

Russian art at Mansion House

By Brian Fallon

THE RUSSIAN art exhibition at the Mansion House in Dublin is a sound, solid and rather unexciting affair, which is neither avant-garde nor old-style academic, but sticks mainly to the middle of the road. And that, in art, is seldom the most interesting or fertile place to be in. The avant-garde has its own *raison d'être*, the embattled conservatives (insofar as they still exist) can sometimes throw up an artist of real calibre who has gone his own, lonely way. The middle way, however, is often just no way at all.

The star billing is given, implicitly, to an elder figure, Roudolf Khatchatrian, who is literally centre stage. His works are hung in the stage space, and you need to climb the short stairs on either side to view them close. In decent reproductions, his work had interested me; in actuality, it is purely graphic, in a dullish sepia tone, and reminiscent of such academic chestnuts of yesteryear as Tretchikoff's "Weeping Rose".

This is untypical of the exhibition in general, which is highly eclectic and stresses solid, even tacky paint surfaces. It is hard to generalise in such a varied show, but my own impression is that in modern Russians are safest in a rugged, rather old-fashioned, slightly expressionistic style, emphasising landscape and the figure; they are weakest when they stress the more "formal" styles. The line of development from their great abstract pioneers of early in the century seems to have snapped at least a generation ago. (So much so, in fact, that at times I felt back in the 1950s, the era of the Kitchen Sink school.)

Even the colour revolution of Chagall and Kandinsky (in their very different ways) seems forgotten; the prevailing colours are rather dour and close. In the works of Leonid Kurilo, for instance, this works in a solid, sincere and well-made way, but in others it is simply dull. Some of the best painting, I thought, came from Vladimir Andreenikov and Yekaterina Medvedeva, while the sculpture is disappointingly conventional.

In adjoining rooms, there is a curious welter of Irish works, some of them from well-known figures such as Louis Le Brocquy and the late Colin Middleton (from the Carrolls Tobacco collection, by the way). The hanging is rather haphazard, and the choice — if there was one — of artist is so unpredictable that it is best just to forget about any "representative" principle and pick out what you like.

Robert Ballagh is well represented, and Evanna O'Boyle, Jacqueline Stanley, Marie Bannon, Graham Reynolds are among the



Gary McMahon, Brian Thunder, and Mike Finn in "Woman in Mind" by Alan Ayckbourn, which opens at the Andrews Lane Theatre tomorrow in a production by the Island Theatre Company from Limerick

people who maintain a good level in what is, frankly, a wildly uneven lot of pictures and sculptures. The sculpture, as in the Russian room, is poor and rather anonymous; it is hard to say much more for it, except that it provides a necessary ballast or counterpoise to the pictures.

The luck of the draw seems to call the tune (if you can overlook the mixed metaphors); but if Russian visitors to the show are told that this is really a representative cross-section of contemporary Irish art, they had better ignore the advice. Few of the leading names are here, and the few who are look out of place.

Mary Hegarty song recital in Cork

By Tomás Ó Canainn

MARY Hegarty sang the final concert of her Music Network Tour to a packed house in the Cork School of Music last week. She combined songs by Irish composers, Harty, Hughes, Victory, Larchet and Nelson with excellent offerings from Schubert and Richard Strauss, in a first half where neither she nor her superb accompanist, pianist Jimmy Vaughan, spared themselves.

I thought Larchet's "Stranger" and Harty's "Sea Wrack" the most satisfying of her first group. One doesn't hear Harty so much nowadays: I remember this song of his as a firm favourite at the Derry Feis, more than forty years ago. It retains a freshness that the rest of us have lost!

Jimmy Vaughan was excellent in the Schubert songs. He is an outstanding musician, sensitive to every nuance of a singer's performance. The word "accompanist" is not sufficient to describe this gifted collaborator. His introduction to "Auf dem Wasser" was a joy and his sparkling, ever-moving accompaniment to the Richard Strauss "Wiegenlied", supporting Mary Hegarty's smooth singing of the lullaby, was something to cherish.

I thought there were some signs of tiredness in Ms Hegarty's voice at the end of the first half of the concert, but they had disappeared without trace in her second-half popular opera offerings, where she demonstrated a flawless top soprano range.

Three artists at Limerick City Gallery

By Hilary Pyle

THREE local artists, Jack Donovan, Henry Morgan and John Shinnors are sharing an exhibition at the Limerick City Gallery of Art. Shinnors and Morgan were pupils of Donovan, and they all work in a sort of surreal expressionism.

John Shinnors is the most subtle, having developed a soft broad form of black-and-white chiaroscuro, which conceals hints of colour. The sheer pleasure of his textured surfaces, which now and again whisper Swanzy or Bacon, without any deliberate plagiarism, is balanced by a controlled romantic horror, the deceptive mystery of things — like magpies and ladies — half seen.

By contrast, Henry Morgan seeks out deliberate thriller images, reminiscent of TV, again choosing what he wants seen, using strong rich colours and naive personalised shapes to create a spirit of blind prophecy. He is interested in the connection between the material and the spiritual, whether in magic, religion or drama, and even has a "Phantom Playground": but his style is uneven, roving between expressionism and a naive symbolism.

Jack Donovan's manner is not as chilling or direct as hitherto, which is rather a pity. His has developed a loose bright naive style, and features historic legendary characters like Sarsfield and St George, enjoys circus subjects and colours, and uses the same lego-like toy figures more appropriately in his paintings of children. Somehow one misses the veiled savagery. "Abraham Sacrifices His Son" makes the most impact, as — ignoring any salutary sheep — the patriarch set to work gruesomely amid a kaleidoscope of scattered colour patches.

...amhain lena chuid amhrán. A bhuíochas de chumadóirí ar nós Tom 'a tSeoighe, Ciarán Ó Fatharta, Tom Rua Mac an Iomaire agus Máirtín Mac Donncha, bhí amhráin nua-aoiseacha aige agus chuir sé i láthair an phobail iad lena stíl nua-aoiseach féin.

Leis an meascán tarraingteach seo d'éirigh leis a mhéar a leagan ar chuisle an phobail. Thuig an pobal na hamhráin. B'as an bpobal féin a fáisceadh ábhar na n-amhrán, agus bhí aithne ag muintir Chonamara ar dhaoine agus eachtraí a bhí luaite iontu.

Rud spéisiúil eile is fiú a lua ná gur éirigh le John Beag dul i bhfeidhm ar gach aoisghrúpa. Tá tóir ag gasúir nach bhfuil ach cúig agus sé bliana d'aois ar na hamhráin seo, díreach mar atá ag seandaoine agus daoine de chuide aois idir eatarthu.

Nuair atá amhráin nua á gcur i láthair an phobail, tá sé fíor-riachtanach go dtuigfí na focail. Seo ceann eile de bhuanna móra John Beag, bíodh amhrán Gaeilge nó amhrán Béarla dhá rá aige — is féidir chuile fhocal a thagann óna bhéal a thuiscint.

Tá guth breá soiléir aige agus fearacht tréithe na n-amhrán sean-nóis cuireann sé a chroí go hiomlán sna hamhráin nuair atá sé dhá gceasadh. Tá sé in ann amhrán sean-nóis ar nós "Johnny Seoighe" a rá chomh maith le hamhráin pobail, "Shoals of Herring" nó "Newport Town" agus racamhráin tíre ar nós "Laethanta Romham" agus "Slán le Londain."

Seachas John Beag, is beag amhránaí eile a chasfaí ort a bheidh ina máistrí ar na stíleanna éagsúla seo ar fad. Ní nach ionadh tá spéis aige fhéin in éagsúlacht mhór ceoltóirí — daoine ar nós Darach Ó Catháin agus Luke Kelly, beannacht Dé leo, Merle Haggard, Joe Burke agus Mary Bergin. Ach ainneoin sin, dá mhéid an aithne a chuireann sé ar cheol na cruinne sea is mó a mheas ar ár sean-nóis féin.

Tá Na hAncairí deich mbliana ar an mbóthar i mbliana. Sé John Beag cnámh droma an ghrúpa. Casann sé fhéin an giotár. Bhí triúr ceoltóirí bosca ag an ngrúpa sa tréimhse sin — John Chóil an Bhreathanaigh as An Trá Bháin (1980-82), Pádraic Ó Lochlainn ón gCeathrú Rua (1984-84) agus Johnny Óg Ó Conghaile as Cor na Rón (1985-90). Tá pobal iomlán Chonamara go mór faoi chomaoín acu le deich mbliana anuas.

Chomh maith leis Na hAncairí, tháinig go leor grúpaí eile le deich mbliana anuas atá ag leanacht a sampla. Tá grúpaí ceoil ar nós Banna Ceoil an Droichid, Iorras Aithneach, Máirtín Óg Ó Gríofa agus Brian Mac Donncha, Duirling, Na Faoileáin agus Beairtle Ó Domhnaill tar éis múnla amhránaíochta John Beag á úsáid. Tuige nach mbeadh, óir sin é an "nós" a theastaíonn ón bpobal. Tá margadh ann don "nós" Gaelach seo anois, a bhuíochas sin do John Beag a chruthaigh agus a chothaigh é o thús.

Fear mór é John Beag.

● Tá físeán agus téipeanna de Na hAncairí ar fail ó Chló Iar-Chonnachta, Béal an Daingin, Co na Gaillimhe — guthán 091-93307.

Scribhneoir agus foilsitheoir le Cló Iar-Chonnachta is ea an t-údar. Eagarthóir na sraithe: Deaglán de Bréadún.

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