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Riverdance's Bill has many strings to his musical bow

THE success of Riverdance has changed Bill Whelan's life.

Bill keeps a constant eye on how Riverdance is doing worldwide. He is in daily contact with the musical director and managers through the internet. When necessary, he makes minute changes to the musical score.

He was a well known figure in music during the 1980s, appearing regularly on RTE television as a performer and then as a producer and arranger. He went to America in 1984.

He was also familiar to the record companies in London.

Some time, he says, he would like to get back playing with a band.

It was Bill's love of music that prevented him from being called to the Bar. He was just one examination away from qualification.

Nevertheless, he completed his law studies in 1973 and graduated with a Bachelor of Civil Law.

He would have studied

PADDY MORONEY profiles the life of Bill Whelan, who is to receive the Freedom of Limerick on March 16.

music at college, had he found a suitable course, but he did not want to come out with a BMus and end up teaching for the rest of his life.

He was a pupil of The Crescent from 1957 to 1968. It was then that Bill first became interested in song writing and recording.

Together with his lifelong friend and current business manager, Niall Connery from New Street, he wrote music for the Richard Harris film, Bloomfield, in 1969.

His earliest recollection at his original Barrington Street home was using a drum and accompanying his father on the harmonica. Bill's mother, the former Irene Lawlor, was a talented pianist.

Bill has worked extensively in the performing arts and his production and arranging credits include U2, Van Morrison and Kate Bush.

His adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan's HMS Pinafore had successful runs at London's Old Vic and in also in Melbourne and Sydney.

In 1980 he joined Planxty and in 1987 wrote his first major orchestral suite commemorating the film music of Seán O Riada, which was performed by Elmer Bernstein and the National Symphony of Ireland.

His own film scores include Lamb, At the Cinema Palace, Some Mother's Son and Dancing at Lughnasa. Another of his compositions, The Seville Suite for Orchestra, was premiered at the Maestranza in Seville as part of Ireland's National Day at Expo 92 while his Spirit of Mayo featured an 85-piece orchestra, a Celtic drum corps and a large concert choir when it premiered in 1993 in Dublin's National Concert Hall.

The seven minute hard-shoe Irish dance interval act, Riverdance, for the 1994 Eurovision Song Contest, provided Bill Whelan with a major breakthrough.

In February, 1995 Riverdance The Show made its debut at The Point Depot, within a short time became a worldwide hit with Bill Whelan receiving the 1997 Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Album.

Bill and his wife, Denise, live at Roundstone, Galway, in the original home of Limerick's Kate O'Brien. They have built on a recording studio and other extensions since 1997.

He still has a residence in Dublin, mainly for his four children. His two sons, David and Brian play with bands and write their own stuff. Daughter Nessa has studied for a post-grad at Queens University, Belfast, and twin Fiona has been doing a degree in nursing.

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FEATURES



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