

Redmond O'Toole – Sat 7 Feb 8pm

Rising Star with strings attached

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From classical to heavy metal and punk, then back to classical again on an eight-stringed Brahms guitar, Redmond O'Toole is a musician who thrives on resisting regimentation.

Redmond O'Toole, the guitarist who will give this year's National Concert Hall Rising Star recital next week, is a player with a mixed musical background. He played in heavy metal bands before he set out on a career as a classical guitarist. But it was actually on the classical guitar that he began, following the path of a schoolfriend ("who was to me a guitar god at that point") by taking lessons with the same teacher.

"It was pure coincidence," he says. "It could have been that he had lessons with a jazz guitarist, and that's where I would have gone.

"It wasn't too long after that that I got interested in rock music, heavy metal, punk, things like that. I started playing in bands. But I was also going every Saturday morning to my classical guitar lesson, which was helping me immensely playing rock music as well, because I understood how the guitar worked. The idea that I played in heavy metal bands, and then emerged into classical guitar, it didn't happen that way. I was learning classical guitar from the very beginning."

He had some success in bands, touring in Ireland and England, and "I did once get into the Irish heavy metal charts. That was with Brinskill Bombeat, with an EP called Fighting to Die. It was right in there between Red Hot Chili Peppers and Metallica. We all had a lot of piercings, and crazy haircuts and coloured hair. We used to dress pretty raggedy, quite typical punk really. People were always surprised that we were quite ordinary guys, you know." He has fond memories of afternoon television appearances, where the shock value of the punk look was still high. It was actually one of the TV shows, Open House, that provided a turning point.

"When they found out I played classical guitar, they had me on to play Bach," he says. "That was one of the first instances when I realised that maybe I did have a chance to play solo classical guitar, which is what I actually wanted to do anyway. That sort of opened up my eyes to the fact that there was some sort of audience for that, and people were interested in it."

He talks wryly about some of the frustrations of band life. "I had two Marshall stacks, the standard six-foot amplifiers, and distortion. Everything was up to 11, as they say. I worked at my sound actually. That was the thing that drove me mad about bands. I would work for a long time at getting good sounds, in inverted commas, and setting my amplifiers and everything. And then we'd get a gig, and the sound was muddy and confused."

Things are better now, he says, but “when we played, everything was just falling apart. I would spend ages working on these complicated guitar parts, and then you’d do the gig and all you’d hear was the drums. To top it off, I was at home practising classical music, where everything is so clear, you can hear all the parts. I’ve always been fascinated by the texture of the guitar that you can have. You can make it sound like two or three guitars, or even four if you go for it. The counterpoint of the instrument is my biggest fascination, and that didn’t exist in the rock band.”

On the other hand, he’s enormously grateful for part of the band legacy. “I still have a lot of the DIY attitude of a punk band in my mind,” he says. “It’s embedded. I don’t expect anything. I accept that I may have to do a lot to make things happen for myself.”

At various times he’s supported himself by working as a bicycle courier and a landscape gardener. “It was all really hard work,” he says. “Playing the guitar is really hard work, too, but in a different way. I just thought it would be great if I could make my living out of this. So that’s what I decided to do.”

He’s a disciplined worker, doing a lot of practice in the mornings (“practise, practise, practise” is his advice to young musicians), though he also appreciates the flexibility that allows him to take a day off if he wants to.

IN ONE WAY, his progress looks perfectly normal and comfortable. He graduated from the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama, and used the money from an RDS Music Bursary to study in Siena with one of Andrés Segovia’s most famous pupils, Oscar Ghiglia, who had also taught O’Toole’s teacher, John Feeley. He then spent some time living in London and in Germany (where he still returns for concerts), before coming back to Ireland to establish a career at home. Later this year, he’ll record his third CD for VGo Recordings in California.

The reality was actually rather fraught. It was while he was still at DIT that his head was first turned by the so-called Brahms guitar, an instrument with an extra string on either side of the conventional six, which O’Toole plays cello-like, with a spike that rests on a special resonance chamber. The instrument’s strange name – Brahms never wrote for the guitar – comes from the fact that it was developed by guitarist Paul Galbraith and instrument-maker David Rubio to give Galbraith the extra notes he needed for a work by Brahms that he was arranging.

“Needless to say, I was always interested in experimentation,” says O’Toole. “In bands, anything goes. There is no tradition. You can do anything you want. You can make any sound you want and no one will question it, unlike classical music, where everything can be very regimented and conservative at times.

“I went to a festival in Scotland, the Dundee Guitar Festival, and Paul Galbraith, the inventor of this instrument, was playing. I just thought it was brilliant. It still remains one of the best concerts that I’ve ever seen. I thought it was a great idea.”

O'Toole didn't hesitate. He has an uncle who is a guitar-maker, "and he built me one, as cheaply as possible, for an experiment really". He quickly decided to switch to the new instrument, but the transition was fraught with problems.

"I realised at that point that I had a lot of tension, my technique wasn't what I wanted it to be in my guitar-playing," he says. "There's that old expression that when the student is ready, the teacher appears. I met Brian McNamara, the violin teacher, who was then studying to be an Alexander technique specialist and teacher. I went to see him, and he said there's a lot of work here, and asked if I would be willing to take it on. I was sort of a project for him in his studies, I think. He later told me that when he met me first, he didn't know what to do with me, I was so bad in my posture and everything. He had to go to see his own mentor to ask him what to do. He thought that this idea, of changing my position completely, was a fantastic idea. Because that is the essence of the Alexander technique, to relearn."

"I had a relatively good musical understanding at that point. I played quite well. I wasn't fantastic, but I was doing okay, I was one of the better students in the college. I went from that to not being able to play a scale of C. I couldn't play a thing in this weird new position. But we worked on that until I could. And not only could I do it then, but I did it with an ease of effort that I hadn't experienced before."

It took about two years. "I went from the highest mark for guitar performance in year two of my degree to the lowest mark in year three, barely passing. Everything in my brain still worked, but the fingers were very different. But the things that I could play were easier for me, very relaxed."

The resonance box, he explains, doesn't amplify the sound of the Brahms guitar hugely and he still often uses amplification, "a necessary evil . . . Light, tasteful amplification I'm a big fan of". But new resonances create extra colours, and he gets more feedback as a player. "It gives the guitar a different quality, especially in the bass. The guitar is full of subtleties, and every little bit helps. I think it's worth the extra bit of baggage, when you have to take it around."

Brahms may have been key to the creation of the new instrument, but it is the extra dimension the eight-stringed guitar brings to Scarlatti that O'Toole enthuses about, and the fact that it opens up Haydn's keyboard sonatas for transcription. He has also got funding from the Arts Council for a three-year project to transcribe the solo violin sonatas of Bach, drawing on expertise from a range of sources, including the Irish Baroque Orchestra's artistic director, violinist Monica Huggett, lute-player Nigel North, and composer Kevin Volans.

Along with the staples of his current repertoire – Scarlatti, Bach, Torroba, Rodrigo, Haydn and Walton – the Rising Star programme, which he is also taking on tour, will include a new work by Brian Bolger, An Homage to Leo Brouwer, which, says O'Toole, will be the first new work to be premiered on the Brahms guitar.

“It’s not contemporary in the squeaky-gate kind of way, and yet it’s very modern,” he says, adding that he sees the influence of Volans as well as Brouwer in the new piece. And, he says, laughing, “it’s certainly Brian , pretty wild. I think he’s tipping his hat to some of my heavy metal roots. He’s certainly asked me to tap into some of those emotions.”

Redmond O’Toole’s Rising Star recital is at the NCH, Dublin, on Mon, Jan 26, at 8pm, then goes to Carrigwohill, Limerick, Galway and Bray
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