as Shakespeare, Christina Rossetti, A.E. Houseman and Hardy – (eg -Songs of Love and Death 2017) together with many works by Irish writers: for example James Joyce – (Four Joyce Songs 1970) and an operatic adaptation of his massive novel Ulysses (2015), Padraic Colum –(The Moon-Cradle 1995), Francis Ledwidge – (The Wild Sky 1975) etc. together with settings of living Irish writers such as Ulick O'Connor – (Deirdre 1989), John Ennis – (Deise Dei 1998), Anne Farrell – (Niamh of the Golden Hair), Mark Roper – (the operas The Invader (2013) and The Green One (2014) and I relished the idea of working with Edward Denniston whose poetry I had read and admired for many years. I had found that an existing text offered suggestions as to the mood, shape, rhythm and structure of the music, as the 17th century Italian composer Monteverdi counseled “*Prima le parole, poi la musica*” (first the words, then the music).

We had little idea of what, if any, contributions from patients might yield but subsequently ‘harvested’ a number of contributions that we thought might be fruitful. WHAT put at our disposal a studio with a digital keyboard plus recording equipment and (what turned out to be most valuable) access to the staff kitchen and unlimited coffee!

One possible starting point for the project we discussed was Gavin Bryars’ CD ‘Jesus’ blood never failed me yet’ in which contributions from a ‘down and out’ tramp recorded on loop tape yielded one of the most fascinatingly original ‘compositions’ of its time.

In recording contributions from patients we were conscious of respecting the privacy, dignity and vulnerability of people, many of whom had serious illnesses, but also of not intruding too much on busy wards. However we found that staff at UHW were unfailingly cooperative and helpful which made our job much easier.

Edward's cycle of poems centered on different aspects of hospital care such as **Hands**, a reflection on 'the healing touch', **Grief** which explored different approaches to grieving, **Let us presume**, which examined 'this healing art of cure' and **The Fine Matter of Cure**, (the only fast movement) which 'dares to become the most becoming gown of all'. To these four movements we later added a short semi-improvised **Prelude** in which groups of singers would gradually enter the concert venue while singing unaccompanied fragments of vowel sounds which gradually coalesced into a short introductory chorus. These five choral movements alternated with four pre-recorded tape inserts as described above.

The premiere of Hospital Voices took place on 6th December in the chapel of UHW and was performed by Madrigallery Chamber Choir conducted by Kevin O'Carroll and accompanied by Siobhain Keappock and received a standing ovation from the capacity audience.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the following, all of whom were unfailingly cooperative, understanding and supportive of our project in every way

To Claire Meaney, Acting Arts Director, Waterford Healing Arts Trust,

To Maeve Butler, Acting Assistant Arts Director, Waterford Healing Arts Trust,

To Anne Woodworth, Chair, Waterford Healing Arts Trust,

and to all the nursing staff, doctors and administrators at University Hospital, Waterford.

To have worked closely with those who were unfailingly positive and encouraging was both a humbling and an inspiring experience as we witnessed the compassion and dedication of staff dealing with those facing major life crisis with astonishing courage and fortitude. However, to so many of those we met, every day was a triumphant celebration of survival.

It is our hope that, in some small way, we may have contributed something positive by the offerings of our art.

Eric Sweeney, December 2018.