

# Michael McGlynn's Role in the Nationalist Choral Music of Ireland

*Michael McGlynn (b. 1964) stands at the forefront of modern Irish choral composition. His music is deeply informed by the Irish language, literature, and modal traditions and represents the culmination of a nationalist trajectory in Irish art music that began with Aloys Fleischmann, continued through Seán Ó Riada and Seóirse Bodley, and reaches a contemporary synthesis in McGlynn's choral works and in his ensemble ANÚNA. This article explores McGlynn's position within that lineage through historical, analytical, and practical lenses. It considers how his use of modality, chromaticism, and text setting merges Ireland's ancient sound world with modern harmonic practice, how his work engages the cultural identity of post-colonial Ireland, and what his music offers to conductors seeking to program works that embody national character through universal expression.*

**Keywords:** Michael McGlynn, ANÚNA, Irish choral music, nationalism, modality, Francis Ledwidge, Fleischmann, Ó Riada, Bodley

## Introduction: A Contemporary Voice of Irish Nationalism

Few living composers have redefined the sound of a nation's choral music as fully as Michael McGlynn. Founder and artistic director of ANÚNA, M'ANAM, and SYSTIR, recognized internationally for their distinctive synthesis of Irish traditional and classical sonorities, McGlynn has written more than one hundred choral works that simultaneously evoke Ireland's ancient heritage and a distinctly modern sensibility. His compositional voice, characterized by modal fluidity, drones, chromatic inflection, and the luminous color of augmented harmonies, bridges the gap between past and present, local and universal.

McGlynn's achievement cannot be understood apart from the nationalist current that has shaped Irish choral composition since the mid-twentieth century. Aloys Fleischmann, Seán Ó Riada, and Seóirse Bodley each sought to reclaim Ireland's musical identity by integrating traditional elements, including language, melody, and modality, into art music forms. McGlynn inherited their mission but expanded it into the global choral arena, creating what is considered by conductors worldwide to be Ireland's modern national choral sound.

## Historical Background: Nationalism and the Choral Tradition

Ireland's choral nationalism developed later than that of other European nations. British occupation from the Norman invasion of 1169 until independence in 1922 subverted Irish cultural expression, silencing public presentation of the language, dance, and native song. When music re-emerged in the early twentieth century, it did so as a reconstruction of identity.

1 Fleischmann wrote in 1934 that “what is needed is a Gaelic art-music which will  
2 embody all the technique that contemporary music can boast and at the same  
3 time will be rooted in the folk-music spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

4 Ó Riada carried this idea further, asserting that Ireland’s oral musical  
5 heritage formed a parallel, not subordinate, tradition to the European classical  
6 canon. Bodley, the next in this lineage, sought a synthesis of Irish folk modality  
7 and continental modernism, particularly the avant-garde idioms of Darmstadt  
8 and post-serialism, while retaining expressive lyricism and a distinctly Irish  
9 sound. Together, these three composers established a conceptual lineage by  
10 consciously blending heritage with innovation. Each used the Irish language,  
11 incorporated folk and modal materials, evoked landscape and myth, and avoided  
12 imitation of continental trends. McGlynn, though a generation later, fulfills this  
13 nationalist project by transforming it from revival to renewal, creating living,  
14 evolving music that embodies Irishness without quotation.

### 17 **Michael McGlynn: Formation and Aesthetic Foundations**

18  
19 Born in Dublin in 1964, McGlynn grew up in a family that valued heritage.  
20 He and both of his brothers, his twin brother John, and Tom showed an  
21 inclination towards music and had their first musical training through piano  
22 lessons. McGlynn admits that much of his early musical influence came not from  
23 those lessons, but from rock musicians such as the Beatles and David Bowie,  
24 and then from New Age music. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, artists like Gary  
25 Numan and John Foxx, and Punk music served as further influence. In secondary  
26 school, he was introduced to classical orchestral and later to choral literature,  
27 where he was particularly drawn to the works of Debussy and Britten, both of  
28 whom would later influence his harmonic palette.

29 Though they were not native Irish speakers, at age eleven, he and his  
30 brothers attended *Coláiste na Rinne*, a Gaeltacht (Irish-speaking community)  
31 boarding school in Dungarvan, County Waterford, where they became fluent in  
32 Irish and first encountered traditional song. This experience left an indelible  
33 mark on McGlynn’s musical imagination.<sup>2</sup>

34 At the age of eighteen, McGlynn entered University College, Dublin  
35 (UCD), where he elected to study music and English literature. It was at UCD  
36 that he first sang in a choir and where he was introduced to Western Medieval  
37 music, a genre for which he found he had a great affinity. Commenting on his  
38 college experience, he said:

39  
40 One of the things that has put me in a unique position among professional choral  
41 directors is that I took up choral music quite late. I had never sung in a choir before  
42 the age of nineteen. I first sang in college in a chamber choir, the UCD Chamber  
43 Choir, which I went on to conduct. I later went on to conduct the Trinity College

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<sup>1</sup>Barra, Séamas de. “Aloys Fleischmann and the idea of an Irish Composer,” *Journal of Music*.

<sup>2</sup>McGlynn, Michael. Interview with author, Ft. Lauderdale, February 2010

1 Singers as well. This has allowed me to look at choral music as a completely fresh  
2 and new form.<sup>3</sup>

3  
4 In 1987, after earning degrees in English and Music at University College  
5 Dublin (1985–86), McGlynn founded *An Uaithne*, named after the collective  
6 Irish term that describes the three ancient kinds of Irish music: *suantraí*  
7 (lullaby), *geantraí* (happy song), and *goltraí* (lament). The ensemble name was  
8 changed to ANÚNA in 1991, a transliteration of the original Irish that was easier  
9 for non-Irish speakers to pronounce and recognize. When asked about the reason  
10 for creating an ensemble of this kind, McGlynn stated, “ANÚNA developed  
11 from that idea [of bringing choral music to more people]. It developed from the  
12 need to reinterpret the choral canvas.”<sup>4</sup> The ensemble became an international  
13 symbol of Irish choral identity over the next several decades.

14 The ensemble, nearly forty years later, is recognized for its interpretations  
15 of traditional Irish songs, reconstructions of medieval Irish music, McGlynn’s  
16 original music, and its unique staging. Additionally, ANÚNA has produced well  
17 over 20 recordings for film, TV, and video games, and performed at the 20<sup>th</sup>  
18 anniversary of the iconic video game *Xenogears*. When McGlynn was asked  
19 why he chose to form a new ensemble instead of working within the framework  
20 of the existing choral infrastructure of Ireland, he stated that he created ANÚNA  
21 because he felt that there was a “need to find a choral voice that was distinctly  
22 Irish.”<sup>5</sup>

23 Since its founding, McGlynn has served as director of ANÚNA and has  
24 become an advocate for change within Ireland’s choral organization. In 2006,  
25 McGlynn wrote for *The Irish Times*: “Choral music transmits the poetry and the  
26 language of a nation through song in a unique manner, something that should be  
27 of particular interest and importance in a country that prides itself on its literary  
28 heroes.”<sup>6</sup> Through ANÚNA, he has brought Ireland’s literary heritage, its culture,  
29 the Irish language, and a sense of Irish choral music to the rest of the world.

30 He describes himself as “not a traditionalist,” noting that the Irish songs he  
31 sets are “impressions of the songs I remembered” rather than transcriptions.<sup>7</sup>  
32 This approach of transforming recollection into creation anchors his contribution  
33 to nationalist choral music. McGlynn’s contribution completes the aesthetic arc  
34 begun by Fleischmann’s call for a “Gaelic art-music.”<sup>8</sup> Fleischmann’s *Clare’s*  
35 *Dragoons* (1945) and *Na Trí Captaení Loinge* integrated traditional tunes into  
36 symphonic texture, while Ó Riada’s *Mise Éire* (1959) translated folk melody

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<sup>3</sup>Michael McGlynn, interview by author, Ft. Lauderdale, February 2010

<sup>4</sup>Rosow, Stacie Lee. *The Choral Music of Irish Composer Michael McGlynn*. Coral Gables: The University of Miami, 2010, p. 7

<sup>5</sup>Michael McGlynn, “A Way to Find Different Voices in this Multi-Ethnic Age,” *The Irish Times*, June 5, 2006, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/a-way-to-find-different-voices-in-this-multi-ethnic-age-1.1012408> (accessed 23 April 2018)

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Aloys Fleischmann, “The Idea of a Gaelic Art Music,” *Studies* (March 1935), quoted in Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin: Field Day Music, 2006)

1 into cinematic grandeur. Bodley sought synthesis through avant-garde means,  
2 blending serial technique and *sean-nós* ornamentation.

3 McGlynn, by contrast, dispenses with both direct quotation and serial  
4 experimentation. His nationalism is instinctive, rooted in sound rather than  
5 theory. Where Fleischmann and Ó Riada sought to *define* Irish music,  
6 McGlynn *embodies* it. His harmonic vocabulary, particularly the augmented  
7 sonorities with added sevenths, owes as much to Debussy and jazz as to ancient  
8 modes, yet the result is unmistakably Irish.

9 As Seóirse Bodley once observed, the true national composer will “speak  
10 his own voice, and from the depths of his Irish soul will be born the music that  
11 ... will seem evocative of the spirit of our country.”<sup>9</sup> McGlynn fulfills that  
12 prophecy: his personal idiom has become the global sound of Irish choral music.  
13

### 14 **Nationalism Redefined: From Preservation to Creation**

15  
16  
17 McGlynn’s nationalism differs fundamentally from that of Fleischmann or  
18 Ó Riada. Whereas his predecessors sought to *revive* Ireland’s musical identity  
19 through adaptation of folk material, McGlynn’s work *reimagines* that identity  
20 through intuitive continuity. His statement that he is “not a traditionalist”  
21 underscores a shift from preservation to creative transformation.

22 This distinction mirrors Ireland’s broader cultural trajectory in the late  
23 twentieth century from post-colonial restoration toward confident self-  
24 definition. McGlynn’s harmonic modernism, overlaid with 15<sup>th</sup>-century modal  
25 structures, demonstrates that sense of reimagination. If Irish choral music could  
26 not gain its own unique voice under British rule, it has now. McGlynn quite  
27 literally picked up where the Norman invasion left off in Irish music, developing  
28 it and infusing it with several centuries of classical, popular, and traditional  
29 musical influences to create something uniquely Irish. This is not to insinuate  
30 that others do not share part of the Irish choral voice; rather, McGlynn’s  
31 compositions, compositional technique, use of both Irish and English texts, and  
32 international collaborations position him as a global representative of Irishness  
33 rather than its curator. His compositions and ensembles, through performances  
34 and recordings by ensembles around the world and through appearances on video  
35 game and film soundtracks, disseminate the Irish choral voice to audiences far  
36 beyond its origins.

37 Yet beneath this cosmopolitan reach lies the same national impulse  
38 articulated by Fleischmann, to “delve into the hidden Ireland.”<sup>10</sup> McGlynn does  
39 so not by quoting ancient tunes but by composing music that *feels* ancient,  
40 evoking the landscape and language through sound. This idea may be best stated  
41 by composer and conductor Eric Barnum in an interview from a 2023  
42 documentary, **Behind the Closed Eye**.  
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<sup>9</sup>Garreth Cox, *Seóirse Bodley* (Dublin: Field Day Music, 2010), p. 72.

<sup>10</sup>Aloys Fleischmann, “The Idea of a Gaelic Art Music.”

1       There's something that I've loved about Michael's music for twenty years, and  
 2       that's that he sounds like where he's from. It sounds like he's experienced the song  
 3       of his past, the history that Ireland has given him. The tradition of *sean nós* singing.  
 4       He has not only embraced it but brought it into a modern sensibility.<sup>11</sup>

## 7       **Compositional Language: Tradition Reimagined**

9       McGlynn attributes influence on his compositional style to his affinity for  
 10      early European music, specifically the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.  
 11      Coincidentally, Irish traditional music often employs many of the same musical  
 12      concepts, including modality, controlled dissonances, and cross or false  
 13      relationships. In fact, it is music from the Medieval period that may be closest  
 14      in form to a uniquely Irish sound. When the British began occupation after the  
 15      Norman conquest in the fifteenth century, they also usurped and oppressed the  
 16      entirety of Irish culture, including language, music, dance, and religion. At that  
 17      point in history, all that was Irish ceased to evolve; in essence, it went  
 18      underground, and rather than develop openly as all musical tradition does, it was  
 19      passed aurally from generation to generation to survive. While the rest of Europe  
 20      transitioned to polyphony and beyond, the modal, mostly monophonic music  
 21      remained so until the late eighteenth century, when two well-known  
 22      musicologists, George Petrie and Edward Bunting, began collecting and notating  
 23      tunes played by the great harpers. They notated these tunes to prevent them from  
 24      being lost forever when that generation died out. It is from that collection and by  
 25      the accounts of those harpers, who were among the last in a great legacy, that the  
 26      origin or history of the songs of Ireland is even recorded. Because of the oral  
 27      tradition, many tunes also exist in multiple versions, some so great a departure  
 28      from the original that they become completely new songs with a shared text. The  
 29      Irish musical tradition is a living entity that continues to evolve today.

30      It is in this way that McGlynn's compositions, especially those works in the  
 31      Irish language, interact with the musical tradition. He used the skeletons of tunes,  
 32      mere recollections of his childhood, and brought them new life, a rebirth into  
 33      another new, living version. They are so vivid in musical concept that they have  
 34      often been misinterpreted as the authentic versions of traditional songs, but in  
 35      fact, most of his works are not arrangements.

36      McGlynn's compositions that are not related to the traditional music of  
 37      Ireland either by text or melodic reference still share commonalities with the  
 38      sounds of the island. He favors ancient texts from Ireland or the surrounding  
 39      areas, works of Irish poets, and his own original words, which often depict  
 40      various facets of Irish life, especially the landscape. His attention and treatment  
 41      of the language bring ancient musical ideas into a fresh and modern setting,  
 42      breathing new life into them through his other influences of jazz, rock, and  
 43      impressionism, which further the evolution of choral music in Ireland.

44      McGlynn did not deliberately use early Medieval compositional techniques  
 45      to recreate these sounds; it was simply the music with which he most identified

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<sup>11</sup>Eric Barnum in *Behind the Closed Eye: Michael McGlynn and Francis Ledwidge*, (44:20)

1 and felt most natural to create. He began adding drones and chordal  
 2 accompaniments to single melodic lines, and by incorporating harmonic ideas  
 3 from his other influences, he achieved a texture that is at once full of motion and  
 4 serene. This compositional texture evokes picturesque images of Ireland's  
 5 landscape, full of traditions and myths, a natural world he loves deeply. In this  
 6 way, his compositions have taken on an Irish existence without his consciously  
 7 borrowing from any one medium.

8 McGlynn's treatment of poems by Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917), an Irish  
 9 wartime poet and soldier from County Meath, shows evidence of several of these  
 10 compositional concepts.<sup>12</sup> He has returned to Ledwidge's poems several times  
 11 over the last twenty years. As they represent different periods of his  
 12 compositional career, these settings, with their signature melodic and harmonic  
 13 structures, demonstrate McGlynn's unique and ever-developing compositional  
 14 language. Included is the use of modal structures, chromatic melodic passages  
 15 and sequences, and possibly the most distinguishable feature found in all  
 16 McGlynn's repertoire, the extensive use of augmented chords with the major  
 17 seventh and other extensions. Though these techniques are prominent throughout  
 18 all of McGlynn's compositions, the development of the composer's deliberate  
 19 and unique voice can be studied through the works with Ledwidge texts (Table  
 20 1) as a microcosm of his broader output.

21  
 22 **Table 1.** *Settings of Poetry by Francis Ledwidge*

Year composed	Title of Composition	Title of Poem
1997	Behind the Closed Eye	<i>Behind the Closed Eye</i>
1997	Midnight	<i>A Soldier's Grave</i>
1997	August	<i>August</i>
1998	Where All Roses Go	<i>Lament for Thomas McDonough and June</i>
1999	When the War is Over	<i>The Place</i>
2010	My Songs Shall Rise	<i>At a Poet's Grave</i>
2015	May	<i>May</i>

23  
 24 In the 2023 documentary, "**Behind the Closed Eye**": **Michael McGlynn**  
 25 **& Francis Ledwidge**, baritone and long-time ANÚNA member Rory Musgrave  
 26 said this of McGlynn's use of the Ledwidge poems:

27  
 28 Michael's relationship with Ledwidge's poetry has been a fundamentally utilitarian  
 29 one. He has been inspired by it, he has used it, he has molded it to serve something  
 30 greater, to serve the music and what it is that he is trying to create. He's not trying  
 31 to re-create Ledwidge's poetry; he's trying to create something new. And what is  
 32 so interesting is that he has absorbed Ledwidge's poetry to such an extent that he  
 33 has created his own songs that have been directly inspired by Ledwidge's words.<sup>13</sup>  
 34

<sup>12</sup>"Francis Ledwidge Museum." <http://www.francisledwidge.com> (accessed 6 May 2018)

<sup>13</sup>Rory Musgrave in *Behind the Closed Eye: Michael McGlynn and Francis Ledwidge*, (40:00).

1 In this way, McGlynn has used the same process with poetry as he has with  
2 traditional music and tunes. He took an idea and created a new entity from it, a  
3 living embodiment of the tradition.

4 McGlynn's textual choices reflect the nationalist emphasis on language as  
5 cultural identity. Many works are set to Irish traditional texts, Irish language  
6 poetry, English poetry by Irish authors, including Francis Ledwidge and James  
7 Joyce, and McGlynn's own writings, which sometimes combine both languages.  
8 Although in English, the Ledwidge Settings, written between 1997 and 2015,  
9 illustrate his evolving style and provide a microcosm of his nationalism:  
10 honoring an Irish poet whose work bridges pastoral tradition and wartime  
11 modernity. The modal and chromatic shifts in these settings parallel Ledwidge's  
12 poetic tension between innocence and loss. And in many ways allowed McGlynn  
13 to find his own voice as a composer. In 2023 he said:

14  
15 For me, the ideas of nature intertwined with the human voice will always be  
16 fundamental to the work that I do, and **Behind the Closed Eye** gave me a chance  
17 to explore different facets of that, different connections. When I composed the  
18 music for "**Behind the Closed Eye**, I was around the same age that Ledwidge was  
19 when he died. It was a very personal journey to go through his writings, his  
20 beautiful poetry, and to find things that resonated with me, that I could relate to in  
21 the world I lived in. His relationship to the simple things in the natural world around  
22 him is, I'd say, pretty similar to my own. The piece I think that most catches  
23 people's attention on the record is *August*, which is the opening track, which is quite  
24 aggressive in a way. It's a very homophonic, which means it's very much blocks.  
25 It's a block-like sound, and it's strong and joyous and simple.<sup>14</sup>

#### 26 27 *Modality and Melodic Linearity*

28  
29 McGlynn's music, while harmonically rich, is conceived horizontally rather  
30 than vertically. Melody governs structure; harmony arises from linear interaction  
31 rather than functional progression. The modal frameworks of Dorian, Aeolian,  
32 Lydian, Mixolydian, and Locrian pervade his works, often juxtaposed or fluidly  
33 alternating. Though harmonically complex, the ear is still drawn to a sense of  
34 tonality using scales, both diatonic and modal, though they often have little or  
35 no relevance to the stated key signature. It is for this reason that while complex  
36 harmonies are certainly in play, the melodic centers are far more difficult to  
37 identify and name according to standard theoretical principles, and often several  
38 options are simultaneously apparent. It is important to remember that Irish  
39 traditional music was a modal art form, in large part due to the use of the ancient  
40 harp. The intentionality of this similarity aside, it is one of the reasons  
41 McGlynn's music is so strongly associated with the traditional and *sean-nós*  
42 music of Ireland. The modal structures and notated keys, as delineated in Table  
43 2, provide an overview of the highly complex and varied usage of modes  
44 throughout the works to be studied.

45  

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14Michael McGlynn in *Behind the Closed Eye: Michael McGlynn and Francis Ledwidge*, (5:00 and 9:30)

1 **Table 2.** Modal and scale use in Ledwidge settings with notated Key Signatures

Midnight	August	Where all Roses Go	When the War is Over	My Songs Shall Rise	May
Key: C Major	Key: D Major	Key: D major	Key: A <sup>b</sup> Major	Key: C Major	Key: D major
E <sup>b</sup> natural minor	G1 pentatonic (melody)	B minor (melodic and harmonic)	F minor	G minor	A minor/ a mixolydian b6
C <sup>b</sup> Lydian	G2 pentatonic (melody)	E Dorian	F pentatonic	C melodic minor	C major
E <sup>b</sup> Lydian	E <sup>b</sup> minor	B Pentatonic	C Locrian/ C pentatonic	G Locrian	
	D <sup>b</sup> mixolydian				

2  
3 McGlynn is not beholden to one scale or, as will be explained later, the  
4 spelling of harmonic structures. New phrases or stanzas of poetry are frequently  
5 assigned their own, unique scale, and often a single idea is carried by one voice  
6 part in a modified or pentatonic version of a mode while the others function as  
7 an accompaniment to that melodic motive, completing the tonal thought. Often,  
8 two melodic devices coexist or are close together, creating ambiguity about the  
9 tonal center.

10 In *Midnight* (1997), the soprano solo begins in E<sup>b</sup> Aeolian (natural minor),  
11 while the chorus outlines C<sup>b</sup> Lydian, producing immediate tonal ambiguity (see  
12 Figure 1). The modal shift mirrors the poem’s movement from life to death.

13  
14 **Figure 1.** Mode use, *Midnight*, mm 1-5

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(© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

18 In *May* (2015), two unrelated modes, A harmonic minor and E Phrygian #6,  
19 sound simultaneously, and allude to D<sup>b</sup> as a tonal center, but the C<sup>b</sup> (Lydian) is  
20 sustained by the bass voice, which acts as the ground and leads to an extended  
21 dominant chord to complete the opening phrase, creating a synthesis of jazz color  
22 and modal inflection (Figure 2). It is the connection of these two modes that

1 creates fluidity, instability, and a sense of modernity over what can be called an  
 2 older-sounding, simple melody.

3

4 **Figure 2.** *Mode use, Midnight, mm 6-7*

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano (Sop.), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The Soprano staff has lyrics: "lif - ted him slow - ly down the slopes of death,". The Alto staff has a red box highlighting a sequence of notes. The Bass staff has a red circle highlighting a note. The score is in a key with three flats and a 6/8 time signature.

5

6 (© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

7

8 Such juxtapositions recall the tuning systems of the ancient Irish harp, which  
 9 produced natural modality through fixed strings, and align with the modal  
 10 vocabulary described by Edward Bunting and George Petrie in their eighteenth-  
 11 and nineteenth-century collections. McGlynn thus reclaims Ireland's modal  
 12 DNA within a contemporary harmonic context.

13 McGlynn does not allow convention or an indicated key to determine the  
 14 progression of a musical idea. When asked about his use and intentionality of  
 15 modes, McGlynn responded:

16

17 For me, when I am creating, there are definitely moments when it is almost like a  
 18 door opens and something comes out, and I become overwhelmed with it. That is  
 19 definitely not a deliberate action, but it is something, I think, which is a response  
 20 to a series of stimuli that are structurally deliberate, whether they are unconscious  
 21 or not. That inspiration, that moment of epiphany, is a result of something.<sup>15</sup>

22

23 The opening phrase of *May* and subsequent similar points throughout the  
 24 work offer a clear concurrence of two remotely related modal ideas. The opening  
 25 statement (Figure 3) is set in either A harmonic minor or A mixolydian  $b6$ ,  
 26 depending on the voice and alternation of the line.

27

<sup>15</sup>McGlynn, Michael. Interview by author, May 2026

1 **Figure 3.** *Mode use, May, mm 1-15*

2

3

4 (© 2015, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

5  
6 The second part of the phrase shifts abruptly to the baritone voice in E  
7 Phrygian #6 (sometimes called Dorian b2). Both modes provide a very jazz-  
8 tinged expression (Table 3).<sup>16</sup> His ability to switch between seemingly unrelated  
9 or non-traditionally related structures is evidence of both the jazz and  
10 impressionistic influences and provides interesting aural effects.

11  
12 **Table 3.** *Mode spellings in May*

A harmonic minor	A	B	C	D	E	F	G#
A Mixolydian b6	A	B	C#	D	E	F	G#
E Phrygian #6	E	F	G	A	B	C#	D

13  
14 *Where All Roses Go* is a combination of two Ledwidge poems, *Lament of*  
15 *Thomas McDonough* and *June*. McGlynn uses the entire *Lament* poem and  
16 inserts the last four lines of *June* as if to present what the departed hero of the

<sup>16</sup>Thank you to jazz pianist and composer David P. Rossow, MA for his assistance naming modes and their relation to common jazz scales.

1 1916 Rising helped set in motion but would not be alive to see. The use of modes  
 2 in this work is specific to the individual poems. *Lament* is presented in B minor,  
 3 the harmonic scale in the melody, and the melodic scale in the choral accompaniment.  
 4 Each entrance of the text from *June* is marked by a shift to E  
 5 Dorian (Figure 4), which offsets it from the text of *Lament*.

6  
 7 **Figure 4.** Mode use, *Where All Roses Go*, mm. 12-13

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(© 1998, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

Each of the statements from *June* is followed by what is identified as a transitional bridge, including a descant with accompaniment in E pentatonic that leads back to B minor for the return to *Lament*. The use of various modes in *Where All Roses Go* delineates the use of text and could also be viewed as a different commentary voice from the original poems.<sup>17</sup>

A final example of McGlynn's unique use of scales and modes is visible in *When the War is Over*. Though the opening section is tonally ambiguous, McGlynn settles into the rarely used C Locrian mode in measure 21 (Figure 5). Interestingly, the melody in the solo line exists as a variation of the same mode, omitting a specific tone of the scale. In this example, the D is notably absent from the solo melody but acts as an important harmonic tone in the accompaniment. The complete structure is only visible when the accompaniment, present in the other voices, is analyzed.

<sup>17</sup>There is a version of *Where All Roses Go* where this is an instrumental solo. The versions analyzed for this article are a cappella.

1 **Figure 5.** *Mode use, When the War is Over, mm. 21-24*

airs shall be Their airs shall be the black-bird's twilight song, lone-ly now lone-ly  
*mp*

gently airs shall be, airs shall be the black-bird's twilight song, lone-ly now  
*p mp*

gently airs shall be, airs shall be the black-bird's twilight song, lone-ly now  
*p mp*

gently airs shall be, airs shall be the black-bird's twilight song, But it is lone-ly now  
*p mp*

gently airs shall be, airs shall be the black-bird's twilight song, lone-ly now  
*p mp*

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### *Chromaticism and Controlled Dissonance*

A second hallmark is his use of chromatic sequences that blur tonal centers while retaining melodic integrity. The chromatic lines could, in many instances, be interpreted as word painting, demonstrating his affinity for medieval and early Renaissance music. They are also a deliberate, although unconscious, choice to create harmonic ambiguity through the apparent lack of a tonal center. In a recent interview, McGlynn responded to his use of word painting:

I have those moments of epiphany within life itself, within the world itself, and they are not associated with sound. It is just that when I have to deal sonically with things, and create musically, that epiphany has to be manufactured. It has to be scaffolded, to use a metaphor I have used earlier.<sup>18</sup>

He frequently uses sequences within a single voice part or as a chordal progression across the voices. These passages serve as an aural reference or an ostinato-like reference while other voice parts shift the harmonic language.

The opening of *Midnight* exhibits both functions of the chromatic descending line. As the solo voice lulls the soldier to sleep in the grave, the tenor voice (Figure 6) descends chromatically from the tonic Eb, ending at the shift to Cb Lydian.

<sup>18</sup>Michael McGlynn, Interview with Author, May 2026

1 **Figure 6.** *Chromatic passages, Midnight mm. 1-5*

Sop. Solo  
 Then in the lull of mid - night, then in the lull of mid night, gen - tle arms.  
*p*

Soprano  
*mm*  
*pp*

Alto  
*mm*  
*pp*

Tenor  
*mm*  
*pp*

Bass  
*mm*

2  
 3 (© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

4  
 5 At that point, the bass voice then mimics the same motive (Figure 7). The  
 6 descending line is a form of *madrigalism* that describes the descent into death,  
 7 and the chromatic bass line shifts the tonal center through obscure harmonic  
 8 relations and borrowed tones.  
 9

10 **Figure 7.** *Chromatic passages, Midnight mm. 12-16*

Sop.  
 gain the mad a - larms Of bat - tle, dy - ing, and

S  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans

A  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,

T  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,

B  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,

11  
 12 (© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

13  
 14 A similar example is present in the opening measures of *Where All Roses*  
 15 *Go*. The lower two voices combine to present a descending chromatic line which  
 16 depicts the hero's descent into the grave (Figure 8). The same passage is repeated  
 17 later in measure 24, to conclude the short descant interlude, and again in the

1 closing measures of the piece as the final descent is completed and is left  
 2 harmonically unresolved.  
 3

4 **Figure 8.** *Chromatic Passages, Where All Roses Go, mm 1-2*

The musical score for 'Where All Roses Go' (measures 1-2) is presented in a four-staff format. The top two staves are vocal lines, and the bottom two are piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. A red box highlights a chromatic line in the piano part, specifically in the right hand, across measures 1 and 2. The notes in this line are G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F#6, G6, A6, B6, C7. Dynamics include *mp* and *p*. The lyrics 'He shall not hear the bit-tern cry in the' are visible in the vocal line.

5  
 6 (© 1998, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)  
 7

8 Further examples of McGlynn’s use of a chromatic line underlying a floating  
 9 melody used to create an unsettled harmonic center are evident in the most recent  
 10 of the Ledwidge settings from 2015, *May*. The chromatic line in measures 2-5  
 11 (Figure 9) creates ambiguity of scale use between a minor scale and a mixolydian  
 12 with a flat six. The use in this instance, as described in relation to the modes,  
 13 shifts from an aurally relatable minor mode to a jazz-influenced A mixolydian  
 14 b6.  
 15

16 **Figure 9.** *Chromatic Passages, May, mm. 1-5*

The musical score for 'May' (measures 1-5) is presented in a four-staff format. The top two staves are vocal lines, and the bottom two are piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. A red box highlights a chromatic line in the piano part, specifically in the right hand, across measures 1-5. The notes in this line are G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F#5, G5, A5, B5, C6, D6, E6, F#6, G6, A6, B6, C7. Dynamics include *mp* and *mf*. The lyrics 'She leans a - cross an or - chard gate some - where' are visible in the vocal line.

17  
 18 (© 2015, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)  
 19

1 The “dying moans” as presented in the tenor and bass voices in this example  
 2 from *Midnight* (Figure 10), not only present the sound of moans as they move in  
 3 parallel motion at the fifth, but subsequent variations of this expression act as a  
 4 returning point from which the phrase always departs.

5  
 6 **Figure 10.** *Chord Progressions, Midnight, mm.*

12  
 S. gain the mad a - larms Of bat - tle, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - - - - - ing, and  
 S gain a - larms Of bat - tle, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans  
 A gain a - larms Of bat - tle, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans,  
 T gain a - larms Of bat - tle, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans,  
 B gain \_\_\_\_\_ a - larms \_\_\_\_\_ Of bat - tle, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans, \_\_\_\_\_ dy - ing moans,

7  
 8 (© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)  
 9

10 A final example of McGlynn’s use of a progressive chordal expression is  
 11 that of an ostinato-like figure. The two-measure, semi-chromatic movement of  
 12 the bass voice in *My Songs Shall Rise* (Figure 11) repeats four times as the  
 13 harmony transitions from F minor to settle on a C $\flat$  with the added 9. When  
 14 viewed in combination with the text “Here where that poet sleeps,” the basses  
 15 seem to plead for the dying poet’s words to settle at the place of rest.

1 **Figure 11.** *Ostinato progressions, My Songs Shall Rise, mm.26-30*

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'My Songs Shall Rise, mm.26-30'. It consists of six staves. The top five staves are vocal lines with lyrics underneath. The lyrics are: 'I hear the songs', 'po - et sleeps And here songs un - sung, I hear the', 'po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps', 'po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps', and 'po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps here where that po - et sleeps'. The bottom staff is a bass line with a repeating ostinato pattern. Two instances of this pattern are highlighted with red boxes. The first box covers the notes G2, C3, E3, G3, B2, and the second box covers the notes G2, C3, E3, G3, B2. The score is marked with a dynamic of *mf* and includes a copyright notice: (© 2010, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission).

2  
3 (© 2010, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

4

5 *Augmented Harmonies and Coloristic Extensions*

6

7 Perhaps McGlynn's most distinctive harmonic device is the augmented  
8 triad, frequently expanded with a major seventh or ninth. This sonority appears  
9 throughout the *Ledwidge Settings* cycle, producing the impressionistic shimmer  
10 reminiscent of Debussy while preserving modal resonance. The coexistence of  
11 the ancient and modern within a single chordal language epitomizes McGlynn's  
12 synthesis of Irish identity and twentieth-century harmony.

13 Augmented chords, by the way they are spelled, are aurally unique as they  
14 inherently can represent two different chords. Additionally, when you include  
15 possible enharmonic spellings, a variety of tonal centers could be analyzed.  
16 McGlynn uses the augmented chord and interchangeable harmonic ideas in ways  
17 that do not interrupt the harmonic flow of his pieces and provide a colorful aural  
18 contrast. In addition, he expands on this triad by integrating a major seventh,  
19 mimicking his use of the augmented triad, as the outside intervals are also major  
20 thirds. These harmonic devices permeate the majority of McGlynn's  
21 compositions, as demonstrated through the following examples.

22 In *Midnight*, McGlynn occasionally uses the augmented triad as a harmonic  
23 motif with the addition of a #9. C $\flat$  Augmented Major 7 is closely followed by  
24 the same chord with F as the root (Figure 12), which enhances the open  
25 dissonance reminiscent of the impressionist works of Debussy or Ravel. Again,  
26 the enharmonic spelling should be noted. The C $\flat$  Augmented Major 7 contains  
27 the notes G, C $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , B $\flat$ , which enharmonically spell a G augmented chord with  
28 the sharp ninth (C B D# A#).

1 **Figure 12.** *Augmented Chords, Midnight, mm. 12-13*

gain the mad a - larms Of bat - tle, — dy - - - - - ing, and  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, — dy - ing moans, — dy - ing moans  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, — dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,  
 gain a - larms Of bat - tle, — dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,  
 gain — a - larms — Of bat - tle, — dy - ing moans, dy - ing moans,

2  
 3 (© 1997, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)

4  
 5 Another representative example of his chordal structure appears in the final  
 6 two measures of *When the War is Over* (Figure 13). At first, the change of the  
 7 bass voice from the G to A $\sharp$  yields the chord D $\flat$  Augmented Major 7 (D $\flat$ , F, A $\sharp$ ,  
 8 C). However, the listener’s ear is drawn to the A as the tonal root. An enharmonic  
 9 spelling of the same chord as A, C $\sharp$  (D $\flat$ ), E $\sharp$  (F), C provides the appearance of  
 10 a different augmented chord, A augmented ( $\sharp$ 9). It is this unresolved chord on  
 11 which McGlynn chose to conclude the piece, possibly a commentary on the idea  
 12 that war is never over, its effects felt by those who remain.

13  
 14 **Figure 13.** *Augmented Chords, When the War is Over, mm 39-45*

war is o - ver, — war is o - ver. —  
 When the war When the war is o - ver. — war is o - ver. —  
 When the war When the war is o - ver. — war is o - ver. —  
 When the war When the war is o - ver. — war is o - ver. —  
 When the war is o - ver. — war is o - ver. —

15  
 16 (© 1999, Michael McGlynn, reprinted by permission)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup>All scores published with permission of composer/copyright holder

1       McGlynn’s use of this chord structure and its variations may be intentional  
2 or may be a result of the linear construct of his pieces. Whichever way they are  
3 derived, they do provide a unique form of dissonance for which he is known.  
4

## 6       **Conclusion: A Living Nationalism**

8       Michael McGlynn’s music represents the evolution of Irish choral  
9 nationalism from revival to renewal. By merging ancient modality, Irish  
10 language, and impressionistic harmony within a choral medium, he created a  
11 living tradition that continues to evolve. His founding of ANÚNA provided the  
12 platform through which Ireland’s choral identity reached an international  
13 audience; his compositions gave it voice. Fellow composer Eric Barnum said of  
14 McGlynn:

16       I’ve never, I think, heard a composer capture nature in the way that Michael does  
17 it. Capturing the sound that the sea might make, or capturing the sound of a hillside,  
18 or capturing the sound of a wave, or a river... There’s something so unbelievably  
19 special about the way and the atmosphere that Michael uses to create this music  
20 that, without even trying, we are brought to those places.<sup>20</sup>

22       And he continued:

24       There’s something that I’ve loved about Michael’s music for twenty years, and  
25 that’s that he sounds like where he’s from. It sounds like he’s experienced the song  
26 of his past, the history that Ireland has given him. The tradition of *sean nós* singing.  
27 He has not only embraced it but brought it into a modern sensibility.<sup>21</sup>

29       In McGlynn’s works, nationalism is not a political posture but a sonic  
30 condition: the resonance of language, landscape, and lineage. His re-imagining  
31 of traditional sound through modern sensibility ensures that Ireland’s musical  
32 heritage remains vibrant and contemporary; he has created a continuation of the  
33 Ireland of old with a modern voice. He has done what Fleischman intended:  
34 renewed the music of Ireland in living, evolving music that embodies Irishness  
35 without quoting it. As conductors and scholars engage with his repertoire, they  
36 participate in an ongoing dialogue between past and present, one in which Irish  
37 music, once silenced, now sings through his compositional voice.  
38

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