



MANY STRINGS TO HIS BOW

Composer Donnacha Dennehy is enjoying life after Crash Ensemble and pushing the musical boundaries again with his new work, writes *Mel Clarke*

I went to Ballyroan Boys' National School, in Rathfarnham," says the composer Donnacha Dennehy by way of introduction. The same establishment as the golfer Pádraig Harrington, I point out. Dennehy chuckles. No sports star himself at school, he did excel at music. He was composing by the age of nine, organised a music marathon when he was 10, and was introduced to Stockhausen at the Royal Irish Academy of Music a year later. "I loved it," he recalls.

If the young Dennehy sounds a tad nerdy, his childhood, as the eldest of five children, was almost disappointingly normal. His parents, from Kerry, were not classical-music types. "I always felt outside of that world," says Dennehy, now 46.

"It meant I was open to sounds that others were closed to, like David Bowie and Tom Waits, which later fed into Crash Ensemble. My father was a radio playwright – his day job was insurance – and he was very encouraging."

Founded by Dennehy in 1997, Crash Ensemble soon impressed with its performances of minimalist works by American composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and compositions by Irish music-writers including Dennehy himself, Andrew Hamilton and Judith Ring. Sound amplification, lighting and video were always integral to their work. What prompted Dennehy to set up the group? "In Ireland, many of us associate classical with Last Night of the Proms," says the Trinity College

music graduate. "All of that jingoism does not sit with us. I hated that. I wanted to take the class out of classical. I was very idealistic. I wanted a group that would deal with music being ignored in Ireland. I was also interested in breaking down genres, both musical and visual."

Bespectacled and mild-mannered, Dennehy does not look like a rebel, but he is one at heart. "I ended up in detention a lot at the end of school," he recalls. "I discovered the minimalists like Reich through reading a biography of Bowie." He shares at least one characteristic with the late English glam rocker. "In the early days, I used to love shocking people. Crash was always about making big statements, about breaking orthodoxies."

Dennehy is no longer directly associated with Crash Ensemble – he has been an "artistic partner" since joining Princeton University's music faculty in 2014. However, *The Second Violinist*, his latest work, will be performed by the ensemble, alongside four other musicians, and the chorus of *Wide Open Opera*, which is co-producing with Landmark Productions. It receives its world premiere on Wednesday evening in Galway's Black Box Theatre, part of the city's international arts festival.

Created with the playwright Enda Walsh, with whom Dennehy collaborated on *The Last Hotel*, it is typically dark. "For *The Last Hotel*, I came to Enda with the scenario," says Dennehy. "But for this one, Enda and I discussed some vague ideas about a staging on three levels. We then discussed how we might build it on the idea of someone with a kind of personality disorder, based on a kind of distortion of the popular idea of what it means to be second fiddle. Enda's narrative is very powerful. There are always hidden depths and structures to everything he writes."

Good friends – "we do not meet very often but we have a great relationship" – Walsh and Dennehy first worked together on a 2011 production of *Misterman*, a one-man drama propelled by a memorable Cillian Murphy. "In some ways, *The Second Violin*'s music is closer to *Misterman* than *The Last Hotel*," says Dennehy.

According to Fergus Sheil, *Wide Open Opera*'s artistic director, it is "rich in overtones, which are created from playing in a new and unusual tuning system. Players in the ensemble must find notes that lie in between the normally tuned notes". Dennehy says his "music has been progressing along this direction over the last decade or so". The overtone-based approach is also evident in another recent piece, *Tessellatum*, he points out.

The Second Violinist is awash with amplified sounds and video effects that reflect its brooding themes. Its central character, the titular musician, is as complex as the drama he dominates. "He's a bit like the guy in the film *Falling Down* ... he becomes sort of genocidal," says Dennehy.

The character does not sing or speak, which, as Sheil notes, is "pretty unusual in opera". He is played by the actor Aaron Monaghan, while the other three cast members are singers. The character finds solace in the music of Carlo Gesualdo, an Italian Renaissance melodist described by Dennehy as "one of the strangest composers that ever lived". His work "lays the foundation for this haunting, ethereal quality that infuses Donnacha's score", says Sheil.

A music scholar whose compositions are influenced by multiple artists and art forms, it is unsurprising that Dennehy would be inspired by an obscure composer who died more than 400 years ago. Machaut is another early music writer he admires, and Hans Abrahamsen, Gloria Coates and John Adams are among the living ones.

"I also love the work of visual artists such as Bridget Riley, Eva Hesse, Sophie Calle and Gerhard Richter," says Dennehy, who collaborated with Colm Tóibín on a composition performed at the National Concert Hall last year, and who is about to work on a project with the poet Paul Muldoon, who also teaches in Princeton. "I've probably



Complex character
Aaron Monaghan in *The Second Violinist*

been the most productive I've ever been," he says.

If Dennehy had not become a composer, he would have liked to have been a film-maker, citing *The Big Short* and *Hunger* as two of his favourite movies. He also loves sport, including tennis and cricket, while professing that he "really likes baseball". Somehow, America's national pastime does seem a perfect fit for the New Jersey-based Irish internationalist. ■

The Second Violinist, Black Box, Galway, July 26-30

ROSS KAVANAGH

Sounding out new ideas

Dennehy, above with cellist Kate Ellis, sees himself as a rebel

“I wanted to take the class out of classical. I wanted to deal with music being ignored in Ireland

★★★★★
'one show you should definitely see.'

IRISH DAILY MAIL

★★★★★
'A big-hearted love song to life, love, music, and Dublin...'

Seen it before? See it again'

THE ARTS REVIEW

★★★★★

THE HERALD

★★★★

TIME OUT

'Not to be missed.'

ENTERTAINMENT.IE

★★★★★

THE IRISH TIMES

'a love affair with music'

THE NEW YORK TIMES

'Beautiful and emotional.'

IRISH MIRROR

★★★★★

THE GUARDIAN

once

NOW ON AT THE OLYMPIA THEATRE

TICKETS FROM €25 OLYMPIA BOX OFFICE AND TICKETMASTER 0818 719 330 | WWW.TICKETMASTER.IE