

 Christine Tobin: Sailing to Byzantium at the RNCM

A collection of 12 poems by W B Yeats, set to music by Christine Tobin for the Manchester Literature Festival

Reviewed by Helen Nugent October 2012

If you ascribe to the view that song lyrics are essentially lines of poetry, it should come as no surprise that someone has set the works of one of Ireland's most respected poets to music.

A lesser artist might have balked at the prospect of scoring the literary canon of W B Yeats but, judging by yesterday's performance at the Royal Northern College of Music, Christine Tobin relished the opportunity. Part of the hugely diverse Manchester Literature Festival, Tobin tackled one of poetry's modern greats and, for the most part, succeeded in capturing Yeats's passion and intensity.

Tobin was fortunate in her venue. The RNCM's concert hall manages to be both intimate and generous with its space, a perfect backdrop for a catalogue of work that flits from personal to epic. The programme began with a recording of Yeats's hauntingly-beautiful poem *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, read by Gabriel Byrne. While Byrne (who was, rather improbably, Tobin's school Spanish teacher) was a perfect choice for the recital, poor sound quality marred the audience's enjoyment. Still, for those who knew the poem, Byrne's slow and deliberate voiceover echoed Yeats's own delivery, a version of which can be heard at the British Library.

Thankfully, the acoustics improved once Tobin and her four-piece band embarked on the musical rendering of some of Yeats's most famous and evocative verses. From the prayer-like refrain of *Sailing to Byzantium* to the ethereal quality of *Long-Legged Fly*, the words and melodies flowed like honey. For those who love Yeats, the intensity of his poems is felt deep down in the belly; and so it was that the combination of Tobin's voice and the notes of the cello and double bass resonated in the body's core.

But it took a bit of getting used to. At first, hearing Yeats's familiar lines put to music was reminiscent of listening to an odd cover of a favourite song. This feeling soon passed, only to creep back in on a couple of numbers which, to be perfectly honest, were too musically similar. But this is a minor quibble. Instead of diminishing the bare-boned honesty of Yeats's work by adding a musical layer, Tobin loosed the blood-dimmed tide. Buy the album, you won't regret it.