



**THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY OF IRISH
MUSICAL
SOCIETIES, 1890-1990**

by

ALICE HUGHES

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND, MAYNOOTH**

HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: Dr Jacinta Prunty

Supervisors of research:

John Bradley, M.A., Dr Jennifer Kelly, Professor Jacqueline Hill

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Preface

A brief explanation as to why the author took up the research for this thesis. She grew up in a family that on both sides was enamoured of musical theatre. Singing round the piano, with excerpts from operettas and musicals, was a regular occurrence. The author took part in her first school musical at Loreto College, Crumlin Road, Dublin, in a production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*. She subsequently enrolled in Loreto Commercial College, Crumlin Road, Dublin, where in 1962 a past-pupils' musical society was formed, offering opportunities for participation. In 1965 this musical society became a founder member of the newly formed Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS), and in 1973 the author became its librarian and information officer. She was elected as a national councillor for the association, a position she held until 1992. Together with other councillors, she visited newly formed societies, and saw at first hand the beneficial effects of a musical society on a local community. This was particularly noticeable in Northern Ireland, which was then entering the period of civil unrest known as 'the Troubles. In some cases, loyalist and nationalist societies (or 'companies' as they are more often known in the North) came together to perform concerts. Subsequently the author, whose own employment background was with Independent News and Media, became the national public relations officer for AIMS from 1992 until her retirement from AIMS in 2006. It was in this capacity that she discovered how difficult it could be to obtain coverage of amateur musical theatre in the national press, although local and regional coverage was rather better.

As a student in NUI Maynooth, the author discovered that the topic of amateur musical theatre in Ireland had received little academic study, and was advised that it would be a suitable subject for research.

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Thanks are also due to Dr Mary Clark for her willingness to take into the custody of the Dublin City Library and Archive of the AIMS material in my possession.

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Introduction

This study examines the development of amateur musical societies across the island of Ireland from the period after World War II down to 1990. Amateur musical societies have been active throughout this island since the late 1880s, and by the 1990s active membership was in the region of 20,000. They produce musicals, concerts, plays and pantomime to audiences of 300,000 annually. Since the beginning of the twentieth century musical societies have played a significant part in Irish communal, social and cultural life, and many are also philanthropic organisations. Despite these activities they have received little scholarly attention. A comment made in the British context is even more appropriate to Ireland: ‘All this music-making has been regarded not just as inaudible but invisible.’¹ This study will examine the origins of these societies, concentrating on their development in the post World War II period, some reasons why people joined them, and their social and cultural impact. Particular attention will be paid to the setting up in 1965 of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS), the Irish counterpart of the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA), first established in 1899, which represents musical societies in the United Kingdom.² AIMS exists to provide for Irish amateurs the same sort of support and services offered by NODA. Both in Britain and Ireland, amateur societies are divided into regions for administrative purposes. In Ireland there are six regions, in the United Kingdom there are eleven.

Many people experience live theatre for the first time at the local musical or at the pantomimes produced by the society. The following, written in the British context, is also relevant to Ireland:

Local music-making in whatever form is not just a matter of musical works encapsulated in musicians’ memories or in written scores...but more centrally the active practice of local people...above all the performance of music by local

¹ John Lowerson, *Amateur operatics: a social and cultural history* (Manchester & New York, 2005), p. 171

² www.aims.ie, accessed 11 April 2014; John N. Young, *A century of service: The National Operatic and Dramatic Association* (London, 1999), pp 4-5.

people. More detailed consideration is needed of the varied performance conventions of differing musical worlds.³

The production of a musical entails considerable organisation if it is to succeed. It must involve a whole series of participants working in a coordinated fashion within specific conventions, resulting in a special performance for the local area.⁴ These attributes are typical of the many amateur societies in the island of Ireland.

Music has been used as a way of enhancing theatrical narrative since classical times, of which Denny Martin Flinn has noted, ‘musical comedy inherited spectacle and numerous technical achievements from this austere, mechanical, and jaded society.’⁵ In the Middle Ages, there was a tradition of religious dramas and mystery plays, set to church chants, developing into a type of autonomous theatre. During the Renaissance the Italian tradition of *commedia dell’arte* developed, but music was rarely involved. During the reign of Louis XIV (1638 -1715), the French composer Jean-Baptiste Lully composed music as an adjunct to the plays of Molière in the late seventeenth century.⁶ English composer John Gay wrote what is commonly known as the first ‘ballad opera’ in 1728 called *The beggar’s opera*, a tale of prostitutes, pimps and highwaymen among the criminal element in London. Gay augmented the piece with a number of borrowed, popular songs such as *Over the hills and far away*. German composer Kurt Weill adapted *The beggar’s opera* into a socialist diatribe against capitalism in 1928, as *The threepenny opera (Die dreigroschenoper)*, with new dialogue by Bertolt Brecht.⁷ Opera which originated in the late sixteenth century led to grand opera in the nineteenth century. As will be discussed in chapter 2, the comic operas of Gilbert & Sullivan appeared in the latter half of the nineteenth century and had a direct influence on the formation of what became the amateur operatic movement. Throughout the English speaking, colonial world, amateur musical theatre played a significant role in India, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the West Indies

³ Ruth Finnegan, *The hidden musicians: music making in an English town* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 143.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Denny Martin Flinn, *Musical! a grand tour: the rise, glory and fall of an American institution* (New York, 1997), p. 22.

⁶ Richard H. Hoppin, *Medieval music* (New York, 1978), pp 180-1.

⁷Website of *The three penny opera*: www.threepennyopera.org (accessed 13 April 2014).

and in the United States of America: in fact in any place previously under British colonial rule, since the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁸

The word 'amateur' in relation to theatre is taken from the word *amatores* meaning 'to love,' from old French and ultimately from Latin, which means, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* 'A person who engages in a pursuit, especially a sport, on an unpaid basis'.⁹ That dictionary defines musical theatre as 'a combination of music and drama in modern form distinct from traditional opera, typically for a small group of performers'.¹⁰ Another somewhat limited but passable definition is by musical theatre historian John Kenrick, 'a musical is defined as a stage, television or film production utilizing...songs to ... tell a story ...with dialogue optional'.¹¹

The world of musical theatre is inhabited by both amateur and professional performers. In the context of musical theatre and drama, an amateur is one who performs on stage in a play or musical simply out of a love of acting, singing, dancing and involvement in a performance. No monetary compensation is sought or given to the performers, be they actors, dancers or chorus members. Only in the latter part of the period considered here were any members paid: the production team and technical personnel, and in some cases, soloists. In certain cases directors might be a member of the group and work without payment, though this might change as they gained experience, or were sought by another group. But it is important to note that no less a personage than musical theater producer Sir Cameron Mackintosh gave his view that 'one of the reasons why musical theatre thrives in this country [Britain] is thanks to the back bone of interest engendered by amateur companies.'¹²

There has occasionally been an uneasy relationship between the amateur and the professional theatre. Dublin-born actress Glynis Casson, daughter of Gate Theatre actor Christopher Casson, granddaughter of Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson, often

⁸ John Lowerson, *Amateur operatics*, p. 217

⁹ <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/amateur> (accessed 28 March 2014).

¹⁰ Definition of musical theatre. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/music-theatre> (accessed 29 May 2014).

¹¹ John Kenrick, *Musical theatre: a history* (New York & London, 2007), p.14.

¹² Young, *A century of service*, p. vii.

quotes her late mother, a professional theatrical designer, who steadfastly refused to attend any amateur production that Glynis took part in, as she felt that ‘you are taking the bread from the mouth of the profession.’¹³ There has been at various times a degree of animosity between amateurs and professionals in Ireland and elsewhere. Professional baritone Austin Gaffney in a conversation with the author stated that he was often derided by other professional singers for playing leading roles in amateur productions. A retired singer, who wished to remain anonymous, said he would rather starve than take part in an amateur show.

Sources for this study

The shortage of secondary works on this topic has been a difficulty. The British context is better served than the Irish, with a particularly useful account being John Lowerson, *Amateur operatics: a social and cultural history* (Manchester & New York, 2005). NODA, the British forerunner of AIMS, which provides support for United Kingdom amateur musical societies, is discussed in the book by John N. Young, *A century of service: the National Operatic and Dramatic Association* (London, 1999). The history of music in general in Ireland is provided in such works as Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland: a symposium* (Cork, 1952), as well as in chapters by Joseph Ryan, ‘Music in independent Ireland since 1921’, and Roy Johnston, ‘Music in Northern Ireland since 1921’, both in J. R. Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland* vii, *Ireland 1921-1984* (Oxford, 2003), pp 621-48, 650-70. There are a number of histories of individual Irish societies, such as Noel Dundon, *From page to stage: a history of Thurles Musical Society* (Thurles, 2011), and Myles Dungan, *If you want to know who we are: the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society, 1913-2013* (Dublin, 2013). Many other societies now possess websites that in certain cases provide some history of the society. The history of the musical is considered in such works as John Bush Jones, *Our musicals, ourselves: a social history of the American musical theatre* (Hanover & London, 2003), and Stanley Green, *The world of musical comedy* (3rd ed., New York, 1974).

¹³ Interview with Glynis Casson, former amateur, now professional actress, 2 July 2011.

For primary sources, gleaning information on musical societies in Ireland has been quite difficult. A valuable source of information can be found in the programmes of societies, where available, as they sometimes include biographical details of the cast and production team, and the sponsors and advertisers who support the society. From the early 1900s, local newspaper archives also provided photographs, local colour and further insights, including reviews of productions, and names of dignitaries who attended.¹⁴ Little archival information was available on the reasons why such groups were founded, who joined and why, as quite a number of minutes or early records had been lost or discarded, or burnt to clear out the attic. Local journals and periodicals provided fascinating insights into the Ireland of the time, including other voluntary organisations in the area and their interaction with musical societies whose members tended to be involved in other organisations.¹⁵ The time period between 1945 and 1965 was notably sparse in information terms in respect of why such groups were founded, and while committee members were mentioned in some sources, there was no information on their social background. To rectify this gap in information, interviews were conducted with a number of persons involved in musical theatre in the post-World War II era. Following lengthy negotiations with former and present members, initial caution was gradually eroded and most interviewees were forthcoming and enthusiastic participants. The appearance of a recorder caused considerable reticence in some quarters, which sometimes took some time to overcome. As many of those interviewed were formerly performers, the audience of one often proved irresistible.¹⁶ Many of those who participated were elderly and pleased to be involved or even remembered. Quite a number flatly refused to be recorded, due in part to recent controversy concerning the recordings made by researchers from Boston College about the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland,¹⁷ however improbable it may seem that a recording of innocuous memories of their life in a local society would be a source of concern. Others preferred to remain anonymous. As in many other activities, the idealism that resulted in the formation of the groups sometimes diminished in the face of marriage,

¹⁴ See, e.g., *Wexford Free Press*, 4 & 28 Nov. 1911; *Westmeath Independent*, 4 May 1902.

¹⁵ Interview with Mary Butler, school principal and chairperson of Thurles Musical Society, regarding her father, Martin, founder member of the society, 23 Aug. 2013.

¹⁷ See <http://bostoncollegesubpoena.wordpress.com/> (accessed 30 June 2014).

children and work commitments, but most interviewees were vocal in their love and support of their society that remained with them always, whether involved actively or not.¹⁸ Some groups made some original minutes available, but most guarded this documentation as though it was a matter of national security. Only two groups would allow access to their financial records. From the early 1970s, AIMS produced a monthly magazine, the *AIMS Bulletin*, containing information on musicals, personnel and various events, and these publications were a valuable primary source of further information. Records of AIMS itself, held in the homes of various officers and former officers, are in the process of being located in the Dublin City Library and Archive in Pearse Street, Dublin. Some of these have been available to the author.¹⁹

As mentioned in the Preface, the author was the national public relations officer for AIMS for fourteen years, and became aware of the difficulties encountered in attempts to publicise amateur musical theatre in the national press. From the founding of AIMS in 1965 to the mid-1980s there was some coverage of AIMS in the *Irish Independent*, the *Irish Press*, and the *Evening Herald* (where Terry O’Sullivan was particularly helpful). Mary McGoris of the *Irish Times* reviewed productions of the Glasnevin Musical Society, as well as those of the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society when they were staged in Dublin’s Gaiety or Olympia Theatres. The major provincial papers, including the *Nenagh Guardian*, the *Westmeath Independent*, the *Wexford Free Press*, and the *Wexford People*, regularly covered the activities of their local society, particularly when they were nominated for, or won an AIMS Award. The two main newspapers in Northern Ireland, the *Belfast Telegraph* and *Irish News* were always amenable to publishing items of interest about northern societies, particularly when their local societies won awards, and local newspapers such as the *Bangor Echo* and the *Coleraine Times*, the *Donegal Democrat*, the *Lurgan Echo* and others publicised the work of local groups.

What this thesis will hopefully bring to light is the extent and variety of musical societies in Ireland, particularly in the period from 1945 to 1990. It will consider the

¹⁸ Interviews with Brian O’Neill, 19 April 2013, Eddie Cummins, 3 March 2013, Richard Lavery, 9 Feb., 5 April 2014, all past or current members of St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast.

¹⁹ *AIMS Bulletin*, 1966-90 (Dublin, 1969-).

connection of societies with other groups as part of the associational world, and the extent to which such interaction was mutually beneficial. Trends in production costs, the efforts required of the cast and members to produce a yearly musical, and the effect of this live show on the local community will be considered, and how such productions provided benefits for the local economy. The influence of schools, the church, and musical theatre dynasties comes under review. The role of AIMS and its effect on the affairs of member societies will be considered. The founding of a northern region of the association during the period of conflict known as the 'Troubles' is an important part of the thesis. Overall, the thesis will attempt to show why the doings of the thousands of people who have been members of musical societies and companies should merit inclusion in Irish social, cultural and other histories.

Chapter 1 will look at the earliest history of amateur musical societies, and chapter 2 will consider production trends and the emergence of what became known as the 'musical'. Chapter 3 examines the social history and background of these societies, while chapter 4 focuses on the formation of AIMS in the 1960s. Finally, chapter 5 will examine the formation of the northern region of AIMS in 1974 against the background of the 'Troubles'.

Chapter 1

Amateur Musical Societies in Ireland before 1945

This chapter examines the emergence of amateur musical societies in Ireland in the period down to 1945. Such societies had their origins in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and were dedicated to staging what would become known simply as ‘musicals’ – that is, productions combining songs, speech, acting, and dance. It will be useful to give a brief account of the development of what has become known as ‘the musical’, from its inception in Italian opera buffa to the form that is familiar today. The comic opera which developed from the works of Offenbach was a significant factor in the formation of what is now the amateur musical society. However, the musical society as it presently exists can be traced back to the music societies of the seventeenth and eighteenth century followed by the choral societies and choirs of the latter part of the nineteenth century. As the Victorian era drew to a close, a number of the drawing room soirees and concert groups of the nineteenth century became the fledgling musical societies of the 1890s and thence the amateur musical societies of the twentieth century.

Early clubs, societies and associations

From the latter part of the seventeenth century a plethora of voluntary clubs, societies and associations were formed in Britain and Ireland. In London and Dublin there was ‘an infinity of clubs or societies for the improvement of learning and keeping up good humour and mirth’.¹ These clubs, societies and associations borrowed ideas and practices from the trade guilds, which resulted in new types of socialising. They were primarily urban-based, reaching outward from cities to towns and villages. Encouraged by the end of censorship and the growth of political pluralism, the years after the Civil War in England saw the growth of scientific and philosophical societies,

¹Peter Clark, *British clubs and societies 1580-1800: the origins of an associational world* (Oxford, 2000), p. 3.

country, political, social, benefit, literary, music societies and clubs.² These new forms of institutions began in the late seventeenth century in Britain and moved from there to overseas colonies including America. Where London led Dublin followed and from the late Stuart period Dublin claimed a growing concentration of associations on the London model. The associational world of clubs and societies also became a feature of Irish social life. As in England, they included moral and reform clubs, benefit and charitable societies, arts and music clubs, freemasons, sporting, and of course, political clubs.³ From the 1700s onwards Irish aristocracy and gentry encouraged and patronised the arts, which were regarded as ‘an essential decoration of elegant living’.⁴ One of the areas of improvement was in the world of music and art. There was a very large range of clubs and societies of all kinds in Britain and Ireland by the late eighteenth century. Precise numbers are impossible to calculate but during the eighteenth century there may have been 21,000 different clubs and societies meeting in the English-speaking world. Music clubs had met intermittently in London since the 1650s and the first concert was organised in London in 1683 on the feast of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music.⁵

Dublin would play an important part in the evolution of musical societies. The population of Dublin increased between 1700 and 1760, from nearly 60,000 to about 140,000.⁶ Despite its location on the edge of Europe, Dublin gained a reputation as a centre of the arts, particularly the astonishing amount of musical activity relative to its size.⁷ Such music societies included the Charitable Musical Society for the Relief of Imprisoned Debtors, dating from the 1710s; the Philharmonic Society (1741); the Musical Academy in Crow Street, the Charitable Musical Society for the Relief of Distressed Families, and the Charitable Musical Society for the Support of the Hospital for Incurables, which organized most of their benefits at Crowe Street.⁸ So great was the extent of musical activity in this period that some clashing of dates was inevitable. In *Faulkner's Dublin Journal* of 11-14 February 1743 there appears a complaint by Dr. Thomas Arne in which he refers to the difficulty of finding any suitable night for his concert. ‘Mondays and Thursdays are taken up with benefits.’ For six weeks ‘all the best hands’ were taken up, on Tuesdays at the Vicar's

²Ibid., p. 26.

³ Ibid., pp 2-3.

⁴ Brian Boydell, *Rotunda music in eighteenth-century Dublin* (Dublin, 1992), p. 16.

⁵ Clark, *British clubs and societies*, pp 2-6.

⁶ Patrick Fagan, ‘The population of Dublin in the eighteenth century’, in *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, vi, (1991), pp 121-56.

⁷ Jennifer O’Connell, ‘The role of women in Dublin in nineteenth century music’, Ph.D. thesis (NUI Maynooth, 2010), p. 19.

⁸ Gary A. Boyd, *Dublin, 1745-1922: Hospitals, spectacle and vice* (Dublin, 2005), p.14 and passim.

Street concerts and at The Bear on College Green, on Wednesdays at the Philharmonic Society and at Crow Street, and on Fridays at the Fishamble Street concerts.⁹ Many of these music societies were involved in fundraising for the voluntary hospitals in the city, and the first performance of Handel's *Messiah* in April 1742, for Mercer's Hospital, was organized by the Philharmonic Society.¹⁰ The aristocracy, such as Lord Mornington, patronized many of these societies and the viceroy of the time attended the performances, lending them a social cachet.¹¹ One viceroy, Lord Halifax (1761-2), while complaining that 'assembly night was dull as usual, and I had many disagreeable assemblages to salute', quickly realised that his presence was a major attraction at charitable events, saying 'the great advantage the charity got by my company was that it filled the room.'¹² Such clubs were responsible for much music making, both choral and orchestral. Singing societies and choral groups were responsible for the spread and popularity of Handel's works.

Nineteenth-century developments

The Act of Union in 1800 united Ireland with Britain, resulting in the removal of the Irish parliament from Dublin to London. Many of the aristocratic patrons followed the new seat of government, and removed themselves to London, causing a decline for some time in the activities of some music and orchestral groups, due to the loss of aristocratic patronage. This resulted in the middle classes emerging as patrons of music. In this period 'art music', or classical music as it is more commonly called, survived largely through the formation of amateur societies for the promotion of large scale works. These societies included the Sons of Handel (1810) and a Philharmonic Society (1826-78). Visiting artists sometimes performed with these groups and also performed at the Ancient Concerts Society (1834-63).¹³ In 1875 Joseph Robinson founded the Dublin Musical Society which, with the Royal Dublin Society, inaugurated a series of concerts in the Exhibition Hall in Earlsfort Terrace (which became the National Concert Hall in 1981). The mid-nineteenth century also witnessed the beginning of the music professional, as we know it today, where musicians were seen as having a career in music rather than being supported by an

⁹ Quoted in Brian Boydell, 'Venues for music in eighteenth century Dublin', in *Dublin Historical Review*, xxix, no. 1 (Dec., 1975), pp 8-34.

¹⁰ J.P. Lyons, *The quality of Mercer's* (Dublin, 1991), p. 78.

¹¹ Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven, 2004), p.11.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 12.

¹³ S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2002), pp 392-3.

aristocratic patron.¹⁴ Choral societies appeared in Dublin as early as 1810 and gained considerable strength from the Victorian period onward. The lack of professional music making was offset by the emergence of amateur activities such as those fostered by the Robinson family and Robert Prescott-Stuart.¹⁵ The dwindling Church of Ireland community preserved its support for music, in Christchurch and St. Patrick's Cathedrals in Dublin. Church choirs had the added advantage of having their own rehearsal premises, and being part of a choir was a respectable pastime, allaying the fears of anxious parents. Later, the Catholic church would be instrumental in forming choral groups, such as the Palestrina Choir in the Pro-Cathedral, formed in 1902, with the help of Edward Martyn, a prominent member of the Abbey Theatre.¹⁶ The various theatres were always well-attended, as were the music halls, and due to improved working conditions and wages, the working classes were able to access theatrical and musical productions, where they could go to the 'gods', the cheapest seats at the top of the theatre for sixpence or a shilling.¹⁷

Musical theatre interests in Ireland were well-served by national and British opera companies. The Theatre Royal, Dublin, founded in 1821, the Opera House in Cork (1855) and the Royal Opera House, Belfast (1895), were among many theatres in Ireland that facilitated the advent of travelling professional companies to Ireland. These would later include the D'Oyly Carte Company which performed the works of Gilbert & Sullivan (of which more below), the wonderfully named Moody-Manners Opera Company, the O'Mara Theatre Company and Carl Rosa Opera Company. These companies became regular visitors to Dublin, Belfast and Cork, bringing grand opera, comic opera and many British musicals to Ireland, including the new musical comedies of George Edwardes and his associates.¹⁸

A further musical activity in Victorian England was the drawing room soiree. Young ladies spent time and shed tears mastering the new instrument, the pianoforte.¹⁹ The middle class were committed to self-improvement by going to concerts, buying sheet music and performing it at home. A belief in the moral power of music was all-pervasive.²⁰ The pianist accompanied family and visitors around the piano, singing sacred songs, ballads and songs from the musical halls and

¹⁴ O'Connell, 'The role of women' pp 20-21.

¹⁵ Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history*, pp 392-4.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 394.

¹⁷ Lyn Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House Belfast* (Belfast, 1995), pp 131-2.

¹⁸ Alicia St.Leger, *Melodies and memories, 150 years at Cork Opera House*, (Cork, 2006), pp 30-31.

¹⁹ Aline Waites and Robin Hunter, *Illustrated Victorian songbook* (London, 1984), p 11.

²⁰ Derek B. Scott, *Musical style and social meaning, selected essays* (Farnham, Surrey, 2010), p. 210.

burlesque, followed later by excerpts from musicals and comic operas.²¹ Again Ireland followed this fashion and musical soirees became a staple of Irish life from the beginning of the twentieth century and continued for many years. Such evenings are typified in a scene from a John Huston film *The dead* (1987), based on the short story by James Joyce in his book *Dubliners*. In the film, the members of a dinner party perform for the other guests. A pivotal part of the film is the departure of the leading characters Gabriel Conroy and his wife Gretta from the party. As they do so, another character in the film, Bartell D'Arcy (played by the late Frank Patterson, a popular Irish tenor), sings the plaintive *Lass of Aughrim*, which reverberated down the stairs. The ballad, originally a Scots story of lost love, impacts on the wife, who remembers a young boy she once loved who died.²² Plaintive love songs such as *The lass of Aughrim* and *She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps*, written by Thomas Moore, c. 1810, and other such doom-laden ballads were popular, in which lost love and death seemed to strike a chord. Songs about war, ending in victory or defeat, also found favour.

As time progressed, some members of drawing room soirees together with members of choirs and chapel groups formed themselves into concert groups. The idea of amateur groups performing secular music in public was often frowned on as coarse exhibitionism by the outwardly puritanical Victorians, many of whom regarded the theatre as being morally decadent.²³ A popular method of silencing these critics and obtaining an audience was to perform for a charitable objective, such as hospital or a specific cause such as church refurbishment.²⁴

The arrival of musical theatre

Musical theatre as we now know it came about through changes in musical form which began in the mid-eighteenth century in England, in which opera metamorphosed from operetta and comic opera to eventually what became known as musical comedy and then 'the musical'. What we know today as the musical had its origins in Paris during the Second Empire which occurred in France in the reign of Napoleon III, 1852-1870. Florimond Ronget (known as Hervé) was appointed organist to an asylum in Paris named the Bicetre Hospital. He organized short musical plays, acted by the

²¹ Ibid., pp 10-15.

²² *The dead*, John Huston (director), 1987: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092843/> (accessed 11 May 2011).

²³ John N. Young, *A century of service: the National Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society* (London, 1999), pp 2-3.

²⁴ Scott, *Musical style and social meaning*, p. 211.

inmates, which he called ‘operettes’²⁵ The popularity of these works caught the eye of noted French composer Jacques Offenbach, who consolidated and developed a series of satirical operettas, including the better-known *Orpheus in the underworld*, (1858), *La belle Helene*, (1864), and *La perichole* (1874), which became popular throughout Europe and made him the darling of musical theatre in London.²⁶ When Offenbach’s music fell out of favour with the French government, other French ‘musicals’ by Lecocq, Planquette, Audran and others took his place. In Vienna, the operetta became popular through the composer Johann Strauss the Younger, known as the waltz king. Straus’s operettas *Die fledermaus* (The bat) (1874), and *The gypsy baron*, (1885), became overnight successes throughout Europe. Other popular composers followed, such as Kalman, von Suppe and Franz Lehár. Lehár’s *The merry widow* (1905), was his most enduring work, remaining a constant in amateur musical theatre. These European operettas, particularly those of Jacques Offenbach, greatly influenced British musical theatre. Offenbach’s work was admired by composer Sir Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900), who with lyricist W.S .Gilbert (1836-1911), was responsible for changing the face of musical theatre in the English-speaking world.

Gilbert and Sullivan embarked on a series of comic operas, which became extremely popular due in part to their partnership with impresario Richard D’Oyly Carte. In 1875, Gilbert and Sullivan were commissioned to write *Trial by jury* as a curtain raiser to Offenbach’s *La périchole*. Such was the success of this short piece that D’Oyly Carte decided to embark on a policy of producing a series of these comic operas, which continued until *The grand duke* (1896), and included five of their most popular works, *HMS Pinafore* (1878), *The pirates of Penzance* (1879), *The Mikado* (1885), *The yeomen of the guard* (1888) and *The gondoliers* (1890). It is to the comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan that we must now turn as these resulted directly in the foundation of amateur musical societies in England and later in Ireland. The roots of amateur theatre, as it is known today in Britain and Ireland, lie in the final decades of the nineteenth century. From the 1880s onwards, men and women with thespian interests began combining their talents as never before to provide live entertainment for themselves and others, and supporting, as already mentioned, local charities.²⁷ The Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas stand alone, as their music and libretti are beautifully integrated so that each number contributes to the development of the story.²⁸ Satirical and amusing, free of vulgarity, romantic in a sterilised manner, free of any obvious sexual

²⁵ Mark Lubbock, *The story of the musical* (London and New York, 1958), p. 143.

²⁶ Kurt Gänzl, *The British musical theatre* (2 vols, London, 1986), i, p.7

²⁷ Young, *A century of service*, p. 1.

²⁸ Alan Hyman, *Sullivan and his satellites: a survey of English operettas 1860-1914* (London, 1978), p xv.

innuendo, they were ideally suited to the puritanical Victorians.²⁹ These operas were produced during the years 1875-96, and gently mock myths of Englishness where the linking of English culture with the past such as Beefeaters and the tower of London in *The yeomen of the guard* dovetails neatly with a pride in ancestry as evinced by Pooh-Bah in *The Mikado*, who tells us ‘I can trace my ancestry back to a protoplasmal primordial atomic globule.’³⁰ Other comic operas followed, highlighting the identity of the modern English everyday man, as seen in *HMS Pinafore*, when Samuel sings ‘He is an Englishman’, and in *Patience* (1881), a man who delights in ‘bottled beer and chips.’³¹ Gilbert satirised the government, the navy, the legal system, even the crown itself, with impunity. As the appeal of Gilbert & Sullivan’s operas reached the public they stimulated growth in amateur societies and quietly helped to loosen the more rigid class structures of the time.

Down to this point, the societies under discussion had typically been concert groups or choirs. Some such societies would go on to perform operatic works and operetta prior to becoming musical societies in the early part of the twentieth century.³² Such societies emerged first in Britain and spread throughout the English-speaking countries of the British empire and the United States of America.³³ Ireland, always influenced by Britain in musical matters, then followed suit

The first amateur production of a Gilbert & Sullivan comic opera took place in Kingston-on-Thames outside London in April 1879, by a group called ‘The Harmonists’ who performed *HMS Pinafore*.³⁴ Other English musical societies followed suit. Gilbert and Sullivan were followed by a number of other British composers and impresarios, such as George Edwardes, the creator of ‘musical comedy’, which he developed from a mixture of Italian opera bouffa and ‘burlesque’, in which popular tunes were fitted to the words of songs.³⁵ These works had a romantic plot, colourful scenes, a plentiful supply of song and dance numbers coupled with handsome men and beautiful girls. Comedians were heavily involved in these performance. The works of George Edwardes, Robert Courtneidge and Frank Curzon were typical examples of the new form of

²⁹ Young, *A century of service*, p 3.

³⁰ W.S.Gilbert & Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado*, Act 1 (London, 1885).

³¹ Scott, *Musical style and social meaning*, pp 225-7.

³² Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast*, p. 145.

³³ Clark, *British clubs and societies*, pp 358-9.

³⁴ Young, *A century of service*, p. 5.

³⁵ Mark Lubbock, *The story of the musical* (London 1958), pp 151-58.

musical comedy, though many of their scores included music of an operatic standard.³⁶ (The emergence of the musical as such will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2.)

Musical theatre in Ireland and amateur Irish musical societies (1870-1921)

In Thomas Moore's ballad 'The minstrel boy', Ireland is spoken of as the 'land of song.' Music historians, writing of the newly formed Irish Free State, mention the 'penurious condition of the art on the eve of independent statehood' in Dublin in the 1900s. While professional companies provided Cork with a high standard of opera and drama, there was a renewed interest in amateur performance.³⁷ From the 1870s the works of Gilbert & Sullivan, already popular throughout the world, were directly influential in Cork musical theatre. Cork was the first city to form an amateur musical society in the sense under discussion here.³⁸ One Gilbert & Sullivan work, *HMS Pinafore*, was an extremely popular professional production when brought to Cork. In 1880 some local amateurs formed the Pinafore Club, as homage to this production, to perform Gilbert & Sullivan comic opera. In May of that year they presented two nights of *HMS Pinafore* at a packed Opera House. This group continued to perform both Gilbert & Sullivan operettas and other musicals, including an opera named *Amergen*, written by Paul MacSwiney, uncle of future Lord Mayor, Terence MacSwiney (who would die later on hunger strike in 1920 in Brixton Prison).³⁹

Another early society was formed at nearby Fermoy, in northern County Cork, a thriving market and garrison town. Fermoy had always been a centre of music, due in part to the British military presence, whose bands regularly gave recitals in the town, in the barracks and on the promenade at Rathealy Road. In 1900 a group of local businessmen formed the Fermoy Choral Society. The group originally performed concerts of choral music and arias from operettas and grand opera, accompanied by an orchestra of British army personnel.⁴⁰ As was usual in early times, committees consisted mostly of professional men and businessmen, from the middle and upper middle classes. The president of the society was General Sir Thomas Dennehy, a Knight Commander of the Order of the Indian Empire, a distinguished soldier and high sheriff of County

³⁶ Hyman, *Sullivan and his satellites*, p. xiii.

³⁷ Joseph Ryan, 'Music in independent Ireland since 1921', in J.R. Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, vii, *Ireland 1921-84* (Oxford, 2003), pp 621-49, p. 621; St. Leger, *Melodies and memories*, pp 32-33.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 32-3, 45.

⁴⁰ Michael Barry, *On wings of song: Fermoy Choral Society through the years* (Midleton, 1999), pp1-4.

Cork, who lived at Brooklodge, Clondulane. The vice-president was Charles J. Furlong, J.P. and J.J. McConnell, a bookshop owner, was secretary. Robert S. Baylor, solicitor, the treasurer, was from Walker's Row in Fermoy where his family firm still practices law. The committee included Harry Barry, auctioneer, Frank M. Gormly, head of the Fermoy Union, Jack Troy, solicitor, and E.C. Stretton, who served as the musical director.⁴¹ The society's first concert took place on 24 April 1902 with a further performance in October of the same year. The concert included drawing room pieces by Michael Balfe, Charles Gounod and Giuseppe Verdi, a typical selection for a concert at the time.⁴² No further records exist of the society until 1924, when Fermoy Choral Society was reconstituted and the committee decided to perform musicals rather than choral music.⁴³ There was also an operatic society founded in Waterford circa 1900, and a photograph of this group can be seen in the Poole Collection of photographs in the National Library of Ireland, though no records of the production remain extant.⁴⁴ The photograph of the society shows the cast dressed in the costumes of *HMS Pinafore*. Despite research in the Waterford Archive, no records of this event appear. Two years were to pass before another society was formed, this time in the midlands.

In 1902 Athlone was a busy midland town on the banks of the River Shannon, in the Irish midlands, which was also garrisoned by the British army. In October of that year, a meeting was held in the Father Mathew Hall, to form a choral or musical society. Present was a Miss Disney, niece of local doctor Dr. Dobbs; Frank Haywood, organist in St. Mary's Church of Ireland; May Walker, and Harry Foy. This meeting resulted in the formation of Athlone Musical Society. Intermittent advertisements were placed in the *Westmeath Independent* seeking new members, especially singers and musicians, particularly violins and cellists.⁴⁵ The same paper, in its column 'Athlone doings', in the previous week (16 Nov. 1905), stated that 'The Athlone Musical Society give their first concert on Monday evening in the Father Mathew Hall...as is fitting for a first effort, the programme is not too ambitious but should be very attractive.'⁴⁶ In 1904 a concert was held in aid of the Boat Club on Saturday 26 November. The *Westmeath Independent* of 3 December 1904 said of this concert: 'the choral selections were excellent...the society has become

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴² Ibid., pp1-4.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Poole Collection of Waterford photographs, N.L.I., Kildare Street, Dublin 2.

⁴⁵ *Westmeath Independent*, 5 Nov. 1902.

⁴⁶ *75th Anniversary programme of Athlone Musical Society* (Athlone, 1977), on loan to author from Billy Flanagan of Athlone M.S..

considerably enriched in membership'.⁴⁷ A further concert was held on Saturday 28 January 1905 and another in 1906. Down to this time, the society had produced choral work, but its first musical, Gilbert & Sullivan's *The pirates of Penzance* was staged in May 1907. The production included some officers from the local barracks, Lieutenant Peebles and Robert Thurburn of the Royal Field Artillery.⁴⁸ *The Mikado* followed in 1908. The *Westmeath Independent* of 15 February stated of the show that 'Athlone Musical Society gave us...this production [which] was even better than the great triumph of Thursday night. The company went through their parts with even greater ease...the house was packed.'⁴⁹

At the other end of the country, as early as 1896 the amateurs of Belfast were welcomed on to the stage of the Grand Opera House, a tradition that has continued ever since.⁵⁰ In that year the newly-formed Belfast Operatic Society presented the musical *Paul Jones*, and the critic from the *Belfast Newsletter* commented that the society had cause to feel gratified at its production, saying that 'There is often very little difference between the amateurs and professional...as the evening progressed many of those present must have forgotten they were listening to amateurs.'⁵¹ This society became defunct until reformed by another group in 1950, as will be discussed in a later chapter. The Ulster Operatic Company originated from a concert recital given by the pupils of Madame Gertrude Drinkwater, a dynamic Welsh-born soprano, who was married to Colonel Robert Hill and lived in Carrickfergus.⁵² She founded 'the Ulster', as it is known, in 1910 and in the following years this group regularly performed scenes from opera and comic operas. The introduction of men into the company in 1919 resulted in the production of two Gilbert & Sullivan works, *The gondoliers*, and *Iolanthe*, in the Opera House.⁵³ Madame Drinkwater was elected president of the company, and remained in that office until her death in 1955.⁵⁴ Many distinguished people followed as president: J. Nelson McMillan C.B.E. (1955-61); Sir Robin G.C. Kinahan, J.P. (1961-66); Councillor Irene McAleery (1966-72) and James T. Kernohan O.B.E. (1972-81).⁵⁵

Turning to Wexford, in the early 1900s the Theatre Royal was the centre of public entertainment in the town. In November 1911 a meeting was held to form Wexford Amateur

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ *Westmeath Independent*, 12 May 1907.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 15 Feb. 1908.

⁵⁰ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast*, pp 127-45.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.128.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., pp 127-45.

⁵⁴ *Ulster Operatic centenary programme* (Belfast, 2010) (Dublin City Library and Archive (D.C.L.A.)).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Operatic Society, formed from a split in an existing group.⁵⁶ A Special General Meeting was reported on in the *Wexford Free Press* on 18 November 1911. The committee included a Mrs Whelan, whose husband worked in the iron works, J. Lennane, a bank cashier, and a Mrs Cogley, wife of a businessman. Mrs Fetherstonhaugh, vice president, was the wife of a bank manager; J.J. French was part owner of a company of coal and corn merchants, and Mrs Hawkes Cornock was a member of an old Protestant landed family from the Cromwell's Fort area of Wexford. Other members included Ernest Beddowes, a dentist and member of the Congregational church, Thomas Sydney Davies, a Welsh Baptist commercial traveller for various flour mills, and Eva Cousins, a member of a mineral water company family. Pat Horan, a clerk in the Harbour Authority was secretary, and he also played leading roles in the productions.⁵⁷ After the first rehearsal Frank Brian, a member of the Royal Irish Academy of Music congratulated those present, saying that 'Wexford could produce an operatic work worthily without...being affected by any petty quarrels and jealousies (applause)'.⁵⁸ This appears to allude to some disagreement with other townspeople, but no further information is forthcoming. Another prominent member of the society was J.J. Scallan, whose family owned Celtic Laundry (now Celtic Linen).⁵⁹

The society's first production was *The pirates of Penzance* in 1912. The *Wexford People* of 2 February 1912 stated that 'standing room only could be obtained...the boxes were filled with the elite of the district'. The production was lavishly praised and the *Wexford People* again stated that 'the opera was mounted in a very realistic manner, the dresses and makeup of the performers by Messrs. F. Carty and Son, Wexford, [were] excellent'.⁶⁰ The society spawned what one could almost call dynasties, in that certain families were involved over generations such as the Corish, Sinnott, and Scallan families. The orchestra as well as the cast were local. Some of the orchestral players also played in the cinemas for the silent movies. Among them was Lily Fitzsimons who played violin, while Charles Vise, a photographer and manager of the Cinema Palace played clarinet.⁶¹ In 1915 the society vacated the Theatre Royal and moved to the cinema. The programme that year included photographs of the committee but not the cast, and a large photograph of patrons

⁵⁶ 'Wexford notes', *Wexford Free Press*, 4 Nov. 1911.

⁵⁷ Wexford Light Opera Society Centenary Programme (Wexford, 2011), on loan to the author by Thomas Irish, past president, Wexford Light Opera Society (the society was renamed the Wexford Light Opera Society in 1946).

⁵⁸ 'Wexford notes', *Wexford Free Press*, 2 Dec. 1911.

⁵⁹ This company has taken a full back page advertisement in the society's programmes since the 1930s.

⁶⁰ *The People* (Wexford), 2, 14 Feb. 1912.

⁶¹ Interview with Thomas Irish, past president of the society, 8 and 9 April, 2011 (a full list of interviews will be found in the bibliography).

of the society, including the bishop of Ferns, Dr. James Browne, and the mayor of Wexford, Alderman James Sinnott.⁶² Their inclusion in the photograph would appear to suggest that the society had attained a prominent position in Wexford and like other societies at this time, drew its membership mainly from the middle classes.⁶³ It appeared to be well funded, as the programme of the 1915 productions notes Messrs. B J Simmons and Co., London, supplies the costumes and dresses, and the scenery was by a Mr. Kennimont, Scenic Artist. The programme also contained an advertisement for the Pierce bicycle, made for a time at the local Pierce foundry, and another for Rochfords, a Wexford drapers' firm which supplied uniforms for the Irish National Volunteers and troops who fought in World War I.⁶⁴ John Redmond, the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party was a Wexford man. There is some speculation that this contract may have accrued to Rochfords through Redmond's influence.⁶⁵ The society returned to the Theatre Royal in 1925 and it has been its home since that time. Alderman Richard Corish, the mayor of Wexford, was president of the society in the 1920s. He was the father of Brendan Corish T.D., leader of the Labour Party (1960-77), and Des Corish, both members of the society.⁶⁶

Another important amateur musical society that dates from this period is the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society (popularly known as the R & R). It was formed in Dublin in 1914. The society was the brainchild of the organist in the (Catholic) Church of the Three Patrons, Rathgar, C.P. Fitzgerald, who called a meeting of residents to form a musical society 'the membership of which would be composed of residents in the townships of Rathmines and Rathgar.'⁶⁷ Their object would be to perform, study and produce high class operatic, choral and similar music and the first production was *The Mikado* in the Queen's Theatre, Great Brunswick Street, on 8 December 1913. Ticket costs ran from £1.10s for a box, 3s.6d for reserved seats in the dress circle, 2s.6d. for the upper circle, 1 shilling for the pit, down to sixpence for the gallery seats. The proceeds were to be devoted to charity.⁶⁸ The original committee members included Lionel Canfield, a solicitor, Edwin Lloyd, a banker, and other members from similar backgrounds. The female members of the new society were mostly the sisters, cousins and friends of the male members. They were mainly Catholic, though this would change in the 1940s, when the society became interdenominational.

⁶² *Programme of Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, 1915*, in the possession of Thomas Irish of Wexford Light Opera Society.

⁶³ Interview with Thomas Irish, 9 April 2011.

⁶⁴ *Programme of Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, 1915*, in Thomas Irish's possession.

⁶⁵ Interview with Thomas Irish, 9 April 2011.

⁶⁶ *Centenary programme of Wexford L.O.S.* (Wexford, 2011), on loan to the author by Thomas Irish.

⁶⁷ *The Rathmines and Rathgar 75th anniversary programme* (Dublin, 1988), (D.C.L.A.).

⁶⁸ Photostat of poster for *The Mikado*, first production of the R. & R. 1913 (D.C.L.A.).

The first Annual General Meeting of the society took place on 24 September 1914 at 81, Rathmines Road. A copy of the minutes makes for interesting reading.⁶⁹ They refer to the society being in debt to the tune of nine pounds. They also refer to the difficulties sustained in producing the show. They note that ‘there was at the time a very serious deadlock in labour circles in Dublin and elsewhere. This not only involved a great deal of anxiety but increased the expense.’⁷⁰ This oblique reference concerned the Dublin Lockout of workers, instigated by Jim Larkin, the prominent trades union leader. A key figure in the lockout was William Martin Murphy, a Dublin businessman and owner of *The Independent* newspaper, who later became president of the R & R in 1918.⁷¹

The onset of World War I had an impact on musical society activity in Ireland. Several of the societies were in garrison towns, including Cork, Athlone, Wexford and Fermoy and suffered some depletion of bandsman in their orchestras. Nevertheless, Athlone Musical Society (except in 1918), Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, the Ulster Operatic Company and the R & R continued to perform throughout the war. The R & R served the war effort by contributing to a fund to send four ambulances to the Front. In the minutes of June 1915 it is noted that ‘the proceeds of the performance to go to British Red Cross and St. John’s Ambulance’ and there is a further reference to ‘giving fifty pounds to the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot’.⁷² Wounded soldiers came to Ireland to recover from wounds in the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, and some joined the society.⁷³ Casualties were suffered by musicians and society members in Ulster, particularly those from the officer class, but no deaths occurred. During the First World War and subsequent internal conflict, travelling companies such as the D’Oyly Carte Company and other British entertainers were reluctant to come to Ireland.⁷⁴ The local amateur musical society or drama group was often the sole provider of entertainment in the area. Athlone Musical Society was so popular that during the run of its productions, audiences from Birr, Galway, and Tullamore travelled by special trains put on to facilitate all who wished to travel to this major social event.⁷⁵ Yearly visits were made to Dublin

⁶⁹ Minutes of the first Annual General Meeting of the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society, 24 Sept. 1914, in possession of Nora O’Rourke, production manager of the R & R.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Interview with Nora O’Rourke of the R & R, 23 Nov. 2010.

⁷² Minutes of the R & R, June 1915, in possession of Nora O’Rourke, production manager of the society.

⁷³ Interview with Nora O’Rourke, production manager of the R & R, 23 Nov. 2010.

⁷⁴ Aloys Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland: a symposium* (Cork, 1952).

⁷⁵ *75th Anniversary programme of Athlone Musical Society* (Athlone, 1977), on loan to author from Billy Flanagan of Athlone M.S.

and Cork to see various musicals performed by the R & R, the Pioneer Musical Society and Cork Operatic Society.⁷⁶

The 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin is not mentioned in surviving musical society minutes, though in 1915 the R & R received a letter from a Mr. McGonagall on behalf of the National Volunteers for permission to use the rooms at 24, Rathmines Road for an agreed three shillings a night.⁷⁷ The War of Independence, too, seemed to have little effect on Irish musical society activity. It is likely that, given their middle and upper class membership, musical societies in the main were little affected by such events. But it is striking that even a society based in north inner city Dublin, the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society (within five minutes walk of the General Post Office), makes no reference to the Easter Rising in its minutes. This was an area where members of the working class lived, worked, and socialised. It must be noted, however, that many minute books from those early years were simply mislaid, lost or destroyed. The minutes in those that remain consist mostly of production and administrative details, though regular mention is made of births, deaths and marriages of members.⁷⁸ With the exception of the brief reference already mentioned, political matters were noted only when such events interfered with musical society activity. However, Aloys Fleischmann, in his book *Music in Dublin*, mentions that the production in 1919 by the R & R of *Merrie England* was largely ignored by the public and had to be postponed for a time due to curfew or street risks. He also writes of a raid by the Black and Tans at a rehearsal, who removed a principal player for a time and also refers to Bloody Sunday (21 November 1920), when members of the Black and Tans opened fire at a match in Croke Park, an event which caused the producer of the R & R, frightened by such events, to flee the country.⁷⁹ The minutes of the R & R are missing for this period,⁸⁰ but the fact that the society was so insensitive to Dublin public opinion as to put on such an arrantly British musical such as *Merrie England* in 1919 indicates either indifference by the committee towards ongoing events of the time or ignorance of the effect of the choice of show on the political situation.

⁷⁶ Anne Phelan, mother of the author, who lived in Bandon, Co. Cork until 1925, spoke often of the family 'going up to Cork to see the opera'.

⁷⁷ Minutes of the R & R, 28 Oct. 1914, stored at the society's premises on Upper Rathmines Road.

⁷⁸ Minutes of the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society, 1907-42, in possession of Mary O'Reilly, president, of Dunboyne, Co. Meath; *25th anniversary programme of the R & R* (in the possession of the author).

⁷⁹ Fleischmann (ed.), *Music in Ireland*, pp.233-34; and the subject was mentioned by the late Patrick Campbell in a conversation with the author in Dublin's Radisson Hotel, 11 Nov. 2011.

⁸⁰ Interview with Nora O'Rourke, production manager of the R & R, 23 Nov. 2010.

Returning to developments in Cork, following the Armistice in November 1918, which marked the end of World War I, Cork Operatic Society was formed in the city. This had originated in a small group of Cork men, known as ‘The Warblers’, who put on performances for charity.⁸¹ They performed in the Cork Opera House and in the Everyman Theatre. One of their members, Jack Pitt, approached Theo Gmûr, a Swiss musician who had settled in Cork, who revived the society.⁸² The first attempt at a production, a French light operetta, *La Mascotte*, failed to be staged due in part to the unstable political situation and the outbreak of the devastating Spanish flu, which engulfed Europe after the war. In 1919, the society produced Gilbert & Sullivan’s *The gondoliers*, which played to full houses.⁸³ The next performance was *The Mikado* in June 1920, followed again by *The gondoliers* in December. On 11 December, the centre of Cork city was extensively damaged by a fire, started by British forces stationed in the city, causing the performers to flee the city centre in their costumes, after the curtain fell.⁸⁴ Professor Gmûr died in 1929 and was succeeded as musical director by J.T. Horne.

The Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society (1917), has already been mentioned. It was formed under the aegis of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), who played an influential part in amateur musical theatre in Ireland. The Jesuits were educators and founded several religious houses and schools, including Clongowes Wood College, near Clane, County Kildare, counting among its students James Joyce, author of *Ulysses*, *Finnegan’s wake* and other major works. The Jesuits also founded Mungret College and the Crescent College in Limerick, Coláiste Iognaid in Galway, Belvedere College and Gonzaga College in Dublin. The origins of the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society went back to 1908, when the Jesuits of St Francis Xavier (Gardiner Street) parish in north inner city Dublin, formed a club for young men who were members of the Pioneer Total Abstinence Association formed by Fr. James Cullen S.J. at 27 Mountjoy Square East in 1898.⁸⁵ Included in the activities of the club were football, debating, table tennis, billiards, and snooker. The Francis Xavier Hall, a large purpose built theatre, had been built by the Jesuits and opened on 2 March 1908. The *Freeman’s Journal* of 3 March 1908 covers this event extensively. In his address Fr. Cullen stated that ‘in the working classes... there are scarcely any legitimate sources of

⁸¹ St Leger, *Melodies and memories*, pp 48-51

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., pp 48-51.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ *Evening Telegraph*, 18 Nov. 1911. On the total abstinence movement, see Diarmaid Ferriter, ‘Drink and society in twentieth-century Ireland’ (2015) (https://www.ria.ie/sites/default/files/priac201508_fnl.pdf, accessed 20 Sept. 2017).

recreation for men...if he seeks recreation...he must content himself with aimless loitering in the streets, or drinking in a tavern.’ He hoped that ‘the club...with its concerts, lectures dramatic presentations etc. will...help in this direction’.⁸⁶ In the *Evening Telegraph* of 7 March 1908, Father Cullen is quoted as saying ‘in the world of poverty and pain, loneliness and depression...it will cast rays of moral and intellectual sunshine’.⁸⁷ The Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society, which initially performed pantomime and musical events, followed in 1917.⁸⁸ Only men were allowed full membership of the club. (Women were admitted as associate members only, until the 1950s.)

In the city of Limerick, the rector of the Sacred Heart College, popularly known as ‘The Crescent’, decided in 1919 to form a musical society in order to raise funds for the Sacred Heart Church.⁸⁹ Originally named the Crescent Operatic Society, it was later re-named the Cecilian Musical Society, in honour of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music. The Jesuit community in Limerick served as patrons of the society, their members acting as musical directors, producers, stage managers or administrators for the productions. The members of the newly formed society were mainly drawn from the middle classes in the city, often past pupils of the Crescent itself, their sisters and relatives. The first production of the musical *A Greek slave* was reported as a ‘brilliant production’ in the *Limerick Leader* of 2 April 1919. A slightly later Jesuit-inspired society was the Belvedere Musical Society, formed in Belvedere College, a Jesuit school in Denmark Street in Dublin. In 1932 Fr John Mary O’Connor S.J. decided to set up a past pupils musical society in the college. The Old Belvedere Musical Society was formed, and produced a yearly musical.

The Bangor Amateur Operatic Society, County Down was another society dating from 1919, following a remark made to a Dr. Emery by another Bangor man, while fighting in the trenches in World War I, that Bangor should have a musical society.⁹⁰ This company continues to produce yearly musical, together with pantomime and plays, and celebrated its ninetieth anniversary in 2009.

The societies that were active at this time were also involved in charitable work in their particular areas. The R & R donated the proceeds of one of performance of each production to local

⁸⁶ *Freeman’s Journal*, 3 March 1908.

⁸⁷ *Evening Telegraph*, 7 March 1908

⁸⁸ Minutes of the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society, 1908, in the possession of Mary O’Reilly, president, Dunboyne, Co. Meath.

⁸⁹ Joseph Donnellan, ‘The Cecilian Musical Society, a social history’, unpublished B.A. thesis, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (2010).

⁹⁰ *Bangor Operatic Society 90th anniversary programme*, in possession of Winston Johnston of Bangor, interviewed 27 Sept. 2011, 7 Jan. 2011.

charities, and each December, a performance of the recent show was given at various hospitals throughout the city.⁹¹ Bangor Operatic was involved in local charities, as was the Ulster Operatic Company, whose ladies committee contributed generously to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1909. Other charities supported by the company included the Royal Red Cross, Belfast Hospitals, Doctor Barnardos and the Shipwrecked Mariners Society. Such causes were undoubtedly helped by the fact that the duchess of Abercorn was president of the company and Lady Londonderry was also involved in the Ulster Operatic. These women were leaders of London society and again where the nobility led, society usually followed suit.⁹² Wexford Amateur Operatic Society provided concerts and carol singers for local causes on a regular basis and in 1915 the profits of the musical were distributed among the poor of the parish.⁹³ Fermoy Choral Society staged concerts in the Palace Hall for the local Confraternity of St Vincent de Paul, for the relief of local families in distress.⁹⁴ Ballinasloe Musical Society contributed to the Lions' Club and other local charities.⁹⁵

Amateur musical societies (1922-45)

When Ireland achieved independence in 1922, music was in a 'debilitated condition', which was in microcosm a broad reflection of the national picture. The conflicts in Irish society found their echoes in a fractured musical tradition.⁹⁶ There was already a rich vein of traditional music which attracted sporadic enthusiasm. (The Feis Ceoil, an Irish music festival, had been inaugurated in 1897.)⁹⁷ The Royal Dublin Society continued its annual series of chamber music. However, the 'land of song' had no permanent orchestra and few auditoriums. The only opportunity to view live opera was when travelling operatic companies visited Ireland. One of these companies was the O'Mara Opera Company, formed in 1912 by the singer Joseph O'Mara, a member of a prominent Limerick bacon factory family, which performed Irish musical plays such as *Sruth na Maoile* by Geoffrey Molyneux Palmer in the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in July 1923. In the following year the company staged a new, large-scale opera, *Shaun the Post* by Harold White, under the auspices of

⁹¹ 50th and 75th anniversary programmes of the R & R, in the possession of the author.

⁹² Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast*, pp 131-2.

⁹³ Interview with Thomas Irish, past president of Wexford Light Opera Society, 8 April 2011.

⁹⁴ Barry, *On wings of song*, p 10.

⁹⁵ www.ballinasloems.ie/home.html (accessed 7 Sept. 2016).

⁹⁶ Ryan, 'Music in independent Ireland', pp 621-22.

⁹⁷ S.J. Connolly (ed.), *The Oxford companion to Irish history* (Oxford, 1999), p. 374.

the Gaelic League. That was the extent of the involvement of the Gaelic League's involvement in operatic form.⁹⁸

General Richard Mulcahy, the first minister for defence, employed Wilhelm Fritz Brase and Friedrich Christian Sauerzweig to direct the newly formed Army School of Music.⁹⁹ The two men were instrumental in creating bands of quality for the army. Meanwhile, amateur musical societies continued to be set up and to perform musicals during this period, but little mention is made of their activities nationally, though the local media covered the annual musical. In Northern Ireland, which remained part of the United Kingdom, church choirs, amateur bands and local musical societies put on concerts and operettas. Touring companies still continued to visit Belfast. This city did not differ much from other large Irish cities and the general features of musical activity differed little from the rest of Ireland.¹⁰⁰

In terms of membership, it has been noted that the pre-World War I societies were formed by and composed of members of the professional or middle class. They included bankers, solicitors, pharmacists, shopkeepers, merchants, office and retail staff, civil servants and teachers. After World War I there was some change in social attitudes with some breakdown in perceived class differences. Musical societies provided a vehicle for young people to meet and socialize together, resulting in a number of marriages. The children of such marriages frequently joined the society, resulting in dynasties such as Donnellan and Boucher family in Limerick, the Campbell and O'Byrne families in the R & R, the Flanagan family of Athlone Musical Society, the Corish, Sinnott and Scallan families in Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, and the Barry family in the Glasnevin Musical Society.¹⁰¹ Several societies can now boast of three and four generations of family involvement.

In the years prior to World War II, the new Irish Free State struggled to assert itself under Cumann na Gael Taoiseach William T. Cosgrave, and later under Fianna Fáil, led by Eamon de Valera. Under both Cosgrave and de Valera's governments, a degree of intolerance crept into Irish theatre, which had hitherto been free from censorship.¹⁰² The influence of the Catholic church

⁹⁸Ryan, 'Music in independent Ireland', pp 638-9.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 633.

¹⁰⁰ Roy Johnston, 'Music in Northern Ireland since 1921', in Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland*, vii, pp 650-70, pp 605-1.

¹⁰¹ Donnellan, 'The Cecilian Musical Society', interviews with Thomas Irish, Wexford Light Opera Society, 8 April 2011.

¹⁰² Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), pp 29-30.

became more prevalent, with political approval for the censorious attitude of the church towards sexual morality. Archbishop Harty of Cashel spoke strongly against the sensationalist press and stated that the proliferation of ‘horrible papers circulating in the country was simply appalling’.¹⁰³ In May 1925 Archbishop Gilmartin of Tuam condemned foreign dances, indecent dress company keeping and bad books. However, priests in general had no problems with amateur musical societies, and several became patrons, as will be noted below. The civil war which had lately beset the state ceased in 1923 and people began to resume their normal lives. Amateur musical societies were no different in this regard, and in Athlone, Bangor, Belfast, Dublin, Fermoy and Limerick, and Wexford the local groups continued to produce musicals. Fermoy Musical Society, after some years of inactivity, reformed in 1924 and continued its annual productions. In 1941, the Dublin Musical Society was formed by George Slater, a jeweller from Johnson’s Court, off Grafton Street, who used his own resources to fund the society and gave considerable amount of time to ensure its success. He was aided in his efforts by John Lynskey of Dublin City Council. This society produced musicals in November each year, as did the Old Belvedere Musical Society and the R & R. Enthusiasts enjoyed six consecutive weeks of musical theatre that followed each other directly before Christmas week.¹⁰⁴

The operettas and musicals performed at this time continued to be those composed by Gilbert & Sullivan together with the European operettas of Strauss, Lehar, Kalman and Offenbach, followed later by the American based European born composers, such as Victor Herbert (born in Dublin), Rudolph Friml and Sigmund Romberg. Herbert’s *Naughty Marietta* (1910) became popular, as did Friml’s operetta, *Rose Marie*, and Romberg’s *The student prince* (1924), and *The desert song* (1926). These composers were classically trained European musicians and their shows contained songs of operatic quality, coupled with plots of a romantic nature and many chorus numbers. By the 1940s these works had become the staples of amateur musical societies.

Such musicals were harmless escapism and caused no offence or threat to morality, comprising stories of innocent, sometimes unrequited love, followed by some personal or political conflict, which usually ended happily. The costumes were pretty, the uniforms dashing and colourful. There was usually considerable chorus work and dancing. The humour was somewhat inane, rather foolish and without innuendo. These musicals were extremely popular with the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ See advertisements in (e.g.) *Irish Times*, 4 April 1972; and Myles Dungan, *If you want to know who we are: the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society 1913-2013* (Dublin, 2013), p. 13.

middle classes in urban and rural areas, and the advent of musicals on film enhanced their popularity. Local gentry, politicians and members of the judiciary and clergy of all denominations became patrons of societies.¹⁰⁵ Such patrons usually paid a fee of between a guinea and £5. The fee entitled them to two tickets for the performance and included a reception where wine and other refreshments were provided. Also invited were the sponsors and representatives of local businesses which placed advertisements in the society programme. These programmes give a fascinating view of business life in the area. In the programme of the R & R production of *The Mikado*, in 1914, advertisements included those for Johnston, Mooney & O'Brien, bakers; Tyler's Shoes; May's Records and O'Dea & Co., makers of the famous Odearest Mattresses.¹⁰⁶ Many of these companies, such as Tyler's and O'Dea & Co. were household names down to the latter part of the twentieth century, though some have now ceased trading. Audiences were composed in the main of family, relatives and friends of the performers though, as musicals became more popular, the local gentry and tradesmen often bought seats for their servants in the galleries or 'gods', as they were known, in local theatres or halls. Local newspaper coverage included details of local dignitaries such as the gentry, politicians, local councillors, and clergy, though general audience makeup remained unmentioned.¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

It has been argued in this chapter that in the musicology of Ireland, musical theatre, both amateur and professional, played an important role in both the performance and visual arts, particularly since the latter part of the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century amateur Irish musical societies that were active prior to World War I were well received and garnered critical acclaim for their productions. During that war, societies were the main source of live musical theatre in the major towns and cities. The period of conflict in Ireland, following the Rising of 1916 through to the cessation of violence in 1923, caused some decline in amateur musical society productions, but the R & R, the Cecilian Musical Society, Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, the Ulster Operatic Company, and Bangor Amateur Operatic Society continued their annual productions throughout, and the admittedly few surviving society minutes have little reference to political events. A possible reason may be that the mainly middle class members were

¹⁰⁵ Barry, *On wings of song*, p 1.

¹⁰⁶ Programme of the R & R production of *The Mikado* (1914).

¹⁰⁷ *Westmeath Independent*, 4 May 1902; *The People* (Wexford), 14 Feb. 1912.

insulated from the military and societal conflicts of the time by comfortable circumstances or political indifference.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ The writer, having read minutes of these societies, has come to this conclusion.

Chapter 2

Production trends in Southern Ireland, c. 1945-90

Following World War II, life slowly returned to normal. As previously mentioned, some Irish musical societies had continued their activities during the war, either producing a musical or a pantomime. Others performed concerts, for charity or simply to raise funds for the group. During the war, reading material from the performing rights holders was difficult to obtain. In cases where costumes and scenery had to be imported, there were difficulties posed by patrolling German U-boats, made the Irish Sea a hostile place.¹ The effect of the war and its outcome on the nature and content of musicals was profound. This chapter will consider the changes that took place in musical theatre, led by developments in America, which had entered the war following the attack on Pearl Harbour in Hawaii in November 1942, and will then go on to consider the impact of these and other changes on Irish amateur musical theatre.

The emergence of the American musical

In the years shortly before and during World War II, the nature of musicals changed significantly, with the birth of the ‘integrated musical’. Previously, productions such as *The belle of New York* (staged in New York in the 1890s), contained elements of the integrated musical, but tended to have thin plots and rather random songs. In the ‘integrated musical’ the music, lyrics, dancing and acting were all involved in the development of the plot. These musicals were associated particularly with the Broadway theatres of New York and became known as ‘Broadway musicals’. Later, many were staged in London. Unlike traditional musical comedy, with its light, romantic, and often downright silly themes, from the late 1930s until the late 1980s, many of these new musicals addressed social and political issues that were affecting the United States at this

¹ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, pp 40-41.

time, including racism, the Cold War and Communism, isolationism, and labour issues.² They also portrayed historical incidents and tragedies. A significant new American musical theatre partnership was that of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. Both had been involved with other composers such as Jerome Kern and Lorenz Hart, and had previously adhered to the Tin Pan Alley songwriting tradition of the music being written first with the lyrics then tailored to the music.³ They now decided to use the Gilbert & Sullivan model of writing the lyrics first, which they hoped would produce a more complete integration of words and music. This would result in *Oklahoma!* (1943), which ran on Broadway for five years, and would become a landmark in musical theatre history. The integration of the words, music, and dance combined to explain the plot. Although *Oklahoma!* contained plenty of traditional comedy and humour, it also portrayed deeper themes concerning personal desires and relationships, which marked a new departure. It was staged in London in 1947, where it played for 1,548 performances.⁴ In addition, the original cast recording was released on a set of six ten-inch rpm shellac discs, in what became known as ‘an album’.⁵ Long-playing records, introduced in the late 1940s, ensured that the show became even more widely known in the English-speaking world, and influenced a whole new generation of musical theatre lovers. Songs from *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949) and *The king and I* (1951), became familiar long before film versions appeared or performing rights became available to amateur musical societies.

A different serious theme in another Rodgers & Hammerstein work, *The sound of music* (1959) was based on Maria von Trapp’s *The story of the von Trapp family singers* (Philadelphia, 1949), which is set in Austria in 1938, before and after the Anschluss (the political annexation of Austria by Nazi Germany). Captain von Trapp’s opposition to Nazism eventually forced the family to flee the country. Hammerstein was Jewish, and by the time *The sound of music* appeared the world had discovered the Holocaust. Musical

² George Brown Tindall and David E. Shi, *America: a narrative history* (7th ed., New York, 2007), pp 892-5.

³ John Kenrick, *Musical theatre: a history* (New York, 2008), pp 246-9

⁴ John Bush Jones, *Our musicals, ourselves: a social history of the American musical theatre* (Hanover & London, 2003), pp 244-5.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 248

theatre historian John Bush Jones suggested of Hammerstein: ‘however buried his connection to his Jewish roots, the revelation of Nazi atrocities may have brought to the surface his need to respond to intolerance and bigotry’.⁶

World War II also spurred mass migration of rural southern black Americans to the cities of other regions, taxing the resources of urban government and the tolerance of white racists, some of whom attacked the newcomers moving into their neighbourhoods.⁷ A musical that dealt with the problem of race in America was *Finian’s rainbow* (1947), written by Fred Saisy and E.Y. (‘Yip’) Harburg, with music by Burton Lane. This show was a musical milestone in that it openly satirised the race question. The unlikely plot of an Irish leprechaun seeking a stolen pot of gold with magical properties was used as a background to a biting satire against a bigoted racist, Senator Rawkins, who accidentally stands over the pot of gold while the leprechaun laments the senator’s treatment of a small black boy (Henry), saying ‘there’s nothing wrong with being black ... but there’s something wrong with the world he and his kind have made for Henry ... I wish he could know what the world was really like ... I wish he was black.’ Magically transformed, Senator Rawkins, now black, sees what it is to be black in the deep south. The mingling of fantasy and social comment was able to cohere into a unified musical. This musical proved to be a hit on Broadway, running for 725 performances.⁸ Other works that dealt with racial issues included *Lost in the stars*, by Kurt Weill and Maxwell Anderson, dealing with racial hatred and injustice in South Africa. In 1962 the musical *No strings*, a story of inter-racial love, with words and music by Richard Rodgers, ran for 580 performances.

Meanwhile, the isolationist feelings of some Americans following the war were reflected in other musicals, including *Brigadoon* (1947), and *Camelot* (1960), both written by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe. The latter was based loosely on T.H. White’s book, *The once and future king* (1958). The magical kingdom of Camelot, founded by an idealistic King Arthur, is an idyllic place where ‘the rain never falls till after sundown. By

⁶ Ibid., p. 160.

⁷ Tindall & Shi, *America*, p. 907.

⁸ E. Y. Harburg, F. Saisy, & B. Lane, *Finian’s rainbow* (New York, 1947); Stanley Green, *The world of musical comedy* (3rd ed., New York, 1974), pp 235-6

eight the morning fog must disappear'. Arthur's ideal of a Round Table, where all are equal, is only threatened seriously when a foreigner, Lancelot du Lac, falls in love with Arthur's queen, Guenevere, resulting in a battle in which Arthur loses his life. The musical reflected Lerner's vision of a philanthropic Eden, destroyed by foreign intervention. *Camelot* became synonymous with the John F. Kennedy presidency (1960-63), its handsome leader and his wife Jacqueline Kennedy reflected in the characters of Arthur and Guenevere. Arthur's death would also mirror the president's assassination in 1963, adding pathos to the ending of those apparently golden times.⁹ Although *Finian's rainbow* (perhaps due to its stage-Irish overtones) did not appeal to Irish-born audiences, the tuneful melodies and strong choral numbers in *Camelot* would make the latter a popular choice with a number of amateur Irish musical societies.

The Cold War that followed World War II was one of the factors helping to create a 'conforming culture'. At a time when critical dissent was suppressed, few brave souls dared to speak out about social issues. One was Frank Loesser, a New York born composer, whose musical *Guys and dolls* made its debut in 1950. The show was based on a short story by Damon Runyan, *The idyll of Miss Sarah Browne* (1933). Runyan's stories were based on the seedy underworld of New York, that of gamblers, gangsters and their lady friends known as 'molls'. Its most witty libretto drew attention to and poked fun at organised crime. Nevertheless, the characters portrayed in the show were a far cry from the mobsters of later years, depicted with chilling accuracy in Mario Puzo's *The godfather*.¹⁰

Other successful American musicals that would later become popular with amateur groups in Ireland included *Fiddler on the roof*, composed by Jerry Bock and Sheldon Harnick which opened on Broadway in 1964, and became the longest running musical for many years. Set in Czarist Russia, it deals with the life of the Jewish population of a small village, and their struggles with changing values, eventually heralding the expulsion of the Jews from the village. The musical struck a chord, not just with members of the Jewish

⁹ Stanley Green, *The world of musical comedy* (3rd ed., New York, 1974), p. 308.

¹⁰ Frank Loesser, *Guys and dolls* (New York, 1950); Mario Puzo, *The godfather* (New York, 1969).

faith, but with people throughout the musical world: it dealt with universal themes of expulsion, loss and alienation. The subsequent film, starring Israeli actor/singer Chaim Topol, who was nominated for an Oscar, added to the appeal of this compelling musical.¹¹ Other Jewish-inspired musicals followed, including *Two by two*, a small-cast musical about Noah and the ark, by Richard Rodgers and Martin Charnin (1970), based on Clifford Odets' book *The flowering peach* (1954). One that became a firm favourite with Irish musical theatre amateurs was *Godspell*, based on St Matthew's gospel and lyrics by John M. Tebalak, with music by Stephen Schwartz. This musical tells the story through a number of parables performed by mime, song and dance, and features Jesus, dressed as cartoon comic hero Superman, with a leather-clad Judas as modern protagonists. One of the songs from the show, 'Day by day', became a popular hit.¹² When produced by amateur societies in Ireland in the 1980s it proved extremely popular, especially with those with a younger membership.

The time lapse between initial performance of musicals in either Broadway or London, and the release of performing rights to Irish amateurs often took some years, so what was pertinent politically at the time of inception had changed by the time performing rights were licensed to amateurs. In the case of *Fiddler on the roof*, first staged in America in 1964, the first amateur production in Ireland was performed by the R & R in 1972.¹³ The Stephen Sondheim show *A funny thing happened on the way to the forum*, was first seen in New York in 1962, but was not performed in Ireland until the late 1980s by Take 4 Productions in Dublin (which will be discussed below).¹⁴

Local societies became familiar with these musicals initially through the medium of radio, first via the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) and later via Radio Éireann. The latter first began broadcasting in 1926, and during the 1930s and 1940s began to include popular music, including songs from current Broadway and London musicals. By then people in Ireland had already become 'addicted ... to the Hollywood film'.¹⁵ Many

¹¹ Jones, *Our musicals, ourselves*, pp 211-15.

¹² Kenrick, *Musical theatre*, p. 251.

¹³ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, p. 72.

¹⁴ Interview with Tom Singleton, retired civil servant, former director of Take 4 Productions, 30 Aug. 2010.

¹⁵ Terence Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history 1922-2002* (3rd ed., London, 2002), pp 141-2.

songs from the Rodgers & Hammerstein and Lerner & Loewe musicals became hits in the popular music charts of the time. As noted, the introduction of original cast recordings of musicals (albums) from the 1940s on meant that the songs became very well known throughout the English speaking world. So when the amateur performance rights became available, societies in Britain and Ireland rushed to secure licences to perform such shows. As well as *Oklahoma!* (1943), *Carousel* (1947) and *South Pacific* (1949), they included *Brigadoon* (1947), *Camelot* (1960), *My fair lady* (1956) and *The sound of music* (1956).¹⁶

Such shows drew the societies away from the operettas and the comic operas of Gilbert & Sullivan in numbers, although they were never entirely overlooked. For instance, the R & R continued its yearly Gilbert & Sullivan season. Other, more traditional shows that remained popular at that time were the operettas of Rudolph Friml's *Rose-Marie* (1924) and Sigmund Romberg's *The student prince* (1924), *The desert song* (1926), and *The new moon* (1928).¹⁷ These European-born classically-trained musicians wrote many of their shows in the 1920-30 era, but they did not become popular with Irish societies until the post-war decades when, depending on the availability of a leading man, they became staples of those societies that employed professional singers such as Austin Gaffney (baritone), John Comyn, Arthur Agnew (father of National Symphony Orchestra oboist David Agnew), Bryan Hoey (tenors) and Cork baritones David McInerney and Brian Donlon, who also sang with Irish National Opera.¹⁸

Another factor that had ramifications for amateur societies was the arrival of new versions of operettas by publishers Glocken Verlag (later Josef Weinberger), of London, in which the tenor roles were transposed to a baritone range. These included *Die fledermaus* (1874), *The gipsy baron* (1885) and *The merry widow* (1905). All three had a number of melodic choral items and retained considerable popularity, especially when baritones such as Gaffney and McInerney could sing former tenor roles.¹⁹ David McInerney noted 'I loved doing Danilo (the male lead) in *The widow* when Glocken Verlag brought it down, I did six

¹⁶ John Lowerson, *Amateur operatics: a social and cultural history* (Manchester and New York, 2005), p. 239.

¹⁷ Green, *The world of musical comedy*, pp 37-62.

¹⁸ Interview with John Allen, musical theatre director, broadcaster and journalist, 22 June 2011.

¹⁹ Interview with David McInerney, Cork Musical Society, 4 March 2013.

Danilos'.²⁰ Tenors were then, as now, a rare breed and highly sought after. Brian Hoey and John Comyn, two popular Dublin-based tenors, enjoyed playing the leading role of Prince Karl Franz, in the romantic musical *The student prince* for several societies, as well as many other leading roles. The librettos of these Glocken Verlag productions were in many cases so vacuous and foolish that they deterred some performers from playing in these operettas, despite the lovely music. Many sought more meaningful parts. In discussion with the author, Brian Hoey recalled that his favourite parts were Charlie Cameron in *Brigadoon* and Freddie Eyensford-Hill in *My fair lady*. Joan Merrigan, a well-known soprano in the 1960s and 1970s played a number of Offenbach heroines, among them Eurydice (*Orpheus in the Underworld*) and Helen of Troy (*La belle Helene*). She was a regular guest artiste with Wexford Light Opera Company, Coolock Musical Society, Dublin and Good Counsel Musical Society, Drimnagh, all of which staged included Offenbach productions. Together with Louise Studley, Merrigan made the role of the widow in Lehar's *Merry widow* their particular preserve during the 1950s and 1960s. Studley was a part-time professional who played leading roles with the R & R and other societies. The *Irish Independent* of 17 April 1951 described her performance as 'vivid and convincing'.²¹

A number of British musicals composed by Lionel Monckton, Noel Coward, Ivor Novello and Sandy Wilson were also popular in the years following World War II, such as *The Arcadians* (1909); *The Quaker girl* (1910); *Bitter sweet* (1929); *Perchance to dream* (1945) and *The boy friend* (1954), before they were superseded by the emerging Broadway musicals. The musicals of Coward and Novello were lush, expensive productions and were in the main staged by the larger societies such as the R & R, Fermoy Choral Society and Cork Operatic Society. Several Dublin and Belfast groups performed Monckton's *The Quaker girl* and *The Arcadians*. These shows were also popular with societies that had a strong singing chorus. The plots of these musicals were rustic English dramas. Another popular show in the 1960s was Sandy Wilson's *The boy friend*, performed by numerous groups, including the St Louis Musical and Dramatic Society, Rathmines, Dublin, which

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Quoted in Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, p. 63.

brought the musical to the Waterford Festival of Light Opera in 1969, taking second place, and winning a number of individual awards.²²

In the 1970s and 1980s the musicals of American composer Stephen Sondheim (born 1930), particularly *A funny thing happened on the way to the forum* (1966), *Sweeney Todd* (1979), and *Into the woods* (1987), became popular, and were regularly performed by Irish amateur societies. Sondheim became known for his witty, conversational lyrics, his seamless merging of words with music, and the variety of his source material. Coupled with his satiric take on life, love, and politics, these features struck a chord with societies in Ireland. Older song and dance musicals such as *Anything goes* (1934) by Cole Porter continued to be performed. Another popular favourite was *The man of La Mancha*, first produced in New York in 1965. This is a musical version of *Don Quixote*. The show was performed by Irish societies on many occasions and seemed to have gone down well with amateur theatre audiences.

A different sort of show, which became popular in the years before and after World War II, was pantomime. This offshoot of the commedia dell'arte had become so prevalent in England that it was eventually drawn out to provide a whole evening's entertainment. Pantomime is a unique form of musical theatre, where the theme became increasingly based on fairy tales such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, or *Aladdin*. The leading man ('principal boy'), usually handsome and brave, is played by a girl, while the comic elderly characters and their henchmen ('dames') are typically played by men. Pantomimes in their new and entirely English form soon became associated with Christmas, and many theatres produced them.²³ In musical society productions the roles were usually played by actors who could sing reasonably well. Sound was used to amplify weaker voices, and scripts were often written locally, and were filled with current jokes about the government, politicians, celebrities – anyone known to the audience could be lampooned at will. The music typically consisted of songs from the show interspersed with

²² Interview with George King, journalist and committee member of the Waterford Festival, 17 May 2012; and for review of *The boyfriend* see John Allen in *AIMS Bulletin*, x (Nov. 1970).

²³ See Victoria and Albert Museum website, www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/early-pantomime (accessed 17 Jan. 2017).

well-known pop songs, and the audience was invited to join in. Costumes were usually made either by members of the local society, or borrowed from other societies; when hired out to other societies, this could be a considerable source of income. The band often consisted of just piano, guitar, and drum, or (in later years) a keyboard. Such productions were a fraction of the cost of the main annual musical, and sold well.²⁴

Choice of show, and directors

Most amateur musical societies had special casting committees, whose members would read a number of scripts before deciding on the choice of production. Some societies picked their shows because a larger neighbouring society had chosen a particular show; and members had travelled to see the show and liked it. This was particularly evident in the midlands, where if Athlone Musical Society produced a certain show, the same choice would probably appear in either Tullamore Musical Society or Birr Stage Guild in the following years.²⁵ A similar situation pertained in Tipperary, where in the 1940s and 1950s, Roscrea was the most prominent society in the area, and where it led, other local societies followed, such as Thurles or Nenagh.²⁶ In south Tipperary Saint Mary's Choral Society was the leader in the area, with Carrick-on-Suir Musical Society and Tipperary Musical Society tending to follow suit. In the R & R, and certain other societies, a strong dynastic element emerged (as noted in chapter 1) which exerted much influence over the choice of show and those who played major roles. A number of societies picked shows to suit their large chorus, since the chorus would be the mainstay of any society, an integral part of its identity, and its members would be the major fundraisers.²⁷ For newly formed societies, the operas of Gilbert & Sullivan were almost invariably the choice of production.

The choice of director for each production was an important matter. Many of the societies formed in the early part of the twentieth century became members of the National

²⁴ Interviews with Stephen Clements, pantomime producer with Ballywillan Drama Group, Portrush, Co. Down, 19 Sept. 2011, and with Moira Nolan, treasurer, Baldoyle Musical Society, 6 June 2013, 10 Feb. 2014.

²⁵ Evidence from cross-referencing titles of musicals produced by societies 1945-86.

²⁶ Noel Dundon, *From stage to page: a history of Thurles Musical Society* (Thurles, 2011), p. 10.

²⁷ Interviews with Nora O'Rourke of the R & R, 23 Oct. 2010; with Mary Butler of Thurles Musical Society, 23 Aug. 2013; with Margaret and Victor Barry, Glasnevin Musical Society, 20 Dec. 2011, and email from Thomas Irish, Wexford Light Opera Society, 19 Sept. 2011.

Operatic and Dramatic Society (NODA), founded in 1899 as an umbrella group for British musical societies, and which came to be based in London (this will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4).²⁸ These societies remained members of NODA after the founding of the Irish Free State in 1922, and as London was the centre of musical theatre, tended to seek guidance from this organisation when choosing a production or seeking directors for their shows. NODA had a panel of directors on its books and a number of Irish societies employed them to direct their shows. These societies included Cork Operatic Society, Roscrea Musical Society, St. Mary's Choral Society, Clonmel Musical Society, and the R & R.²⁹ The directors included Ray Jeffery, Ricky Price, Joyce Bradfield, and Beverly Jones, who were all known for having directed a number of English productions.³⁰ Among the English directors chosen by the R & R were Anthony Cundell and James Belchamber. Jimmy (as he was known) Belchamber was half-Irish and directed twelve productions for the society between 1970 and 1989.³¹ From 1965 most Irish societies joined the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) (discussed in chapter 6), though many of societies in both Northern Ireland and the Republic which were already members of NODA retained their NODA membership and continued to employ directors and other personnel from the UK. Some also rented their scenery and costumes from British companies, a practice that has continued.³²

Among this stable of directors, Ray Jeffery, a former London actor, worked for several years with St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast; Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, County Down; Birr Stage Guild, Offaly, and New Ross Musical Society, Wexford. He was also employed by the Association of Irish Musical Societies as course director for a number of production workshops. A tall bombastic actor, his disciplined approach, colourful language and acid-tongued ripostes could subdue the most belligerent

²⁸ Young, *A century of service*, pp 1-5.

²⁹ Interviews with Eddie Cummins, Clonmel Musical Society, 3 March 2013, and David McInerney, Cork, 4 March 2013.

³⁰ *NODA News 1972-99* and programmes of the Waterford Festival, 1976-89 (D.C.L.A.).

³¹ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, p. 130.

³² Athlone Musical Society, *One hundredth anniversary programme* (Athlone, n.d.).

chorus.³³ He was a specialist in chorus direction and used the same template for each of his productions, wherever he directed. His shows were noted for their overall colour-co-ordination where costumes, scenery and lighting were carefully chosen to blend together in colour-coded harmony.³⁴ Jeffery's productions were slick, well-choreographed, beautifully presented shows that served as a prototype for technical excellence and well-rehearsed choral and principal integration.³⁵ His influence on several societies was immense, and those who worked with him learned much about the basic skills of performance before they in turn passed on their skills to others.³⁶

Imported directors rarely influenced the casting of shows, which was normally completed prior to their arrival. They worked to a tight schedule, usually arriving for a week to block or roughly shape the production, and then returning for two weeks prior to the show being staged. In the interim, societies would utilise the services of an assistant director, a member of the society, who worked with the cast when the director returned to England. A number of these assistants later became directors in their own right, including the late Mary Cummins (Clonmel) and Peggy Hussey (New Ross).

Another source of directors came from closer to home. Army bands were founded in the early years of the new Irish state in 1922 under the aegis of the then minister, Richard Mulcahy, and were initially under the direction of Colonel Wilhelm Fritz Brase and Colonel Christian Sauerzweig, formerly musical directors in the Germany army. As noted in chapter 1, the army had its own School of Music and a number of army officers who had degrees in music were then trained as conductors (the Curragh Musical Society was founded in the Curragh Army Camp, County Kildare in 1956). Some of the officers also served as musical directors either in the place where they were stationed or close to where they lived. These included Colonel Con O'Sullivan, Colonel Fred O'Callaghan,

³³ *Association of Irish Musical Societies 21st anniversary programme*, (Dublin 1986) (in possession of the author, to be donated to the D.C.L.A. collection).

³⁴ 'Jeffery's is [a household name] wherever the amateur music theatre is mentioned...he is the man who revolutionised the face of Ulster's amateur music world', *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Apr. 1993.

³⁵ Interview with Richard Lavery, past chairperson of St. Agnes Choral Society, Belfast, 9 Feb. 2014, and Paul Anthony, former university lecturer and former performer with St. Agnes Choral Society, 13 Nov. 2012.

³⁶ Interview with Moira Nolan, former member of the Pioneer Musical Society, 6 June 2013.

Colonel John Magee and Captain James Weafer. These officers were involved in amateur musical theatre for many years with several musical societies, including the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society, the R & R, the Athlone and Ballinasloe Musical Societies and were involved in a number of operettas and musicals. Cork baritone David McInerney remembers Colonel O'Sullivan as a somewhat brusque but committed conductor, and others remember similar traits in other military musical directors.³⁷ John Allen, a former AIMS adjudicator, recalls an after show party in Collins Musical Society, Cork (an army-based society), when the musical director called out the name of a soldier who had been in the show and ordered him to sing a certain song. This individual rose, saluted and complied with alacrity.³⁸ On another occasion, O'Sullivan's production with the Curragh Musical Society gained the approbation of the *Irish Times*, as follows: 'we do not usually notice the production of amateur musical societies unless they perform in the capital's main theatres ... but John Strauss's *Die fledermaus* ... is worth stretching a point when a high standard is offered. Captain Con O'Sullivan's production was clean, practical and unfussy ... in every way ... the chorus is admirable'.³⁹

Musical directors could also influence the choice of production, especially directors with strong personalities such as the later Fr John O'Brien (Wexford); Frankie Bergin (Roscrea), Gearóid Grant (R & R), Colman Pierce (The Glasnevin Musical Society, Dublin), and William Cairns, OBE (Fortwilliam Musical Society, Belfast). Their influence was particularly strong in vocal casting. The quality of the chorus in these societies was consistently excellent, and they regularly won 'Best chorus' trophies at the annual AIMS awards ceremonies.⁴⁰

This raises the subject of awards. In the 1960s a new and important influence on amateur Irish musical theatre was the John Player Tops of the Town competitions in which community groups and companies, including many multi-nationals, competed for the opportunity to reach the finals of the competition which were televised on RTÉ 1. Tops of

³⁷ Interview with David McInerney, Cork, 4 March 2013.

³⁸ Interview with John Allen, 22 June 2011.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 18 Feb. 1965.

⁴⁰ Programmes of these societies, D.C.L.A.

the Town started in Waterford in 1962 and then became a nationwide variety competition sponsored by the John Player cigarette company.⁴¹ Each entry had a forty-five minute slot which was composed of song, dance and comedy sketches. This involved complex and swift scene changes and a complicated lighting design for each item. There were a number of dance routines and chorus and solo numbers. Large companies became involved in the competitions, such as Irish Distillers, the Electricity Supply Board, Dunne's Stores, Technicon (Swords), Limerick Insurances, and sometimes community groups such as Greenhills Variety Group, Dublin.⁴² In the case of large companies, it was common practice for the producer, musical director, choreographer and technical crew to be paid, and elaborate lighting and stage sets were also paid for. In some cases, musical society performers, directors and technical crews who had not been previously paid by societies were employed and were handsomely remunerated by these companies. The impact on local musical societies was considerable. Technical crews wanted the same standard of equipment they had become accustomed to working with for Tops of the Town. And while the overall technical standards of musicals rose, due to the expertise gained by technical staff during their time with Tops of the Town, budgets also increased, as directors and societies in general realised that the high standards of technical expertise had to be maintained, if they had a chance of winning awards of any kind. The public had also come to expect higher production standards. Competition from television and other sources had to be considered when choosing a show and audiences were becoming more critical of live performances. These factors not only influenced the hiring of more experienced technical personnel in the area of lighting, set design and sound, but costumes and make up were also examined and the practice of hiring costumes from professional costumiers became more prevalent. Courses on make-up and hair arrangements were sought to improve these aspects of the show.⁴³

⁴¹ See John Player Tops website: https://www.facebook.com/John-Player-Tops-of-the-town-Competition-257319501116282/info/?tab=page_info, (accessed 17 Sept. 2016).

⁴² RTÉ Archives website: <http://www.rte.ie/archives/2015/0813/721065-xanadu-are-tops-of-the-town/> (accessed 17 Sept. 2016).

⁴³ Interviews with former directors of Tops of the Town and other musicals, Tom Singleton, 30 Aug. 2010, and Noel McDonough, 18 Feb. 2013.

Further challenges arose in the early 1970s, when a group of musical theatre performers formed a production company named Take 4 Productions to perform more modern and sometimes controversial shows, which many societies would be unable to perform due to restrictions imposed by theatre and hall proprietors who were mainly members of religious orders. Take 4 Productions hand-picked, not just leading players, but the entire chorus, recruiting outstanding performers from other societies. The company produced a number of recent Broadway shows that were Irish premiers, including *The Fantasticks*, *Cabaret*, *Promises, promises*, *Chicago*, and *Mack and Mabel*. The shows were performed in the John Player Theatre, Dublin, and audiences flocked to see these new and exotic musicals.⁴⁴ These productions influenced some of the larger societies in and outside Dublin to move away from the older operettas and musical comedies and to seek out more modern shows. As will be discussed further in chapter 3, the practice of recruiting leading players from other societies had far-flung implications for Dublin societies, which were losing their leading players to the more innovative groups.

One Dublin society that began staging the less familiar musicals was Muckross Musical and Dramatic Society, Donnybrook, Dublin, which staged musicals such as *Robert and Elizabeth*; *Drama at Inish*; *The heart's a wonder* (based on Synge's *The playboy of the western world*) and Steven Sondheim's *A little night music*.⁴⁵ Its most notable production was the Irish premiere of *Two by two*, based on the biblical tale of Noah's ark and the flood. The production was entered in the Waterford Festival of Light Opera in 1978, where the leading actor, Brendan Hughes, won Best Actor in the Festival.⁴⁶ Other societies such as Sandymount Musical Society, Arthur's Team, and the Dublin Area Youth Musical Society (all from Dublin), also frequently took first place in the Waterford Festival from the late 1970s onwards.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Interviews with Tom Singleton, 30 Aug. 2010, and with Mary Monks, former secretary of Take 4, by email, from her home in Vancouver, Canada, 27 Feb.. 2013.

⁴⁵ Interview with John Allen, director of *A little night music*, 22 June 2011.

⁴⁶ Valerie Cox (ed.), *A century of memories: Dominican Convent Muckross Park Past Pupils Union 1912-2012* (Kerry, 2012), pp 119-20.

⁴⁷ Waterford Festival Programmes 1972-1990 in the possession of the author, now returned to owner in Belfast.

At around this time the introduction by the Association of Irish Musical Societies of annual awards in 1973 also had a profound effect on societies, particularly in Dublin and other large urban centres. Award-hungry directors and committees became more selective in their choice of show and cast and would not give leading roles to society members who they felt were not of a sufficient standard to win an award, often preferring to give the role to an outsider. This had a negative effect on the aspirations of some members who felt that the role should have been theirs, causing discontent and often resignations from societies.⁴⁸ In staging shows the societies that performed in professional theatres had a significant advantage over their counterparts which had to make do with school halls or gymnasias, village halls, or rooms rented from hotels. Apart from matters such as scene changing and lighting, sound was a key consideration. In the period after World War II, as operetta increasingly gave way to musical comedy, there was less emphasis on vocal training, and since the musical required more realism from the characters, singers who could act only a little were replaced by those with greater acting skills. As many of the vocalists did not have sufficient vocal volume to fill the larger auditoriums, the use of microphones became increasingly necessary. These pieces of equipment evolved from free-standing microphones in front of the cast, or suspended overhead, to sophisticated head microphones attached to the leading performers. While the use of radio microphones could enhance the volume of any voice,⁴⁹ singers with particularly good voices were encouraged to seek vocal training, which many did. The R & R offered a number of scholarships to members who wished to continue vocal training.⁵⁰

Operettas continued to be performed, and still required trained singers. Also, the 1970s and 1980s saw something of a revival of interest in the works of Gilbert & Sullivan, partly due to new versions of some of the pair's classic operas. These included *The black Mikado* and *The hot Mikado*. As the performing rights to these comic operas had by this time expired, directors began to take outrageous liberties with plots and music, and there

⁴⁸ Interview with Richard Lavery, past president of St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast, 9 Feb. 2014.

⁴⁹ This was rarely mentioned in any publications but from the 1970s sound engineers became part of technical support terms, such as Sean Clancy (Dublin societies), Willie Kiernan (Maynooth Musical Society), and Star Systems (Thurles). All three are mentioned in Take 4, Trim M.S. and Thurles M.S. programmes, D.C.L.A.

⁵⁰ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, pp 80-84, 192.

was a resurgence in the popularity of such works. Many of the modern musicals were also vocally demanding. The result was that soloists increasingly came from schools of music in Dublin, Cork, Limerick, and Belfast, rather than from the ranks of society members.⁵¹

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the changes in professional musical theatre from the end of World War II to the end of the 1980s, and has considered how the war and its consequences, social and political, were mirrored in the burgeoning musicals of this time. Musicals became used as a means of social and political comment, sometimes dealing with serious matters and imparting moralistic messages and ideals to the public. The chapter has also addressed the main reasons for changes in musical taste in Ireland and in methods of production. It has argued that while operetta and the works of Gilbert & Sullivan continued to have an appeal and to be performed, the more traditional works were increasingly supplemented by the musical comedy of Rodgers & Hammerstein, Lerner & Loewe, and others, and later by (among others) the sophisticated musicals of Stephen Sondheim. Changes in casting, technical support and the coming of amplified sound changed the face of musical theatre. By 1990 the standard of productions in Irish amateur musical theatre had risen considerably, and from the late 1970s onwards Irish musical societies increasingly won awards at events such as the Waterford Festival. All this meant a greater variety and range of productions by amateur musical societies, with greater musical versatility and sophistication.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp 99-100.

Chapter 3

The location and membership of amateur musical societies in Southern Ireland, 1945-1990

Musical societies' location; regions, town and country, 1945-90

As noted in chapter 2, although southern Ireland adopted a neutral stance during World War II, known somewhat euphemistically as 'the Emergency', over 50,000 men enlisted in the British armed forces.¹ When the war ended in 1945, the musical societies that had either ceased performing musicals during the war or had put on very few productions, gradually resumed their activities. Ireland was slowly returning to a normal existence, though shortages and rationing were still in place. Many societies produced at least one show in 1946.² In the latter stages of the war and the years following the conflict, a number of new societies were founded in various towns of Ireland and in the major cities, a trend that continued until the latter part of the 1980s. A similar situation prevailed in war-torn Britain, where some rural societies continued performing and others ran concerts and similar events as fundraisers. Despite post war austerity and apprehension concerning the threat posed to amateur musical productions in Britain by television, there were encouraging signs such as the formation of the Little Theatre Guild in the London area, with thirteen affiliated societies. The magazine *Amateur Stage* was launched in London in September 1946, and gradually amateur societies in Britain returned to their normal pursuits.

This chapter will focus on the reasons why new amateur societies were formed in post war Ireland and down to the late 1980s, and seek to identify those who took the lead in setting them up in their locality. Also investigated are the reasons why members joined these societies. Information

¹ Terence Brown, *Ireland, a social and cultural history, 1922-2002* (3rd ed. London, 2002) pp160-1.

² Young, *A century of service*, pp 45-6

on amateur musical theatre from the end of the war to 1965, when the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) was founded, is surprisingly difficult to find. Some useful sources are original programmes of the societies, where available, and the local press. These sources give details on the production and cast but rarely give information on how and why individual societies were formed. The main sources of information for that period are the interviews conducted by the author with older members of the societies.³ From 1965 onwards, following the foundation of AIMS, the author also has the minute books of the national council of AIMS, which give some information on new members, constitution, and finance.⁴

In Ireland in the post war years there was a surge in the growth of amateur musical theatre. Several reasons are posited for the growth in numbers at this time. Just as had been the case earlier in the century, as noted in chapter 1, some societies were founded to give men (it was essentially men who were targeted) an alternative to regular visits to the local public house. For some decades Roman Catholic clergy had been preaching constantly on the evils of drink, exhorting men to refrain from imbibing, particularly during the Lenten season. (This season is a seven-week time of penitence prior to Easter Sunday: the practice of refraining from the consumption of alcohol, confectionery and smoking was common among church-goers.) The level of alcohol consumption had declined worldwide in the early twentieth century as the result of a temperance movement, which in the period 1919-33 introduced prohibition on alcohol production in several countries such as Canada, Finland, Norway and the USA. Even where there was no prohibition, as in Britain and Ireland, the influence of the temperance movement had an impact. However, after World War II the influence of the movement declined and as world economies began to grow so too did alcohol consumption.⁵ As noted in chapter 2, County Tipperary already possessed two musical societies, one in Roscrea, and one in Carrick-on-Suir, where Fr (later Canon) James Harty had formed a musical society in 1943 to occupy young people as well as keeping men from drinking in Lent. The first production, held in the Castle Cinema, was *HMS Pinafore*.⁶ Other towns in County Tipperary followed suit, including Clonmel, and Fethard, where the Hogan Musical Society was

³ Seventy-nine interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2016, but not all interviewees were prepared to sign the consent form.

⁴ Minute books of the meetings of the National Council of AIMS, 1965-1990 on loan to author.

⁵ Daniel A. McCoy, "Issues in Irish alcohol policy, a historical perspective with some lessons for the future" in *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland*, vol. xxxi, part 4 (1965).

⁶ <http://www.carrickmusicals.com/> (accessed 8 Sept. 2016).

formed in 1981.⁷ Tipperary town formed a society in 1948 with the help of local curate Fr O'Brien. Nenagh Choral Society was founded by a local curate in 1949, following an advert in the *Nenagh Guardian* which mentioned a meeting to be held in Loreto Hall, to form a musical society. Fr John Hayes was elected chairperson.⁸ Thurles Musical Society was founded in 1951 by Fr William Noonan, a lover of music and an accomplished violinist. Noel Dundon, the editor of the society's history, notes that the members were 'inspired by the success of Roscrea Choral Society's production of *The desert song*' to form the society.⁹ These societies were founded by Catholic priests who had the power and the means to do so, including the provision of rehearsal premises, publicity in parish notices and influence. When the cast of the Patrician Musical Society, Galway, were rehearsing during Lent, the local parish priest, Fr Forde, absolved members from fasting when rehearsals were running late.¹⁰ Priests were encouraged by the Catholic church to take a leading role in parish activities. As Terence Brown states in his social history of Ireland 'Catholic clergy were occasionally to the fore in the encouragement of amateur dramatics because they saw the social benefits to be derived from community effort because...they saw in local drama an alternative to the questionable offerings of Hollywood.'¹¹ For reasons not known, the plot of musicals including love scenes seemed inoffensive to clergy, whereas embracing in film was monitored by the Hays Office in America¹² and eagle-eyed bishops and the film censor in Ireland.

Apart from church influence, many people who joined musical societies at this time, and later, came from a background of musical theatre and grew up listening to the comic operas of Gilbert & Sullivan, the operettas of Monckton, Lehar and Romberg and later those of Rogers and Hammerstein, and Lerner and Loewe. A number of musical society members throughout Ireland, interviewed for this study, came from similar backgrounds and developed a love of musicals from their childhood. Many joined either their local society or, if employment or a relationship took them to another town, city or, in a number of cases to Dublin, they sought out and joined a musical society there. One such was Nora O'Rourke, a native of County Cork, who on starting work with Aer Lingus in Dublin in the 1960s joined the company musical society. She later joined the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society (the R & R) as an assistant stage manager (and later

⁷ Interview with Michael O'Donoghue, teacher and musical theatre director, www.fethard.com/organ/HogMusical.html (accessed 8 Sept. 2016).

⁸ *Nenagh Guardian*, 12 March 1949.

⁹ Noel Dundon, *From page to stage: a history of Thurles Musical Society* (Thurles, 2011), p. 9.

¹⁰ James Casserly, *Patrician Musical Society, 1952-2006* (Galway, 2006), p. 15.

¹¹ Brown, *Ireland*, p.167.

¹² The Hays Office promoted a code of self-censorship for films (www.artsreformation.com/a001/Hays-code.html) (accessed 5 April 2017).

became production manager with the group).¹³ Limerick born baritone, Patrick Doherty, a chemist, moved to Dublin in the late 1980s, owing to a change in employment. He had no friends or family in Dublin but an encounter with members of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS), at a concert in Limerick just prior to his move to the capital, resulted in his joining a number of musical societies in Dublin where he made lifelong friends. Sean Hogan, a native of Clonmel, and Barney O’Gorman from Limerick became senior committee members of the R & R.¹⁴ Noel Murphy from Cork city came to Dublin to find work as a professional actor. He stayed in Dublin, played a number of roles with the R & R and with the Loreto Musical Society, and joined the RTÉ Players where he remained for many years.¹⁵

‘The show’, ‘d’opera’, the ‘musical’ often began in the local secondary school. A significant number of musical society members had been in school productions and had enjoyed the experience. For many, including the author, it was a life changing experience. There was usually a central figure, often a teacher, who was a former participant in a show, who brought their love of musical theatre into the onerous task of directing the school musical. Several pre-war past-pupil societies were already in existence, including the Cecilian Musical Society, Limerick (1919) and the Belvedere College society in Dublin (1927). Old boys of O’Connell school, North Richmond Street, Dublin, run by the Irish Christian Brothers, together with a teacher, Brother Fitzgerald, had formed the O’Connell Musical and Dramatic Society in 1943. In the 1960s Brother Fitzgerald, or ‘Brother Fitz’ was a colourful figure who ensured that the society was a social club as well as a musical society. He became a regular donor of scores and libretti to the AIMS library.¹⁶ Other past pupil societies included the Patrician Musical Society, Galway, which was formed in 1952 by past pupils of the Patrician Brothers School. The society has recently celebrated its sixtieth birthday. In 1960 the Belfast Operatic Company was founded, drawing many of its members from Stranmillis Teacher Training College (by then catering mainly for Protestants).¹⁷ In 1962 a past pupil of Loreto College, Crumlin Road, Dublin, Ann Hodgins, the possessor of a wonderful, trained mezzo soprano voice, decided to form a musical society as a vehicle in which to perform and as a social

¹³ Interview with Nora O’Rourke, retired executive with Aer Lingus and current Production Manager of the R & R, 23 Oct. 2010.

¹⁴ Myles Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, pp 9, 62.

¹⁵ See Loreto College (Crumlin Road) Musical Society, *Programme (Oklahoma!)* (1972); Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, p. 154.

¹⁶ ‘History of the O’Connell Musical Society’, <http://oconnellmusicalsociety.com/history.html> (accessed 2 Sept. 2016); and recollections of the author of her time as librarian for AIMS, 1973-93.

¹⁷ Interview with Thompson Steele, past president, Belfast Operatic Company, 8 Feb. 2012; his MS ‘From the Long to the Short Strand: a history of Belfast Operatic Company’ (copy in author’s possession).

outlet for other ‘Loreto girls’ including the author.¹⁸ Mother Cecily Morris, the music teacher, hugely influenced the founding members of Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society. Those influenced by such teachers included two former presidents of AIMS, Marian Eddery and Mary Mullen, together with Alice Kelly, former public relations officer of AIMS and Eithne Weymes, past president of Loreto Past Pupils’ Musical Society, and treasurer of Take Four Productions. All were pupils of Mother Cecily from 1950 to 1962.¹⁹ The committee, in common with the other past pupils musical societies in south Dublin, comprised young people including teachers, civil servants, office workers, insurance and bank officials and retail staff. The majority had no experience of committees or organisational skills. All were imbued with enthusiasm for the project, a love of musicals, and a desire to perform on stage.²⁰ Little thought was given by anyone to the financial implications of setting up a society. Nevertheless, Loreto (Crumlin Road) Past Pupils’ Musical Society remained in existence for several decades until (in common with certain earlier past-pupil societies in Dublin, such as St Louis Past Pupils Musical Society in Rathmines, and Muckcross Past Pupils Musical Society) it was disbanded due in part to changing influences, a growing lack of interest or financial difficulties.²¹

Michael O’Donoghue, a retired secondary school teacher from the High School in Clonmel, produced the school musical for around thirty years. Pat McElwain, a former pupil at St Jarlath’s College, Tuam, now a primary school principal in Dublin, produced and performed in numerous musicals. He owed his love of musical theatre to his former English teacher Joe Donoghue, and music teacher Noel Kirrane, both sadly deceased, who were directors of the musical in St Jarlath’s College for many years. The Saint Louis Past Pupils Musical and Dramatic Society spawned generations of amateur musical theatre performers, including West End star Siobhán McCarthy, who created the role of ‘the mistress’ in *Evita* (Lloyd Webber and Rice) in 1978 and later created the role of Mama in the musical *Mamma mia* (1999), based on the music of Abba. Stranmillis Teaching Training College, Belfast, was a provider of amateur conductors, chorus master/mistresses and leading performers for fifty years. The Ursuline Convent in Thurles, County Tipperary was responsible for a number of past pupils’ involvement in musical theatre. Past pupils

¹⁸ Interview with Gerry Martin, former Chief Officer of Comhairle Na nOispideal, former founder member of Loreto Musical Society, also founder member of the Association of Irish Musical Society and editor of its magazine *AIMS Bulletin*, 20 Jan. 2012.

¹⁹ Interviews with Eithne Weymes, 22 June 2011, Marion Eddery, 19 Jan. 2011.

²⁰ Interview with Eithne Weymes, past committee member and chairperson of Loreto Musical Society, 22 June 2011.

²¹ Interview with Marion Eddery of Loreto Musical Society, 19 Jan. 2011.

included Mary Butler, former president of AIMS,²² and Mary Rose McNally, a musician and musical director in the Tipperary area and musical director of the AIMS summer school. Through all parts of the island, teachers played and continue to play a major role in amateur musical theatre in schools, and trained thousands of performers in musical theatre, from schools of all denominations. In this way, the local musical society became an integral part of the cycle of annual events in many suburbs, towns and villages.²³

In 1963 a group of young men from the Inchicore Boys Club in Dublin joined Loreto Musical Society. These men were perceived as being from a more working class area, and in fact a special meeting was held by the committee to see if these men were ‘the right sort’ to mix with the girls in the society.²⁴ The fears were groundless, however, as many of the female members married several of the ‘Inchicore men’, resulting in eleven marriages within five years. The members were also involved in other activities. Some were members of sodalities and involved in mentoring young boys both in Inchicore and in John Bosco Boys’ Club in Drimnagh. Several of the members were involved in the Legion of Mary. Others were involved in the St. Vincent de Paul Society, working on O’Connell Street Dublin, distributing medals and leaflets.²⁵

The cost of housing in the Dublin area rose prohibitively in the 1970s and 1980s. This resulted in many young couples seeking houses in either County Dublin or neighbouring counties such as Kildare, Louth, Meath and Wicklow. The outcome resulted in a number of members involved in musical theatre leaving suburban Dublin and moving out to neighbouring counties. Former members of societies, now residing in the new satellite towns of Dublin, missed their musical pastime. Some joined an existing society or became involved in the foundation of new societies. One such was Arthur McGauran, an electrical engineer, formerly a member of his local society, Good Counsel Musical Society, Drimnagh. He moved to Clane, a town in County Kildare with his wife Teresa whom he met while playing the part of Merlin in Loreto Musical Society’s production of *Camelot* in 1976. McGauran joined Clane Musical Society, and played a number of leading roles with this group. He later directed a number of their productions. As his children came and grew into their teenage years they too joined the society. His son David (Dave) McGauran, a

²² Interview with Mary Butler, 23 Aug. 2013.

²³ Interview with Victor Barry, former president of the Glasnevin Musical Society, 20 Dec. 2011.

²⁴ Interview with John Allen, broadcaster, journalist and founder member of Loreto Musical Society, 22 June 2011.

²⁵ Interview with Eithne Weymes, 22 June 2011, and Joan Allen, former members of Loreto Musical Society and members of St. Vincent de Paul Society, 22 June 2011.

music graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, became musical director for the society. His two younger sons and daughter became members of the chorus and his second son Art, went on to play various roles with the group.²⁶ Clane Musical Society was founded in 1983 by Marie Hickey, a native of Greystones, County Wicklow, and a former member of Greystones Musical Society. She moved to Clane after her marriage and founded the society, directing many of the early productions.²⁷ The author (as mentioned above, a former member of Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society), moved to Malahide in 1973 and in 1978 co-founded Malahide Musical Society with John Miley, a chartered accountant, drummer, and former pupil of Belvedere College, and Orla Fenix, former member of Harold's Cross Musical Society. Elsewhere in County Kildare, the musical societies of Kilcock, Kill, Leixlip, Naas and Newbridge had similar origins.²⁸ The members came not just from Dublin but from cities and towns where musical societies already existed. Conor Kilduff came to Newbridge Musical Society *via* Athlone Musical Society where his family had originated, and where his brother Alfie was the chairperson of the society.²⁹

In County Meath, Navan, Trim and Kells musical societies have been active since the post war period and their ranks were continuously swollen by expatriate Dubliners together with exiles who came to work in these towns.³⁰ In County Wicklow, Jim Molloy, now in his eighties, and formerly a master baker in Kilkenny, joined the Kilkenny Musical Society in the 1950s. He moved to Bray and set up a bakery and shop there. He joined Bray Musical Society and has been a member for fifty years.³¹ The examples given above are a mere microcosm of how musical societies began and continued through generations, founding a number of musical dynasties.

It was noted in chapter 2 that in 1974 a group of performers and administrators of Dublin musical societies decided to form a production company, Take 4 Productions, to perform more modern musicals, many of which were overtly sexual or political.³² The shows they wished to produce were modern and controversial and might not be permitted by the owners of premises in which societies had hereto performed, who were in the main religious orders. The group was

²⁶ Interview with Arthur McGauran, 5 June 2013.

²⁷ Website of Clane Musical Society, <http://clanecommunity.ie/groups/clane-musical-society/> (accessed 28 July 2014).

²⁸ See for instance Joe Connolly, *Musical theatre behind the spotlight* (Newbridge, 2015), p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ For instance, St Mary's Musical Society, Navan, produced musicals in the mid-1950s; it was re-formed in 1967: see Navan and District Historical Society, <http://navanhistory.ie/index.php?page=st-mary-s-musical-society> (accessed 5 April 2017).

³¹ *AIMS 21st anniversary programme* (Dublin, 1986).

³² *Evening Herald*, 15 May 1978; *Irish Independent*, 11 May 1976.

composed of Edmund ('Ed.') Brady, computer programmer with the European Space Agency, Brendan Hughes (assistant mortgage manager, Irish Permanent Building Society), Mary Monks (secretary/personal assistant to Ambrose McInerney, owner of McInerney Holdings, a large building firm) and Tom Singleton (postman and later civil servant), All four were in their late twenties/early thirties. They embarked on a series of modern shows, starting with *The fantasticks*, by Stephen Schwartz, followed by *Cabaret*, (Kander and Ebb), *Promises, promises* (Bacharach and David) and *Company* by Stephen Sondheim. All principal performers were invited to audition, as were the members of the chorus. The very fact that participation was by invitation acted as an instant lure to the top musical theatre performers in the Dublin area. A further attraction was the nature of the musicals performed by the group. The reviews of the shows were largely favourable, including those by John Finnegan of the *Evening Herald*³³ In 1976 Take 4 entered its production of *Cabaret* in the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera. The show caused a sensation and won several individual awards. These shows were produced on a limited budget and were funded by the four members of the production company.³⁴ (The scenery was made in the front garden of the author's home at weekends, and the author also helped to market the show to other musical societies, taking phone bookings of tickets and working front of house.) Costumes and props were also made by the members.³⁵ The group relied on door receipts alone to cover production costs. To ensure that no loss would be made, the show would run for sixteen nights, which took a significant toll on amateur voices, stage and front of house crew. A decision was made not to have a raffle (it was common practice among most musical societies to hold nightly raffles during productions, but Take 4 was keen to appear more professional). The cast and crew were office managers, civil servants, technicians, an architect, an auctioneer, retail staff, a printer and housewives. They also included an electrician, carpenters and other tradesmen mainly drawn from the lower middle classes. This group performed in the John Player Theatre but had no connection with the local community, as the members came from all parts of the city. The after show drinks held the group together and fundraising was done within the group, including table quizzes, cabaret nights and garden parties. Take 4 went on to produce other modern shows such as *Chicago, Mack and Mabel* (Herman and Stewart) and a re-run of *Promises, promises*. Finally, this group, in common with many others, suffered from a 'split', resulting in Ed Brady leaving the group, a significant loss.³⁶ While Take 4 continued for a few more years, it too folded. Despite its

³³ Review of *Chicago*, *Irish Press*, 26 Sept. 1984; see also *Evening Herald*, 26 Sept. 1984.

³⁴ Interview with Tom Singleton, retired civil servant and former director of Take 4, 30 Aug. 2010.

³⁵ Interview with Joan Allen, props mistress for Take 4 Productions, 22 June 2011.

³⁶ Interview with Tom Singleton, 30 Aug. 2010; reminiscences of the author (a member of Take 4).

short life, Take 4 changed the face of musical theatre in Ireland. Other musical society committees then realised the limits imposed by producing musicals in either parish halls or halls in religious communities. They, too, sought other secular venues, if affordable. An example of this occurred when in 1989 the O'Connell Musical Society was asked by St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, to remove a banner advertising *The best little whorehouse in Texas*, its latest production, from the gate of the college.³⁷

Further damage occurred in that producers and committees of musical societies, which had hitherto confined leading roles to their own members, began to seek alternatives from other societies if none of their own members were judged to have sufficient talent, citing Take 4's methods of casting as a precedent. The knock-on effect was to have long term consequences. Many of the best people joined, or were lured to, the more progressive societies, leaving the less talented members behind. Some members, exhilarated at the prospect of performing on the stage of the Gaiety Theatre or at the National Concert Hall, were drawn to performing with the R & R, or later with Lyric Opera. This caused resentment in some cases, causing fractures in society relationships, and leading in some cases, to the inevitable 'split', more of which later. In musical societies, in common with other societies and associations, disagreements and differences of opinion were common, often leading to members leaving or joining other groups.³⁸ Ruptures were frequently caused by artistic differences, and monetary issues. Other rifts were caused by perceived and real arrogance on the part of committees, causing a distance to develop between them and ordinary members.

Probably because women were more likely to have experienced musical theatre through school productions, they tended to outnumber men among musical society members. As a result, new male recruits were always welcome in musical societies, whether talented or not, singer or tone deaf.

Up to this time, some committees had run their musical societies like their personal fiefdom, and in some cases, had brought influence to bear on the production team to cast their favourites in leading roles. In many cases, other performers had to wait years to get a part. Glynis Casson, now a professional actress, daughter of Christopher Casson and granddaughter of Dame Sybil Thorndyke and Sir Lewis Casson, played a number of leading roles with the R & R and Take

³⁷ Reminiscences of the late Joe Donnelly, 4 April 2011.

³⁸ Interview with Sinead Clements, former member of DAYMS [see below], 19 Sept. 2011.

4 Productions as a means of attracting professional roles.³⁹ She eventually played in *Gigi*, *My fair lady* and other roles in Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas, including Ruth in *HMS Pinafore* and Inez in *The gondoliers*.⁴⁰ Such practices caused a lot of dissatisfaction among younger members and led the way for the advent of another influential group.

In 1983 an encounter between the author and a young civil servant and journalist, Brian Merriman, at a musical theatre workshop in An Grianan in County Louth, resulted in a decision to form a musical society for young people in Dublin. Merriman was a journalist, singer and dancer from Waterford city, then living in Dublin. He was also a civil servant and press officer to Gemma Hussey T.D. He had trained in voice at the College of Music in Chatham Street, Dublin. The resulting society was named Dublin Area Youth Musical Society (DAYMS). Its first production was *HMS Pinafore*, a Gilbert & Sullivan comic opera, followed by the opera *Christopher Columbus* by Offenbach. The society then performed some more modern musicals such as *West Side story*, *Godspell*, *Zorba* (Kander and Ebb), and *The hired man* (Bragg and Goodall). All these productions were directed by Brian Merriman.⁴¹ The main feature of this group was that members were young in comparison to those belonging to mainstream societies. The age span initially ranged from fifteen to the mid thirties, though later, older members also joined, as the society extended the scope of its productions. An emphasis on inducing younger people to become involved in musical theatre was the core ideal of DAYMS. Both working and middle class members joined, including secondary school and university students, apprentices, office workers, sales representatives, civil servants, insurance and bank officials. DAYMS won many awards. It was successful at the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera in 1989 and 1990, at the Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera (1990), and in the AIMS Awards, winning the Best Overall Show and ten individual awards with *Godspell* in 1987.⁴² In 1989, the society took part in the Bangor Festival, taking first place with *The hired man*, followed by an appearance at the Newport Musical Theatre Festival in Wales, where the show was highly acclaimed.⁴³ The advent of this group led to a number of junior or youth musical societies being formed throughout Ireland.⁴⁴

³⁹ Interview with Glynis Casson, 2 July 2011; *Irish Independent*, 3 Oct. 1987.

⁴⁰ Myles Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, p. 196.

⁴¹ See *Irish Examiner*, 5 Oct. 1987; *Irish Press*, 3 Oct. 1988; interview with Brian Merriman, July 2013.

⁴² *Irish Examiner*, 5 Oct. 1987.

⁴³ The Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera, *Festival programme 1991-2*, lists all winners of earlier festivals.

⁴⁴ AIMS website, www.aims.ie, and society websites in Newcastle, Co Down, New Ross, Co. Wexford, Cecilian Youth Musical Society, Castleknock, Dublin.

Membership of musical societies

Rank and file members came from all walks of life, though they were mainly from the middle classes. They included office workers, junior managers, civil servants and gardai, teachers, electricians, postal workers, fitters and carpenters, and in some cases, members of existing drama groups. Others were members of the legal profession, such as Mr Justice Peter Kelly (now president of the High Court), who was a member of the Pioneer Musical Society, and Paul Kelly, tenor, a barrister, who worked in the law library.⁴⁵ Tony O'Reilly, media mogul, late of Independent News and Media had his first stage experience in Belvedere Musical Society. David McClarty, MLA for East Derry, recently deceased, performed in pantomime and musicals for forty years with his local societies, Ballywillan Drama Group and Portrush Musical Society, Country Antrim. Some were confident and others were timid and shy but soon became involved in the group, as chorus members, dancers, stage crew, and scene painters.

In the course of interviews with past and present members of musical societies throughout Ireland, members were asked about their reasons for joining such societies. It emerged that members joined musical societies for various reasons. The premier reason for joining a musical society had less to do with music than wishing to meet members of the opposite sex. Both Gerry Martin and Tom Singleton, former civil servants and members of Loreto Crumlin Road Past Pupils Musical Society were quite outspoken in their reasons for joining musical societies. Neither man was, at that time, interested in music; they felt that they were unable to sing and joined merely to meet girls.⁴⁶ Both men later met their wives through musical society involvement. Men sometimes joined because girl friends urged them to do so.

Many joined musical societies in towns and urban areas where they were working, such as gardai, teachers, and bank officials, or factory workers in sugar beet or meat factories in Tuam, Roscrea and Thurles.⁴⁷ In the larger cities, where numbers might permit such developments, societies could be formed from members of a trade or profession, such as the Teachers' Musical

⁴⁵ Mr Justice Peter Kelly is pictured, in costume, in Valerie Cox (ed.), *A century of memories: Dominican Convent, Muckross Park* (Kerry, 2012), p. 173.

⁴⁶ Interview with Tom Singleton, 30 Aug. 2010, and interview with Gerry Martin, 20 Jan. 2012.

⁴⁷ Interview with Mary Butler, Chairperson of Thurles Musical Society and National Secretary of AIMS, 23 Aug. 2013.

Society (Irish National Teachers Organisation) in Dublin. When the Cecilian Musical Society was formed in Limerick, the sisters, cousins and friends of the men were called upon to join, and this was typical of many other groups.⁴⁸ Others joined musical societies to sing, either as part of a chorus or wanted to dance.⁴⁹ A number were singers who had vocal training wished to join as a means of showcasing their talent, such as John Allen, a founder member of Loreto Musical Society.⁵⁰ Others were urged by parents or local clergy to join. They included Brian O'Neill, mechanic and former national treasurer of AIMS, whose mother brought him to the now defunct Fr Matthew Musical Society in Church Street and told him to join.⁵¹ Kathleen Garahy, a stalwart of Birr Stage Guild, County Offaly spoke of a parishioner giving ten pounds at the church gate collection in aid of the Stage Guild, saying of her daughter that the guild gave her something to do and she knew where she was at all times.⁵² Others joined as a result of a mention of the society in church leaflets or bulletins. A member of Birr Stage Guild, having found a leaflet soliciting members in the letterbox, then joined.⁵³ Quite a number were members of past pupils' musical societies and wanted to continue their involvement in musical theatre, either founding or joining a local musical society.⁵⁴ Former choir members who went to teacher training colleges such as Stranmillis Teacher Training College, Belfast often went on to join other Protestant orientated groups such as Belfast Operatic Musical Society, Bangor Operatic Society or Lisnagarvey Musical Society, Belfast. St. Mary's Training College, Falls Road (which later became St Mary's University College) was a Catholic Teacher Training College, and its graduates mostly joined Catholic orientated societies such as St. Agnes Choral Society, Belfast, or the mixed societies such as Fortwilliam Musical Society (Belfast), Newry Musical and Orchestral Society.⁵⁵

Members who came from the Protestant tradition sometimes moved into musical societies through their Boy Scouts or Girl Guides,⁵⁶ or from singing in their church choir or when the local

⁴⁸ Joseph Donnellan, 'The Cecilian Musical Society, a social history', (BA dissertation, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick).

⁴⁹ Email from Michelle Kavanagh, Assistant Principal Officer in Dept of Transport, former member of St. Louis M.S and DAYMS, 23 Nov. 2010.

⁵⁰ Interviews with John Allen, broadcaster and journalist, 22 June 2011, and Gerry Martin, 20 Jan. 2012.

⁵¹ Interview with Brian O'Neill, retired mechanic and former national treasurer of AIMS, 19 April 2013.

⁵² Interview with Kathleen Garahy of Birr Stage Guild, 26 April 2012.

⁵³ Excerpt from Birr Stage Guild *50th anniversary programme*

⁵⁴ Emails from Moira Nolan, Baldoyle Musical Society, (25 Nov. 2010); and Michelle Kavanagh, St Louis Musical and Dramatic Society Mary Monks, Muckross Musical and Dramatic Society (23 Nov. 2010); personal reminiscences of the author.

⁵⁵ Interview with Thompson Steele, 8 Feb. 2012; email from Tony Finnegan, 23 Nov. 2010; interview with Paul Anthony, 13 Nov. 2012.

⁵⁶ Interview with Derek Pullen, accountant and past president of Dun Laoghaire Methodist Musical Society, 21 Sept. 2011.

pantomime group decided to extend its range by producing a yearly musical. These included Ballywillan Drama Group, Portrush, and Belfast Operatic Company, Belfast, together with Dun Laoghaire Methodist Musical Society and the now defunct societies, Clontarf Parish Musical Society and St John's Musical and Dramatic Society, Mounttown, Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin.⁵⁷

Others were simply mesmerised by certain productions and felt a compulsion to be part of what they watched on stage. Paul Timon, a former engineer with the Pfizer company in Dublin states 'I was amazed that a story could be told through music...I wanted to be part of this incredible idea that you could create a new reality and draw an audience into it.'⁵⁸ Brian O'Neill, retired mechanic and former national treasurer of AIMS recently spoke of his first musical 'I just loved it, I can't explain it. I couldn't sing but wanted to be involved, so I became a set builder and stage manager' His brother Derek O'Neill, now chief scientist in Beaumont Hospital, joined the now defunct Whitehall Musical Society where he met his late wife Anne, who was the rehearsal pianist. He later became involved in lighting and is now a well known lighting designer. His son Alan is a professional dancer in the West End.⁵⁹

There are, and always have been, a number of gay men who form a significant part of musical society activity. There is some academic and social conjecture on the reason why this is so.⁶⁰ Some cite the nature of artistic involvement as a reason for the influx and influence of gay men into both amateur and professional musical theatre. There are also those who believe that a number of gay men, unhappy and alienated in their environment find a safe haven in musical societies, a place where they can express their individual artistic talents. It may be that members of musical societies are generally more open and accepting of sexual preferences.⁶¹ In the times before homosexuality was decriminalised gay men lived in fear of being 'outed', particularly in rural areas. A member of a drama and musical group in Northern Ireland mentions being constantly worried of the discovery of his sexuality.⁶² Within the world of amateur musical theatre it is not uncommon for gay men to be directors.

⁵⁷ D.R. Byrne, *Look behind you: a history of Ballywillan Drama Group, Portrush* (Coleraine, 2001) and interview with Stephen Clements, computer programmer, former member of the group, 19 Sept. 2011.

⁵⁸ Email from Paul Timon, 22 Nov. 2010.

⁵⁹ Interview with Brian O'Neill, retired mechanic and former National Treasurer of AIMS, 19 April 2013, and with his brother Derek by email, 23 Nov. 2010.

⁶⁰ <https://www.musicals101.com/gay2.htm> (accessed 29 March 2017).

⁶¹ Interview with former AIMS councillor who wishes to remain anonymous, 1 April 2012.

⁶² Interviewee who wishes to remain anonymous.

As noted, one reason why people joined musical societies was the influence of their parents or grandparents, many of whom were members. In many groups there are a number of musical dynasties some of which have been involved for many years. The Corish family have been members of Wexford Light Opera Society since 1911. The Butler family in Thurles have been involved in the society since its formation, when Martin Butler was a member of the founding committee. His daughter Mary became the chairperson of the society and her cousins and their children continue to perform. A brother of Martin Butler was also a member of Wexford Light Opera Society and his son Noel later joined the committee. In Dublin the Barry family have been involved in the Glasnevin Musical Society since the 1950s with Alfie Barry, who was a dance band leader, and his sister Billie, a prominent choreographer and stage school proprietor.⁶³ A number of celebrities had their early stage training in the Billie Barry Stage School (founded 1964), including Ronan Keating, leading singer with the band Boyzone. The school has provided young dancers for the Late Late Show for forty years and for professional pantomimes in the Gaiety Theatre.⁶⁴ Alfie Barry's son Victor, a retired architect, his wife Margaret and sister Carole are involved in the society, having served on committee since the 60s. Their children Nikki, Paul, Gillian and Andrew have been performing members and also served on the committee. The R & R boasts a number of dynasties. Michael Campbell was a member of the societies in the 1930s, his son Pat became a committee member, secretary and later president of the society, and Pat's children Joanna and Patrick were also chorus members.⁶⁵ This trend continues throughout Ireland, with a number of three generational families in such places as Limerick, Gorey, Belfast, Newry, Longford and Galway. As Brian Gunning, chairperson of Tullamore Musical Society, says in his interview 'there were always musical society parties in our house and I longed to be part of this happy, singing movement'.⁶⁶

The amateur musical theatre movement sometimes resembled a family or a club, whose members were united by a common interest and gave of their time in great measure.⁶⁷ To pick out just a few by way of illustration, they included housewife and grandmother Betty Dwyer from Birr (now aged 87 and still involved), who has made costumes for the group for sixty years. They

⁶³ <http://www.billiebarrystageschool.ie/about/index.html/> (accessed 15 Sept. 2017).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Wexford Light Opera Society, *100th anniversary programme* (Wexford, 2011); Interview with Victor and Margaret Barry, former presidents, Glasnevin Musical Society. 20 Dec. 2011; Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*.

⁶⁶ Email from Brian Gunning, 23 Nov. 2010.

⁶⁷ Interview with Marian Eddery, former chairperson of Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society, 19 Jan. 2011.

included Tom O'Brien, a former resident of Artane Industrial School, a dock worker from the inner city who saw a poster in a window, joined a musical society and became a regular member of Playback Productions.⁶⁸ There were society members who, though no longer with us, are remembered. Amongst them were truly remarkable Edmund 'Ed.' Brady, computer programmer with the European Space Agency, performer, designer, putative singer, acid tongued wit and raconteur. They included the late Dick Meany, shoe shop owner and gifted amateur director from Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary, whose life from the 1950s on was dedicated to his local society, to the provision of a theatre for the town and to charitable work with the St Vincent De Paul organisation.⁶⁹ Baldoyle Musical Society, County Dublin recently lost a founder member, Peter Murphy, company director and performer with the society since its inception in 1972. His performances as the evil wizard in pantomime caused many a child to cling to its mother in fear, and his fine tenor voice graced many productions of Gilbert & Sullivan in the earlier years of the society. Originally from Stoneybatter in the Dublin inner city, he felt that a musical society would enhance the area in north County Dublin where he made his home. He started a choir in the ladies club which evolved into the musical society. He was chairman, president and a lifelong society worker, building scenery, raising funds to offset debts, helping to look after new members. He believed in community involvement and in encouraging young people to join, working with other older members in welcoming and keeping up contact with new members.⁷⁰

Community interaction; support for charities

Musical societies had strong links with other local bodies, particularly in the area of charitable endeavours such as the St Vincent De Paul Society, a charitable society founded in France in 1833 by Antoine Frédéric Ozanan.⁷¹ It bases its activity on practical work in the homes of the poor. The Rotary Club which was founded in Chicago in 1905 has strong connections to local musical societies and is an international service organisation, whose stated human rights purpose is 'to bring together business and professional leaders in order to provide humanitarian services and to advance goodwill and peace around the world'. The Lions Club was also founded in Chicago, in 1917, to

⁶⁸ Personal reminiscences of the author.

⁶⁹ *Irish Times*, 30 Aug. 2008.

⁷⁰ Reminiscences of the late Peter Murphy, past president of the Baldoyle Musical Society and author of *History of Baldoyle Musical Society*, 1 June 2012.

⁷¹ For Ozanan, see James Brodrick, *Frederic Ozanan and his society* (London, 1933).

provide leadership in the community and offer community and humanitarian support.⁷² All of these organisations produced local branches, and many members of amateur musical societies became involved in these or similar organizations. Martin Butler, a local solicitor in Thurles was a founder member of the musical society. He was involved in the tennis and rugby club, the Lions Club and Rotary Club.⁷³ John Grayden, a journalist with the *Belfast Telegraph* newspaper was a founder member of Belfast Operatic Company and a member and historian for Glentoran Football Club in Belfast. Jarlath McConville, past president of Lurgan Operatic Society sang with the society, played Gaelic football and hurling, was heavily involved in his local church and the Saint Vincent De Paul Society. Such was his involvement in the Catholic church that he received the Benemerenti Medal (awarded by the pope for service to the church) for fifty years involvement in the society of St Vincent de Paul.⁷⁴ McConville joined the society when aged sixteen in 1950, and became local secretary in 1956, a post he held until two years ago.⁷⁵ George King, formerly a journalist with the *Irish Independent*, a member of many Dublin societies, was heavily involved in the National Council for the Deaf.⁷⁶ A group from the Patrician Musical Society, Galway, known as the ‘Christmas Concert’, sang carols on the streets each year to raise funds for charity. They also performed in St Francis Home, Newcastle and Merlin Park Hospital.⁷⁷ Many societies offered tickets for their opening nights to a local charity, or invited pensioners.

Along with national or international charities mentioned above, local charities could also benefit, as many groups offered their opening night as a ‘benefit night’ to a selection of worthy causes. To take some examples, Clane Musical Society, County Kildare gave some of its opening night tickets to the residents of St. Raphael’s Special School (which still caters for young persons with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities).⁷⁸ In the 1940s and 1950s the R & R performed its Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas in the Royal Hospital, Donnybrook, Dublin and other hospitals.⁷⁹ When constraints on time prevented further performances in 1959, the society instituted a ‘benefit night’, on which the first or second night tickets for the show were offered to a charity, which could then sell them to raise funds. The first benefit night, for *The merry widow*, on 9 March 1959 was in

⁷² Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible empire: America’s advance through twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); the Points of Light Foundation (<http://www.pointsoflight.org/programs/recognition/extra-mile/melvin-jones>) (accessed 29 March 2017).

⁷³ Interview with Mary Butler, daughter of Martin Butler, 9 Feb. 2014.

⁷⁴ Interview with Jarlath McConville, past secretary of Lurgan Operatic Society, 5 Oct. 2011.

⁷⁵ *Lurgan Mail*, 13 Jan. 2013; interview with Jarlath McConville, 5 Oct. 2011.

⁷⁶ Interview with George King, 17 May 2012.

⁷⁷ James Casserly, *Patrician Musical Society 1952 – 2006* (Galway, 2006), p. 20.

⁷⁸ Website of St Raphael’s School, <http://sjogkildare.ie/st-raphael-s-school> (accessed 1 Aug 2015).

⁷⁹ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, pp 84-7

aid of the Jervis Street Hospital Kidney Unit.⁸⁰ The R & R received £300 and the hospital made £800. Other beneficiaries included the Bon Secours Hospital (1964), Sir Patrick Dun's Hospital (1966), the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (1969) and Santry Stadium, Dublin, the venue for national track and field events (1962). This combination caused the *Irish Press* to note, 'it is not often that athletes and theatre combine, but when that supreme showman Billy Morton, is involved, one's surprise is lessened'.⁸¹ St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast performed an annual concert and carol services for Mencap, an organisation that supported the families of people with learning disabilities. The society selected a different charity each year to support, including Breast Cancer, the MS Society and the support group Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke.⁸² Belfast Operatic Company fundraised for Cancer Research for several years. Stage Aid Musical and Dramatic Society was set up by Armand Gaillard and Tony Finnegan in Gilford, County Down, in 1985, inspired by the precedent of Bob Geldof's 'Live Aid' famine-relief concert. Members gave their services free of charge, and proceeds of productions went to support charitable relief.⁸³ Wexford Light Opera Society sang carols for local charities and was able to raise between €5,000 and €15,000 each Christmas. Thurles Musical Society ran a golf classic each year for Tipperary Hospice and presented substantial amounts to the charity, running into thousands each year, and also raised funds for local schools.⁸⁴ There was a clear benefit for both the society and the charity in that the societies was guaranteed a set amount at the beginning of the run when bookings might be sparse, while the charity made a handsome profit. The publicity gained by the charity, often handled by a professional company, also accrued to the musical society in that it was seen to support a good cause and the show itself would be favourably mentioned, and would benefit later in the run by a possible increase in ticket sales. In the United Kingdom, a league table was published annually in the *NODA Directory* from 1926, detailing monies raised for charity by musical societies, giving details of the relevant societies and the amounts raised. Also mentioned were hospital beds and cots, presented and maintained. Bradford Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society (founded in 1903 to raise money for charity) led the field with Glasgow Orpheus Club in second place.⁸⁵ Such matters were not reported in the *AIMS Bulletin* at national level, but in the society

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp 85-87.

⁸¹ *Irish Press*, 5 Nov. 1962.

⁸² Interview with Richard Lavery, former chairperson of St. Agnes Choral Society, 5 April 2014.

⁸³ See <http://www.tullylish.com/stage-aig/160-stage-aig> (accessed 2 Feb. 2017).

⁸⁴ See for instance, *Wexford People*, 19 Feb. 2000; Thurles Musical Society website, <http://thurlesmusicalsociety.com/evita-charity-night/> (accessed 17 Feb. 2017).

⁸⁵ Young, *A century of service*, pp 35-6; Lowerson, *Amateur operatics*, p. 53.

notes section of the *Bulletin*, the societies themselves were not slow to mention their role in supporting local charities.

As well as contributing to charities, the musical society brought income to the locality. Major beneficiaries of the local show were the local hostellers. Singing for two hours at an intense rehearsal could result in dry throats or tense leading actors as well as chorus members. A libation or two allowed for the relief of throats and tensions and included a ‘come down’ period after the show when performers’ high adrenalin levels returned to normal. Several societies developed a special relationship with other societies. Carrick-on-Suir Musical Society and Galway Musical Society supported each other as did Ballinrobe and Nenagh Choral Societies. In common with most societies, a last night party in a hotel or similar venue ended the run of the show. This sometimes ensured an overnight stay by the travelling society, so local hotels and bed and breakfast establishments benefitted by the influx of travelling supporters. Local businesses could also advertise in the programme of the show and many donated gifts for the raffle, an integral part of the performance.

Funding

Finally, the matter of funding needs to be considered. Despite the fact that in the period under discussion much of the basic work needed for the productions was done by members themselves, such as creating and painting scenery and stage props, making costumes, etc., the costs associated with staging musicals were considerable. These included orchestral costs (usually the largest); fees for directors, choreographers, lighting and sound technicians; printing of programmes, raffle tickets, performing rights for publishers (discussed in chapter 1), hire of theatres, and so on. Musical were (and continue to be) funded by membership subscriptions, patrons and associate members (who would receive tickets for the show and for a reception), selling programmes, advertisements in the programme, raffles, and of course by ticket sales.⁸⁶ It was common for societies to lose money on their main productions, but they aimed to offset such losses by running a series of fundraising activities during the year, such as golf tournaments, concerts, table quizzes, sales of varying kind (cake, jumble, Christmas), and other events such as parties, garden parties, dream auctions.⁸⁷ These events also helped to keep the members together between musicals. By the

⁸⁶ Personal experiences of the author, and evidence from many interviewees.

⁸⁷ Dungan, *If you want to know who we are*, pp 7, 16, 84-7.

1970s, some societies received funding from their local councils, but by the time this study ends (in 1990) that had largely been removed by local authorities. Those societies that staged pantomimes usually diverted the profits from it to the musical show budget.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the reasons for the spread of musical societies in Ireland from the post war years down to the end of the 1980s. In the early period, as in the years before World War II, it was noted that the main factors involved in the spread of these societies included the encouragement of the Catholic clergy, who hoped to divert men from drinking; the role of schools, leading to the formation of past pupils societies, and family involvement. The growing number of musical societies in the counties surrounding Dublin in the 1970s and 1980s was affected by the rising cost of housing in Dublin, leading to an exodus to counties such as Kildare, Meath, and Wicklow, where those who had been involved in Dublin societies might set up new ones or join existing ones. In addition to their social and cultural impact, societies made a considerable contribution to charities, ranging from international bodies to very local ones.

In terms of organisation, the societies were run by committees, which in the early post-war period tended to be powerful in terms of making decisions about staging and casting. But over time this could produce dissatisfaction and splits. Also, with the example of societies such as Take 4 Productions in the 1970s it became more common for societies to look outside their own membership for key roles in musical productions. Funding was a common problem, as the costs of production could be high, and few members had experience of dealing with such matters. However, by a variety of methods and general goodwill among members, these problems were usually overcome.

Chapter 4

The foundation of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (1965) and its impact on amateur musical societies in Ireland

This chapter will examine the background and context of the foundation of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) in 1965. Its predecessor, the National Operatic and Dramatic Society (NODA), founded in Britain in 1898, which a number of Irish societies had joined before the 1960s, will be mentioned. AIMS began with support from musical societies based in Dublin, but quickly spread to take in societies from other parts of the country, and soon there were also regional organisations, and the development of an Awards system.

Ireland in the 1960s

It has been said that few societies changed more rapidly and more radically than Irish society in the 1960s.¹ Ireland was becoming more open to the world. The 1950s were a time of austerity, unemployment and emigration, coupled with rigorous control by the Catholic church and Irish state on many aspects of cultural life. The Catholic church censored certain books. *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books) was a list of publications deemed heretical, anti-clerical or lascivious. The *Index* was formally abolished on 14 June 1966 by Pope Paul VI.² The state also exercised control on film when the 1923 Censorship of Films Act allowed for the

¹ Tony Farnar, *Ordinary lives: three generations of Irish middle class experience* (Dublin, 1991), p. 149.

² *Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07721a.htm> (London 2004), pp 229-30.

appointment of a film censor to grade films and ban those deemed unsuitable for public viewing. In the 1970s, however, a more liberal attitude was adopted by the censor.

The difference between the Ireland of the late 1950s and what came later was evident to the author who spent those earlier years as a pupil of a Catholic boarding school where yearly drama and school musicals were a welcome respite from school work, a brief journey into another reality. The occasional film was shown, including *The student prince*, a film version of a popular musical of the same name by Sigmund Romberg. The following morning the class was summoned by Mother Superior who stated that the film was unsuitable for viewing because the leading lady, a barmaid, allowed the leading man, a prince, to kiss her, even though he was engaged to be married. The class was urged to confess that it had seen the film.

Changes in the 1960s were bound up with economic growth. The economic revival of the early sixties was due in part to the adventurous policies of T. K. Whitaker, ably promoted by Seán Lemass, the taoiseach of the Fianna Fáil government, culminating in the publication of a White Paper on economic development in 1963. During this period, Terence Brown writes of a new air of confidence in the future, which began to blow through Ireland and argues ‘that those years represented a major turning point in Irish fortunes.’⁴

This new state policy attracted over 350 foreign companies to Ireland. There was a new briskness and openness among young people who freely discussed everything from political matters to fashion and sexual behaviour. Young Irish people embraced such change, aping the changes in fashion from Carnaby Street and other areas of London, the clothes of British designer Mary Quant and others, wearing mini-skirts, eye make-up and vivid colours.⁵ As the poet Philip Larkin wrote of the early part of the era ‘life was never better than in nineteen sixty-three ... between the end of the “Chatterley” ban and the Beatles’ first LP.’⁶ By the 1960s the folk music revival was in its ‘boom’ period, with the arrival of the music of American composer/ musicians such as Tom Paxton, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger to Irish shores.⁷ These influential folk singers wrote songs of protest against the withholding of civil rights to African Americans, the Vietnam War and the ever-

⁴ Terence C. Brown, *Ireland: a social and cultural history, 1922-2002* (London, 2004), pp 229-3.

⁵ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/f/1960s-fashion-london/> accessed 10 Oct. 2016.

⁶ ‘Annus mirabilis’, <http://www.wussu.com/poems/plam.htm> (accessed 4 Nov. 2016)

⁷ Gillian Mitchell, *The North American folk musical revival: nation and identity in the United States and Canada, 1945–80* (Burlington, 1988), p, 10.

present threat of nuclear war. These songs became hugely popular in the United Kingdom and in Ireland.⁸

‘Irish traditional music has always been a particularly vital aspect of Irish culture...clearly song, music, dance and related material are all part of ... Irish musical culture.’⁹ The 1960s also saw an extensive resurgence of Irish balladry and traditional music through emerging folk groups such as the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, the Dubliners, the Wolfe Tones and the Johnstons. Music venues such as the Embankment in Tallaght and the Abbey Tavern in Howth together with Dublin city venues such as Slattery’s Public House in Capel Street and The Chariot in Ranelagh resounded to their music, as did similar establishments throughout the country. Active during this period was composer Seán Ó Riada, whose new and endearing re-creation of the ethnic repertory, born of ‘that colonial-ethnic fissure which has been the signature of music in Ireland’ was particularly evident in his work *Mise Éire*, written for the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising in 1966.¹⁰ The presence of art music became increasingly evident through the establishment of choral festivals such that organised in Cork city by Professor Aloys Fleischmann in 1954,¹¹ and the foundation of professional orchestras in Dublin, Belfast and Limerick. The Wexford (Opera) Festival had been founded by Dr Tom Walsh in 1951. Telefís Éireann, the new state television channel, took to the airwaves in 1961 and as President de Valera tellingly foretold ‘never before was there in the hands of men an instrument so powerful to influence the thoughts and actions of the multitude.’¹² The influence of the national broadcasting service on both art and popular music was seminal. Prior to the advent of television, radio stations in the United Kingdom and Ireland played not just popular music but songs from British and American musicals and with the advent of television in both countries, excerpts could be seen and as time went on, entire musicals were shown on television.

⁸ S. J. Connolly (ed.) *Oxford Companion to Irish history*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 2002), p. 394.

⁹ Rionach úí Ógaín, ‘Traditional music and Irish culture’, in Gerard Gillen & Harry White (eds.), *Irish musical studies: 3: Music and Irish cultural history* (Dublin, 1995).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp 393-4.

¹¹ Cork International Choral Festival, <http://www.corkchoral.ie/history-of-the-festival-future-dates/> (accessed 12 January 2017).

¹² ‘RTÉ TV history, the 1960s’: <http://www.rte.ie/tv50/history/1960s.html> (accessed 16 Oct. 2014).

The formation of the Association of Irish Musical Societies

As already mentioned in chapter 1, while a number of musical societies had been in existence in Ireland and Britain since the last quarter of the nineteenth century, World War I caused a pause in amateur musical theatre, as men were fighting in the trenches in both Ireland and Britain. New amateur musical societies were formed in the years between World Wars I and II. Following the war an abundance of musical societies formed during and following the end of World War II. The number of societies continued to increase in the fifties and early sixties throughout Ireland, north and south. A similar resurgence took place in Britain after World War II.¹³ It was during this prolific period of social change in Ireland that the Association of Irish Musical Societies came into being.

Tensions had existed for some time between Irish societies and the London-based rights-holders, similar to the problems experienced towards the end of the nineteenth century that had ultimately led to the formation of the National Operatic and Dramatic Society (NODA), by a group of Lancashire amateur groups in England in 1898.¹⁴ Applications for licences to perform musicals had to be made to the rights holders such as Samuel French Limited, Joseph Weinberger & Company, Chappell Music, and Musicscope. The D'Oyly Carte Company held the rights to the works of Gilbert & Sullivan until the end of copyright restrictions ended (REF). There were delays in the posting and arrival of reading material (musical scores and libretti), coupled with recalcitrant societies that were tardy in returning material, which often arrived back in a bedraggled condition.¹⁵ Music publishers regarded marking the scores as 'vandalism' and any notes made by musicians were supposed to be removed.¹⁶ Gearóid Grant, musical director of the R & R, noted that it could take an entire night to remove the pencil marks made by musicians on scores prior to their return to London.¹⁷ Occasionally the sudden withdrawal of the licence to perform a particular musical caused havoc within societies that had already booked directors and technical personnel. The cancellation of the licence was invariably caused by rights being granted to a professional travelling company to perform a specific work, which always took precedence over any amateur production anywhere in the British Isles, be it Dublin, Cork, Belfast or Galway.¹⁸ A further difficulty for

¹³ J.N. Young, *A century of service. The National Operatic and Dramatic Association*. (London, 1999), p.46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁵ Interview with Joan Allen, librarian of AIMS (1983), 22 June 2011.

¹⁶ Myles Dungan, *If you want to know who we are* (Dublin, 2013), p.181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ One such case is mentioned in the *AIMS Bulletin*, Feb. 1981.

Dublin societies was a duplication of productions and performance dates. This was sometimes unavoidable as groups depended on the availability of the local school or church hall, which was mostly available in holiday periods, mid-term and the week following Easter, but also arose because of the lack of information sharing about what shows were planned. Two or more versions of the same show, particularly in adjacent locations, could result in a degree of animosity between societies and a reduction of audience numbers. Members of Aer Lingus Musical Society, Dublin had on a number of occasions discussed the possibility of forming a co-operative movement for societies, similar to NODA, to counteract the current problems that existed between Dublin groups. Some Irish societies were already members of NODA, but it was not really geared to meet the current needs of Irish societies.¹⁹ The Aer Lingus society found itself in difficulties with the performing rights holders of *Show boat*, giving further impetus to seek a solution to this problem.²⁰ When three productions of *The gondoliers* appeared in Dublin in 1964, four members of Aer Lingus Musical Society decided to take action.

These were Dermot Brophy, Pauline Cooper, Frank Ryan and Tim Morrissey, who worked in various administrative positions within the company. They felt that an association, similar to that of NODA, would greatly benefit Irish musical societies and they were prepared to devote time and energy to get such an organisation off the ground.²¹ All were aware of larger societies such as the R & R, the Glasnevin Musical Society in Dublin, the Cecilian Musical Society in Limerick, Wexford Light Opera Society and some larger urban groups, but little was known of the membership or how to contact them.²² The founding four wisely decided to concentrate on Dublin city, where they had a number of personal contacts. They spoke to their contacts to ascertain whether societies would be interested in the idea of a co-operative movement. After some months of investigation and discussion they decided to organise a meeting to discover whether the possibility of mutual self-help existed.

An initial meeting took place in the Gresham Hotel on 3 June 1965 and several societies sent representatives. Those present found that the idea of an association of societies supporting each other had its attractions. The prospect of sharing publicity, as well as the concept of block-

¹⁹ Association of Irish Musical Societies, *Tenth anniversary Sept. 6-7 1975* (Dublin, 1975), p. 1 (in possession of the author).

²⁰ Young, *A century of service*, p. 80

²¹ Interview with Dermot Brophy, founder member of AIMS, 28 Mar. 2011.

²² *Ibid.*

booking for shows evoked much enthusiasm.²³ A concerted approach to dealing with the performing rights holders in London was also an alluring prospect. Other suggestions such as a lending service for costumes, props, musical scores and scripts met with a guarded response from the larger societies.²⁴ The most significant outcome of the meeting was that a number of people emerged who were willing to convert the concept of mutual co-operation into a reality. A working group of members of some Dublin-based societies was set up to draft a constitution and to prepare for an inaugural meeting. The group consisted of Dermot Brophy (Aer Lingus), Detta O'Brien (Fr Matthew Musical Society, Church Street, Dublin), Gerry Martin (Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society, Crumlin Road), Joyce Tunstead and Pat Galloway (Dun Laoghaire Methodist Musical Society). They set about the task with the conviction that such a co-operative organisation would have certain advantages for amateur musical groups in the country. Eleven Dublin societies decided to become member of the fledgling organisation.²⁵ The Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) was becoming a reality: it was launched at a meeting (again, in the Gresham Hotel) on 6 September 1965.²⁶

Members of the working group were mostly teachers, civil servants, insurance and bank officials, office and retail staff and housewives. A number of the latter were excluded from employment due to the marriage bar imposed on civil servants on marriage.²⁷ Others suffered boredom in suburbia as children grew less demanding and sought outlets outside the home.²⁸ Dermot Brophy, the first chairperson of AIMS, was also pursuing a musical career, having completed a BA in music and English at University College Dublin.²⁹ The inaugural committee of AIMS immediately realised that the first priority of the organisation would be to bring about contact with the other participating societies in both a social and working context. In order to achieve this ambition the committee organised a concert, named *Musical cavalcade*, containing

²³ Association of Irish Musical Societies, *Tenth anniversary*, p. 1; *Aims Bulletin*, 1, no. 11 (Nov. 1966).

²⁴ Interview with Dermot Brophy, past president of AIMS, 28 Mar. 2011.

²⁵ Gerry Martin, 'It began like this ...', in Association of Irish Musical Societies, *AIMS 21st anniversary programme* (Dublin, 1986), pp 4-5.

²⁶ *Ibid*; John Grayden & Alice Hughes (eds), *AIMS: celebrating 50 years of musical theatre* (Belfast, 2015) (unpaginated). No contemporary newspaper references to this meeting have been found, but see (e.g.) *Irish Press*, 4 Oct. 1965.

²⁷ Mary Cullen, 'Women, emancipation, and politics, 1860-1984', in Hill (ed.), *A New History of Ireland*, vii, *Ireland 1921-1984*, pp 826-91 (pp 871, 879); personal experience of author who had to leave work under the marriage bar in 1968.

²⁸ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and cultures: England, 1918-61* (Oxford, 1998), pp 90-96.

²⁹ Interview with Dermot Brophy, 28 March 2011, and with Gerry Martin, retired civil servant and founder member of AIMS, 20 Jan. 2012.

excerpts from musicals performed by member societies.³⁰ On 16 December 1965 150 members of six Dublin societies, Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society (Crumlin Road), St. Louis Past Pupils Musical Society, Rathmines, Pioneer Musical Society, Muckcross Past Pupils Musical and Dramatic Society, Donnybrook, St Pius X Musical Society, Terenure, and Aer Lingus Musical Society combined to present the concert at the Francis Xavier Hall, Gardiner Street, Dublin. The concert presenter was radio personality Bunny Carr and the guest artiste was John McNally, a well-known singer. The concert sold out and made an impact on both performers and public.³¹ A constitution was drawn up and the main objectives of the newly-formed Association of Irish Musical Societies were set out as follows:

Through co-operative effort between amateur musical societies, the objects of the association would be:-

- (a) to assist individual member societies in the staging of musical and other similar productions
- (b) to promote the furtherance of amateur musical activity
- (c) to engage in any activity for the purpose of raising the standards of amateur musical productions.
- (d) to provide services and facilities to member societies including the regular publication of a bulletin containing news and other items of interest to those involved in amateur musical activities
- (e) The association was to be non-political and non-sectarian.³²

To address concerns about the status of the musical societies that were members of the association the constitution indicated that a musical society was to be considered amateur if its principal objects were other than the monetary gain of its members or officers.

Following the success of the concert the committee realised that some regular method of communication between societies was necessary. This decision resulted in the publication of the

³⁰ See *Evening Herald*, 14 Dec. 1965.

³¹ 'The Association of Irish Musical Societies, constitution', in *AIMS Bulletin*, i, no. 11 (1966), pp 8-10, in possession of the author.

³² *Ibid.*

somewhat unimaginatively named *AIMS Bulletin*, a monthly periodical for musical enthusiasts, and the aforementioned Gerry Martin was appointed editor. This publication contained information about impending productions by various societies, information about performing rights holders, advertisements for society productions, and articles on various local personalities involved in musical theatre. A calendar of upcoming shows and dates proved to be invaluable. The first subscriber was Terry O'Sullivan, a journalist with the *Evening Press*, whose column 'Dubliner's diary', was widely read. The *AIMS Bulletin* first appeared in January 1966, as a three page newsletter, poorly printed on a Gestetner printing machine. It cost three old pence.³³ As time progressed it developed into a well-designed magazine that became the voice of musical theatre in Ireland. Later, when the publication of reviews by the new adjudicator of the various productions appeared in the magazine (this will be discussed below), sales of the *AIMS Bulletin* increased to three hundred for each edition.³⁴

To further the policy of promoting inter-society contact, the committee organised the first AIMS dinner dance, held on 21 January 1966 in the South County Hotel. It was a financial and social success. By this time the formation of AIMS had shown results in the box offices receipts of the societies that had joined the organisation. Reports of significantly increased block booking of seats by fellow societies followed. In June 1966 a library service was introduced, where expensive scores and libretti of shows were loaned at a nominal charge to societies. The library received donations of scores and libretti from societies and individuals, and some were bought at a slightly reduced rate from music publishers who were reluctant to donate material that would reduce their hire fee.³⁵ This service proved to be a boon to societies, particularly when choosing a show, as hiring and buying these items was expensive and delays often occurred in hiring material from copyright holders in the United Kingdom.³⁶ As noted, societies had been somewhat cavalier in taking care of band parts and other hired material, which caused further bad feeling between rights holders and societies. Complaints came from many publishers on the condition of the returned material, often badly wrapped, arriving in torn parcels.³⁷ Further evidence of the effect of AIMS on the musical societies revealed that earlier duplication of shows by societies had ceased as had the

³³ Gerry Martin, 'It began like this', in AIMS, *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 4.

³⁴ AIMS, *Tenth anniversary*, p. 6.

³⁵ Minutes of AIMS committee meeting, 11 March 1967 (on loan to author, and to be lodged in DCLA).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Interview with Dermot Brophy, past president of AIMS, 28 March 2011, and with the librarian and information office of AIMS, who wishes to remain anonymous.

³⁷ Personal experiences of the author, a previous librarian and interview with Joan Allen, later librarian of AIMS, 22 June 2011.

clashing of dates by neighbouring societies. Soon after the setting up of AIMS, enquiries from societies outside Dublin began to trickle in.

In the 1966-67 season, Dermot Brophy, who had been mainly responsible for the foundation of AIMS and who had led the organisation through its crucial first year, was unable to continue due to family and work commitments. The new committee, chaired by board of works engineer Vincent Duffy (Glasnevin Musical Society, Dublin), was determined to consolidate the achievements of the founding committee. The committee set a new objective of achieving one hundred per cent membership in Dublin and extending the influence of AIMS to the provinces, resulting in a further two societies becoming members. One of these was Drogheda Musical Society, the first group to join from outside Dublin. During these years the *AIMS Bulletin* was becoming an important source of information on musical theatre, in part due to a series on the history of operetta entitled 'A tale of five cities', by John Allen, a well-known Dublin tenor, and editor of *Cara*, the in-flight magazine of Aer Lingus. Allen was and still is a recognised authority on opera and musical theatre. He later became musical theatre critic for the *Irish Times* and a presenter on Lyric FM.³⁸ These articles by Allen further enhanced the circulation of the magazine. Another dinner dance was organised, and a second *Musical cavalcade* concert was planned, this time in the Olympia Theatre, Dublin on 6 November 1966. The concert played to full houses with queues forming an hour before the theatre opened. This event gave further exposure to both AIMS and the societies that performed in the show.³⁹ Visits to rural societies by the new committee over the next few years increased the membership to twenty-three.⁴⁰ The need to cater for groups outside Dublin became pressing. The influence of AIMS was tested early in 1968 when the old problem of the clashing of dates of three neighbouring Dublin societies re-appeared. The AIMS Committee had a meeting with the three relevant groups, resulting in an amenable settlement and the restoration of inter-society relations.

In the 1967-68 season, accountant and performer Derek Pullen (Dun Laoghaire Methodist Musical Society), was elected as the new chairman of AIMS. Pullen travelled extensively to meet with country societies and assure them of AIMS' willingness to adapt to meet their needs. His efforts resulted in a further three societies joining the association.⁴¹ He had also presided over

³⁸ Interview with John Allen, retired editor and journalist, 22 June 2011.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 4 Nov. 1967; *AIMS Tenth anniversary*; *Evening Herald*, 3 Oct. 1975.

⁴⁰ *Irish Independent*, 16 Nov., 14 Dec. 1970; interview with Derek Pullen, former AIMS president, 21 Sept. 2011.

⁴¹ *Evening Press*, 4 Oct. 1965.

another successful year with the inaugural meeting of the newly-formed north-eastern region of AIMS on 26 November 1967 (the formation of regions will be discussed in more detail below). By 1968 there was a sizable membership of societies outside the Dublin area for whom little could be done until AIMS was re-organised to cope with the influx of new members. The first joint venture by societies took place in Navan on 21 April 1968 when six societies from Trim, Navan, Kells, Stackallen/Rathkelly, Dundalk and Drogheda staged a regional concert.⁴² This concert increased a realisation among members that regionalisation was the best way to cater for the increasing number of societies. At the AIMS Annual General Meeting in September 1968 a number of amendments and changes to the constitution were proposed, to deal with procedural matters and financial aspects of AIMS. Such changes placed the organisation on a strong constitutional footing, but stopped short of the major re-organisation needed to cater for societies on a national basis.⁴³ These changes would come later.

In the May 1968 issue of the *AIMS Bulletin*, a letter appeared that would have lasting implications on the future of AIMS. Patrick Russell, a Dublin Corporation official and member of a number of societies including the R & R, wrote complaining about the lack of progress in AIMS and the regular self-congratulatory aspect of society productions, which Russell stated was ‘of no use to the society and did nothing to improve performance’.⁴⁴ He advocated the setting up of a service to provide critical assessment of productions by amateur musical societies saying ‘if it introduced some realism into our own assessment of the quality of work we are doing, it might be well worth the effort’.⁴⁵ The letter caused considerable controversy among societies and resulted in numerous meetings on the subject by the AIMS committee. Fears were expressed about how such reviews would cause offence and discouragement to amateur performers. Concerns were mentioned about the unfair advantage between groups performing in theatres as opposed to those playing in school halls, gymnasia and other lesser venues. Following much deliberation and hours of debate, the committee of AIMS decided to appoint an official adjudicator.

This was Robert. A. Bramham, a Dublin based journalist experienced in reviewing theatrical performance.⁴⁶ The appointment was for one year and the service was optional to member societies. These reviews first appeared in the December 1968 edition of the *Bulletin* and seemed to

⁴² AIMS, *Tenth anniversary*, p. 9.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ *AIMS Bulletin*, iii, no. 5 (May 1968), p 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ The reviewer was also known as Riobáirt Bramham.

succeed in the desire to provide an objective appraisal of performance and constructive criticism, which would be sympathetic to the surroundings in which these productions were staged. As a result of the appearance of these reviews in the magazine, the circulation increased to five hundred copies monthly.⁴⁷ As a mark of further pursuit of excellence and consolidation with other music organisations, AIMS donated a trophy to the Feis Ceoil (the Irish music festival established in 1897), which ran a series of competitions in voice and musical performance. The trophy was awarded to the winner of a competition for groups performing excerpts from a musical, not exceeding ten minutes duration.⁴⁸ This event quickly became an established feature of the Feis Ceoil programme and was well-attended. The AIMS committee organised a series of lectures and demonstrations on stage make-up by Nora Lever, a well-known theatrical producer, which were moderately successful. They did, however, point the way towards aspects of production in which further workshops could benefit member societies. In the 1968-69 season, some financial troubles beset the organisation. The annual dinner dance on 10 January 1968 had to be switched at the last minute to an alternate venue, resulting in a decrease in attendances. The fourth *Musical cavalcade* presented in the Olympia Theatre on 10 November 1968 failed to reach the previously high standards. A sense of disappointment following the lack of success of both events caused a realisation by the committee that AIMS had become too dependent on societies for funding and that affiliation fees were unrealistic at two guineas from each society per annum. The warning signs of a looming financial crisis were becoming evident.⁴⁹

Controversy erupted in 1969 when a dispute between the Waterford Festival of Light Opera (which catered for societies in Britain and Northern Ireland) and AIMS occurred. This concerned the non-inclusion of societies from the Republic of Ireland, resulting in an exchange of letters between the Festival Committee and AIMS. The festival had been set up in conjunction with Bórd Fáilte, with the expressed hope that it would bring valued foreign currency into the country. In this the festival had succeeded, as its president P.F. Breen noted in 1963 festival programme, ‘the festival has attracted thousands of free-spending visitors to Waterford’.⁵⁰ Northern Ireland societies were welcome as they brought valuable sterling into the local economy. Gerry Martin took part in

⁴⁷ See *AIMS Bulletin*, iv, no 11 (November 1968), and *Irish Press*, 23 April 1969.

⁴⁸ *Irish Independent*, 23 April 1969; *Irish Times*, 25 April 1969; *Irish Press*, 13 May 1969.

⁴⁹ *AIMS Bulletin*, iv, no. 1 (January 1968), p. 13.

⁵⁰ Waterford International Festival of Light Opera, *Souvenir programme, 18 September 6 – 3 October 1976*; *AIMS Bulletin*, iv, no. 2 (Feb. 1968), p. 15.

a radio interview with Gay Byrne on the dispute.⁵¹ Following further discussions, an application by St Louis Past Pupils Musical and Dramatic Society, Rathmines was accepted by the festival in 1969. The society's production of *The boy friend*, by English composer Sandy Wilson, was staged in September. It was awarded second place and won several individual awards.⁵² This led to the acceptance of other societies from the Republic and heralded their dominance in the competition for a number of years, taking first place on many occasions and winning many individual awards. St. Louis' production of *The boy friend* was invited by the management of the Olympia Theatre to perform the show there for a week. The committee and members of AIMS began to feel justified in their achievements, particularly the role of the adjudicator in the improvement of production standards which appeared to be mirrored in the success of societies at the Waterford Festival and in the AIMS Awards. Morale in AIMS was further boosted when the Arts Council granted a subsidy of £50 towards *Bulletin* expenses.⁵³

At the Annual General Meeting in September 1970, Captain Brian Dobey of the army-based Curragh Musical Society stepped down as chairperson, having guided AIMS through two difficult years. Captain Dobey was the first member of the armed forces to be president of AIMS and he was succeeded by a Catholic priest from Kells, County Meath, Fr Nicholas Foley, whose genial personality injected an informal, friendly atmosphere into committee meetings. The system of adjudicator (or 'critic' as these judges came to be known) was by then firmly established. Robert Bramham had been succeeded by the previously mentioned John Allen, journalist, director and music historian, who was appointed for a second year. In an effort to establish closer ties with societies, the committee decided that one of its members would attempt to visit all shows. The committee then turned its attention to organising the societies outside Dublin into regions.

Formation of regions

When AIMS had established a base in Dublin and extended that base to the counties that bordered Dublin, the committee decided to extend the services and ideals of the association into other areas of the country. The National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA) in Britain had

⁵¹Gerry Slevin, 'AIMS – twenty-one years a growing', in *AIMS 21st anniversary programme* (Dublin, 1986), p. 6.

⁵²*Irish Independent*, 14 Dec. 1970.

⁵³ Arts Council archives; see also Gerry Martin, 'AIMS – 10 years on target: a personal view', in *AIMS, Tenth anniversary*, pp 5-12. The introduction of the AIMS Awards is dealt with more fully below.

adopted a policy of dividing the country into regions. These regions were the East, East Midlands, London, North, North East, North West, Scotland, South East, South West, Wales and Ireland, West Midlands, and East Midlands. Ireland, a much smaller country than its neighbour also followed a regional policy. In the *Irish Independent* dated 14 December 1970, the drama columnist ‘Prompter’ wrote of the effort made by AIMS to involve all member societies throughout Ireland in the activities of the association, giving significant coverage to efforts made by AIMS to consolidate these regions within the association.⁵⁴

The south-eastern region

On 8 November 1970 a meeting was held in Kilkenny to which societies from outside Dublin were invited. A large attendance decided to set up a region in the area and Brother J. B Keegan of New Ross Musical Society took on the task of forming a region in the south east. Following a further meeting in Enniscorthy, County Wexford on 29 November, a committee was formed with Brother Keegan as chairperson. Joseph (Joe) O’Loughlin, a farmer from Carnew, County Wicklow became secretary. (O’Loughlin, now aged 87, still remains active in his society.) The societies that joined this region were De La Salle Musical Society and Edmund Rice Choral Society, (Waterford), New Ross Musical Society, Wexford Light Opera Society, Gorey Operatic Society (all from Wexford), Bagenalstown Musical Society, County Carlow and Carnew Musical Society, County Wicklow. Musical and dramatic societies in this part of Ireland had always had a strong representation from the Protestant community, and the musical societies in the area were and still are, marked by religious inclusiveness.⁵⁵

The south-western region

In Munster, Edmond Fitzgerald of Fermoy Choral Society agreed to organise a South/South Western Region. On 6 December 1970, a meeting was held in Clonmel, County Tipperary, at which Colonel Sean Weafer of Collins Musical Society, Cork, was elected chairperson, with Fitzgerald as secretary. Societies from Cork city and county (Fermoy and Charleville), Limerick city, Ennis and

⁵⁴ *Irish Independent*, 14 Dec. 1970.

⁵⁵ Interview with the late Fr John O’Brien, musical director and past president of AIMS, national councillor for the south-eastern region, 12 Jan. 2011.

Kilrush (Clare), Killarney (Kerry), Clonmel, Thurles and Carrick-on-Suir (Tipperary), and Dungarvan (Waterford) sent representatives, and a number of those societies became affiliates of the new region. The region organised a number of social events in the years that followed, such as a dinner dance on 18 February 1972 (tickets £2 each). A yearly concert, named *Regional revels* took place each year in a different venue. A number of workshops, including two on lighting and dance, followed by production and choral workshops were held in the region between 1971 and 1987. Society members travelled in numbers to see each regional production and celebrated with the host society at the after show functions.

The formation of regions took on a new dimension after 1972, when under the terms of the new AIMS constitution of that year the organisation moved in a federal direction, setting up a national council on which the regions would be represented, and giving the regions a greater role in AIMS' affairs. Article 5.1 of the new constitution indicated: 'For organisational purposes, the country shall be divided into Regions, the boundaries of which shall be decided by the national council.'⁵⁶ That development will be discussed further in the following section. In the mid 1970s, however, two further regions were formed.

The northern region

One of these new regions, in 1974, was for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland had a strong musical tradition, emanating from church choirs, choral groups, school musical societies, amateur orchestras and marching bands. On 3 March 1974 a northern region was formed in Dundalk with Brendan McCann, a journalist from the northern desk of the *Irish Independent* and a member of St Agnes Choral Society as chairman and Fr Eamon O'Brien of Larne Musical Society as secretary. Joe Smyth, the owner of a bottling factory in Warrenpoint, County Down was also appointed as a national councillor for the region. Smyth was a member of Newry Musical and Orchestral Society. Approaches were made by McCann to Banbridge Musical Society, Lisnagarvey Musical Society, and to Belfast Operatic Company.⁵⁷ John Grayden, a journalist with the *Belfast Telegraph*, and member of Belfast Operatic Company wrote: 'It wasn't until the mid-70s that I became fully aware of AIMS and the increasingly important role it was playing in the life of Northern Ireland's operatic

⁵⁶ AIMS, Constitution, 1972, in the possession of the author.

⁵⁷ Minutes, AIMS national council, 24 June 1974.

companies'.⁵⁸ Northern Ireland was beset by the political agitation of the time known as 'the Troubles', and it was a source of pleasure to all that societies containing members holding disparate political and religious views were willing to join the new AIMS region, which by 1986 had fourteen members, all of which were major companies in the area. This region will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

The western region

The western region was formed on 28 April 1974 in Portumna, County Galway, under the chairmanship of Gerry Dolan (Birr Stage Guild), a local garage owner and Nuala Larder, a staff member in University College, Galway, from Patrician Musical Society, Galway as secretary.⁵⁹ Mary Killian, a pharmacist, from St. Brendan's Choral Society, Loughrea, was also elected. Andrew Staunton, a supermarket owner from Ballinasloe Musical Society was appointed treasurer. The activities of the western region were initially concentrated on the needs of the choral societies in the area, and were instrumental in organising the AIMS Choral Festival in Birr, which is discussed later in this chapter. From 1974 onwards a number of perpetual trophies had been presented to the association in memory of friends and colleagues who had been active in their society affairs, or in the amateur musical theatre movement. The *Connaught Tribune* mentions the presentation of a trophy by the Patrician Musical Galway to AIMS in memory of Mary Kitt, a deceased member of the society.⁶⁰

The midland region

An attempt to found a Midland region had been made by Fr. Bannon of Tullamore Musical Society, but despite his efforts and those of fellow member Mona O'Reilly they failed to form a region at that time. A further attempt was made at a meeting on 29 November 1979. Societies from Tullamore and Birr (County Offaly), Athlone (County Westmeath), Portlaoise (Laois), Ballinasloe and Loughrea, County Galway, Roscrea and Nenagh (County Tipperary), were represented, but failed to reach agreement on the way ahead. As a result of this impasse, it was

⁵⁸ John Grayden, 'Getting to know you', in *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Interview with Gerry Dolan, 30 Aug. 2012.

⁶⁰ *Connaught Tribune*, 27 March 1981.

decided to affiliate the societies in the area to existing regional groups, notably the western region.⁶¹ By 1980 that region had twenty-six members, but by 1984 it was felt by national council that as the region stretched from Ennis in County Clare to Donegal and as far east as Tullamore, it was difficult to administer. The long distances and high cost of travel caused undue hardship to councillors, meetings were hard to arrange, and it was decided once again to try to establish a midland region. The new midland region was formed with Billy Flanagan, a retailer from Athlone Musical Society as chairperson. The region included societies from Tullamore, Birr and Clara from County Offaly, Athlone and Mullingar from Westmeath, St. Mel's Musical Society, Longford town and Ballinasloe Musical Society from East Galway.⁶²

A new constitution

With the formation of regions getting underway, in 1970 the Association concentrated on enlisting Dublin societies that were not members of AIMS. Some success was achieved when more societies, including the prestigious R & R, and Good Counsel Musical Society, Drimnagh became affiliated in 1970. Both societies were initially chary of joining AIMS (the R & R on account of its age and prestige, and in the Drimnagh case because the local parish priest, Fr. Doyle, was not initially supportive).⁶³ Both were persuaded by the success of the block-booking scheme and publicity engendered by the *AIMS Bulletin* to do so.⁶⁴ By the end of 1970, the membership had reached fifty societies.

At a meeting on 23 October 1970, the committee received a letter from Cathal McCabe, head of music in Radio Telefís Éireann, regarding a new competition to find the 'Voice of Ireland' which would take place in twelve locations around the country, including three in Northern Ireland. A seventy five minute concert was to be held in each area and McCabe offered AIMS an opportunity to perform in each location, offering the association a fee of twenty-five pounds a performance. The minutes of this meeting mention this opportunity saying 'it was generally felt that

⁶¹ Geoff Oakley, *50 golden years: the story of Tullamore Musical Society, 1950-* (Tullamore, 2005), pp17-19; interview with Gerry Martin, 20 Jan. 2012.

⁶² *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 15.

⁶³ Informal discussion with the late Patrick Campbell, 11 Nov. 2011; interview with Arthur McGauran, former member of the Drimnagh society, 5 June 2013.

⁶⁴ Interview with Gerry Martin, former editor and national councillor of AIMS, 20 Jan. 2012.

this figure was too small for the work involved'.⁶⁵ Three members of the committee subsequently met McCabe, but eventually decided not to get involved in the project, though it was decided to offer him full publicity in the *Bulletin* for the event. In a further effort to establish closer ties with societies it was decided that one committee member would attempt to visit all shows. But by this time many members of the original regional and national committees were married, some with young families. A number may have felt that constraints on their time prevented them availing of this opportunity. It was also decided to postpone the annual *Musical cavalcade* as no suitable person could be found to direct it which was a blow to those wishing to perform. However, the committee decided to organise an event that it was hoped would further unite the member societies and bind them together.

That event was a weekend seminar. The seminar programme would be designed to cater for the social, educational and business aspects of the common leisure interest.⁶⁶ The Annual General Meeting would be held at the seminar in an effort to encourage members to meet and exchange views and discuss mutual difficulties. The seminar was fixed for 22-23 May 1971 at the Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire, County Dublin. Events included a lecture on the management of a musical by Anthony Condell, a London based producer, including a talk on the role of the stage manager in earlier times.⁶⁷ A talk on publicity by Brian McSharry, a public relations executive, was also part of the programme. Heather Hewson, committee member and leading performer with the R & R spoke on the organisation of a society. John Allen gave the first of many record recitals on the Saturday afternoon, and a formal dinner and the Annual General Meeting completed a weekend of activities.⁶⁸ Sponsorship for these lectures was provided by cigarette company Player Wills. The seminar was officially opened by David Andrews, parliamentary secretary to the taoiseach, and received considerable media coverage. Under the continuing presidency of Fr Nicholas Foley and the formidable secretarial control of Joyce Tunstead, the association concentrated on internal matters.

While the newly formed regions were functioning well at local level, the central committee was mainly Dublin-based and the societies outside Dublin felt that their membership was not adequately represented. To counter this, it was proposed to establish regional councils, consisting

⁶⁵ Minutes of committee meeting, 23 Oct. 1970 at the Royal Exchange Hotel, Parliament St. Dublin, on loan to the author.

⁶⁶ AIMS, *Tenth anniversary*, p. 17.

⁶⁷ Interview with John Allen, journalist, director, who attended Condell's lecture, 22 June 2011.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

of three representatives from each regional society. In a further move towards greater inclusivity, a national council was proposed, candidates for which could be voted on at regional Annual General Meetings. There would also be a national president and national secretary elected each year at the Annual General Meeting. After extensive consultations throughout Ireland a new constitution to accommodate these new structures was drafted by a working group chaired by Gerry Martin, which heralded much discussion throughout the country. An Extraordinary General Meeting was called in May 1972, at which this newly drafted constitution was adopted.⁶⁹ In addition, a new Dublin area was formally set up as a region with Derry Smyth, a hotel manager, (St Louis Musical Society, Dublin), as chairperson.

Another major change occurred this same year which was to have far reaching effects on musical societies and their membership. Since the inauguration of the adjudication service, Gerry Martin, editor of the *AIMS Bulletin*, had allowed informal nominations by the adjudicator to be printed in the magazine, which had evoked great interest among members. The idea of developing a system of official awards had been under discussion for some time among council members. This idea was encouraged by the success of the Irish societies at the Waterford Festival in autumn 1971, when they won twenty one awards.⁷⁰ The national council of AIMS decided to introduce official awards for best performances based solely on the decisions of the AIMS adjudicator, by then known as ‘the critic’.⁷¹

The decision was greeted with enthusiasm and *Independent Newspapers* offered sponsorship for the first awards. Planning for a second AIMS seminar to be held again in the Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire was well underway and the proposed announcement of the official awards scheme at the dinner dance resulted in a significantly increased attendance. The official opening was performed by T P. Hardiman, director general of Radio Telefís Éireann⁷² Educational content included a lecture on stage management by Billy Burke, stage director of the Waterford Festival, and a make-up demonstration by Richard Blore of Leichner Ltd., a professional make-up company. An air of expectation was evident at the dinner dance, when the awards were announced. The R & R won first place with its production of *The yeomen of the guard*. Wexford Light Opera

⁶⁹ A copy of this constitution (1972) is in possession of the author, and is in the process of being transferred to Dublin City Library and Archive. For details of the new constitution, see also *AIMS Tenth anniversary*, pp 9, 18.

⁷⁰ Waterford International Festival of Light Opera, *Programme* (1972).

⁷¹ *AIMS Tenth anniversary*, p. 17

⁷² *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, pp 6-7.

Society took the runner-up place with *The pirates of Penzance*. Ten other individual awards were announced and certificates were awarded to the runners-up.⁷³ Fr Foley was unable to attend due to a sudden illness and his absence cast a pall over the weekend which saw the culmination of many of his aspirations.

Consolidation, and the tenth anniversary of AIMS

With the introduction of the new national council, it was important to find venues for meetings that would suit the societies outside Dublin. The Newpark Hotel, Kilkenny became a popular venue for meetings. Irish societies continued their success at the Waterford Festival of Light Opera in 1972. St Louis Past Pupils' Musical Society was awarded first place, winning the international trophy with *Love from Judy* (1952), based on the novel *Daddy long legs* by Jean Webster. Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society, Crumlin Road came a close second with *Guys and dolls*, which also won numerous individual awards.⁷⁴ The membership had now risen to fifty-nine societies.⁷⁵ In 1972, Gerry Martin resigned as *Bulletin* editor due to promotion at work and the editorship passed to Derek Pullen, former president and member of Dun Laoghaire Musical Society.⁷⁶ The new AIMS awards continued successfully and the annual seminar (followed by the Annual General Meeting) moved from Dublin to the Ardree Hotel in Waterford, which proved later to be a positive move, leading to increased bookings. As most of the participants had to travel away from their own regions the weekend atmosphere was one of gaiety and relaxation. A golf tournament was instituted and proved immensely popular with resolute golfers arriving on the tees at nine o'clock following a night of music and a late night sing-song. The serious side of the weekend was provided by a lecture on production by actor/producer Martin Dempsey.⁷⁷ One of the most significant events of 1972 was the affiliation to AIMS by St Agnes Choral Society from Andersonstown, West Belfast, and the first group to join from Northern Ireland.⁷⁸ At the Annual Awards Banquet in 1973 this society won the Best Show Award for its production of *The gipsy baron* by Johann Strauss. Second place was taken by the O'Connell Musical Society, Dublin with

⁷³ AIMS *Tenth anniversary*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18

⁷⁵ AIMS *Bulletin* (November, 1972), pp 17-22

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp 18-20.

⁷⁷ Minutes of AIMS Council meeting, 8 Oct. 1972; AIMS *Bulletin* (Dec. 1972), p. 1.

⁷⁸ Minutes of AIMS Council meeting, 8 Oct. 1972

The music man. Roscrea Amateur Operatic Society, County Tipperary came third with its production of *My fair lady*.

The AIMS seminar of 1974 was again held in the Ardree Hotel, Waterford. Large bookings by member societies ensured that this event was booked out. The national council decided that the emphasis would be on those members attending the seminar. Both practical and more relaxing events were offered. A theatre workshop was given by James Belchamber, a popular and highly respected director from London. A golf tournament was booked to capacity, and an ecumenical service with choral singing was also included. The Annual Awards were sponsored by the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera and the major award went, for the second time, to St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast for its production of Johann Strauss's *Die fledermaus*. Wexford Light Opera Society took second place with a production of Offenbach's *La Perichole*, with *Fiddler on the roof*, performed by Dundalk Musical Society taking third place. The weekend's events were attended by more than three hundred people, who were accommodated in several hotels in the city. The Awards were announced by the AIMS adjudicator or 'critic', Geoff Oakley, a journalist with the *Midland Tribune* newspaper. A major feature of the weekend's events was the late night sing-songs interspersed by soloists from many societies.⁷⁹ A piano was provided by the hotel and there was never a shortage of accompanists. Among those were Patrick Heaney of Galway Patrician Musical Society and Eileen Cronin of Tullamore Musical Society, who regularly accompanied the performers and chorus until six o'clock in the morning. The bar receipts of the hotel were considerable and the city benefited from the amount of clothes and keepsakes bought by the visitors, particularly by the ever growing numbers of societies from Northern Ireland. Hairdressers in the city were fully booked by the women attending the Awards Banquet, and local pharmacies reported that supplies of fake tan had run out. The Awards were extensively covered by both national and local newspapers.⁸⁰ Societies also benefited by interaction with other groups sharing ideas about productions. Advice and warnings of possible mishaps and pitfalls that some musicals caused were shared, together with experiences of shows that were successful and why. Such interaction often imparted useful information and saved time and money in future productions. Costumes, props, sets and band-stands were regularly loaned between societies at nominal fees.

⁷⁹ Interview with Brian O'Neill, former president of AIMS, former national councillor and then information officer of AIMS, who was present at the event, 19 April 2013.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

As the tenth anniversary (1975) of the founding of AIMS approached, the number of member societies increased to sixty-seven. As the jubilee year came closer it was evident that the regions were emerging as strong, viable local organisations with their own individual strengths and weaknesses.⁸¹ Each region developed a measure of autonomy in organising its particular events. This was particularly evident in the organisation of jubilee events, and a number of events were planned to celebrate the landmark year. The Dublin area, now called the eastern region, organised a series of events culminating in a jubilee concert called *Maytime musical*. Eleven societies from the region took part. The south eastern region organised a Viennese Ball which took place in the Talbot Hotel Wexford. It was attended by over four hundred society members from the area. In the northern region, ‘the Troubles’ had interfered with the progress of the region to a degree, but a regional get-together took place at the Ballymascanlon Hotel, Dundalk, County Louth. It was attended by a large number of northern companies (musical societies in the north have always been called companies, rather than societies), which augured well for the future. The south/south western region organised a series of social and business gatherings for local societies. These events served to increase the profile of AIMS both locally and nationally, and a Jubilee *Musical cavalcade* was staged in the Gaiety Theatre on Sunday 7 September 1975 in the presence of President Cearbhall O Dhálaigh and his wife, compered by popular baritone Austin Gaffney. The musical director for the concert was Fr John O’Brien, newly elected president. The concert included societies from Birr, Dublin, Carrick-on-Suir, Dundalk, Gorey and Enniscorthy.⁸²

The annual AIMS Awards was proving successful in ensuring that productions were of a considerably higher standard, particularly in the technical side of performance, lighting, set design, stage management, costume and make-make-up. Ongoing workshops by regions had been largely responsible for this, as had the comments of the adjudicators in both the published critique of productions and in the private and more detailed critique sent to the society. By the end of 1975 the demand for the services of the adjudicator was such that during one week in April, two societies had been unable to have him attend their productions because of the plethora of shows being staged that week.

While the jubilee year was a cause for celebration, there were also some causes for concern.⁸³ In the special brochure printed for the event, newly elected president Fr John O’Brien

⁸¹ Gerry Martin, ‘AIMS ten years on target – a personal view’ in AIMS, *Tenth anniversary*, pp 5-12.

⁸² AIMS, *Tenth anniversary*, pp 5-12, at p. 11.

⁸³ Interview with Gerry Martin, founder member of AIMS, 20 Jan 2012.

from Wexford Light Opera Society sounded a note of caution, citing rising costs, more demands on members' time and noting that a striving for excellence threatened the existence of some societies.⁸⁴ This was an indirect reference to the attitude developing towards the AIMS Awards. Such was the desire to win the competition that some societies, in their quest to win the coveted awards, were going outside their own members to fill roles in their shows.⁸⁵ In some cases, when they saw outsiders taking on key roles, this was causing discontent and envy among leading players who had hitherto felt secure within their own society. Some show directors, similarly award-hungry, urged societies to hand-pick their leading performers in order to give their shows a better opportunity to win some awards. Indeed some committees were picking musicals specifically to attempt to win either AIMS Awards or the Waterford Festival. This could be seen as having as a negative effect on musical theatre, particularly in Dublin.

The AIMS Awards themselves were the subject of internal controversy. Dublin based Take Four Productions, already mentioned in chapter three, was an amateur production company formed to produce musicals that other groups were unwilling or unable to perform, due to the controversial nature of these shows. This group comprised experienced musical theatre performers, hand-picked by the producer, to stage new musicals to a high standard.⁸⁶ Its first production, *The fantasticks* (1974) had been one of the nominees for Best Overall Production in the AIMS Awards the same year, despite having a cast of just seven and no chorus. This nomination resulted in a letter of complaint from Ned Power, the director of Wexford Light Opera Society. Despite this objection, Take 4 Productions took third place in the Annual Awards in June 1974. From that period on, these individual and society awards became the subject of continuous debate and controversial comment. Adjudicators, all of whom were members of individual societies, followed a fixed set of regulations to ensure conformity, and tried as far as possible to enforce the rules of the association. They tried to be impartial and distance themselves from controversy. However, as in other organisations, members began to speak of a distance appearing between the AIMS national council and the ordinary member. The first stirrings of a 'them and us' mentality were appearing. This was typified by a remark made by Ed. Brady, founder member of Take 4, at a regional meeting in May 1976 when he suggested that if the organisation vanished, the national council would take six

⁸⁴ Interview with the late Fr John O'Brien, past president of AIMS, 12 Jan. 2011.

⁸⁵ Interview with Eddie Cummins, retired shopkeeper, former member of St. Mary's Choral Society, Clonmel, 3 March 2013.

⁸⁶ Interview with Tom Singleton, retired post office official and director of Take 4 Productions, 30 Aug. 2010.

months to find out.⁸⁷ While humorous in tenor, this remark struck a chord with some disaffected members.

There was also a ‘them and us’ situation developing between the eastern region (Dublin area) and the rural societies, due to the fact that the councillors from the eastern region were the largest group, given the number of societies in the region. The representation was two councillors for the first five societies and one for every subsequent five, and as the eastern region had thirty-five societies, it was entitled to seven councillors, far more than the total representation from the remaining regions (by 1986 it had fifty-five societies, and was entitled to twelve). Eastern councillors could therefore effectively block or outvote resolutions and amendments from other regions.⁸⁸

Therefore the first ten years of the association, while ending on a high note with the tenth anniversary concert and other events, were also showing some signs of dissatisfaction.

AIMS, 1976-90

In the years following the tenth anniversary celebrations AIMS consolidated its position as the voice of musical theatre in Ireland, making a number of changes, including the formation of a limited company. This was to protect the association, its councillors and members from any undue financial demands that might arise. It was decided to hold an Extraordinary General Meeting in Tralee in 1978 with a view to getting the views of the members on the proposal of national council to form a limited company. The proposal was ratified by the members and AIMS Limited came into being in 1979.⁸⁹ After the formation of AIMS Limited it was decided to hold the Annual General Meeting on a date apart from the annual seminar. A decision was also made to make changes to the rules of membership, to expedite the process of joining AIMS. It was also decided that a show would have to be seen by a national councillor prior to a society being admitted into AIMS.

⁸⁷ Interview with Brian O’Neill, former president and treasurer of AIMS, 19 Apr. 2013.

⁸⁸ Constitution of the Association of Irish Musical Societies, 1972 (Dublin, 1972), and Memorandum and Articles of Association of Association of Irish Musical Societies Ltd. (Dublin, 1979).

⁸⁹ AIMS, Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Association of Irish Musical Societies (Dublin, 18 May 1979). A copy of the Articles of Association can be found as an Appendix to this thesis.

In 1979 the newly elected president of AIMS was Joe Smyth of Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, the first president from Northern Ireland. Bangor Operatic Company celebrated its sixtieth anniversary by organising the Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera. This festival was a success with societies from both southern and northern Ireland taking part.⁹⁰ In order to give an overall picture of the achievements of AIMS down to 1990, the major activities of the association are now dealt with separately.

The choral festival

The association was aware that a number of its members were choral societies, so a decision was made to introduce a choral festival. The new western region, under the chairmanship of Gerry Dolan of Birr Stage Guild had organised a non-competitive choral festival in Castlebar, County Mayo in 1974. Fr John O'Brien of Wexford put forward the suggestion that there should be a yearly festival. Birr was chosen as the venue and the local musical society offered to donate a trophy, as did McCullough Piggott, a Dublin music store. The western region also donated a trophy and on Sunday, 30 May 1976 eleven choirs and musical societies took part in the competition.⁹¹ It was followed by an ecumenical service at Vespers attended by ministers of all faiths. A lively sing-song concluded the proceedings in the County Arms Hotel, Birr. The town hosted the festival for seven years, and new competitions were added as time passed, with trophies, including the Ballyclare Rose Bowl, presented by Frank Culminant, the then president of AIMS. This was a perpetual trophy presented by Ballyclare Male Voice Choir, County Antrim, in recognition of the warmth of their reception by the people of Birr on the many occasions they came to sing in a 'hands across the border' concert in the town. The choral festival was suspended in 1983, but in the International Year of Music in 1984, it was decided to re-constitute the event in a new venue.

The new venue was the town of New Ross, County Wexford, where the event has remained. The *Irish Press* of 15 November 1984 noted that the AIMS choral festival was opening its competitions to all choirs, not merely AIMS members, and mentioned the stature of the adjudicators, Professor Aloys Fleischmann of the Cork School of Music, Dr Geoffrey Spratt and Ethan Barror, founder of the Lindsay Singers, a prominent Dublin choral group.⁹² The competition

⁹⁰ Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera, *Festival programme 1979* (Newtownabbey, 1979).

⁹¹ *Irish Times*, 26 May 1976; Gerry Dolan, 'The choral festivals', in *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, pp 33-4.

⁹² *Irish Press*, 15 Nov. 1984.

was expanded to include a madrigal and sacred music section. (Later, a barbershop section was added.) A section for schools and young soloists was also added, and a concert took place in St. Michael's Theatre. The festival was attended by hundreds of choral aficionados together with music lovers from the area. The festival would become a significant source of revenue to the area.

Workshops

One of the avowed aims of the association has been to improve the standard of performance in member societies. The eastern region of AIMS applied to the cultural committee of Dublin Corporation in 1976 for funding to arrange a series of workshops.⁹³ The Corporation acceded to the request and granted an initial stipend of £1,500 a year to provide a series of workshops on choral and production technique, choreography, lighting, set design, stage management, make-up, costumes and hair design. A number of these workshops concentrated on the economic and administrative business of society management, finance, publicity and that most exhausting and onerous subject of choosing a show, a decision that could lead to success or financial disaster. Poor choices could be made if personal preferences, rather than a cold eye, were allowed to influence the result.

Other regions of AIMS have evolved their own workshops on similar topics, events that are well received and attended. In 1977 the first national workshop was held in Gurteen Agricultural College, County Offaly.⁹⁴ The RTÉ chief conductor Hans Waldemar Rosen was in charge of the weekend residential course. A production workshop was held later the same year, given by David Turner, a well-known English producer, which culminated in a performance of the first act of *The yeomen of the guard* by Gilbert & Sullivan. The musical director was Kieran O'Gorman of Ennis. The success of this workshop prompted the organisers to provide a week long workshop the following year again in Gurteen College. This workshop concentrated on production and choreography and was given by another English director, Ray Jeffery, who was well-known to Irish societies, as he had directed productions for several of them, including Newry, St Agnes Choral Society, New Ross, and Birr Stage Guild. Jeffery, a relentless perfectionist, with a colourful and lethal vocabulary, gave a strenuous in-depth, intensive workshop, greatly enjoyed by his exhausted

⁹³ *Irish Times*, 5 Dec. 1976; *Irish Independent*, 5 Dec. 1976.

⁹⁴ A collection of newspaper cuttings (unfortunately undated), concerning the first workshop forms part of the AIMS material being donated to the Dublin City Library and Archive.

students. In 1980 Jeffrey again presided over a workshop on the first act of *The boy friend* by English composer Sandy Wilson.⁹⁵ The performance was fully costumed and sets were constructed. Despite the punishing schedule from 9.15 a.m. to 9.15 p.m., the participants found time to pursue a series of extra-curricular activities. 1981 saw two co-existing workshops: a conductor's workshop given by Gearóid Grant, conductor of the National Youth Orchestra, and another by the R & R, attended by twenty two participants. In conjunction with this workshop Maura Cranny, a well-known Dublin director, involved her group in production techniques.⁹⁶

The following year the workshops moved from Gurteen to Dublin, to the Carysfort Teacher Education College, Blackrock, where dance workshops were given by Des McLoughlin, and Gearóid Grant gave a further workshop for musical directors.⁹⁷ This was followed in later years by lighting courses given by lighting directors Ray Cobban and Derek O'Neill, and a stage management course given by George McFaul of the Gaiety Theatre and Denis McGrath of the Waterford Festival. The workshop then moved to the headquarters of the Irish Countrywomen's Association headquarters in An Grianán in Termonfecken in County Louth, where Louis Lenten of RTÉ gave a director/acting course, followed later by more lighting and dance workshops.⁹⁸ The workshops continued at a more local level in the years following 1986, as several of the participants developed individual skills as producers, choreographers, musical directors and technical support personnel such as lighting and set designers for their own companies. A number of the participants in the workshops are now successful musical theatre directors, including Noel McDonough and Tim Singleton (Dublin). McDonough speaks of the week long director's workshop as a life-changing experience, which resulted in him becoming a full time professional director with a number of societies, including a long-term contract with the R & R.⁹⁹ He also went on to direct musicals for Tipperary Musical Society and St. Agnes Choral Society, Belfast, as well as professional productions in the Cork Opera House and the Tivoli Theatre, Dublin.

Sponsorship

⁹⁵ See 'A little more homework', in John Grayden and Alice Hughes (eds.), *AIMS: celebrating 50 years of musical theatre* (Belfast, 2015), unpaginated.

⁹⁶ Harry Cousins, 'Workshops and summer schools', in *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 23.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Interview with Noel McDonough, 18 Feb. 2013.

Sponsorship of various events has been in existence for many years, and is a form of marketing and advertising for the firm that becomes a sponsor. In Ireland sport and sporting events are the main beneficiaries of sponsorship and, with some exceptions, music and the arts seem to have difficulties in obtaining sponsorship. Sporting events receive pages of coverage, while cultural events that are sponsored received less press and media coverage, and sponsors suffer accordingly. As already noted, the AIMS Annual Awards had been instituted during the 1971-2 season. They were initially sponsored by the *Irish Independent*, a national newspaper, for two years. The Waterford International Festival of Light Opera then agreed to sponsor the awards from the 1973-74 season and this sponsorship continued for some time. Indeed, sponsorship was vital to the continuation of the awards. By the 1979-80 season it had become increasingly difficult to find or appoint a suitable adjudicator on terms already in place. The national council considered a number of options but finally concluded that it would be preferable if the entire adjudication system could be sponsored, rather than the awards alone. It was also felt that a more suitably qualified adjudicator could be employed if offered a more realistic remuneration.

On 19 August 1979 it was announced that the Irish Life Building Society had agreed to sponsor the ILBS/AIMS Awards, as they became known. The offer of sponsorship was arranged through the good offices of Father Daniel Dargan S. J., already mentioned above. Dargan was chairperson of the Pioneer Musical and Dramatic Society, where one of the leading players in the group was Des Byrne. When insurance company Irish Life Assurance PLC decided to extend its business to include a building society, Byrne was installed as general manager. The new company was seeking to sponsor an event and agreed to sponsor the AIMS/ILBS Annual Awards. In this way, Irish Life Building Society sponsorship became a reality.¹⁰⁰ As Byrne wrote in the twenty-first anniversary programme of the association ‘it is interesting to note that the cultural and sporting involvement of chief executives is often reflected in sponsorship.’¹⁰¹ This sponsorship allowed AIMS to run its adjudication service, allowing a qualified adjudicator or ‘critic’, as they were universally known, to visit over sixty musicals each year. The duty of the adjudicator was to provide a public critique for the *AIMS Bulletin* and a more detailed private critique for the local society. The critic nominated three candidates in each section of the Annual Awards, as well as a winner for each section. The sponsor covered all costs including the provision of commemorative plaques for runners up. With this sponsorship in place, it became the practice for the announcement

¹⁰⁰ *Sunday Independent*, 9 Sept. 1979, 29 May 1982.

¹⁰¹ Des Byrne, ‘The I.L.B.S. sponsorship of AIMS’, in *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 28.

of the nominations for the Annual Awards to be held in the head offices of Irish Life in Abbey Street in Dublin. This ensured that some of the local national media would attend, as their offices were minutes from the location. The event received some publicity in the form of photographs and a small piece about the nominations might appear in the press, mainly in the *Evening Herald* and *Evening Press*.¹⁰² The societies that were nominated also lost no time in contacting their local media, so the event received substantial coverage in rural papers. The presentation of the Awards at the annual seminar became a huge success, ensuring that societies or individuals nominated would travel in numbers to the event, which rapidly grew as a result. It also featured a dress dance, and considerable effort was invested in the event, to make it more slick and enjoyable.

In any event, Irish Life Building Society continued to sponsor the annual AIMS Awards. No doubt the company was aware that there were over one hundred societies in AIMS throughout Ireland at that time. Byrne hoped that by sponsoring the awards the societies' membership would reciprocate by getting financially involved with Irish Life, either through savings or mortgages with the company. AIMS and Irish Life were disappointed with the lack of national coverage of the Awards, but very happy with the considerable amount of exposure they received in the provincial press.¹⁰³

Byrne may have been encouraged by an article in the *Sunday Independent* by John Honohan, dated 2 June 1985, concerning the announcement of the annual AIMS/ILBS Awards nominations, which stated 'The Association of Irish Musical Societies ... are lucky to have a fairy godmother in the Irish Life Building Society, which, in five years has made over £30,000 available to them.'¹⁰⁴ The company also introduced its own specific award for services to musical theatre in Ireland. The first recipient was Austin Gaffney, a professional singer, who played leading roles with many musical societies. His genial personality, together with his magnificent baritone voice combined to make this particular recipient a very popular choice.¹⁰⁵ Others followed, such as Kevin Hough, an RTÉ producer, and Pat Flood, a respected director of musicals.

Relations with the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA)

¹⁰² *Irish Independent*, 13 June 1977

¹⁰³ *AIMS 21st anniversary programme*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ *Sunday Independent*, 2 June 1985.

¹⁰⁵ See front cover of *AIMS Bulletin*, xxii, no. 1.

The membership of a number of Irish societies in the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA) formed in Britain in 1898 has already been mentioned. Societies in the north became members of NODA's north-western region and those in the south joined its western region.¹⁰⁶ The majority of these societies continued their membership of NODA after the formation of AIMS in 1965. The majority of Dublin societies that were the founder members of AIMS chose not to become members of the British organisation. Some Irish members of NODA felt challenged by the formation of another umbrella organisation and might have decided to mount a riposte to the new Irish organisation but for some problems that beset NODA in the 1960s and 1970s. The organisation experienced financial difficulties and had to move the yearly NODA conference away from Waterford, due to the expense of funding delegates to travel to Ireland. This was a blow to Irish members, and the organisation in Ireland floundered. NODA members in the south of Ireland became part of the Welsh region of NODA.¹⁰⁷

NODA, which became a limited company, still has members among societies and individual members in all four provinces in Ireland.¹⁰⁸ AIMS members in Ireland avail of the services provided by NODA Limited, including the sale of scores and libretti at a discounted price and the provision of lists of professional producers, many of whom have worked with Irish societies in Belfast, Bangor, Birr, Clonmel, Cork, Dublin, New Ross and Roscrea for many years. The president of each association is a guest at the other's annual conferences. NODA began to produce an *Irish area newsletter* in May 1987. In the first issue the newsletter noted that Marion Eddery, president of AIMS, was a guest at the National Conference and AGM in Swansea in September 1987, and that past president Ken Barnes and his wife were present at the AIMS Weekend in Newcastle, County Down in June of the same year.¹⁰⁹ By 1984 the membership of AIMS had risen to 114 societies and companies. New rules had been introduced to streamline the membership process and make aspiring applicants aware of the association's aims and regulations.

The library and information service

One of the stated ambitions of AIMS was to set up a library of scores and libretti to provide reading material for societies when picking a show. The societies could borrow scores at an

¹⁰⁶ Young, *A century of service*, pp 80-81.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp 80-81.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹⁰⁹ National Operatic & Dramatic Association, *Irish area newsletter*, May 1987.

inexpensive rate to use when learning the words and music. The library was run by a number of national councillors or by society members. Its holdings were augmented by donations from individuals as well as societies. Many societies preferred, if possible, to borrow directly from AIMS rather than have the material posted out to them. This continued until 1974, when a combined library and information service was initiated.¹¹⁰ The information service consisted of lists of directors, musical directors, choreographers, set designers and lighting and sound engineers. A list of performers, including parts played by them, was also added, as was information on music publishers and copyright holders. This particular service was a major factor in forming links between national councillors and society committees, who often felt that ‘that lot up in Dublin’ or ‘AIMS’ did not know or care about their difficulties. They were sometimes surprised to discover that the information officer was familiar with the local society, names of members, and past and present shows, and was often able to procure props, sets, backcloths and leading s performers at short notice.¹¹¹ In the mid-1970s more scores were purchased for the library with funding from national council and some financial help from Forás Éireann (see below). By the end of 1975 the library held over five hundred scores and one hundred libretti, as well as references books on musical theatre, makeup and stagecraft, and had to request financial assistance from the council for the building of shelves to house the increasing load of material. An amount of £40 was allocated.¹¹²

The Arts Council and Forás Éireann.

During its early years AIMS attempted to develop a relationship with other agencies involved in the arts. Several overtures were made to Forás Éireann, a permanent association of voluntary organizations that had come together for the purposes of consultation and joint action to assist and promote social, cultural and economic developments in Ireland.¹¹³ Included in these participating associations were groups such as Comhaltas Ceoltóiri Éireann, the Amateur Drama League, and the Irish Countrywoman’s Association. Forás Éireann was set up initially to administer funding from the Carnegie Trust, set up by industrialist Andrew Carnegie and the C.F. Shaw Trust (Charlotte Shaw was the wife of George Bernard Shaw), who stipulated in her will that the proceeds from the royalties of some of Shaw’s work be used for educating and improving the

¹¹⁰AIMS, Minutes of the national council, 8 Jan. 1975

¹¹¹ The author served as information officer for over thirty years from 1973 on.

¹¹² Interview with the later information officer (who wishes to remain anonymous), 18 Nov. 2014.

¹¹³ <http://foraseireann.com/> (accessed 26 Nov. 2014).

lot of the lower classes. Both were administered by the board of Forás Éireann under strict conditions. AIMS was invited to take up a position on the board of Forás Éireann which was taken up in the 1970s.¹¹⁴ Together with other associations, AIMS has been a beneficiary of grants from the Shaw Trust for music scores, concerts and operatic recitals.

AIMS also made attempts to establish close contact with the Arts Council (founded in 1951 to encourage interest in Irish arts, music, and culture more generally). AIMS sought to obtain funding from the organisation, and to gain recognition as an integral part of Irish social and cultural life. While courteous and sympathetic to the efforts of AIMS, the Arts Council informed the national council on several occasions that amateur musical theatre did not come under the terms of the Arts Act of 1951. This was clearly indicated when Killarney Musical Society wrote to the Arts Council requesting a grant for a production of the Strauss operetta *Pink champagne*. It was told that as the society was performing the amateur version of what was really *Die fledermaus* by Johann Strauss, it was not possible for the Arts Council to make a contribution towards the performance.¹¹⁵

The twenty-first anniversary of AIMS was celebrated by a collaborative concert arranged jointly by AIMS and Radio Éireann held in the National Concert Hall in Dublin in September 1986, with a chorus and soloists drawn from the entire island. The concert ('There's no business like show business') was broadcast live on RTÉ Radio 1, accompanied by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra conducted by Gearóid Grant.¹¹⁶ The concert was attended by the president of Ireland, Mary Robinson, who was received by the first woman president of AIMS, Marion Eddery (Loreto Past Pupils Musical Society, Crumlin Road). In the years leading up to 1990, matters continued apace. The adjudicator visited sixty-six shows in 1987 and the numbers increased each year, causing headaches for the adjudicator. National council workshops continued at national and regional level. The *AIMS Bulletin* continued (although still as a loss making venture) as it was the primary communication vehicle between the association and the societies, containing as it did a calendar of forthcoming shows, society information and fundraising events and advertisements. As it contained reviews of shows by current adjudicators, it was also a public record of regional and national committees.

¹¹⁴ In her capacity as an AIMS councillor, the author was a member of the board of Foras Éireann, 1973-80 and 1990-2005.

¹¹⁵ Minutes of Arts Council Archive, Merrion Square, Dublin, 1955/3 C.E.46.

¹¹⁶ 'You're timeless to me', in *AIMS: celebrating 50 years of musical theatre* (ed. Grayden & Hughes), unpaginated.

Conclusion

In the twenty-five years since its inception in 1965, the Association of Irish Musical Societies had achieved most of the objectives set out in the original constitution. The library and information service was running smoothly and was a valuable service to member societies. Workshops on all aspects of production, the AIMS Awards, and entries at the Waterford Festival had been responsible for a marked improvement in all aspects of performance. The most important result of the establishment of AIMS was improved and cordial relationships between societies and regions. Despite occasional tensions, societies felt that they were part of a national movement, producing musicals and pantomimes of a high standard, recognised by their audiences locally and nationally as an important part of live musical theatre in Ireland. This is summed up by an article in the *Irish Times*, 25 July 1985, entitled ‘Still drawing in the crowds.’ The author noted that:

the home town’s ‘opera’ still draws the crowds and gives a lift to the community. AIMS was founded in 1965 ... to improve standards of presentation in amateur musicals. It has grown and expanded and has members throughout Ireland who display a great bond of friendship and support.¹¹⁷

A month earlier, the *Irish Times* had heaped praise as follows: ‘the Association of Irish Musical Societies ... have given thousands of young people an alternative to the pub and disco culture. They are entitled to considerable status ... today this social amenity displays high standards.’¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ *Irish Times*, 25 July 1985.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 June 1985.

Chapter Five

The founding of the Northern Region of AIMS and its effect on local musical societies

‘I’d never have known one of your sort if it wasn’t for Waterford and AIMS.’¹

This remark made to the author by a member of a northern Irish music festival committee member is typical of the relations that developed between northern and southern musical societies in the early 1970s. No insult was intended, it was just the way of stating how things were at the time. In Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics frequently did not mix or socialize together, even if they were members of similar organisations.²

In this chapter some background will be provided for the formation by the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) of the northern region in 1974. As part of that, the pre-existing distinctive denominational aspects of this region, and the extent to which this affected societies, will be considered. The earlier political background will be briefly discussed, as well as the period of civil unrest known as ‘the Troubles’, which began in the Northern Ireland in 1969, and its effect on amateur musical societies in the region. The development of music and musical societies in the region is considered, as is the effect of the decision to produce a yearly concert, later known as the *Cavalcade of song*, held each year in November in the Ulster Hall, Belfast. The involvement of the National Operatic and Dramatic Association (NODA), the umbrella group for British musical societies, and the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera on the founding of the northern region of AIMS is also considered.

¹ Remark made to the author by Maureen Campbell, secretary of the Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera, 16 Aug. 2011. ‘Waterford’ refers to the Waterford Festival of Light Opera.

² Paul Arthur, ‘Northern Ireland, 1972-84’, in Hill (ed.) *A new history of Ireland vii, Ireland 1921-1984* (Oxford, 2010), pp 395-425, at pp 401-2.

Historical relations between Ulster and the rest of Ireland

We begin by considering the distinctive demographic and political context in Northern Ireland. Dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a significant number of Protestant communities were established in Ireland, particularly in Ulster. This minority continued to dominate political and economic life into the early nineteenth century. Following the Easter Rising of 1916 and the subsequent war of independence, the Government of Ireland Act 1920 resulted in the partition of Ireland.³ Northern Ireland, comprising the six Ulster counties of Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry and Tyrone was given its own parliament. Northern Ireland remained within the United Kingdom, while from 1922 the rest of Ireland gained ‘home rule’ and became a dominion of the British empire. The relationship between southern Ireland and the United Kingdom was not clearly defined during the years following partition.⁴ Ireland’s neutral stance during World War II outraged Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, causing some bitterness between the Allies and the Irish government. The new inter-party government was not comfortable with the idea of belonging to the Commonwealth, and in 1948 the then taoiseach, John A. Costello, while on a visit to Toronto, announced the repeal of the External Relations Act. This resulted in Ireland leaving the Commonwealth. The inter-party government passed the Republic of Ireland Act in 1948, which caused some confusion as it was not the name of the state as defined by the constitution. Following this, relations between Ireland and Great Britain improved, but not those between the Republic and Northern Ireland.⁵ The latter resented the south’s claim, enshrined in the constitution of 1932, that its territory included the whole of the island. Northern Ireland was given some reassurance when the British government’s Ireland Bill (1949) contained a clause stating ‘in no event will Northern Ireland, or any part thereof, cease to be part of his majesty’s dominions and of the United Kingdom, without the consent of the parliament of

³ Brian Barton, ‘Northern Ireland 1920-25, in Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland vii*, pp 161-98, at pp 161-2.

⁴ S.J. Connolly (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Irish History*, p.112.

⁵ J.H. Whyte, ‘To the Declaration of the Republic and Ireland act, 1945-9’, in Hill (ed.) *A new history of Ireland vii*, pp 261-77, at pp 274-5.

Northern Ireland.’ There was dismay in the Republic at this guarantee, but the bill passed notwithstanding. Relations between the two parts of the island remained cool and distant.⁶

Music in Northern Ireland.

Music had always played an important role in Northern Ireland. It did not mean, as was often mooted, that music simply meant ‘hymns and psalms.’⁷ Certainly sacred music played a part in the churches of all denominations in both towns and countryside, but to say that it was the extent of musical involvement in the province is without foundation.⁸ And in music there had always been cross-border traffic notwithstanding the lack of common institutions. ‘The repertory of the concert hall and opera house was international enough in character and appeal to transcend political boundaries.’⁹

In the realm of classical music, orchestras from RTÉ and BBC Northern Ireland travelled between Belfast, Cork and Dublin. Solo artists knew the studios of both the BBC and Radio Éireann. The establishment of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in Northern Ireland in 1943 was responsible for a number of recitals throughout the north and was responsible from a visit by the Hallé orchestra under Sir John Barbirolli to Belfast.¹⁰ The Sadler’s Wells Opera Company visited Belfast in 1945 and continued to do so for some time. Among the many celebrities that appeared in Belfast, Derry and Dublin were Irish tenor John McCormack, Italian tenor Giuseppe de Stefano, and American bass Paul Robeson. Mario Lanza, a popular American tenor and film star also appeared in the Grand Opera House, Belfast. Jarlath McConville, a lifelong member of the Lurgan Operatic Society, travelled throughout the British Isles and New York to see professional musicals and concerts.¹¹ Luciano Pavarotti, one of the great Italian tenors, made his British debut as Lieutenant Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* in 1963 in the Grand

⁶ Ibid., pp 274-77..

⁷ Roy Johnston, ‘Music in Northern Ireland since 1921’, in Hill (ed.) *A new history of Ireland*.vii, pp 650-70, at p. 650-1; Joseph Ryan ‘Music In independent Ireland since 1921’, in Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland vii*, pp 621-49, at pp 650-52.

⁸Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 652.

¹⁰ Johnston, ‘Music in Northern Ireland’, pp 657-9.

¹¹ Ibid., pp 651, 658; interview with Jarlath McConville, shop keeper and singer, 5 Oct. 2011.

Opera House, with local singer Kathleen Smyth playing Ruth Pinkerton. Pavarotti also played the duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto* by Verdi, earlier in the year. Popular entertainers such as Scots singer Sir Harry Lauder, and popular northern English songstress Gracie Fields played there in 1963.¹²

'During the mid-1950s a new style of country music and rock and roll known as rockabilly became popular throughout Britain and Ireland, featuring singers such as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash and others.'¹³ Rock and roll quickly became popular. Country music had originated in North American, as a musical genre based in part on a Scots Irish emigrant traditional music, with influences from Ireland and Scotland.¹⁴ Much of the folk music of the late 1950s and 1960s owed its origins to songs and melodies from both countries and many of these songs indicate the political differences that arose from their diverse traditions. American country music gained in popularity throughout Northern Ireland, where a number of local country music performers such as Susan McCann and the Ramblers, Margot and the Country Folk, and Brian Coll and the Buckaroos gained a large following. Scottish traditional groups and later Hiberno-Scots music later became popular among northern unionists.¹⁵

Brass bands flourished throughout Ireland and had been in existence for centuries. In Northern Ireland a number of brass bands were active including Laganvale Flute Band (1908), later to become the band of 1136 Squadron Training Corps. Hillsborough Silver Band had been formed as early as 1850 and Murley Silver Band, County Tyrone in 1924. The First Old Boys Silver Band was formed in Belfast in 1946 from former members of the Boys Brigade. Marching music is an old tradition and one widespread throughout Europe. Its presence is noted in New Ross, County Wexford as early as 1265.¹⁶ Soldiers marching

¹² Lyn Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast* (Belfast, 1995), p.81.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁴ Ryan, 'Music in independent Ireland', pp 626-7; see also Bill Malone, *Country music USA* (Austin, 2002)..

¹⁵ The leaning of Protestant loyalists towards Hiberno-Scots music and dance became markedly more popular following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

¹⁶ Comerford, *Ireland*, p. 204.

to battle were serenaded by bands and many bands continued to mark parades and various state occasions.

Flute bands also evolved from a military tradition. The Corps Drums had led the soldiers in the British army from 1748. Irishmen joined the army in garrison towns throughout Ireland, learning to play in fife and drum bands. When they left the army, they sometimes joined civilian bands and the tradition has flourished up to the present day.¹⁷ Fife and drum bands have been in existence in Ulster since the Orange Order developed a distinctive culture of music. Many loyalists were involved in communal music-making, and also took part in the loyalist marching season in Ulster, beginning with the commemoration of the Battle of the Boyne on 12 July.¹⁸ The Orange Order has lodges in Donegal, Cavan and some border counties as well as in Northern Ireland, and those lodges too often have marching bands.

Traditional Irish music prior to ‘the Troubles’ was played by members of both traditions; by the descendants of Catholic Scots from the Western Isles, who settled in the Glens of Antrim and elsewhere, and by those of the Protestant tradition, who settled throughout the province in the plantation areas.¹⁹ Since 1969 however, borders between opposing political and religious factions have often been delineated through music. Catholics consider the tunes and styles of Orange bands and the beating of the Lambeg drums to be provocative intimidation. On the other hand, Protestants find that music performed by Catholics may be a sign of Irish republicanism and have rejected the uilleann pipes and the bodhrán as signs of a nationalist tradition.²⁰ For traditionalists there were ceilidhe bands such as the Green Glen, the O’Neill Family, the Parks and Sands families. Bands from the Protestant tradition included St. Mary’s accordion band, Silverwood pipe band, St. Coleman’s flute band and Lurgan amateur flute band.

¹⁷ <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/music/fifes-and-drums#stash.tmu75hbS.dpuf> (accessed 4 Nov. 2015).

¹⁸ Gordon Ramsey, ‘Band practice: class, taste and identity in Ulster loyalist flute bands.’ in *Ethnomusicology Ireland*, i (2011), pp 1-20, at pp 8-9.

¹⁹ For the context, see Johnston, ‘Music in Northern Ireland since 1921’, pp 659-60.

²⁰ David Cooper, *The musical traditions of Northern Ireland and its diaspora* (Farnham, 2009), pp 98—9.

Ballroom dancing was popular in all parts of Ireland. In the post-World War II period, orchestras gave way to dance bands. Later, towards the end of the 1950s and 1960s, the showband era arrived. The bands mainly consisted of guitars, a brass section, drums and a lead singer, though other members of the band sang harmonies with the main singer in certain numbers.²¹ Northern bands mirrored their southern counterparts in showband activity. These included The Freshmen from Ballymena, who had an ardent followers not just in the north but in the Republic of Ireland, who turned out when they appeared in Dublin and other areas. The lead singer of this band was the late Rob Strong. (His son Andrew, also a singer, played the role of the obnoxious Decco in the film *The commitments* (1991)). Other popular bands included the Clipper Carlton from Strabane, Dave Glover's Showband based in Newtownabbey, and the Melody Aces from Newtownstewart. Gay McIntyre's Showband and the Johnny Quigley Allstars were both from Derry, as well as Fergal Sharkey and the Undertones. The Plattermen from Omagh recruited guitar ace Arty McGlynn. Van Morrison, now a world blues star appeared with the Manhattan Show Band.²² Other performers from the north included Phil Coulter from Derry, songwriter and singer Bridie Gallagher; Daniel O'Donnell; Nita Norry and the group Clannad.²³ Bands from the Republic and Northern Ireland performed all over the island. These included the Royal Showband from Waterford, the Dixies from Cork, the Pacific Showband from Dublin and Joe Dolan and the Drifters from Mullingar. These bands were equally popular in southern and Northern Ireland as were their northern counterparts in the south of Ireland.²⁴

Early amateur musical societies in Ulster

Amateur musical theatre has been a constant feature in Ulster since the latter part of the nineteenth century. Many drew their inspiration from travelling opera companies such as the Carl Rosa Company (1873), the D'Oyly Carte Company (1874), the Moody Manners

²¹ Irish showbands website: www.irish-showbands.com/showbands.htm (accessed 9 Aug. 2015).

²² <http://www.culturenorthernireland.org/features/music/enniskillen-celebratesshowbands#sthash.xp4Mm3WN> (accessed 9 July 2015)

²³ Irish showbands website: www.irish-showbands.com/showbands.htm (accessed 7 Jan. 2016).

²⁴ <https://prezi.com/3v9sjh8clun-/let-the-show-begin/>, accessed 7 Jan. 2016.

Opera Company (1897) and others, which travelled extensively throughout Ireland performing opera, operetta, musical comedy and comic opera.²⁵ As early as 1896, amateur societies performed on the stage of the Belfast Grand Opera House. The original Belfast Operatic Company performed *Paul Jones* by Planquette, which had been first performed by the Carl Rosa Company two years earlier in 1889. As already mentioned in chapter 1, the Ulster Operatic Company (1910), was founded by Madame Gertrude Drinkwater. Bangor Operatic Company was founded by two local men who had a conversation in the trenches about founding a musical society in the town, which they duly did in 1919. Charles Brennan, city organist and conductor of the City Amateur Operatic Society was a major influence in Belfast musical circles throughout the first half of the twentieth century.²⁶ World War II resulted in travel restrictions being placed on theatre and musical companies, though the Gate Theatre Company from Dublin made regular visits to Belfast.²⁷ During World War II, some local musical societies such as the Ulster Operatic Company entertained the American troops stationed there in Ulster. The shows performed in the early years of amateur musical theatre in Northern Ireland were mainly those of Gilbert & Sullivan, followed by Edward German's *Merrie England*, and *Haddon Hall*. *Chu Chin Chow* (1916), *San Toy* (1899) and other British operettas were also performed. Later came the musicals of Lionel Monckton, *The arcadians* and *The Quaker girl*, followed by those of Sigmund Romberg such as the *The desert song*, *The student prince* and *New moon*. In 1943, two new musical societies were formed. They were Newcastle Glee Singers and Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, both in County Down. These societies mainly performed Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas and operettas, though this would change when Broadway musicals arrived in Europe in the 1940s. Ballyshannon Musical Society County Donegal was first founded in 1900 and re-formed in 1942.

During the 1950s Northern Ireland remained in a condition of stability. The Unionist party continued in power. Some disagreements continued in matters of education,

²⁵ Ryan 'Music in independent Ireland,' p. 638.

²⁶ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast*, p. 124

²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 38.

flag flying and social welfare.²⁸ In the early 1960s Belfast suddenly seemed a more prosperous and a slightly more sophisticated city. A number of restaurants and boutiques opened. Pop concerts came to Belfast. Television sets became common.²⁹ Jazz quickly became popular in Belfast. Some of the American soldiers who came through the city played in jazz with local groups. The Chris Barber Band, one of the best known traditional jazz bands in the United Kingdom, discovered Otilie Patterson, a Belfast singer, who remained with the band for many years.³⁰ However, in 1969 the period of civil unrest known as ‘the Troubles’ began and later sections of this chapter will discuss the effect of these disturbances on amateur musical theatre. But before this, certain important developments occurred which influenced both the founding of the future northern region of AIMS and the development and improvement of standards in Irish musical theatre, north and south.

The National Operatic and Dramatic Society (NODA)

As noted in chapter 4, the National Operatic and Dramatic Society (as NODA was originally known) was highly influential in the development of musical theatre in Ireland, prior to and following World War I. The society was originally formed because difficulties had arisen between performing rights holder of the works of Gilbert & Sullivan, Richard D’Oyly Carte, and societies from the north of England. During the latter part of the century, the spectacle of amateurs playing in public, even for charity, was regarded by many in Victorian England as coarse exhibitionism.³¹ This changed with the arrival of the comic operas of W.S. Gilbert & Sir Arthur Sullivan. The public embraced these works, which were easy to stage, had plenty of choral numbers, a number of leading roles, lovely melodies and were full of humour. They were also free from sexual innuendo and tilted at the institutions of the state through the ‘topsy-turvy’ plots. When released for amateurs, amateur societies rushed to obtain performing rights to these works. Richard D’Oyly Carte

²⁸ J.H. Whyte, ‘Economic crisis and political cold war, 1949-57’, in Hill (ed.), *A new history of Ireland* vii, pp 278-93, at 288-9.

²⁹ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House, Belfast*, pp 92-3, 190.

³⁰ Johnston, ‘Music in Northern Ireland since 1921’, p. 660.

³¹ Derek B. Scott, *The singing bourgeois: songs of the Victorian drawing room and parlour* (2nd ed. Ashgate, 2001)

held the rights and only refused permission to stage an amateur show if one of his comic operas was playing in the same area.³² These pioneer British societies faced numerous difficulties. No recordings were available as yet, to help decide what show suited the societies, which had to rely on reading or playing copies of scores and libretti, hired from D'Oyly Carte and other music publishers. Distance from London caused postal delays, there were differences in rights' fees, and delays in receiving scores and libretti. Lack of any means of direct contact caused frustration. This resulted in a decision by A.P. Bulfield, director of Lancaster Musical Society to contact other local societies, asking them to join together in founding what became the National Operatic and Dramatic Association. Its first meeting was on 15 February 1899 in Manchester.³³ By the start of World War I there were two hundred societies in NODA. The war intervened as thousands of men left for the trenches. At the 1914 annual general meeting of NODA in Llandudno, in Wales, members of the Rathmines and Rathgar Musical Society (the R & R) founded in Dublin in 1913, attended, and the society later joined NODA. The whole of Ireland was at that time still part of the United Kingdom, and other Irish societies from the south and the north also became members of NODA. The Ulster Operatic Company, the New Lyric Opera Company and Bangor Operatic Company were among the first to join, followed by the companies which were formed or reconstituted after the war such as St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast Operatic Company, and Newry Musical and Orchestral Society.³⁴ Edmund Fitzgerald of Fermoy Choral Society and Jarlath McConville from Lurgan Operatic Society were NODA councillors for many years. NODA was divided into regions and national councillors were elected from each region to the NODA national council. Ireland was attached to the western region of NODA until January 1959 when the Irish region was formed.³⁵ As will be argued, the councillors from NODA such as Denzil Rees from Wales, played an integral role in the foundation of the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera. This festival and NODA had a profound influence on the formation in 1965 of both the Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS) and, later, its northern region (already

³² Young, *A century of service*, pp 3-4.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp 8-9

³⁴ Interviews with Richard Lavery, 9 Feb., 5 April 2014; with Thompson Steele, 8 Feb. 2012; see also *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Nov. 1984, 9 Nov. 1985.

³⁵ Young, *A century of service*, pp 52-3.

mentioned in chapter 4), and was in the opinion of many musical theatre lovers, responsible for raising standards of production generally. From 1965 onwards, as will be discussed below, most Irish societies and companies joined the newly formed AIMS. Societies which were already members of NODA were able to join AIMS while retaining their NODA membership.

The Waterford International Festival of Light Opera

Waterford International Festival of Light Opera was founded in 1958 by the local tourist board and local businessmen in the hope of extending the tourist season and bringing foreign currency into the area. They felt that a Festival of Light Opera would be in keeping with the city. Music was important in Waterford, which had many choirs (a copy of a photograph of the Waterford Amateur Opera Group (1900) was on the cover of a recent study of the associational world in Ireland).³⁶ Two musical societies were already active in the city. Stanley Bowyer, a well-known conductor and choirmaster would take care of the orchestra.³⁷ The festival needed an input of foreign currency, so the organisers, including local businessman Joseph O' Regan (who became president of the festival committee), contacted officials from NODA's Welsh region, seeking their help in attracting societies from Wales and England to Waterford. The NODA national councillors from Wales contacted societies in the area and were successful in bringing them to the festival, including Tredegar Amateur Operatic Society, and Standard Telephones and Cables Operatic Society. Two of NODA's Welsh national councillors, Denzil Rees and David J.I. Owen, were elected as honorary vice-presidents of the festival committee. Lurgan Operatic Society from County Armagh and Dundalk Musical Society from County Louth took part. Trophies were donated by the Waterford Glass Company. Patrons included Most Rev. Michael Russell, bishop of Waterford and Lismore, Right Rev. John Ward Armstrong B.D., bishop of Cashel and Emly, Waterford and Lismore, the marquis of

³⁶ R.V. Comerford and Jennifer Kelly (ed.), *Associational culture in Ireland and abroad* (Dublin & Portland, OR, 2010).

³⁷ Waterford Festival of Light Opera, *Souvenir programme, 1968* (Waterford, 1968).

Waterford, Lord Moyne, and other dignitaries.³⁸ The Arts Council and the Irish Tourist Board, together with many local businesses sponsored the festival.

The first festival was very successful and gradually more societies competed from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (part of the United Kingdom). As well as the society from Lurgan, St Agnes Choral Society in Belfast and Bangor Operatic Company competed successfully from the early 1960s onwards. St Agnes took first place on three occasions. In 1969 the period of conflict known as ‘the Troubles’ erupted in Northern Ireland. When ‘the Troubles’ were at their height, in 1973, the St Agnes society presented Strauss’s *Die fledermaus* at the festival. One of the memorable songs in the show is ‘Brother mine’, a song about brotherly love and togetherness. When this song, sung by Michael Blair, with the rest of the leading players and large chorus ended, the audience rose to their feet, cheering and clapping. Many were in tears, knowing the background of the society and the difficulties they had experienced, living in the nationalist area of Andersonstown.³⁹

The ramifications of ‘the Troubles’ had an effect on societies from England, which were fearful of travelling. Many of them did not compete in the festival for some years, allowing space in what was now a fourteen day festival. The Association of Irish Musical Societies had campaigned for some time to have entries accepted from the Republic. Members of southern societies and AIMS councillors began attending the festival, and as noted in chapter 4, a number of Dublin musical societies were finally admitted as competitors from the late 1960s. The first of these was St Louis Past Pupils Musical Society, Rathmines, Dublin. The society took second place in 1969, and won the best overall show in 1971 and 1972. Three groups from Dublin were successful in the 1980s, Sandymount Musical Society, Dublin took first place in the festival in 1981, 1983 and 1985, St John’s Musical Society, and Foxfield/Kilbarrack in north Dublin won in 1982. Other Dublin societies were successful in later years, leading to the dominance of southern Irish societies in the festival. Two English societies ignored the political situation and

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Irish News*, 30 May 1973.

competed regularly. They were South Anglia Savoy Players from the London area and the Savoyard Appreciation Society, Halifax, West Yorkshire. Both societies brought Gilbert & Sullivan comic operas of very high standard to the festival, with wonderful choral singing and excellent leading performers.

Productions at the festival changed over the period down to 1990 in line with broader tastes among musical societies. The content moved from the eternally popular comic opera of Gilbert & Sullivan to operetta by Strauss, Lehar, Romberg, Offenbach and others to the British musicals of Noel Coward, Ivor Novello, Lionel Monckton and then to more modern musicals such as those of Rogers & Hammerstein, Kander & Ebb, Jerry Herman, Stephen Sondheim, and Andrew Lloyd Webber.⁴⁰ It is possible to chart how musical theatre changed in Ireland by noting the musicals that were entered in the festival.⁴¹

The festival developed a method of identification for members of competing groups by issuing each society with badges of a particular colour, with the society name printed on it, and space for the name of the individual performer. Wearing the badge was imperative, as one could not enter the festival club without a badge. The festival club was usually located in the Tower Hotel, a short walk from the Theatre Royal. Several societies also provided their members with specially designed sweatshirts, with the society's logo and title of the current production inscribed on the garment. It was little wonder that members of the different societies became familiar with each other, or were introduced by members of the festival committee.⁴² The atmosphere in the festival club at night, or in the many public houses near the Theatre Royal, Waterford, was conducive to encounters and sing-songs, and did much to create an atmosphere of openness and bonhomie.⁴³ Another festival tradition that evolved was that the society which performed on Saturday night would sing at a local religious service, Catholic or Protestant, the following day. For

⁴⁰ For changing production choices, see chapter 2 above.

⁴¹ List of shows performed by festival competitors in programmes of Waterford Festival on loan to author; *Fiftieth anniversary programme*, 2009.

⁴² Interview with George King, 17 May 2012, and many others who met initially at the festival, and the personal recollections of the author.

⁴³ Recollections of the author, a regular visitor to the festival.

many, it was the first experience of being in a church of a denomination other than their own and for some, it was an unnerving experience.⁴⁴

The festival also led to the raising of standards in production. Competing groups and visitors noted unusual or innovative set design, lighting plots, musical content, choral technique and production techniques. New shows were often seen for the first time at the festival, some controversial, some uplifting, some splendidly sung or stunningly staged.⁴⁵ All added to the musical theatre knowledge of both audience and members of visiting societies. Playing in front of an audience of musical lovers and other competitors who often had a score or libretto of the show with them could be a terrifying experience, but always one to remember.⁴⁶

The festival productions were adjudicated initially by British directors who had been performers or directors in either professional or amateur productions. Most had qualifications in music, speech and drama, and had attended schools of the performing arts in London. The adjudicator spoke about the performance to the audience, with the cast huddled together in trepidation, on stage but behind the curtain.⁴⁷ A marking sheet was allocated to each society at the end of the festival which was of use in defining strengths and weaknesses of the company or society.

The Waterford festival was run in a very professional manner. The Theatre Royal was an excellent venue, with good acoustics. The orchestra, led by Stanley Bowyer, was of a professional standard. There was certainly cutthroat competitiveness but in tandem with this aspect, there was a great spirit of helpfulness between the groups. Jarlath McConville remembers a group from Wales, whose costumes arrived in a sorry condition, being helped by members of Lurgan Operatic Society to iron the wrinkled garments.⁴⁸ Furniture was borrowed from local houses or shops if emergencies occurred. When Derek Collins, the director of South Anglia Savoy Players, on leaving the theatre, walked into a lamp-post,

⁴⁴ The late George Moore, in a conversation with the author, spoke of the hair rising on the back of his neck.

⁴⁵ Recollections of the author who was present at many of these productions.

⁴⁶ Personal experience of the author who worked backstage on two such productions.

⁴⁷ Interview, 22 June 2011, with John Allen, director of Coolock Musical Society, which had received a scathing review.

⁴⁸ Interview with Jarlath McConville, former performer with Lurgan Operatic Society, 5 Oct. 2011.

shattering the large Waterford Glass International Trophy, valued then at about £2,000, the company immediately made a replica for the stunned director.⁴⁹ The Theatre Royal stage crew helped with repairs to scenery, stage cloths, breakdowns of trucks and other catastrophes.

The Waterford Festival played an important role in Irish musical theatre. The festival's good relations with NODA helped lay the foundations for a cordial relationship between NODA and AIMS, and in general between societies from both parts of Ireland and the societies from the United Kingdom. The introductions made between societies from the south and companies from the north in the friendly, ebullient atmosphere of Waterford, discussing their common love of musicals, helped to lessen suspicions and ease differences. Lelia Mackinlay wrote in the *NODA Bulletin* of January 1962: 'What makes Waterford is its unique spirit of all hands to the wheel... helpers erecting scenery throughout the night...orchestral players playing in bedrooms...nuns stitching pennants for street decorations.'⁵⁰

Friendships were formed with members of northern societies. Brendan McCann, chairperson of St Agnes Choral Society, was a journalist with the *Irish Independent* in its Belfast office. George King, a journalist in the *Irish Independent* Dublin office, was a member of the welcoming committee of the festival. King introduced McCann and Joe Smyth, chairperson of another competing society, Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, to AIMS councillors who attended the festival and to other competing societies from the south. (This resulted in St Agnes Choral Society being the first society from Northern Ireland to join AIMS in 1973). Newry Musical and Orchestral Society had competed in Waterford for some years, and Joe Smyth was already acquainted with McCann. The two men and the author became friends with Denis McGrath, the stage director of the Waterford Festival and others from Dublin.⁵¹ It was through such introductions that those from different musical societies got to know each other. Lifelong friendships were formed

⁴⁹ Interview with George King, member of the welcoming committee of the festival, 17 May 2012.

⁵⁰ Young, *A century of service*, pp 91-2; *AIMS: celebrating 50 years*, unpaginated.

⁵¹ Interview with George King, journalist and committee member of the Waterford Festival, 17 May 2012

at Waterford, not merely between societies from the two jurisdictions of Ireland, but between English, Welsh and Scottish societies, particularly the Savoyard Appreciation Society from Halifax in Yorkshire, and musical societies from Clydach and Neath in Wales, and Guarach and Motherwell in Scotland.⁵²

A major step in the furthering of good relations between societies was the decision by Belfast Operatic Company to take part in the festival. A degree of friendly rivalry existed between this company and St Agnes Choral Society. ‘Aggies’ as they were popularly known, had been competitors in the festival since 1962, winning the premier award on several occasions with *The gondoliers* (1973), *Die fledermaus* (1974), and *The gypsy baron* (1975).⁵³ (Lurgan Operatic Society had been the first Northern Irish society to win the festival in 1961 with *The gondoliers*, and that society also won with *La perichole* in 1968.)⁵⁴

Belfast Operatic Company was one of the most influential companies in Belfast, but by the mid-1970s still had not yet competed in the festival. George Moore, the chairperson had determined for some time that it should enter the festival. John Mercer, founder and musical director of the company, had also harboured an ambition to compete in the festival.⁵⁵ A party of nine company members travelled to Waterford in September 1975 on a ‘spying mission’ to see what the festival was about, including Moore, Mercer and John Dallas, a music teacher.⁵⁶ On their return to Belfast an extremely positive recommendation to apply to the festival was made, and in 1976 the Waterford Festival secretary Jimmy Hassey contacted Moore early in the year to offer the company a weekend slot, two nights at double the usual fee. Moore, having checked that the fourteen teachers, who were members of the company, could get time off from school, accepted with alacrity. The company performed *The mikado*, taking third place, with leading lady Rosemary McKillen winning the Best Irish Singer award and two other awards. The company continued to

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Interview with Thompson Steele, in Belfast, past president of Belfast Operatic Company, 8 Feb. 2012

⁵⁴ Waterford 48th International Festival of Light Opera, *Souvenir programme, 20 September – 1st October, 2006* (Waterford, 2006)

⁵⁵ Interview with John Mercer, former musical director and founder of Belfast Operatic, 22 July 2014

⁵⁶ Thompson Steele, ‘From the Long to the Short Strand, a history of Belfast Operatic Company 1960-2010’, unpublished (copy in possession of the author) and subsequent interview with Steele, 8 Feb. 2012.

perform in Waterford each year and in 1980 took the premier award with Offenbach's *Orpheus in the underworld*. Other societies from Belfast such as Fortwilliam Musical Society and Lisnagarvey Operatic Society also competed regularly, winning a number of individual awards. Londonderry Musical Society, originally founded as Londonderry Light Opera Society in 1962, also competed.⁵⁷ The societies from Northern Ireland enjoyed a break from the bombing, shooting and general tensions in Belfast and other areas, and were able to see that not all Irish people were republicans who hated loyalists. They were able to recognise fellow competitors in amateur musical theatre, thus contributing to improving relations between northern and southern musical societies.⁵⁸

The composition of societies in Northern Ireland

Members of existing musical societies in Northern Ireland in the 1970s were drawn mainly from the middle classes, or in the case of Belfast Operatic Company a number of were sons and daughters of shipyard giant Harland and Wolff. Quite a number of that company were teachers who had studied at the Stranmillis Church of Ireland teacher training college. The majority of societies were divided along religious and political lines. In general people from opposing traditions did not mix.⁵⁹ Paul Anthony, a lecturer at St Mary's Training College in Belfast (as it was known until 1985), and a member of St Agnes Choral Society, later attended Queen's University, Belfast. He confirmed that he and other Catholics sat together and had almost no connection with fellow students of other denominations.⁶⁰ The political situation had implications for the composition of the societies.⁶¹

During 'the Troubles' a sectarian conflict of the bitterest kind developed on the streets of Belfast and some other parts of the province.⁶² There is no doubt that in the violence and turmoil that followed, normal life was altered. There was certainly very little

⁵⁷ Waterford International Festival of Light Opera, *48th festival programme* (Waterford, 2006).

⁵⁸ Steele, 'From the Long to the Short Strand'.

⁵⁹ Interview with Brian O'Neill, former president of AIMS, 19 April 2013.

⁶⁰ Interview with Paul Anthony, former member of St Agnes C.S., 13 Nov. 2012.

⁶¹ Paul Bew, *Ireland, the politics of enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford, 2007), pp 478-85, 565; Denis Barritt and Charles F. Carter, *The Northern Ireland problem, a study in group relations* (London,), pp 194-6.

⁶² Bew, *Ireland*, p. 495.

night life. Few pubs remained open and few buses ran after nine o'clock. Articles by Graham Patterson of the *Daily Telegraph* painted Belfast as an uninviting place for the visitor. 'In the city centre people hurry through empty streets, cinema queues are sparse. The army's presence becomes more noticeable as darkness falls.'⁶³ The Arts Theatre closed in 1971, though the Lyric Theatre remained open, as did the Northern Ireland Opera Trust. The Grand Opera House, which is situated beside the Europa Hotel 'the most bombed hotel in Europe', as it was known, was closed down in 1972, but was bought back from the developer by the Arts Council, 'thus holding out the prospect of an appropriate home' for visits by major companies.⁶⁴

The modern websites of the societies that were founder members of the northern region of AIMS generally stress their cross-community character. Down to the mid-1980s, it is evident that this was rarely the case. The majority of musical societies (or companies, as many of them were known in the north) drew their members mainly from the Protestant community. This can be verified by an examination of the lists of members in show programmes.⁶⁵ As a result of the many interviews conducted with society members in Northern Ireland, it is clear that the membership issue arose from the ghetto-like nature of communities where these societies were formed, rather than an active policy of sectarianism.⁶⁶

Belfast Operatic Company was founded in 1960 at Ballymacarrett Presbyterian Church, situated in East Belfast. John Mercer, the organist and choirmaster founded the society from the nucleus of the church choir to perform musical and dramatic works. Although founded as a church group, it was intended to be an interdenominational society drawn from all areas of the city.⁶⁷ The company occasionally boasted that its members included a 'token Taig' (Catholic). This company became one of the foremost amateur musical societies in the region and the possessors of its own premises at The Mount, in

⁶³ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House*, pp 92-3, 190.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 97

⁶⁵ Programme of Londonderry Musical Society, 1977; programme of Belfast Operatic Company, 1966.

⁶⁶ Interview with Thompson Steele, former president of Belfast Operatic Company, 8 Feb. 2012.

⁶⁷ Grand Opera House, history & heritage, <http://www.goh.co.uk/history-heritage> (accessed 8 Feb. 2017).

East Belfast. Thompson Steele, former president of the company, in an interview with the author said, ‘I grew up and went to school in Orangefield, went to college in Stranmillis, where I would have [first] met Catholics.’⁶⁸ Members who came from Orangefield in Belfast, or trained at Stranmillis Protestant Teacher Training College were usually from the Protestant tradition. In the mid to late 1970s graduates from Stranmillis usually joined Belfast Operatic Company, Lisnagarvey Operatic Company, Ulster Operatic Company, or the New Lyric Opera Company, whose members were mainly drawn from the various Protestant traditions.⁶⁹

St. Agnes Choral Society, formed in 1950, was a mainly Catholic society with a number of members coming from St. Mary’s University College, a Catholic teacher training college on the Falls Road. In later years, members of other faiths were invited into the society to play leading roles, though they rarely remained as permanent members.⁷⁰ Fortwilliam Musical Society in north Belfast was formed in 1977 to bring communities together during ‘the Troubles’, comprising all faiths, as was Lurgan Operatic Society, in County Armagh.⁷¹

The founding of AIMS northern region

As mentioned in chapter 4, the Association of Irish Musical Societies was founded in September 1965 by a group of Dublin societies. Initially confined to Dublin city and its environs, the association had spread throughout southern Ireland by the early 1970s, and was interested in attracting societies from Northern Ireland (the association’s constitution contained no barriers to such a development).⁷² As noted, some initial contacts had been made through the Waterford International Festival. During the period of conflict which lasted from August 1969 until 1998 (beyond the end of our period), the societies in Northern Ireland continued to produce musicals and sometimes pantomimes, and were the

⁶⁸ Interview with Thompson Steele, 8 Feb. 2012.

⁶⁹ Interviews with Paul Anthony, 13 Nov. 2012, Thompson Steele, 8 Feb. 2012; and email from Tony Finnegan, 23 Oct. 2010.

⁷⁰ Interview with Paul Anthony, former secretary of St. Agnes C.S., 13 Nov. 2012.

⁷¹ Interview with Jarlath McConville, former member of Lurgan Operatic Company, 5 Oct. 2011.

⁷² Association of Irish Musical Societies (AIMS), *Constitution of AIMS*.

main providers of live entertainment in the province. It was during the mid-1970s that the proponents of musical theatre in Northern Ireland became involved in AIMS; the onset of ‘the Troubles’ had delayed the attempt form a region. Eventually, as a result of initial meetings in Waterford and further discussions between AIMS members and members of St Agnes Choral Society and Newry Musical Society, the northern region was formed in March 1974.⁷³ The region was envisaged as comprising societies in the nine counties of the province of Ulster: Antrim, Armagh, Cavan, Derry, and Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Monaghan and Tyrone.

This inaugural meeting of the northern region took place at the Fairways Hotel, Dundalk on 3 March 1974. The musical societies present were those from Dundalk, Newry, Monaghan, St. Michael’s Enniskillen, St. Agnes Choral Society, and St. MacNissi’s Choral and Dramatic Society from Larne. (Dundalk and Monaghan musical societies, originally members of the northern region, decided later to move to the eastern region of AIMS.) The meeting was attended by the president of AIMS, Fred Taylor, and *AIMS Bulletin* editor Mary Monks.⁷⁴ As six societies were present, three national councillors were elected at the meeting. Elected were (chairperson) Brendan McCann, a photographic journalist, of St Agnes Choral Society, Belfast, (treasurer) Joe Smyth of Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, and (secretary) Fr Eamonn O’Brien of St MacNissi’s Choral and Dramatic Society.

By the time of the first AGM held again at the Fairways Hotel, Dundalk, three more societies had joined the region; Derremore Singers County Down, Portrush Musical Society, County Antrim, and Bangor Operatic Company, County Down. Belfast Operatic Company joined the region in May 1975. There were now ten societies. Mention was made at the meeting of the AIMS seminar, to be held in Waterford at a cost of £16.10s to include Friday night, the Awards Dinner Dance and Sunday High Tea. At the following AGM held in the Slieve Donard Hotel in Newcastle, County Down new societies were: Cloughmore Male Voice Choir, Lurgan Operatic Society, County Armagh, St Patrick’s Musical Society,

⁷³ Minutes of AIMS National Council,

⁷⁴ Interview with Mary Monks, 2 Nov. 2010.

Downpatrick, and Ballyshannon Musical Society. At this time, individual members were allowed, so Jarlath McConville of Lurgan Operatic Society became an individual member.⁷⁵ The reasons for joining were varied. AIMS was a relatively local, easily accessible organization, whereas NODA was based in London. The publicity given to local productions in the *AIMS Bulletin* and the idea of block booking by other societies provided an incentive, but the main attraction was, in the author's view, participation in the AIMS Awards and attending the AIMS Awards weekend which took place in June each year.

During the years that followed the societies of the northern region, besides providing most of the live entertainment in the province, embarked on a series of regional concerts, initially organised in 1972 by St Agnes Choral Society Belfast, Belfast Operatic Company and Newry Musical and Orchestral Society, and consisting of choruses and dance routines from a selection of operetta and musical comedy. Performers were members of local societies who rehearsed in Belfast, mainly in the premises of Belfast Operatic Company in The Mount, East Belfast on Sundays. At that time, the Grand Opera House Belfast was being restored, and it re-opened on 15 September 1980, with a gala concert containing a 'Good olde days' selection by the Ulster Operatic Company. Later that year, the AIMS northern region made its special contribution to the musical world with *Cavalcade of song – a tribute to the Grand Opera House and Cirque*. Nine societies from the region under the direction of Billy Cairns, OBE, musical director, gave a concert 'rich in nostalgia' from the great musicals and operettas of the theatres history.⁷⁶ Several amateur societies performed in the Grand Opera House,⁷⁷ including the City Amateur Operatic Company, and Ulster Operatic Company; in later years the venue became a home for societies such as St Agnes Choral Society and Belfast Operatic Company.⁷⁸ In later years *Cavalcade of song* took place annually in the Ulster Hall.

⁷⁵ Interview with Jarlath McConville, 5 Oct. 2011.

⁷⁶ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House*, pp 136-7.

⁷⁷ Johnston, 'Music in Northern Ireland since 1921', p. 668.

⁷⁸ Gallagher, *The Grand Opera House*, pp 136-7.

As seen above, a key role in the formation of the *Cavalcade of song* was played by Billy Cairns, of Fortwilliam Musical Society in North Belfast, founded in 1977. Cairns, the musical director of the group, was the driving force behind the high quality of choral music that has made Fortwilliam Musical Society synonymous with an excellent chorus. Well-known in the world of musical theatre, he has won many AIMS awards as both musical director and chorus master, and has also won awards from the Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera.⁷⁹ For many year Cairns devised and directed *Cavalcade of song*, combining the talents of many of the musical societies in Northern Ireland. He is also much in demand as an adjudicator and examiner.⁸⁰ *Cavalcade of song* prospered due to its inclusion the Belfast Festival, which ensured a regular audience, as well as support from the societies from both sides of the border. The proceeds of the concerts were, after expenses were paid, divided among the participating societies. The concert continued until 1988 when the Belfast Festival decided to remove the concert from the festival, ostensibly for artistic reasons. Another factor that caused the demise of the event was the societies themselves. They had, over the years, learned a considerable amount of musical material, and a number of them decided to run concerts for their own societies. The region did, however, take part in national concerts in Dublin on the twenty-first anniversary of AIMS in 1986.

The AIMS Awards

The AIMS Awards, as noted in chapter 4, were set up in 1972, as a method of raising standards in production.⁸¹ Participating societies were visited by an adjudicator who provided a private review to the societies and a written review, published in the *AIMS Bulletin*, the magazine of the association. Categories included best overall show, best male and female singers, best comedian/comedienne and best supporting actor/actress. Included also were best director, musical director and choreographer. Trophies were donated as well as mementos for runners-up. The Annual Awards weekend was held in a large hotel, which was usually booked out in advance. Such venues included White's Hotel in Wexford, the

⁷⁹ Northern Ireland Festival of Light Opera, *Festival programme*, 1981.

⁸⁰ In 2005 Billy Cairns received an OBE for services to music.

⁸¹ 'Only the very best', in *AIMS: celebrating 50 years*, unpaginated.

Ardree Hotel in Waterford and the Slieve Donard Hotel, Newcastle, County Down. In later years the event was held in Waterford and Kerry. Societies from Northern Ireland travelled by train or by plane from Derry and Belfast. The numbers increased each year and by 1985, almost six hundred society members attended these annual events.

Conclusion

AIMS's northern region, established in 1974, has certainly brought societies together in Northern Ireland, and has also encouraged good relations between northern and southern societies. This role, as noted above, built on the work done first by NODA in the early part of the twentieth century. From the 1960s it also built on the important contribution played by the Waterford Festival of Light Opera. The attraction of AIMS, unlike NODA, was that it was on the spot, and the *AIMS Bulletin*, as well as the awards system and simple curiosity encouraged interaction, causing northern societies to visit productions of societies both north and south. The formation of the AIMS northern region was delayed until 1974 on account of 'the Troubles'. However, the regional and national concerts brought people from all backgrounds together in a shared love of musical theatre. The Ulster societies were strong, played to full houses and would feature prominently in the AIMS Awards.⁸²

⁸² See list of winners of awards, 1972-, in 'Only the very best', in *AIMS:celebrating 50 years*, unpaginated.

Conclusion

This study began by looking at the history of amateur Irish musical societies in the era before World War II, and it was noted in chapter 1 that several of the major societies still flourishing today were already in existence by that time. In fact, by the time World War I broke out in 1914, such societies were already functioning as the principal forum for live musical theatre in the major urban centres in Ireland, north and south. The war itself, as well as the Easter Rising and the period of political and military upheaval that followed, was the cause of some falling-off in amateur musical society productions, but certain societies, including in particular, the R & R, the Wexford Amateur Operatic Society, the Ulster Operatic Company, and the Bangor Amateur Operatic Society continued to stage performances for much of the period from 1914 to 1923. The few surviving minutes of such societies make little mention of current events, and give little clue as to the impact of the war on the societies themselves: this may stem from the fact that most members were drawn from the middle classes who may have been relatively immune from the upheavals of the day.

From there, chapter 2 turned to a discussion of the main changes in musical theatre productions from 1945 to the late 1980s. The period witnessed a key change in production trends, with the advent of the American musical, and attention was drawn to the ways in which the war itself impacted on such musicals. Works of a more traditional kind, such as operetta and those by Gilbert & Sullivan, didn't entirely fall out of favour, but there was a growing willingness to try out the musicals of Rodgers & Hammerstein and others. This development was accompanied by other changes, especially an increasing tendency to use greater technical support and amplified sound. Such changes naturally increased costs, but the overall result by the 1980s was to raise the quality of productions in Irish amateur musical theatre.

Chapter 3 examined some of the reasons for the popularity and growth of amateur musical societies, particularly in the post World War II period. It was argued that before that time (and to some extent later), the Catholic clergy had been a supportive force, sometimes in the hope of distracting young men from drinking. Other factors included family influence, and in some cases the influence of school teachers. Such factors would continue to make their mark in the post-war period. The marked increase in the number of such societies in the greater Dublin area in the 1970s and 1980s was very much linked to the rising costs of housing in the capital, and a consequent dispersal of some families already active in the musical theatre world to the surrounding counties.

While middle class members continued to be the norm, members of the working classes also joined. Past pupil societies were common, and there was some appearance of work-related societies. Besides their contribution to the cultural and social life of their local community, societies were frequent contributor to charities, and also brought business to the locality.

The advent of the American musical, and its consequent challenges to staging and technical matters, produced problems for the committees that ran the societies, both in terms of deciding what sort of production to choose and of funding. Occasionally these challenges resulted in splits. But the popularity of the musical was unstoppable, and a wide variety of fund-raising methods were adopted in order to cover costs.

In chapter 4 attention turned to the origins and role of the Association of Irish Musical Societies, founded in 1965. Although there was a pre-existing body (the National Operatic and Dramatic Association, based in the United Kingdom) which already catered for a number of Irish societies, NODA was not particularly geared to dealing with problems being experienced by some Irish societies such as production rights. AIMS was set up, and was soon providing valuable services to its members. This is borne out by the steadily growing number of affiliated societies. Such functions included, notably, a concerted approach to production rights, a library and information service, a monthly *Bulletin* with news of AIMS and local societies and a variety of workshops on different aspects of production. An official awards system helped to improve standards of performance.

The final chapter considered the establishment in 1974 of AIMS's northern region. The importance of the Waterford Festival of Light Opera as a forum where northern and southern societies could come together was emphasised, and there was discussion of the reasons why membership of AIMS appealed to musical societies in Northern Ireland. By the mid-1970s these included the influence of the *AIMS Bulletin*, and the AIMS awards system, but the formation of the region was delayed on account of 'the Troubles'. The northern region has helped cement good relations between societies on both sides of the border.

To sum up, it has been argued in this thesis that in the musicology of Ireland, amateur musical theatre, though hitherto largely neglected by scholars, has played a most important part in both the performance and visual arts, particularly since the period after World War II. In addition to this cultural role, amateur musical societies have made a significant contribution to the social life of their communities. It is to be hoped that this thesis will encourage others to investigate the

subject further, and perhaps to adopt a comparative approach by considering the history of similar societies in other countries.

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