Riverdance the Music by Bill Whelan

There are two particular problems for the composer writing music in the idiom of any given folk or ethnic tradition – one is social and the other is technical. If the composer is Irish and working with the modes and forms of traditional Irish music, then the first of these problems is most acute – and for very positive reasons.

Traditional music holds a special position in Ireland. To many Irish people it has a defining role culturally and provides an authentic and eloquent link to their past. It is also a rich musical vein that reveals much about Ireland and the Irish – quirky, mischievous, evasive dance tunes, and dark proud airs that can heal grief and comfort loss.

So, when you find yourself in and around a music that has such a long tradition, and such delicate associations and nuance, it can begin to feel like being in a church. Even the lightest footfall can echo long and you may think twice before you dare to whisper.

From a technical point of view, the instruments from which this music has grown are themselves problematic. In particular the uilleann pipes, not being chromatic, tend to confine melodic writing and the very nature of the instrument itself demands caution. The uilleann pipes are a very beautiful but frustrating combination. Both primitive and sophisticated, their evocative abilities are boundless, but the piper’s terror is that they may decide to desert him in the midst of his most ardent flight, like some haughty lover – sweet, mysterious and unpredictable. This dynamic goes to the heart of piping and the composer may do well to remember the piper’s careful pampering of his reeds before setting a note on the page.

Add to this the varied demands created by whistles, bodhráns, Irish fiddling styles, and in the case of Riverdance, the quirks and vagaries of the Eastern gadulkas and kavals, and soon the relative familiarity of a symphony orchestra may beckon like a safe harbour in a storm.

Composition is essentially a solitary occupation, and it is only when you first bring your music into the dance studio that you experience the full rush of fear and excitement. The dancers do not quite know what to expect, and you have no idea how they are going to respond.

When Riverdance began back in 1994, it would be folly to suggest that we all knew exactly what we were at, or that there was some kind of grand design. But there is no doubt that as the pieces began to fit together, there was a sense that something unique was happening around and among us. I had deliberately written pieces with rhythmic patterns that were foreign to traditional Irish music, but after the initial raised eyebrows the thrust of the principal dancers’ creativity took hold and I can still remember the excitement as they began to fashion the ir first steps.

Gradually these steps were learned by the troupe and I have many memories of arriving to the studio to find individual dancers in corners, corridors and canteens as they worked on the kind of precision that was to become a hallmark of Riverdance.

And then came the day that, for me, really copper-fastened it.

It was one of the last days of rehearsal for the Eurovision in 1994. Producer Moya Doherty, myself and the entire company were assembled in the dance studio. There was hardly room to move. We had seen the dance performed in sections, but had not seen it all in one piece. The music began, and for the next six minutes the room was like a power-station. When it was over we all just looked at each other and smiled. There may have been no grand design, but we knew at that moment that whatever it was, it worked.

Riverdance was truly on its feet and I will never forget it.

Even though it is now a mature adult, Riverdance still holds that original potency and magic. There are young people performing the show today who had just arrived into the world when I was writing it back in 1994. These young dancers and musicians bring their own energy and interpretation to the performances. For those of us there since the beginning, it has been a joy to witness how a new generation, many of whom were attracted to Irish music and dance by the success of Riverdance, are now up there on the stage injecting it with a youthful verve, flair and enthusiasm that belies its age.

For me, when I see the show these days, it is often just like that first night in 1994.