

GHOST SONGS

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AND WORDS FROM IRELAND



LAETARE VOCAL ENSEMBLE | RÓISÍN BLUNNIE



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1	Numinosity words: <i>Dairena Ní Chinnéide</i> music: <i>Síle Denvir</i>	1:35
2	The Solace of Artemis words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	1:38
3	The Destroyer words: <i>Lola Ridge</i>	0:42
4	The Destroyer words: <i>Lola Ridge</i> music: <i>Seán Doherty</i>	3:48
5	Extract from <i>Woman and Scarecrow 1</i> words: <i>Marina Carr</i>	1:14
6	Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep words: <i>Mary Elizabeth Frye</i>	0:55
7	Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep words: <i>Mary Elizabeth Frye</i> music: <i>Rhona Clarke</i>	3:14
8	An Aimsir Láithreach words: <i>Dairena Ní Chinnéide</i>	1:06
9	The Last Thing words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	0:55
10	Extract from <i>Woman and Scarecrow 2</i> words: <i>Marina Carr</i>	1:54
11	Well words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	1:22
12	It's Strange About Stars words: <i>Lola Ridge</i>	0:39
13	It's Strange About Stars words: <i>Lola Ridge</i> music: <i>Seán Doherty</i>	4:30

14	Extract from <i>Phaedra Backwards 1</i> words: <i>Marina Carr</i>	1:00
15	<i>Teorainn Leasa</i> words: <i>Dairena Ní Chinnéide</i>	1:26
16	<i>Sister Trauma</i> words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	1:29
17	Extract from <i>Indigo</i> words: <i>Marina Carr</i>	6:38
18	<i>Down by the Salley Gardens</i> words: <i>William Butler Yeats</i>	0:53
19	<i>Down by the Salley Gardens</i> words: <i>William Butler Yeats</i> music: <i>Seán Doherty</i>	2:46
20	<i>Tairseach Toinne / Morning Raga</i> words: <i>Dairena Ní Chinnéide</i> music: <i>Síle Denvir</i>	3:55
21	<i>Under-Song</i> words: <i>Lola Ridge</i>	1:21
22	<i>Under-Song</i> words: <i>Lola Ridge</i> music: <i>Seán Doherty</i>	5:32
23	Extract from <i>Phaedra Backwards 2</i> words: <i>Marina Carr</i>	1:03
24	<i>The Old Woman</i> words: <i>traditional</i>	1:11
25	<i>The Old Woman</i> words: <i>traditional</i> music: <i>Rhona Clarke</i>	3:43
26	<i>The Old Neighbourhood</i> words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	0:49
27	<i>Lios</i> words: <i>Dairena Ní Chinnéide</i>	1:12
28	<i>At the Spring Equinox</i> words: <i>Paula Meehan</i>	3:46

29	The Graves at Arbour Hill <i>words: Paula Meehan</i>	0:49
30	The Graves at Arbour Hill <i>words: Paula Meehan music: Seán Doherty</i>	3:32
31	Oileán / Amhrán Mhuínse <i>words: Dairena Ní Chinnéide/trad. music: Síle Denvir/trad.</i>	3:40
32	Bagairt na Marbh <i>words: Seán O Ríordáin</i>	0:49
33	Bagairt na Marbh <i>words: Seán O Ríordáin music: Michael Holohan</i>	4:44
34	The Ghost Song <i>words: Paula Meehan</i>	1:04
35	The Ghost Song <i>words: Paula Meehan music: Seán Doherty</i>	4:35
Total playing time		79:31

LAETARE VOCAL ENSEMBLE, RÓISÍN BLUNNIE, CONDUCTOR

(tracks 4, 7, 13, 19, 22, 25, 30, 33, 35)

SÍLE DENVIR (HARP, VOCALS, SHRUTI BOX)

(tracks 1, 20, 31)

Readings:

MARINA CARR: tracks 5, 10, 14, 17, 23

DAIRENA NÍ CHINNÉIDE: tracks 1, 8, 15, 20, 27, 31, 32

CARL CORCORAN: tracks 3, 6, 12, 18, 21, 24

PAULA MEEHAN: tracks 2, 9, 11, 16, 26, 28, 29, 34

GHOST SONGS

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC AND WORDS FROM IRELAND

Foreword

For me as a choral conductor, the interaction of music and words is a subject of endless interest and analysis. These two arts can stand independently, but when they combine and act upon one another, their essence can change, whether slightly or profoundly, to create a new entity, an alchemy that is forever open to interpretation and re-imagination.

Two events provided inspiration and momentum in bringing this multi-genre album from the initial idea to its release: Dublin's 'Bealtaine' Age and Opportunity Festival, where Laetare Vocal Ensemble premiered two pieces composed by Seán Doherty, setting words by Paula Meehan, who read each poem immediately before its choral performance; and the Anam Arts Festival at Dublin City University, where again Paula Meehan read her work before Laetare's performances, Marina Carr read powerfully from her plays, and where I first encountered the innovative bilingual collaborations of poet Dairena Ní Chinnéide and harpist and traditional singer Síle Denvir.

*I see sketches of islands
half revealed
like deities
in a haze*

From Ní Chinnéide's opening words, *Ghost Songs* takes the listener through the earthly and the otherworldly, the liminal and the ethereal, and through encounters and vistas, real and imagined, in Ireland and beyond.

The album is built around nine choral pieces, by contemporary Irish composers Seán Doherty, Rhona Clarke, and Michael Holohan. Each piece is preceded by the poem on which it is based, and these are interspersed with thematically resonant readings by Paula Meehan, Dairena Ní Chinnéide, and Marina Carr. Carl Corcoran reads texts by poets unknown or no longer living, including W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) and Irish-American modernist Lola Ridge (1873–1941), while Dairena Ní Chinnéide lends her voice, and her dialect, to the words of fellow Irish-language poet Seán Ó Ríordáin (1916–77).

This album has a strong connection with Dublin City University. Marina Carr, Síle Denvir, Seán Doherty, and myself are members of the University faculty, Rhona Clarke is a former colleague and Dairena Ní Chinnéide a former Irish-Language Writer-in-Residence, Paula Meehan is a recipient of an honorary doctorate, and much of the album was recorded in the chapel of the DCU All Hallows Campus in Drumcondra. I am grateful to the University community, and in particular to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, for their support.

Róisín Blunnie
Conductor, Laetare Vocal Ensemble
Producer, *Ghost Songs*

PROGRAM NOTES

1 *Numinosity*

Dairena Ní Chinnéide & Síle Denvir

The poetry of Dairena Ní Chinnéide combines with the voice and harp-playing of Síle Denvir in this opening piece. The poem is published in Ní Chinnéide's English-language collection, *Deleted* (Salmon Press, 2019), where it bears the dedication 'for Síle Denvir'.

2 *The Solace of Artemis*

Paula Meehan

Read here by the author, this poem features in an anthology of works on a theme of climate change curated by British poet Carol Ann Duffy in 2015. It is dedicated to historian and former head of special projects at the National Archives of Ireland, Catriona Crowe.

3 *The Destroyer*

Lola Ridge

Carl Corcoran reads this poem, originally published in Lola Ridge's 1918 collection *The Ghetto and Other Poems*. Ridge (1873–1941) was born in Ireland, but emigrated with her mother to New Zealand, subsequently moving to Australia, San Francisco, and finally New York, where she was deeply involved in anarchist politics and radical activism. A brief preface to *The Ghetto* cries out:

"Will you feast with me, American People?
But what have I that shall seem good to you!

On my board are bitter apples
And honey served on thorns,
And in my flagons fluid iron,
Hot from the crucibles.

How should such fare entice you!"

Historian Dr Angela Byrne writes that while Ridge was "a well-recognised feminist poet and modernist in her own lifetime, she has since been largely forgotten, possibly in part due to the inhospitality of mid-twentieth century

America towards socialists and communists. Despite this neglect, she remains significant for the courage with which she addressed social issues in her writing and for her pivotal position among the modernist and women writers of twentieth-century America."

4 *The Destroyer*

Seán Doherty

This choral piece was commissioned from Seán Doherty (b. 1987) by Laetare Vocal Ensemble and premiered at the City of Derry International Choir Festival in 2018. Doherty's interpretation follows his view that the poet "considers what we have come to know in popular culture as the 'butterfly effect' [...] whereby a minor change in initial circumstances can have a far-reaching ripple effect in subsequent historic events. Ridge had felt the winds of change grow from wisps into hurricanes." The poem, Doherty says, "is no less a warning to our own time, a hundred years on, to be cognisant of mere 'wisps of the wind'."

5 *Extract from Woman and Scarecrow (I)*

Marina Carr

Marina Carr reads from her play, *Woman and Scarecrow*, first produced by the Royal Court Theatre, London, in 2006 and published by Faber & Faber.

6 *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep*

Mary Elizabeth Frye

Carl Corcoran gives voice to this well-known poem, whose authorship was for many years unknown but is now widely (though not universally) attributed to Mary Elizabeth Frye (1905–2004).

7 *Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep*

Rhona Clarke

This setting by Irish composer Rhona Clarke (b. 1958) was written in 2006, revised in 2010, and published in an updated version by Caifino Music Publishers in 2018.

Solos by Niamh Murray (soprano) and Niall Hayes (tenor).

The poet recounts the experience of hearing her mother's voice on Raidió na Gaeltachta, Ireland's national Irish-language radio station.

Translation by the author:

The Present Tense

(in memory of my mother)

Shortly after
your death
I feel you
in the past tense
for the first time
absent
in the abyss of the dead

I have only a recording of your voice
the accurate music
which flowed with the measured
metre of your talking
there was no surplus
just pure communication

I heard you on radio R na G
my heart lifted
you were in the present tense
for a while
the programme ended
I looked out the window

looking for a trace of you
the echo of your voice
like a balm
from the afterlife.

9 *The Last Thing*

Paula Meehan

Meehan reads this poem from *Geomantic*, her 2016 collection of eighty-one nine-line poems. It appears more recently in *As If By Magic*, her selected poems published by Dedalus Press in 2020.

10 *Extract from Woman and Scarecrow (II)*

Marina Carr

In a second extract from her 2006 play, *Woman and Scarecrow*, Carr references the famous 'Song to the Moon', from Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*.

11 *Well*

Paula Meehan

Meehan reads this poem from *The Man Who Was Marked By Winter* (1991). The first of five poems in a set called 'Mysteries of the Home', it is prefaced by a quotation from Theodore Roethke:

The soul stands lonely in its choice,
Waiting, itself a slow thing,
In the changing body.

'Well' appears more recently in *As If By Magic*, Meehan's selected poems.

12 *It's Strange About Stars*

Lola Ridge

Carl Corcoran reads this poem from Lola Ridge's 1920 collection *Sun-up and Other Poems*.

13 *It's Strange About Stars*

Seán Doherty

Seán Doherty's setting of Ridge's poem is dedicated to Laetare Vocal Ensemble and Róisín Blunnie, and was premiered at the Cork International Choral Festival in 2017.

Solos by Derina Johnson (soprano), Alan Duff (bass), Niall Hayes (tenor), and Jane Kelly (alto).

14 *Extract from Phaedra Backwards (I)*

Marina Carr

Marina Carr reads from her play *Phaedra Backwards*, a subversion of the classic myth of Phaedra, wife of Theseus. Her play, Carr states, is set "Now and Then. Then and Now. Always." It was first produced at the McCarter Theatre Center, Princeton, New Jersey, in 2011 and is published by Faber & Faber.

15 *Teorainn Leasa*

Dairena Ní Chinnéide

Translation by the author:

The Boundaries of the Fairy Fort

Between the Large Fort
and Field of the Small Fort
she came upon a ghost
on the side of the mountain
on the threshold of truth
under mist and rain.

They made each other out
with words from the bottom of the
sea
streams both soft and heavy
she was spellbound by him
with his light human form
hanging on his body
she could not detect any hooves.

The stranger said he often
roamed alone aimlessly
that this was the nature of the loner
to be on the sides of hills
at nightfall
asking one of the human race
to set his soul free.

She cast a stern eye upon him
but she couldn't quite make him
out
and so she escaped
from the dark stranger
with his magical cloak
and his hidden hooves.

16 *Sister Trauma*

Paula Meehan

Meehan's poem was included in *Diving into the Mystery: Studies in the Creative Process*, an anthology of essays and writings from a wide range of contributors, published in support of Irish mental-health charity Pieta House in 2019. Meehan writes that the poem was composed "to honour whatever muse it is who sits beside me when my heart breaks, and I write out of the brokenness."

17 *Extract from Indigo*

Marina Carr

Carr reads from her play, *Indigo*, commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and published by Faber & Faber in 2015, in a volume that also includes *Phaedra Backwards* and *Hecuba*.

18 *Down by the Salley Gardens*

W. B. Yeats

Carl Corcoran reads Yeats's famous poem, published originally in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* in 1889.

19 *Down by the Salley Gardens*

Seán Doherty

This setting was arranged for a performance by the DCU Lumen Chorale, conducted by Róisín Blunnie, at a ceremony conferring honorary doctorates on Irish social activist Sr Stanislaus Kennedy, businessman Martin Naughton, and former U.S. President Bill Clinton at Dublin City University in 2017.

20 *Tairseach Toinne & Morning Raga* *Dairena Ní Chinnéide & Síle Denvir*

'Morning Raga' is published in Dairena's English-language collection, *Deleted* (2019), while 'Tairseach Toinne' is published in her Irish-language volume, *Tairseach* (2021). Harp accompaniment is composed by Síle Denvir, finishing with her solo piece 'An Chloch Mhór'.

Translation by the author:

Wave Threshold

Ancient day
that closed in upon itself
like a kidnap

cold sunny morning
dissolves
like snow

the silver of the sun
on a wave
a bite in the wind

the restrictions of life
the limits of the mind
on the threshold of maturity

embedded
the Tuatha Dé underfoot
a prayer of reverence

sifting your conscience
as night reflects
the rubrics of the mind.

dispossessed
you retreat into the darkness
to plant your seed

21 Under-Song

Lola Ridge

Carl Corcoran reads this poem from Ridge's 1918 collection *The Ghetto and Other Poems*.

22 Under-Song

Seán Doherty

Seán Doherty outlines his interpretation of Ridge's poem thus: "The under-song of this poem is the medieval philosophy of *musica universalis*, as the poet ascends through each of its three categories: from music made by singers, to the music of the earth and finally, to the music of the spheres, where the dance of the celestial bodies – the sun, moon, and planets – are a form of music. The piece begins with the sounds of a rainforest, created by the choir, following detailed notation in the music score. The work was composed for the Mornington Singers Composition Competition 2014. Solo by Trudy Maguire (mezzo).

23 Extract from Phaedra Backwards (II)

Marina Carr

Marina Carr reads a second extract from her play, *Phaedra Backwards*.

24 The Old Woman

Traditional

Carl Corcoran reads a version of the widely known children's rhyme.

25 The Old Woman

Rhona Clarke

Rhona Clarke's setting was commissioned by Laetare Vocal Ensemble and premiered at the Cork International Choral Festival 2017.

Solos by Trudy Maguire (mezzo) and Niamh Murray (soprano).

26 *The Old Neighbourhood*

Paula Meehan

In this nine-line, eighty-one-syllable poem from her 2016 collection *Geomantic*, Meehan recalls the area around Gardiner Street, just north of the River Liffey in Dublin's Georgian inner city, where she lived before moving out, like many others from the neighbourhood, to the city's new, north-side suburbs.

27 *Lios*

Dairena Ní Chinnéide

Translation by the author:

Fairy Fort

There is a fairy fort
in the clutches of the house
a sickle moon
in its own universe
a small starry farm
a field on the boundary of a fort
I am in the king's chair
all earthly comforts
fall through fine threads of silk
the great world is outside

I am in the womb of a dream
where there is respect and love
the rustling of skin
a quiet sanctuary
a small embrace of trust
to descend from that strange land
over the waves
returning like a curlew
into dark limbed arms
the night we went to the fairy fort
and dreamed.

28 *At the Spring Equinox*

Paula Meehan

Written for a ceremony conferring an honorary doctorate on Paula Meehan at Dublin City University in 2019, the poem makes reference to suburbs such as Ballymun, Finglas, and Glasnevin, which surround the university's original campus on Dublin's north side.

29 *The Graves at Arbour Hill*

Paula Meehan

Another of Meehan's nine-line poems from *Geomantic* (2016), this references the Arbour Hill Cemetery in Dublin, where fourteen of the executed leaders of the 1916 Rising are buried.

30 *The Graves at Arbour Hill*

Seán Doherty

Doherty's choral setting was commissioned by the Bealtaine Age and Opportunity Festival in 2017 and first performed in the Garden of Remembrance on Dublin's north side, by Laetare Vocal Ensemble with the choir of St Patrick's Cathedral Grammar School.

Solo by Derina Johnson (soprano).

31 *Oileán - Amhrán Mhuínse*

Dairena Ní Chinnéide & Síle Denvir

Here, Dairena Ní Chinnéide's reading of her poem 'Oileán' is placed within the sean-nós singing of Síle Denvir. Denvir sings the first and final verses of the traditional song 'Amhrán Mhuínse', in which a woman pleads that when she dies, she will be buried not on the mainland, but in her island home of Muínis, off the coast of Connemara, Co. Galway.

Translation of Oileán, by the author:

Island

Island
at the edge of the world
lying mid sea
like a mystery
that bends your mind
in deep sunshine
crooked rocks
create a vision
of your life cycle
retreating from the crowd

wandering with a band of fairies
on an ocean peak
a glint in your pupil
desire in your eyes
beyond the bay
the rusty chain
of your reclamation
like some ancient prayer
it is hard to live
in the island of your soul
without fearing ghosts.

Dairena Ní Chinnéide reads the work of Seán Ó Ríordáin (1916–77), an Irish-language poet from Co. Cork.

Translation by Róisín Blunnie:

The Threat of the Dead

The room is tense with the threat of the dead,
Their anger cannot be assuaged.
There is no living person with me,
But I feel her near me,
Though she is buried three months.

There is no sound that I can make
That does not put her on edge,
Ready to emerge, awakened, into my presence.
Be quiet, and let not the person who is newly dead,
Newly fallen into the stupor of death,
Hear you.

Composer Michael Holohan (b. 1956) sets Seán Ó Ríordáin's poem in full, but interpolates an excerpt from the Latin Requiem: 'Lux aeterna luceat eis, Domine, cum sanctis tuis in aeternam, quia pius es' (May eternal light shine upon them, O Lord, with your saints forever, for you are faithful), and finishes the piece with the words 'requiem aeternam' (eternal rest).

Solo by Derina Johnson (soprano).

34 *The Ghost Song*

Paula Meehan

From Meehan's collection *Geomantic* (2016), this poem is prefaced by the line 'The singers and workers that never handled the air', from 'the mother' by Gwendolyn Brooks.

35 *The Ghost Song*

Seán Doherty

Doherty selects just seven words of Meehan's poem for his musical setting: 'I learned to breathe your ghost song'.

The piece was premiered by Laetare Vocal Ensemble at the Bealtaine Age and Opportunity Festival in 2017.

Solo by Niamh Murray (soprano).

Thanks to

Síle Denvir, Rhona Clarke, Michael Holohan, Marina Carr, Paula Meehan, Dairena Ní Chinnéide, Carl Corcoran, Marie Hanlon, Donogh Hennessy, Gráinne Logue, Laetare Vocal Ensemble Committee, Anna O'Herlihy, Pádraig Ó Liatháin, Declan Tuite, Micheál Ó Conghaile, Cló Iar-Chonnacht, Eoin MacCárthaigh, Lorcan Doherty, Eoin & Donagh, David Galligan IMRO, Brad Anderson.

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dublin City University.

Special thanks to Ailie Blunnie, Orla Flanagan, and Seán Doherty.

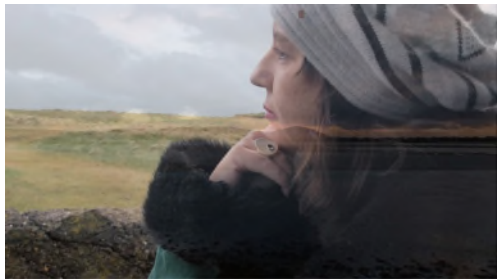
Róisín Blunnie



RÓISÍN BLUNNIE



SÍLE DENVIR



**DAIRENA
NÍ CHINNÉIDE**



MARINA CARR



PAULA MEEHAN



CARL CORCORAN

PERFORMERS

Laetare Vocal Ensemble is a 36-voice chamber choir based in Dublin, Ireland. Founded in 2014 by conductor Dr Róisín Blunnie, Laetare has established a profile as one of Ireland's leading amateur choral ensembles. The choir is active in commissioning new works from composers at the forefront of Ireland's vibrant contemporary music scene and has won multiple awards for the performance of new music. Previous releases include *In Circling Flight* (2017), an album of choral music by John Buckley, Rhona Clarke, and Seán Doherty. Collaborations include pop/folk albums *A Lifetime of High Fives* with singer-songwriter and cellist Vyvienne Long, and *West to the Evening Sun* with singer-songwriter Ailie.

Conductor **Róisín Blunnie** is a Lecturer in Music and Director of the MA in Choral Studies at Dublin City University. She studied Choral Conducting at the Kodály Institute of Music in Kecskemét, Hungary, and has a PhD in Music from Trinity College in Dublin.

Dairena Ní Chinnéide is a bilingual poet living and writing in the Irish-speaking area of Corca Dhuibhne in west Kerry. Among her many collections are *Deleted* (Salmon Press, 2019) and *Tairseach* (Éabhlóid, 2021). She has received numerous awards for her writing, including Irish Language Literature Bursaries from the Arts Council of Ireland and a Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship; she is a former Irish-Language Writer-in-Residence at Dublin City University and is currently Writer-in-Residence with the Irish language and culture organization Oidhreacht Chorca Dhuibhne in partnership with Ealaín na Gaeltachta. She has performed her work at festivals and literary events throughout Ireland, Europe, and the United States.

Síle Denvir is a singer and harpist. She hails from Indreabhán in the Irish-speaking area of Connemara in Co. Galway. As a researcher, she has a particular interest in Irish-language song in a modern context, and her publications include *Ciarán Ó Fátharta: Amhráin*, and *Tom a' tSeoighe: Amhráin*, both editions of songs from Connemara. Her CD project *Caithréim: Ceol agus Amhráin ó Dhrámaí an Phiarsaigh*, on music and song from the plays of Pádraig Pearse, was shortlisted for Irish Times Best Traditional Album 2016. She has a PhD from the University of Limerick, and is a Lecturer in Irish at Dublin City University. Síle is a regular contributor to TV and radio, and is the presenter of the *Sean-Nós* series on TG4, Ireland's Irish-language TV station. She has toured widely with the traditional group *Líadan*, of which she is a founding member.

Paula Meehan is a poet from Dublin. From 2013 to 2016 she was Ireland Professor of Poetry. Besides seven award-winning poetry collections, she has also written plays for both adults and children. Her works have been translated into many languages. She has conducted residencies in universities, in prisons, and in the wider community, and she has collaborated with musicians, dancers, visual artists, and film-makers. Awards include the Butler Award of the Irish American Cultural Institute, the Laurence O'Shaughnessy Award, Cholmondeley Award for Poetry, Denis Devlin Award, and the Marten Toonder Award. As *If By Magic: Selected Poems* was published by Dedalus Press in 2020.

Carl Corcoran is an arts professional and broadcaster. He was for ten years the presenter and curator of the critically acclaimed *Blue of the Night* on RTÉ Lyric FM, Ireland's national classical music and arts radio station. During a twenty-year stint in New York, he worked in songwriting, publishing, management and performance, before returning to Ireland,

where he now lives. He is the Course Director of the MA in Songwriting at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance at the University of Limerick.

Marina Carr is a playwright based in Dublin. Her work has been produced by The Abbey Theatre, The Gate, Druid, Landmark, Opera Theatre Company, The Royal Court, Wyndham's Theatre, The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Tricycle, The McCarter Theatre, San Diego Rep, and Milwaukee Rep, and has been translated into many languages. Awards include the Windham-Campbell Prize, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the American Ireland Fund Award, the E. M. Forster Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Macaulay Fellowship, and the Puterbaugh Fellowship. She has taught at Trinity College Dublin, Villanova, and Princeton, and she is a Lecturer in English at Dublin City University.

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Recorded at Dublin City University and Studio Mhic an Daill, Co Kerry,
April 2019–February 2020
Produced by Róisín Blunnie
Co-production: Richard Duckworth
Recorded, mixed and edited by Richard Duckworth
Additional recording by Donogh Hennessy
Mastered by Peter Montgomery at CHR Mastering
Booklet & packaging: Stephen Sutton (Divine Art)
Cover image: "All These Others" by Marie Hanlon
Photo of Dairena Ní Chinnéide: Lisa Ní Laoire
Photo of Paula Meehan: Theo Dorgan
Photo of Laetare Vocal Ensemble: Lorcan Doherty
Photo of Carl Corcoran: Sunday Times
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