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The Leader Interview: Aodán Ó Dubhghaill



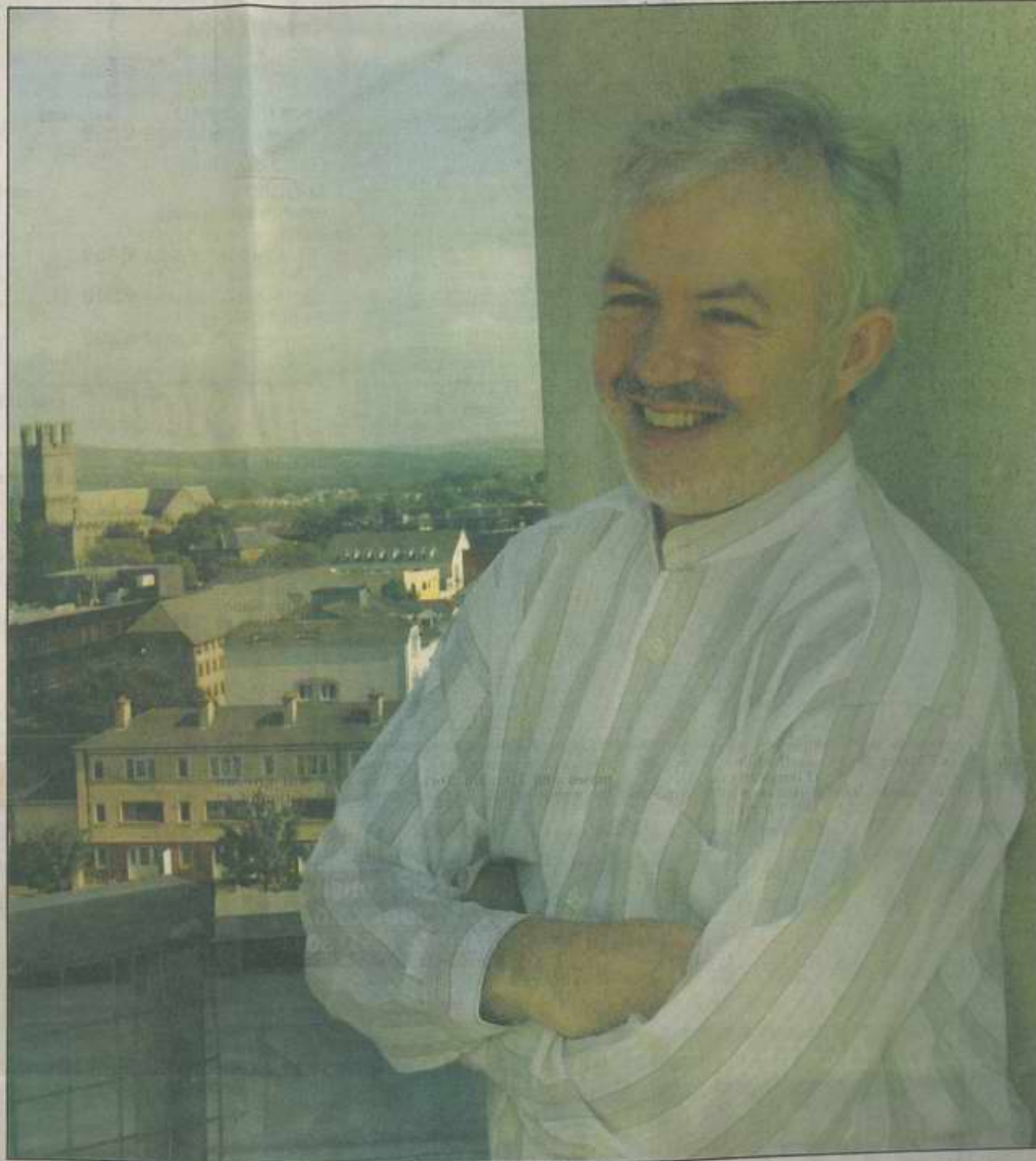
AODÁN Ó Dubhghaill brings a lifelong immersion in the poetry and science of recorded sound to bear in his work as head of Lyric FM. Talking to **NORMA PRENDIVILLE**, Aodán reveals how he is as open as ever to the excitement of new musical territories; and as keen to share his pleasure with others

Radio head with lyrical take on music for pleasure

MOCK sword fights in a back-garden in Clondalkin may seem an unlikely launch-pad for a career in public service radio. But for Aodán Ó Dubhghaill, that child's afternoon of fun many years ago proved to be a formative influence along a road which eventually led him to his current job as head of Lyric FM. Growing up in a household steeped in music was another. But first to the swords. "My father was always into recording and sound and for a while had a recording company, in the late 1950s," Aodán explains. "He was also a great DIY man and used to build sets for the local drama group. For one of their plays, they needed sound effects so my father took his tape recorder out the back where my brother and I had a sword fight which he recorded." Aodán came to share his father's fascination with sound and music, and many years later, his well-tuned ear found its natural outlet

school, probably because it was classical music rather than traditional music."

The renaissance of Irish music in the 1970s, along with the upsurge in folk music made a powerful impact on Aodán. "I discovered traditional music with a vengeance". But he adds: "At school, I used to hide the fact that I played violin. It was a real Woody Allen thing. I was playing in the National Youth Orchestra... that was really 'unhip', 'uncool'." But a class-mate at school, one Ferdia MacAnna (who went on to be known as Rocky DeValera and his band the Gravediggers) begged and nagged him to bring in his violin. "So one day I did." It proved to be a crucial turning point in more ways than one. Overnight, Aodán's violin-playing lost its uncool label and it was to open up another rich vein of very different music. Ferdia MacAnna introduced him to Leon



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And it is for enjoyment. His first job on leaving school was with Gael-Linn, the Irish language and culture organisation. "I was never going to be a violinist. I knew that. I didn't have the discipline it takes. But I really desired to work 'as Gaelige' and Gael-Linn was a very vibrant company in those days... they were visionaries." His job was in their record shop off Grafton Street which specialised in classical, Irish and folk music. For a while too, he worked with hi-fi specialists Cloney Audio and, during the early years of his marriage, played the piano at the

over to TV. I was always a radio-head," he says.

What he particularly remembers from those radio days is working with exceptional people like Ciaran MacMathuna, John Quinn, Tim Lehane and making programmes with them. The opportunity to make a "creative input" appealed to him. But he says, he might never have crossed over into producing programmes himself but for the support of colleagues like Tim Lehane. A conversation over coffee with Martin Luther King led

about belly-dancing. (Shades of Din Joe dancing on the radio perhaps?)

But radio was not standing still and after a stint with FM3, the classical music predecessor to Lyric, Aodán was happy to get involved in the setting up of Lyric in Limerick. It was not a hard decision to make, moving to Limerick. Always in the back of his mind had been the dream of living or at least retiring to the west. "I always considered Westport (his mother's hometown) to be my spiritual home," he explains.

tional, world music, jazz, show-music all find their place. Hopefully, he says, if somebody hears a movement from say a Tchaikovsky ballet it will encourage them to listen to more of his music. It is, he believes, about bringing people on a journey. "The language of classical music can be very alienating and as much as possible we avoid it. We use everyday language." "A lot of people think they don't know what they like and there is no formal education for music in schools in Ireland." But Aodán firmly believes classical music is a world that everyone

take on music for pleasure

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By then though, Aodán had a whole world of sound inside his head, having made his own musical odyssey, which began with violin lessons at the age of four or five. He and his two brothers and two sisters were all classically trained musicians and he remembers: "There was no pop in the house. It was Schubert or Seamus Ennis."

The Clondalkin of Aodán Ó Dubhghaill's childhood was still a village on the outskirts of Dublin, not the sprawling suburb it is today. "I was regarded as a culchie when I went to school in Dublin," he says. Irish language and culture were very much part of his upbringing. His parents were involved, along with a lot of other people in the area, in promoting things Irish and, thanks in large part to their pioneering efforts, Clondalkin now has its own cultural centre for music and language. "As a family, my earliest memories were holidays in Ceathrú Rua (Carraroe) where we rented a house every summer." Not surprising then, a young Aodán asked to go to an all-Irish school which turned out to be Scoil Mhuire in Dublin's Parnell Square. "The school was run by the Christian Brothers and was great for those who played sport and who loved maths. They couldn't accept the fact that I was taking music lessons outside of

school, probably because it was classical music rather than traditional music."

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But a class-mate at school, one Ferdia MacAnna (who went on to be known as Rocky DeValera and his band the Gravediggers) begged and nagged him to bring in his violin. "So one day I did." It proved to be a crucial turning point in more ways than one. Overnight, Aodán's violin-playing lost its uncool label and it was to open up another rich vein of very different music. Ferdia MacAnna introduced him to Jean Luc Ponty, an electric jazz violinist and then passed other albums along too. "I was really blown away. Then he gave me other things to listen to."

Being open to the excitement of new discoveries is still a quality that Aodán brings to his listening. "I discovered the Beatles late in life," he explains but even still, he finds new things every time he listens to the Fab Four's White Album.

And one of his great pleasures when his three children were growing up was when they said, "Dad, you should listen to this", telling him of their own discoveries in music.

One thing he does regret though is the way we "consume" rather than listen to music today. Who now, he asks, has the time to sit down and listen fully to a new album just bought? "That is what my father used to do. That is what I used to do."

Aodán Ó Dubhghaill is not in any way precious about any kind of music. He considers the music of 'The Gladiators' to be just as worthy as, say, Brahms or Mozart. And it is obvious that he has no truck with snobbery in music.

Yes, he agrees. There is snobbery about music. "There is snobbery in rap, in traditional music, in jazz, in classical music."

For him, though, music is music.



And it is for enjoyment. His first job on leaving school was with Gael-Linn, the Irish language and culture organisation. "I was never going to be a violinist. I knew that. I didn't have the discipline it takes. But I really desired to work 'as Gaeilge' and Gael-Linn was a very vibrant company in those days... they were visionaries." His job was in their record shop off Grafton Street which specialised in classical, Irish and folk music. For a while too, he worked with hi-fi specialists Cloney Audio and, during the early years of his marriage, clocked up many miles as an agent for a number of record labels.

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Then in 1979 came the opportunity to join RTE, where he was trained as a sound engineer. At that time, he recalls, one of a soundman's jobs was to actually play the records in the radio studios. "You then moved up to working behind the sound desk." The next step after that was radio drama and working with the orchestras recording concerts. That, he still remembers with amazement, was wonderful, to be sitting through concerts and being paid to do so. "I never had the urge to move

over to TV. I was always a radio-head," he says.

What he particularly remembers from those radio days is working with exceptional people like Claran MacMathuna, John Quinn, Tim Lehane and making programmes with them. The opportunity to make a "creative input" appealed to him.

But he says, he might never have crossed over into producing programmes himself but for the support of colleagues like Tim Lehane. A conversation over coffee about Martin Luther King led to the suggestion: why not make a programme about him? So Aodán

did, splicing excerpts from King's speeches with a narrative and music of the day.

"I remember getting a gorgeous letter from a man in West Cork... a man who had been on the Freedom March and he described how he sat in his kitchen with his daughter, listening to the programme, and in the end they were holding hands across the table and crying."

"That did it for me," Aodán says simply. He also remembers with pleasure another documentary he did

about belly-dancing. (Shades of Din Joe dancing on the radio perhaps?)

But radio was not standing still and after a stint with FM3, the classical music predecessor to Lyric, Aodán was happy to get involved in the setting up of Lyric in Limerick. It was not a hard decision to make, moving to Limerick. Always in the back of his mind had been the dream of living or at least retiring to the west. "I always considered Westport (his mother's hometown) to be my spiritual home," he explains. Instead, the Mid-West and a chance to help set up a new station opened up a new chapter in his life.

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It was also a great challenge. "When you are faced with the unknown it is very hard. It is when you start getting feedback, the phone calls, the e-mails, the letters... you realise no other station is doing this."

And it pleases him that the word "oasis" is used so regularly by listeners to describe Lyric.

In 2003, Aodán took over the running of the station—and wishes he had 12 or 14 hours more in every day. But far from missing the buzz of producing his own programmes, he thinks of the job in terms of producing for 24 hours a day.

He has a very clear vision of what Lyric is about. "We are not here as educators. We are in the entertainment business but people learn from what we do. We are not here to ram it down their throats. We are here to play good music." Classical is the core but tradi-

tional, world music, jazz, show-music all find their place. Hopefully, he says, if somebody hears a movement from say a Tchaikovsky ballet it will encourage them to listen to more of his music. It is, he believes, about bringing people on a journey. "The language of classical music can be very alienating and as much as possible we avoid it. We use everyday language."

"A lot of people think they don't know what they like and there is no formal education for music in schools in Ireland."

But Aodán firmly believes classical music is a world that everyone can explore. "I would say to somebody, tell me what you like. It could be a pop song, a traditional song, whatever, and I would say, 'if you like that, then you should try listening to such and such'. You can bring people on a journey."

At a personal level, he gets great satisfaction from the fact that his children have all made their own musical journeys. His eldest daughter, Fiona is a teacher at a Gaelscoil in Tallaght but also teaches music while Síle, who plays concert and Irish harp, piano and guitar, is now embarking on an MA in community music at UL. Even Cianán, the youngest, has finally found his instrument. "I tried him with everything and he never showed any interest until I bought him an electric guitar."

"To me, music is something that comes out of you. And my attitude is, if they get one-eighth of the enjoyment that music has brought me, fair play."

Aodán still pulls out his violin on occasion and likes nothing better than a good session. Indeed, his idea of bliss would be to have the space to learn a new tune. But at the moment, life is not quite so obliging.

Be certain, however, he is not complaining. Now settled in a new home close to Lough Derg with his partner Margaret, Aodán says: "I am happy where I am now." And it shows.