THE GREAT CHIP-PAN FIRE NOVELIST OF THE AGE

Author Andrew O'Hagan on exploring his working-class, Scots Irish Catholic roots, nostalgia, cancel culture and being 'equal to your times'

JOHN SELF

'There's still any number of kinds of life being lived in Ireland and Scotland, England and Wales that have never really made it onto the page," says Andrew O'Hagan as we meet, in the new traditional way, over Zoom video. "When Roddy Doyle published his first books, it was a voice that could have been broadcast straight out of the transistor radio in our childhood, straight into our living room, that echoed the voices in the room."

That childhood in a working-class Scottish town is the spring of O'Hagan's new novel Mayflies, which describes the rich friendship between two young men, Tully Dawson and Jimmy Collins. The story splits neatly in two, with the first half set in 1986 as they and their gang of mates head to a music weekend in Manchester. Then the story picks up 30 years later, when Jimmy takes a call from Tully, the call we all dread:

> **There's such a present tense-ism in the social media universe. They have a bad relationship with nostalgia because the past to them is only nostalgia, whereas I think it's a kind of continual present**

Tully is terminally ill, and wants Jimmy's help to die with dignity.

The story certainly has the ring of lived experience. "It came from life. My oldest friend Keith Martin, who was the great charismatic frontman of our childhood, and had been, from 13, a constant companion . . . he suddenly had oesophageal cancer in 2017, and he actually said to me, 'Would you ever write about us?' And I felt I could write this book straight from the heart."

Mayflies then is a tribute to Keith – the novel is dedicated to him – but also to friendship itself.

In the first half, which is full of the joy of life, when "everything was new and everything was fresh", the friends talk in quotes from books and films, lobbing favourite lines at one another like tennis balls. "It's a sort of bondy book," says O'Hagan. The books and movies Tully and Jimmy like are working-class stories: A Taste of Honey, Billy Liar, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. They are all about "getting out, or getting stuck". In the book, Jimmy has a teacher who spots his potential and his interest in literature: "You're a weirdo and weirdos have to get out," she tells him.

"That's almost verbatim, that line!" O'Hagan laughs. "I had one of those great teachers. She said, 'If you stay here, you're going to be unhappy. I would come in with copies of, you know, Norman Mailer's Advertisements for Myself and she'd say, 'The f*ck is this?! You need to get out of here.'" Those working-class stories "were all little works of art which gave you permission to travel from your working classness, into a state of elsewhere. That wasn't a guarantee in any of our houses. My mum was a cleaner, my dad was a joiner. It's not a sad story – I had a great time growing up – but there wasn't a whole number of books in the house. The cliche about working-class life is that the people who grow up working class are desperate to stay authentic to themselves, to stay what they are. That's just false."

In Mayflies, Tully and Jimmy's first move toward getting out is to that music weekend in Manchester. The friends see The Smiths walking through a pub, where Morrissey "hit[s] the air like a chip-pan fire" – a very 1980s simile, I point out. "I'm claiming it, the chip-pan fire!" O'Hagan says. "The great chip-pan fire novelist of the age!"

But then, notwithstanding the sadness in the second half of the story, Mayflies is a funny, bright-centred book, in contrast to the serious, straight-faced fiction for which O'Hagan has become celebrated and multiply awarded. "You find things about yourself as a writer as you go along," he says. "I didn't know I had half the comedy in me that I found for the book. I've always had a laugh with my friends and my family, I just hadn't particularly tuned into that in any of the books."

O'Hagan grew up in a Scots Catholic family with Irish blood: his father's side of the family was from Magherafelt. He had a close friendship with Seamus Heaney: "We made these trips to Ireland and Scotland and Wales together. The next one, we were going to go to the Isle of Wight and then back to Magherafelt." I mention the Seamus Heaney HomePlace, now well-established as a cultural centre around Heaney's work in Bellaghy, near Magherafelt. O'Hagan smiles at a memory: "I took him to Robert Burns's memorial birthplace in Alloway, outside Ayr. And there was a thing that said: The Tam O'Shanter Experience! And we teased Seamus and said, 'Hey Seamus, in Bellaghy it's going to be the Seamus Heaney Experience quite soon.' And he said, deadpan: 'Well, what are they going to have in there? A confessional box and an old butter churn?'"

From Thatcher to Blair

The connection between Ireland and Scotland is still strong for O'Hagan. "When I'm on that Northern Irish coast, I'd feel I was in Largs or Argyll or Ayrshire. It's made of the same stuff, the people are made of the same stuff. On the 12th of July every year in our town on the west coast of Scotland, it was the Orange walk, and we were Catholic, so we were kept in the house. My granny would throw pails of shite out of the window, or water, or just shut the blinds."

The point, made lightly, is that O'Hagan believes keenly in fiction's calling not just to outline the world but fill it in. "That was our moment. What happened to us was the

Andrew O'Hagan: "I had one of those great teachers. She said, 'If you stay here, you're going to be unhappy.'"
PHOTOGRAPH: JON TONKS

1980s and 1990s. You know, that journey from Thatcher through to Blair is an absolutely gobsmacking and interesting and profound period in world history, and in our corner of the world, everything changed. And I would expect novels to get into the specifics of that . . . It's the sense of wanting novels to somehow connect with the specificity of those slightly forgotten things."

Even, in Mayflies, a Tunnock's teacake: "If I can get that Tunnock's teacake onto the page just once, if I can get a chip pan fire to light up a bit of black sky in one novel, one time, I'll be quite content."

For Tully and Jimmy, still quoting the same films at one another 30 years on, "it's that feeling that all human beings get to. The backward glance, the sense of mid-point, the middle of the journey-ness." Not surprising especially now, when looking ahead has become so frightening. "There's such a present tense-ism in the social media universe. They have a bad relationship with nostalgia because the past to them is only nostalgia, whereas I think it's a kind of continual present."

Speaking of social media, O'Hagan had his own experience of "cancel culture" in 2018 when he published a long essay on the fire at Grenfell Tower, London, which had killed 72 people. In it he was "disgusted that the Tory government were manipulating this fire for political purposes. I went into depth on how international companies had been able to flout British safety laws for their own profit. But those things still didn't please my friends on the left, because I also pointed to their unfairness." He rejected the idea that the Conservative council in whose borough the fire took place did not help the victims and their families, and he was critical of the response on the night by the London Fire Brigade and of some of the activist groups that claimed to speak for the residents of the tower block. "It was obvious," he says of his critics, "how few of them had actually read the piece. It was 65,000 words, and within 45 minutes of it being published, thousands of people were online, quoting each other, saying I should be shot."

Unlike Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, JK Rowling and others, he didn't sign the "cancel culture" letter to Harper's magazine this year in support of free speech, but agreed with it. It was dismissed by critics as a rejection by the established and famous of accountability for what they write.

"I was surprised by the reaction. I'm an old-style sort of political believer, I've always been one to go out on the marches, I've never been shy of writing a political piece. I think the world is full of incredible abuses of power at the moment and terrifying injustices, but there seems to be so much slack energy going into what I think is much smaller stuff. I thought the intention of that letter was perfectly reasonable, but the need for the letter was demonstrated by the reaction to it."

Politics in Britain, both large-scale and personal, runs through O'Hagan's work: his author blurb on some books describes him as a "chronicler of contemporary Britain and its place in the world". His novels cover the decline of Scotland's urban landscape (Our Fathers and Be Near Me), "the ravages of fame and what it does to young people's sense of reality" (Personality) and Britain's involvement in Northern Ireland and Afghanistan (The Illuminations). And "I've been working on a big social novel for years, called Caledonian Road, a thousand-page novel set in contemporary London. It's my big book."

But O'Hagan's first book was non-fiction: The Missing, published in 1995, seemed to me at the time very new in its merging of reportage, history, memoir and essay: a genre-defying approach which has since become a genre in itself, indeed is now almost de rigueur in non-fiction.

"To be quite honest, its newness took me by surprise," he says now. The Missing was about children and adults who had disappeared in Britain – runaways, amnesiacs, victims of crime – and included O'Hagan's own childhood and the disappearance of his grandfather. It's clear when listening to him talk that this passion to capture the social life of Britain remains undimmed.

"You've got to be a prose professional, get out of bed every morning and say, what is pressing on my nerves? You've got to come out of your trap every morning like you are equal to your times."

In fact, although it was novel in Britain at the time, that genre-blending new journalism of The Missing had been established in the US already, not least by Norman Mailer, whose Advertisements for Myself had so discombobulated O'Hagan's teacher and made her tell him to "get out". And get out he did, along the way meeting Mailer himself, when he interviewed him for the Paris Review in 2007.

"He couldn't have been less fashionable at that point. He was 82 and had all his glories and disasters behind him," O'Hagan recalls. "And I said, what's the most important thing for a young writer? He said, 'They've got to be willing to get their shoes on and get out the house. Go and meet the world, and stare right into it.'"

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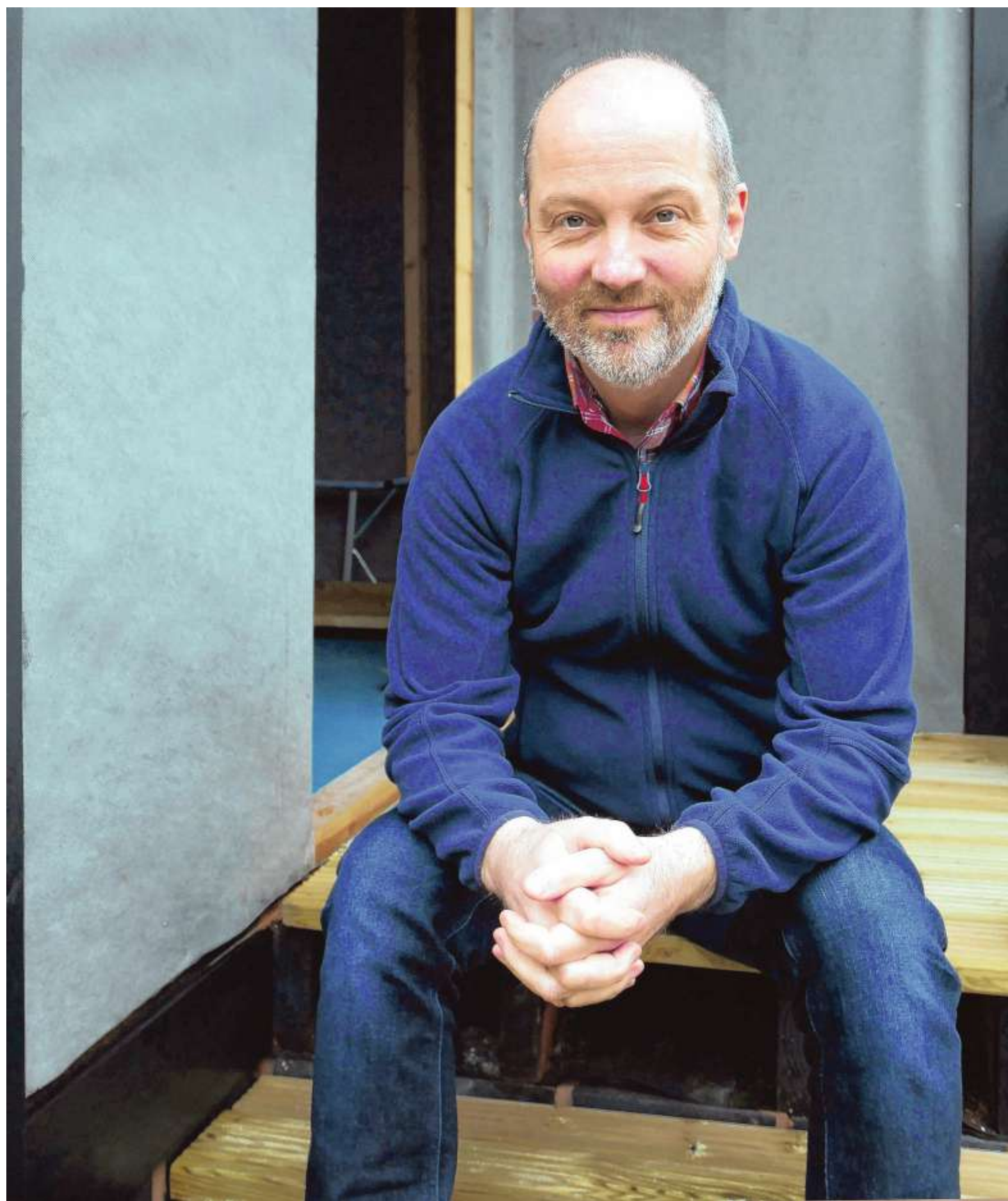
Here's all your daily news, from bad to verse

Nick Asbury's books of 'Instapoetry' offer daily snapshots of life in the era of Trump, Brexit, Covid and putting the bins out, driven by the twin energies of comedy and anger



■ Poet Nick Asbury: 'If you're engaged in writing at all, you need to believe it's possible to communicate, no matter who you are and what background you're from.'

John Self

How do you cope with, and de-stress from, the endlessly interesting times we live in? Exercise? Socially distanced sounding off to friends? Self-medication via Netflix box sets? If your response – not unreasonably – is to switch off social media and look elsewhere, you might miss one of the greatest treats coming from the perpetual news cycle of the past few years.

In August 2017, English writer Nick Asbury was sitting alone in a pub ("standard for poets") and decided to vent his feelings about the news by composing a poem which he posted on Instagram. And he did it again the next day. And the next, for 3½ years, acquiring a cult following in the process, and publishing the poems in four volumes.

Poetry on Instagram – "Instapoetry" – was already a thing, but it tended toward what Asbury, talking to me via Zoom from his home near Macclesfield in Cheshire, calls "a very aphoristic, life-coaching way of writing". Asbury's poems – he calls them Realtime Notes – are more singular, tending to be driven by twin energies of comedy and anger. As one very short poem puts it (June 1st, 2020): "Turn on phone. See thing. / Turn off phone. Seething."

What drove him to keep "standing under the Niagara Falls / trying to catch the news / in the teaspoon of a poem" (July 24th, 2019)? "We were a year post the Brexit vote, nine months into the Trump administration," he says. "It felt like things were moving very fast, every big news story seemed to be superseded by another one the next day. And I felt this writer's urge to write something."

Writing was already Asbury's job. Born in 1972 and raised in northwest England, he attended a local grammar school and then studied English at Oxford University, before ultimately finding himself a "creative writer for hire", working on projects from a rebranding of roadside restaurant chain Little Chef ("Like many of my projects, it subsequently went out of business") to, last year, new retro jackets for John le Carré's Smiley novels which adapted the stilted ad-speak of the time.

All these projects are playful and witty, but, says Asbury, "really to fulfil your own creative urges, you have to do your own stuff as well". These included his greatest success before Realtime Notes: the Perpetual Disappointments Diary, which peppers its pages with proverbs that reverse the motivational language of social media and "give it a downbeat twist". (Example: "When the going gets tough, tough.")

It's also a handy source for essential phrases in other languages ("Do you have any very cheap wine?" or "I am locked in the toilet") and provides space for Ideas You'll Never Follow Up, Imaginary Enemies and the names and numbers of People Who Never Call. It's at number 7 in Amazon's Perpetual Calendars category, which is not too disappointing.

Daily outlet

But the Realtime Notes provided a daily outlet for Asbury's off-centre creative urges, and one of the most important qualities is their immediacy, not just for the writer – most take no more than 30 minutes to write, often much less – but for the reader. Instapoetry, after all, must be short and clear enough to arrest a thumb idly scrolling a timeline.

What if inspiration doesn't strike one day? That's part of the point, says Asbury. "It's quite liberating knowing that whatever you post, there's going to be another poem a few hours later. So even if it's not a particularly successful one, it's only up there briefly." That, presumably, is why not all the poems Asbury posted on Instagram are in the books.

The poems cover the whole gamut of living through the past four years. "I wanted to do funny, but I also wanted to do, say, what's it like to write a poem when you're bored, or just feeling down or angry. Trying to say to a future reader that, even in the time of Trump and Brexit, there were times when we were just putting the bins out."

Indeed, some of the most memorable poems combine Asbury's daily family life with the wider political landscape. The poem for April 25th, 2018 describes finding an old ball at the back of the garden, three years after it had been lost, and ends: "did a pixie find you? / did a mole dig a hole? / was it some intrepid resident? / wait till you hear who's president."

Other poems on quiet news days include one for Madonna's birthday (August 16th, 2018) – "sixty years of madonna / good on 'er / they should declare / a holiday in her honour / just one day out of life / it would be so nice" – and a regular run of entries marking the deaths of famous people. "Farewell Barbara Bush / a strange life, / being the president's / mother and wife." (April 18th, 2018)

Like any long-term creative endeavour, Asbury's poems have recurring storylines, and indeed villains. Brexit and Trump provided endless opportunities for Asbury to get things off his chest, but being continually inventive on one subject is difficult, and Trump often inspired visual graphic poems: one where Asbury notes the similarity between Trump's spiky, Sharpie signature and the hectic ups and downs of the price of crude oil ("Trump l'oil", April 20th, 2020); or one on the day after the US election, showing images of Trump and Biden side by side, with the text below the images reading: "MR VICE / PRESIDENT." (November 4th, 2020.)

As 2020 sped up, Covid-19 became a mainstay of Asbury's poems. Much of this was about the inadequacy of the UK government's response, like health secretary Matt Hancock giving a press conference to explain why the NHS contact tracing app hadn't been launched as promised: "hapless / hancock / app-less / hancock / witless / windsock / bobbing / ballcock / half-cocked / halfwit / dithering / dipshit / gurning / gobshite / good grief / goodnight" (June 18th, 2020) – "one that came out fast and fully formed", says Asbury.

But the pandemic also inspired humanity and depth in Asbury's responses, as when news broke of the death of the doctor in China who had blown the whistle on Covid-19. "So sad / but why so / particularly and peculiarly sad? / maybe because in this story / of someone far from us who fought for us / we glimpse the same thing viruses see: / our common humanity." (February 7th, 2020)

> **Asbury's poems – he calls them Realtime Notes – are more singular, tending to be driven by twin energies of comedy and anger. As one very short poem puts it (June 1st, 2020): 'Turn on phone. See thing. Turn off phone. Seething.'**

What I wonder, however, is whether there are subjects in the news he's been wary of covering, or felt himself inadequate to write about. (We're speaking on the day after Derek Chauvin was convicted of the murder of George Floyd.) Does he censor himself? "I think this is quite a dangerous time to write at speed," he says, carefully. "The easiest thing to do is to write the approved opinions and trumpet them as loudly as possible. That's what will keep you safe and get you retweets.

"But I've always wanted to capture something more complex than that. If you're engaged in writing at all, you need to believe it's possible to communicate, no matter who you are and what background you're from. I'm conscious that I'm writing as a straight middle-aged white male, which is kind of a weirdly interesting thing to be these days.

"I had a recurring refrain," he says, "in some of the post-George Floyd poems that 'the meeting place between white and black is the grey matter between our ears' which is kind of a glib idea, but also feels radical to say in a time of identity politics. I generally hold to the idea of common humanity – and politically I think progressive politics works best when we unite around issues of class and income that cut across identity divides."

The end of the Realtime Notes came suddenly when Asbury realised that "two of the big plot points had reached a kind of resolution. Trump was leaving office and leaving Twitter, the Brexit process had reached a kind of conclusion." (Hmm, kind of.) "It was a useful exit point." His final poem, number 2,113, pays tribute – hands the baton? – to another, younger poet, Amanda Gorman, delivering The Hill We Climb at the inauguration of Joe Biden.

But Donald Trump's shadow still looms over what is perhaps the best expression of the intent of Realtime Notes – of any writing, slow or fast, anywhere – when Asbury ended a poem, one of his many one-sided arguments with the former president, like this (June 4th, 2018):

"And there is literally nothing / you can do to fight us / you think history is written by the victors? / it's written by the writers."

Realtime Notes vols. 1-4 can be purchased at asburyandasbury.com/shop

Ireland must follow the example of other countries in bringing back live music

Sharon Rollston

The Government will lay out its plans on Friday for reopening live music. It's time to be ambitious, innovative and to trust the sector to act responsibly

A vast number of people across Ireland have sorely missed the opportunity to experience live music in their local arts spaces since stages went dark 14 months ago.

From the perspective of Music Network, the national music touring and development organisation, news that a major announcement is expected from the Government at the end of this week regarding the reopening of arts venues is hugely welcome. The opportunity for musicians to return to our stages and for music lovers to collectively experience the thrill of live music performance again can't come soon enough.

It's our mission at Music Network to provide access to high quality live music for people throughout Ireland, and in a regular year we present 80-100 concerts with our partners around the country, which include arts venues, voluntary organisations, festivals and local authorities. Despite the varying restrictions in place since March 2020, we have succeeded in presenting a number of live events in safe and comfortable settings for audiences and musicians when circumstances allowed.

Last August, for example, Music Network and five partner promoters – Triskel Arts Centre, The Dock, The National Opera House, Ionad Cultúrtha and Glór – presented the concert series Music Network: Live & Local. People from Cork, Carrick-on-Shannon, Wexford, Baile Mhúirne, Ennis and farther afield jumped at the chance to come out and enjoy live performances of classical, jazz, traditional and folk music by some of Ireland's finest musicians in these venues, and the series was a big success for all involved.

The high level of planning and preparation that went into these events to ensure the safety of all should be of comfort to everyone involved in, or benefiting from, the forthcoming reopening of venues. To say that the concerts were an emotional experience for Music Network, our partners, the musicians and audience alike would be to understate the visceral energy, the sense of connection and of belonging we all felt in each of those spaces that evening.

■ Above: The reconfigured Lincoln Centre in New York, which is offering audiences an outdoor programme of concerts as part of the Restart Stages initiative. Left: concertgoers in Prague earlier this month. PHOTOGRAPHS: SACHYN MITAL/ LINCOLN CENTER; EPA/MARTIN DIVISEK

Of course, aside from events like these, we have not been entirely without live music of all sorts since March 2020. The music sector, including Music Network, has been swift and innovative in translating concert offerings into digital formats. But while digital has been a lifesaver in many ways, it is not the solution ultimately. If anything, it has thrown the irreplaceability of the live experience into starker relief. While it may be one way in which we continue to enjoy the arts in the future, and help to broaden access to them, it will work best as a complementary offering.

It's been interesting to observe how other countries have approached the issue of a return to live events. Our closest neighbours in the UK have seen arts venues reopen from May 17th. The extensive health and safety measures in place include reduced capacity audiences and use of the National Health Service's track and trace app with manual recording of contact details for those who don't own smartphones. Farther afield in Vienna, large capacity venues such as The Wiener Staatsoper, home of its State Opera, have taken the further step of requiring proof of a negative Covid-19 test, recovery from Covid-19 or of vaccination. In New York, the Lincoln Center has been offering audiences an outdoor programme: Restart Stages comprises 10 outdoor performance and rehearsal spaces, "to help kick-start the performing arts sector and New York city's revival".

Whatever the approach Ireland takes, it needs to be as fast and as ambitious as possible. Most importantly, it needs to be inclusive, in line with both government and Arts Council strategy of working to ensure the arts are for everyone in Ireland, and towards this end, increasing public engagement with the arts. It's worth noting in terms of smaller arts venues around the country that a 5 per cent capacity figure translates into five people in the audience in a 100-seater theatre.

> **Behind the scenes, promoters have also been devising new ways to support the work of artists, and musicians have been developing exciting new work for future listeners**

Many of us have used the past year to rethink how we present live music, and have delivered concerts safely and effectively across Ireland. Behind the scenes, promoters have also been devising new ways to support the work of artists, and musicians have been developing exciting new work for future listeners. It's time to capitalise on these efforts, to trust the sector to act responsibly in its approach to reopening and to be ambitious and innovative in restoring this vital aspect of Ireland's cultural and social fabric.

Sharon Rollston is chief executive and artistic director of Music Network