

Sheela-na-gigs and an ‘Aesthetics of Damage’

Sir—Ralph Kenna (December 15th) calls for the return of two Sheela na Gig figures from the British Museum to their places of origin in Westmeath. During many centuries of British exploration and conquest, it was inevitable that a large number of artefacts would find their way back to museums and private collections.

It would be unfair, however, to suggest that the British only took things away. They also brought things with them: law, the conventions of civilized conduct and, perhaps most importantly, the language in which Mr. Kenna expresses his opinions, in which Pearse phrased his Proclamation, and without which it is hard to imagine the prosperous, modern nation we know today. Let us hope they do not come looking for these things back. —yours, etc.

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This crass letter to *The Irish Times*, dating from 2001, demonstrates the persistence of a colonial-racist mindset with a long lineage back to Giraldus Cambrensis and his infamous *Topographia Hibernica* written in about 1188. That such dogmatic attitudes still exist in the 21st century is a state of affairs that finds broader political resonance in developments such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of populism in Europe. However, for me the letter is also intriguing because by situating the Sheela-na-gig within this extended trajectory of English colonial narratives relating to Ireland, it reminds us of the prolonged presence of the Sheela, no matter how seemingly peripheral, in the affairs of both countries.

About ten years ago, having come across a rather enigmatic Sheela-na-gig on display in Rothe House, Kilkenny, I was struck by the thought that these strange carvings could offer me as a composer a rich source of thematic material. For many, this might seem an unusual idea; and some might legitimately ask how the rather crude and distorted physiognomy of these stone figures could ever translate into music. However, I am one of those composers who needs to do a lot of thinking around my music before I can think in it; and my compositions have always caught fire with extramusical disciplines and modes of thought such as myth, literature, symbol, feminism and post-colonial theory. Many of my large-scale works were deeply influenced by such perspectives. *Umbilical* (2011),² for example, is a retelling of the Oedipus story from the perspective of Jocasta (Oedipus’ mother and lover); *Scenes from Crow* (2000),³ is an extended response to Ted Hughes’s *Crow* poems, and my Percussion Concerto—*Rajas, Sattva, Tamas* (2000) is inspired by Vedic philosophy. So it did not take long, in fact, for these strange carvings to cast their spell on me; and over the following five years I embarked on an intense investigation into them that took me all over Ireland and parts of Britain. A number of pieces emerged out of that exploration that radically altered my thinking in terms of music, and its function and place in our contemporary world. Today, I am still working on Sheela-inspired music.

¹ Letter to *The Irish Times*, 9 January 2001.

² *Umbilical* is available on Diatribe Records: <http://shop.diatribe.ie/album/umbilical>

³ *Scenes from Crow* is available on Diatribe Records: <http://shop.diatribe.ie/album/scenes-from-crow>



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What are Sheela-na-gigs? Sheela-na-gigs are stone carvings of naked female figures that prominently depict oversized vulvas. In contrast, the rest of the body is often emaciated or even skeletal, with sagging, diminutive or missing breasts. Their bodies thus present images of both death and life regeneration. The figures are often balding with wrinkled foreheads and chevron-shaped striations on their faces. In addition to their extravagant vulvas, Sheelas often have excessively large heads, eyes and ears. The quality of the carvings varies from rough-hewn to well crafted, though very few have the aesthetic finesse of the delicately carved gargoyles seen on European medieval churches and cathedrals.



Sheela-na-gigs are found on medieval churches, castles and town walls, and near

⁴ Photographs by Benjamin Dwyer

ancient wells, with over one hundred figures found in Ireland and around forty uncovered in Britain (often on or close to monastic sites). Their origins are unclear because many were discovered *ex situ*, having been hidden in fields or dumped into rivers; or because they were carved from stone different to that forming the structures in which they were found. Their placement above church doorways or close to wells (often situated on ancient roads) suggests that they were at some periods venerated. In other contexts, their intentional destruction tells a different story. It is quite impossible therefore to establish for certain when, how, where or why they originated. While there is much disagreement among experts, most anthropologists agree that they date from between the 11th and 17th centuries; though it is perfectly plausible to suggest an earlier period, as many of the medieval churches where Sheelas are located were built to replace former pagan sites of worship; and there is a distinctly credible hypothesis that Sheelas were placed on church doorways as a means of appropriating residual Pagan elements—the powerful female icon of a pagan communal society becomes the powerful female icon of the ‘Mother Church’.

Sheela-na-gigs are not mentioned by name in written records until about the mid-1800s after the English Ordnance Survey of Ireland had been initiated (in 1825) and when the writings of antiquaries started to be published. Since then, anthropologists, archeologists and historians have offered numerous theories pertaining to their potential meaning and function. Among these is that they are icons of fertility that facilitate conception and childbirth. Another is that they are warnings against lust or the transgression of religious taboos. Opposing these propositions is the notion that they are Celtic Goddesses of female empowerment and untamed sexuality. They are also seen as symbols of the power of nature to give and take life, as defensive talismans against the evil eye, or as emblems and facilitators of sovereignty over land or communities. The liminal location of many Sheelas (above church doorways or windows) and their occasionally concealed (or semi-concealed) placement within castles and church walls suggests that, for some, they had an apotropaic function (intended to ward off evil) or that they facilitated rights of passage from one state to another—from life to death, a spiritual transformation, or an elevation to higher social or political status.

The lack of a dominant theory of what Sheela-na-gigs truly represent fascinated me; in fact, it seemed to me that their value lay specifically in their semiotic ambiguity, which challenges the veracity of those wishing to pin her down to one static meaning. That was when I started searching for them throughout Ireland (and later, Britain). I must have driven five thousand miles seeking them out, photographing them and sketching them. I saw them in garden walls, driveways to farmyards, in sheds, on medieval churches and Anglo-Norman castles, over old church doors and windows, and on roof apexes, on bridges, buried under wild ivy on town walls, placed into cathedral walls in the ‘occluded’ position (sideways, so as not to be immediately observable); and built into homemade grottos. I met those who cared for them—farmers, rural families, young kids, elderly men and women, graveyard caretakers, and priests. I studied those held in the National Museum of Ireland, in the British Museum, and in numerous smaller rural community centres that had acquired them. All in all, I photographed and sketched nearly seventy Sheelas in my travels. Each one was more fascinating than the last, each seemed to have her own story; each had seen things we could only imagine.



The more Sheelas I photographed and sketched, and the more related literature I read, the more I realized that they would remain ultimately unknowable, that their nebulous semiotic complexity would never be fully untangled. So I neither rejected nor accepted any one interpretation. What is important for me is that Sheela-na-gigs clearly were at one time deeply significant to early (and later) Gaelic communities, and likely representative of potent female agency within them. Indeed, they are so long part of the Irish cultural and psychic landscape that I began to appreciate them as witnesses to its shifting cultures, its transformational histories and its ongoing traumas. Significantly, for me, that witnessing is not to be misunderstood as a powerless or silent one. I sense this because of a salient feature of the Sheelas—their intense stare. Nearly all Sheelas stare defiantly and austerely back at those looking at them. That insolent, unflinching stare is often reinforced by either a scowling grimace or a wry smirk (sometimes it is deeply inscrutable). In my view, this is one of the really enigmatic aspects of the Sheela—her outrageous insolence, her ‘what-are-you-looking-at’ impudence; the power she exudes in returning the gaze upon her with an audacious ‘fuck off’.

Once I started thinking about the Sheela-na-gig in this sense, it became clear to me that this abject though mysterious figure, because of her very complexity, had an extraordinary associative power. What could she represent as witness to Ireland’s unfolding political, religious and social histories? It intrigued me that her perennial presence on the Irish landscape—at the very least, throughout the last millennium—ran concurrently with the entire English (later British) colonial project in Ireland. Within this context she would, for example, have witnessed the devastation of relentless war, plantation and ethnic cleansing, and the enforcement of English Common Law and economic systems, all of which led to the near complete appropriation of Irish lands (85% of which were in English hands by 1700). She would also have witnessed the elimination of the Irish language as a dominant cultural form and the near destruction of other Gaelic cultural modes such a bardic poetry and orally transmitted music. Ultimately, she would witness the annihilation of the entire structure of Gaelic civilization—a series of actions that can only be described as cultural genocide. At times, as I thought about this disastrous history, I began to project onto her inscrutable face a contempt for what she had witnessed.

Looking from the perspective of her abjection and her own history of destruction, the Sheela could perfectly represent the ongoing uglification of the Irish in the wake of

⁵ Fieldwork sketches by Benjamin Dwyer.

the unremitting racist-colonial narratives I've mentioned above—to the writings of Giraldus Cambrensis we can add much more; from the calm contemplation of genocide by that refined man of letters Edmund Spenser (c.1552-1599) to the barely concealed bigotry of the contemporary letter writer with whom I open this piece. The damage done to the Sheela could also be seen as resonating with the detrimental impact that political and religious history had on spiritual practices in Ireland: firstly, with the conquest of Roman Catholicism over Irish 'Celtic' Christianity, permeated as it was with pagan and druidic philosophies and practices; and secondly, with the aggressive English policy of plantation in Ireland, which divided Irish society along religious and class lines, and which can still be seen as a divisive factor in the contemporary Irish politics of the North. From yet another perspective, the Sheela's defiant repulsiveness and abject bodily features could be seen as a powerful critique and rejection of centuries of imposed notions of female beauty, not least contemporary versions with their rampant messages of body fascism so ubiquitous today.

Suddenly, because of her semiotic ambiguity, and thus her ability to acquire and project numerous associative meanings, the Sheela-na-gig became a tremendous icon for me. She's an underdog to fight for; she's a defiant hag that rejects colonial narratives; while she's a witness that shows her scars of damage, she also rebelliously spits back in the faces of her oppressors; disrupting dominant notions of beauty and feminine grace, she is an 'ugly' feminist that asserts her sexual agency and defiantly returns the gaze of the male uncomfortably back at him.

What did all this mean to me as a musician? As a classically trained composer and guitarist, I had had only a peripheral interest in traditional Irish music; indeed, I tended to steer clear of it, as intuitively I was uncomfortable with the easy appropriation of largely oral traditional practices within the constraints of European notated music disciplines—what Adorno calls the 'crystallization of the creative impulse'. I had (and still have) the same misgivings about the appropriation of jazz in similar ways. But my fascination with the Sheela forced me to reconsider Ireland's indigenous music—what was it? What happened to it? How had it been preserved? In what ways was it being distorted in contemporary reiterations of it, particularly in its highly stylized, musically sumptuous and commercially acclaimed incarnations? Furthermore, what did these new manifestations of an ancient music tradition say about how we wanted to portray ourselves to the world? To what degree was this new-old music rewriting narratives about us as new-old Irish that reflected a desire to embrace neoliberal values at all costs and to verify us as a pure nation with a special lineage unscathed by outside forces. Proximity to the Sheela forced me for the first time to question this ancient musical tradition, and to scrutinize its re-packaging today in traditional, commercial and contemporary art music genres.

While the vibrant resurgence of traditional Irish music in recent decades is, of course, to be celebrated, it seems to me that there remains a disturbing breach between the unquestioned positivity of this revival in all its forms and the actual history of destruction of the Gaelic culture from which it has emerged. The distortions of traditional Irish music seen in its more commercial exploitations speak for themselves. However, even within more purist traditional practices, there seems to me to be a tremendous effort to present Irish music as constantly celebratory, positive and culturally intact in ways that run contrary to the facts of our colonial history. The large-scale participation of highly skilled and well-known traditional Irish musicians in music projects of an overtly commercial nature does not help matters.

This omission of historically-informed perspectives also occurs when contemporary art composers appropriate traditional Irish materials in ways that imply a rich and culturally undisturbed historical trajectory.

My encounter with the Sheela made me want to engage with, to re-invoke my traditional Gaelic music inheritance but only in ways that took cognizance of the real story of the decline and destruction of that heritage. It seems to me that in confronting the music practices of Gaelic society, we cannot evade the inconvenient truth that many have been effectively destroyed and many of its oral practices lost. It is this salient fact, the profound damage done to Gaelic culture, which forms the basis for my own artistic engagement with it. My work is not only an honest response to the historical damage that took place but also acts as a critique of some current forms of cultural reconstruction of Gaelic musical and dance traditions. It is my contention that much of what remains of this tradition is further subject to exploitation. In some cases, even non-commercial artistic attempts to reinvigorate Gaelic musical culture through the incorporation of indigenous materials into palatably reified art-music aesthetic practices remain problematic for me.

Central to this are questions arising out of the validity of (re)presenting this culture in ways that are exclusively attractive from an aesthetic perspective and syntactically coherent. While many compositions by Irish and non-Irish composers alike invoke ancient Gaelic mythologies via thoroughly integrated, cohesive and acceptable compositional languages, my encounter with Irish traditions builds upon an integral 'aesthetic of damage'. I am not convinced, even from an ethical perspective, that what remains of this damaged Gaelic source material should be constantly and exclusively revitalized and presented as entirely coherent and celebratory. For me, such artistic renovations run the risk of creating narratives of Gaelic culture that are not only ahistorical but further airbrush over *actual* histories of oppression and destruction.

If my 'aesthetic of damage'-perspective puts me at odds with many of those active in both traditional and contemporary music circles, it also runs contrary to the trajectory of Western art music generally. A tension is created between the tradition of its heightened beauty and sought-for cohesion on the one hand and, on the other, the search for a broken and crude aesthetics, a damaged musical syntax and grammar commensurate to the task of addressing and contemplating the complex trauma of the destruction that occurred. It results in music that, like the Sheelas' crude abjection, is antagonistic to notions of what Walter Benjamin calls auratic art, that is, works that emerge out of a creativity self-conscious and desirous of heightened aesthetic essence, which has been Western civilization's cult of beauty.

At this point, perhaps some examples of how my encounter with Sheela-na-gigs has impacted my 'aesthetic of damage'-approach to composition would be instructive. Fragmentation, disintegration and abjection form the aesthetic tenets of my work for solo viola in four movements entitled *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae*.⁶ The title

⁶ *imagines obesae et aspectui ingratae* was commissioned by Garth Knox with assistance from the Irish Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon. It was composed at the Heinrich Böll Artists Residency, Achill Island (8–22 June, 2013). Knox premiered the work on 15 November 2014 at the Bernaola Festival, Spain. The score is available from the Contemporary Music Centre (Ireland). See: <https://www.cmc.ie>. It is also published (alongside an audio recording of the work by Garth Knox) in a limited edition hardback publication by New Dublin Press/Distinctive Repetition Design Studio, 2015. See: <http://www.newdublinpress.org/books/imagines>

is taken from documentation indicating that in 1631 parish priests in Tuam were instructed by a Catholic Church edict to hide or destroy Sheela-na-gigs—the ‘gross images with unpleasant aspects’. Now music, being inherently abstract, presents a challenge when it comes to remodeling something as physically solid as these stone carvings and their rich cultural and semiotic complexities. The Sheela-na-gig’s associative themes of crudity, damage, loss, unknown origins and functions, abjection and oppression have thus to be realized through purely compositional devices such as structure, timbre, juxtaposition, the use of modal or quasi-modal constructs, extended techniques and even the employment of noise.

One of the very first responses I had to the Sheelas was a desire to represent their sheer coarseness. The unrefined craftsmanship of many of the carvings suggests that they were not created for aesthetic pleasure but rather for more symbolic uses connected to smaller community units. The very crudity of the Sheela carvings and the image of their being chiseled were early touchstones in finding both the sound I was looking for and a method by which melodic fragments might be chiseled into form in the opening movement, *Chloran*. While coarse timbral, textural and percussive elements are central to an aesthetic that is inherently antagonistic to received notions of artistic beauty, they are wholly justified here as a means of remodeling the crudity of the Sheelas into music. The opening repeated notes of the movement are unpitched sounds (as the left hand dampens all the strings; see x-shaped note heads in example below), crudely ‘hammered out’ by the bow in a noisy, percussive manner. Only after twenty or so repetitions do sounds, actual pitched notes begin to be carved out by the bow (as the left hand releases the strings and allows them to resonate).

Chloran

Heavy and organic (relentless)
 battuto
 dampen strings with left hand, gradually allow full resonance

crude sound
 sim.

The musical notation consists of a single staff in 4/4 time, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The first 20 measures feature a series of 'x' shaped note heads, representing unpitched sounds. Above these measures, an arrow points from left to right, indicating the gradual release of the left hand's damping. The final measure of this sequence is marked with a 'crude sound sim.' label. The notation then transitions into a series of pitched notes, with the first measure of this section marked with a '3' above the staff, possibly indicating a triplet or a specific rhythmic pattern.

A further process in *Chloran* subjects its melody to sundering, a separation of its parts so that only fragments of it may be gleaned; the listener struggles to piece together the broken shards. The music itself enacts a severing process—a potentially coherent melody is aggressively damaged by violent interventions. Thus, the music both represents that damage and enacts it.

Chloran (bars 15-21)

In the second movement, *St John's Well*, I developed my own variant of an isorhythmic motet, a compositional process thought to have been devised by Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377). An isorhythmic motet is constructed around two central principles: the *talea* (or the order of rhythms) and the *colour* (or pitch series of the melody). Where a long *colour* is repeated several times according to mensuration rules that make its execution faster by a fixed proportion each time, a Diminution Motet is created. This is somewhat akin to a series of matryoshka dolls—each variation on its return is identical to the last though smaller (that is, shorter in terms of length) than its predecessor. Running in parallel to this diminution process is one where fundamental notes are increasingly transformed into lighter grace notes (ornaments). The progressive effect is that each repetition of the melody sees not only a reduction of its rhythmic values, but also (in time) a constant reduction of its notes also, accompanied by an exponential increase of ornamental material. This results in a shift from established and recognizable melodies towards more ephemeral and ineffable textures of ornamental figurations.

The above example indicates that the first talea comprises 65 syllables, the second talea has 64, the third is reduced to 47, the fourth has 36, and the fifth has 21. In addition, starting from about the 3rd talea, a slow transformation from fundamental notes to trilled harmonics further diminishes the tangible, grammatical aspects of the music, which disperse into ephemeral textures and timbres. Something akin to the process of a developing photograph in reverse, this inbuilt process of decay in *St John's Well* also disrupts spatiotemporal perceptions in ways that I hope resonate with the Sheelas' vigorous presence and mysterious past. This process of decay enacts the opposite to that which we heard in *Chloran*, where notes are chiseled into existence. Here, notes dissolve into the ether, into an intangible form creating a sonic resonance with the Sheelas' inscrutability, their elusive meanings, their effacement.

By creating music from an 'aesthetics of damage' and by subjecting it to processes of decay and transformation, I've tried to echo sonically, to transmit into sound the cultural loss the Sheela has both endured and witnessed. While it may seem to some that the conscious embedding of damage into music signifies a willful and pointless embrace of the negative, I see it as a necessity, if it is not to fall into a soporific slumber of conforming privilege devoid of political consciousness. As the most ambiguous of the arts, music tends to be seen as transcendental, as that which soars above the murky and mundane world of everyday life; but I follow Adrienne Rich's formation in believing that music needs to 'account for itself politically, consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language.'⁷ My engagement with Sheela-na-gigs has further underpinned my conviction that music can conduct autopsies on received historical narratives and current ideologies of power and politics, it can dislodge the 'desperate logic of therefore and thus',⁸ and it can tell things as they were and as they are, warts and all.

⁷ Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), 174.

⁸ Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (London: Vintage, 1999), 176.