

ARTS/CULTURE

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Arts/Culture Editor: Des O'Driscoll

10 things to see this Midsummer

Kamchätka
City centre, June 14-16

The Catalan theatre company's June 16 performance sees seven characters create a bit of chaos as they wander the streets with their suitcases. In their other piece, *Alter* (June 14-16), the audience will be brought to a secret location for a late-night experience that's part-theatre, part-adventure, and all-fun.

THIS YOU!YOU
Millennium Hall, City Hall, June 18-23, free

German-British artist Tino Sehgal is hugely respected internationally, and his Cork piece will evolve from work first performed in Santander last year. Expect a small cast of parents and children participating in a piece that will take shape as the audience reacts.

Wiff Waff Is Playing At My Gaff
Crawford Art Gallery, June 13-July 7

Ping pong meets art installation as attendees are invited to play on these rather unconventional tables. Davey Moor, curator, will also launch impromptu tournaments.

This Summer I Robbed A Bank
Everyman, June 8-16

Another one for younger attendees. Some of them may even have read comedian David O'Doherty's book about a 12-year-old getting up to all sorts of adventures on Achill Island. The story has been adapted for the stage by the author's brother, Mark Doherty, as a commission by the Everyman and the Ark.



A parade train proceeding past the GPO in the Midsummer Parade last year.

Cork Proms
Cork Opera House, June 12-20

The city's best venue has split its Proms programme into three offerings: Heyday — A Mixtape of Irish Rock (June 12-13); Jack O'Rourke, May Kay, and others perform classics of the canon from the likes of Sinead O'Connor, Rory Gallagher and Thin Lizzy.

New World Symphony and Rhapsody in Blue (16 June), Cork pianist Gary Beecher leads an orchestra for a night that will have those magical pieces by Dvorák and Gershwin at its heart.

There's No Place Like Home (June 19-20); Molly Lynch and Majella Cullagh are among the performers in a night of musical theatre classics, from works such as *Wicked*, *The Sound of Music*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

Tempesta
The Pav, June 14-23

Theatre-lovers will come for the tale of two Dubliners caught up in the momentous events in Europe in the 1930s; music fans will attend for the live score performed by Steve Wickham of The Waterboys. Deirdre Kinahan has based her story on real events, with settings including a jazz club in Dublin, and battlefields of the Spanish Civil War.

Midsummer Parade
Oliver Plunkett Street, June 16

Cork Community Art Link have been busy for months preparing for this parade down the city's famous pedestrianised thoroughfare. They've also roped in men's sheds, dance troupes, and other community groups for an event that provides an ideal opportunity to bring the smiles into the city.

Theatre For One
Emmet Place, June 15-23

A success on its debut in 2019, the peep show-like booth is back outside Cork Opera House for another series of five-minute plays performed for one audience member at a time. Established figures such as Louise Lowe, Mark O'Rowe and Enda Walsh have collaborated with novice writers to create the pieces. No booking — just join the queue.

New Blood
St Luke's, June 21-22

Four venues at the northside crossroads will host a series of gigs featuring such emerging acts as Ezra Williams, the Love Buzz, and The Cliffords. Another one for music-lovers is 9.57 (Sunset) at Triskel, where festival artists in residence Eilli has put together two weekends (15-16 & 21-22 June) of live performance and electronic music.

Solstice Céili
Elizabeth Fort, June 21

A céili with a difference will see trad band Dána, Lisa Liamsa and Fear an Sprioi Martin O'Donoghue guiding punters through dances created especially for this solstice event. Along the way they'll delve into the different eras of dancing in Ireland.

'People come because I ask them to, not for the fees'

Noel Baker talks to West Cork Chamber Music Festival founder Francis Humphrys about his 30-year passion

FRANCIS Humphrys has a theory. Cows hate rock and roll, but they love classical music.

"My son used to have to do the milking sometimes and he put on rock music and he came tearing back up to the house saying, 'take it off, take it off, I'm covered in shit!'" he remembers, laughing like it was yesterday. "They just couldn't stand it. Cows have great taste."

Humphrys is chief executive officer of West Cork Music, which plans and stages three festivals every year in and around Bantry. The Chamber Music Festival, the Literary Festival, and the Masters of Tradition Festival. With his David Niven moustache and perfectly co-ordinated ordoury garb, he is every inch the classical music enthusiast, even an impresario: he is a less likely farmer, and yet he still is, almost five decades on from when he first came to West Cork with his family.

"The parlour was down there and the record player was in the house, so you'd put on the record, and the speakers, we ran cables down to these big speakers," he says, pointing overhead to a large furry brown box that looks like it has a few bullet holes in it. "The cows respond to a calm milker. The cow's way of showing displeasure is lifting the tail, so if there wasn't any of that, you were doing it right. Baroque was the winner — Handel and Bach and Ravel."

The tale speaks of his almost religious devotion to classical music, showcased through his 'other' job as programmer of the annual Chamber Music Festival, which this year runs from June 28 to July 7.

"We're speaking in the nerve centre of the festivals, the former bull house at his property on an ever-narrowing road outside Durrus, where he came to live in 1977.

"It was astonishing how we were accepted when we first came," he says, surrounded by ring binders and racks of CDs. "I didn't know a thing about farming. I just had to get out of the UK and I had to try and find a way to put a few bob together. And farming, of course, was a rotten choice. But we got a nice place to live, we got a house and land for, compared to today, next to nothing."

And so they milked between 10 and 15 cows, only giving up when the festival started 27 years ago. "They did look a bit strangely at me down at the creamery," he says.

As many farmers will tell you, there's no money in it but you do it for the love of it. Maybe it's not a surprise that Francis continues to drive the Chamber Music Festival despite the challenges.

"Well, we've fewer people [working], because the funding has flattened for two years now, so that's the Arts Council, that's the Cork County Council, that's Fáilte Ireland, and also the European Council that supports us, they have



Russian/English violinist Alina Ibragimova has been playing at the West Cork Chamber Music Festival every year for almost 20 years. Humphrys describes her as a 'huge name'.



Francis Humphrys founded the West Cork Chamber Music Festival after moving to Durrus from the UK in 1977. He is also chief executive officer of West Cork Music.

all done that," he says, drawing his hand across an imaginary horizon, "and costs have all done that," he adds, shooting his arm towards the ceiling.

"So we actually had to let a staff member go."

The Chamber Music Festival is even more reliant on volunteers, typically music students, and the high calibre of performers who visit from overseas. Even there, it is a logistical puzzle, given that the festival strives to limit its related carbon emissions, encouraging performers to stay for five days and to only take one flight, meaning classical performers getting the motorway coach from Dublin Airport to Cork and festival staff picking them up from there to fetch them down to Bantry.

"Musicians have always travelled, the troubadour of old, that was the way they were, but nowadays it's all tied up with carbon emissions," Francis says.

"You get a lot of musicians now, especially from Scandinavia, who won't fly, so they have to do what we call slow travel, which is basically train and bus, but the problem of that, for people like me, is they need to get an extra fee to come here. Bantry is hard to get to."

Yet get there they do. Francis's eyes light up when he recalls some of the magical performances over the years, yet it's clear that hosting chamber music in West Cork on this scale requires something like blind faith — something that might not come easy to a graduate of Oxford and the London School of Economics.

"The problem is the arts are under-resourced and understaffed," he says. "I say this for the arts, but it seems to be the case across the country. Anything anyone is doing, they don't have the money, except the super-rich."

"The Chamber Music Festival could not survive without its 40% international audience," he says candidly.

"We have three tour groups — one from Holland, two from the UK — who come specially for the festival. We have a German foundation supporting us, quite substantially, to the same level. If not more, than Cork County Council, serious money. And these are people who..." he pauses; "I mean



West Cork Music stages three festivals every year in Bantry and its surrounding areas. (Picture: Dan Linehan)

chamber music is still highly thought of in Germany; Ireland, really, is on and off."

The festival used to co-ordinate string-quartet performances at dozens of schools across West Cork, but due to a whittled-down budget, it no longer does. Francis speaks about the role music, and the arts, should play in the Irish education system, a kind of cultural nourishment where you get some of what you need, not always what you want.

"I got a bit dispirited with it, because its become very much teachers filling a gap in the schedule," he says of the school performances. "There used to be music teachers, but there are fewer and fewer of them now. From the enthusiasm of young performers, we used to send young string quartets into school, but it was just a single spark. It needs to be pushed all the time. And we all have so many demands on our time now."

There is plenty of draw on his own time, not least with efforts by West Cork Music to secure its own venue in Bantry. The plan is with the architects and would, if finalised, create what Francis sees as a musical counterpart to the Ullin Gallery in Skibbereen, a dedicated cultural space that would host masterclasses and workshops as well as performances.

"The big hope is that we manage to get this building together," he says. "The money is eye-watering. But people keep telling me that it is easier to get money for capital than it is for running costs, because it is something that will always be there."

"So that is a great thing to look forward to. I am gradually going to have to step back. I'd like to go on doing chamber music (the festival). I have not found anyone yet who would like to do it. Problem is, no one will do it for the money I do it for, this is the trouble with not paying yourself properly for over decades and, to be fair, my board have said this to me."

If that sounds like Francis is a Wonka-like figure, seeking someone to take on the chocolate factory once he's gone, he's self-deprecating. "You see, I'm the founder, the founder turns into a problem eventually." He laughs heartily at this.

"People come because I ask them, I have built up a reputation over almost 30 years and people know that I know the music, that I can have discussions

I have built up a reputation over almost 30 years and people know that I know the music... and I know what I'm talking about

Some of Francis's highlights:

"When I look back, some of the people we had here are now major stars. There was a fantastic violinist, who is still going strong, called Patricia Kopatchinskaja, who came to us many years ago, when she was much younger. What happens is, they come when they're young and, as they get older, two things happen: They need bigger fees, because they probably have a family to look after, and things like that. There's more demand for them, so that they don't really want to stay for five days. And they are not so keen to take on repertoire that they won't be playing anywhere else. So this is a development that has been happening over the years."

"There is a wonderful Russian/English violinist, who I think is now resident in Berlin, who has been coming to us for almost 20 years. She is the sort of person who could stand up, on her own, in the Albert Hall and play the Bach solo to a packed house. She is a huge name: Alina Ibragimova. And she has a quartet, they play with what they call original instruments. She keeps coming back, bless her cotton socks with him."

"And there are others who keep coming. The fact that we are interested here in putting on repertoire that is a normal concert hall wouldn't, so they can experiment. It hugely depends on what the musician is prepared to play. In the early days, I don't know how I got away with it. In the early days, I asked them to play the most obscure pieces and they would do it."

Seamus Heaney: That was the very first festival, in '96, the year he won the Nobel Prize. I had him booked long before that and he very sweetly rang me and said, 'I'm still coming.' He was such a gentleman, such a pleasure. He was going to read a long series of poems and there was a cello on stage with him."

"I don't think Seamus had done anything like this before. I got him back years later. There was a piece by an English composer, a contemporary piece that had a set for words to be spoken and not sung, or there was some spoken and some sung. I think, so Seamus had to be conducted, this was another new experience. He was great."

authors is that musicians are trained to perform, authors are not. Going to read at festivals, except that it sells more books, is actually a waste of their writing time."

"This is all with an eye on a future in which he won't be present. He says he "rather doubts" the new building will be delivered in his lifetime, but something about the twinkle in his eye suggests he may not quite believe that to be true."

"My ghost will be there," he jokes. "I'd love to be there, hearing the first concert on the stage in the new building, that would be great." And what would be playing, in an ideal world? "I think it would be late Beethoven quartet," he responds immediately.

So Beethoven for Bantry, and for the bovines. At one point he recalls how, pre-covid, a local rock band was using the aforementioned milking parlour as a rehearsal space. They split up though. Maybe this part of the world is acoustically attuned to the classics — just ask the cows.