

The composer Bill Whelan secured his reputation with Riverdance, but it became something of a millstone around his neck, and now more intimate projects beckon, as he tells Pavel Barter

A few years ago, on a trip to Slovenia, Bill Whelan happened upon one of the world's many Riverdance copycat shows, an experience that proved memorable for the wrong reasons. Instead of live music, the production used a CD; instead of trained Irish dancers, it used theatrical performers who stomped around to recorded taps. Shocked by the badly performed karaoke, Whelan was particularly irked that the 5,000-strong audience, who appeared unimpressed by the performance, also seemed to think they were experiencing the real thing.

Composing the music for Riverdance, Whelan could not have predicted the monster he was helping create — or the clones it would spawn. It was written in a hurry: between October and Christmas 1994, during which time he seldom slept longer than four hours a night. Despite the speed with which the show was written, cast, rehearsed and staged, it occupied his time for years to come, as he, John McColgan and Moya Doherty nursed Riverdance onto the world stage, forming multiple touring troupes and travelling the globe to promote it.

Whelan the composer became somewhat lost amid the Riverdance phenomenon, his work diluted not only by opportunist copycats but also by the overfamiliarity of his breakout hit, which has been lampooned in many places, from *Shrek* to *Scary Movie*. Millions have heard his music but few know his name. Riverdance was no flash-in-the-pan fluke for the 60-year-old composer, nor was it an overnight success, but rather the culmination of a life spent experimenting with the tropes of tradition and culture.

Riverdance's lineage stretches back to Timedance, which Whelan wrote with Donal Lunny for the interval of the 1981 Eurovision song contest, performed by Planxty and set to dance. His traditional-tinged *The Seville Suite* in 1992 and orchestral *The Spirit of Mayo* in 1995 also fed into Riverdance.

These compositions, along with the original seven-minute Riverdance piece from the 1994 Eurovision song contest, will be performed at a celebration of Whelan's music in the National Concert Hall next month. For Whelan, the event is more than just a reunion with collaborators such as Declan Masterson; it's also an opportunity to take stock of his career, a rare excursion into the limelight that will allow him lift his head above the parapet of Riverdance.

"Headlining is not particularly what I want to do," he says. "It's not a big deal for me. In fact, a certain amount of anonymity is good. For someone like me, who came up through music the way I did, what's

important is that the music moves people. For me, the Grammy [which he won in 1997] was important because it is voted for by an academy of musicians and composers. That's what you look for: affirmation from those around you, acclaim from your peers. Few people write music to keep it at home."

Whelan's relative anonymity is the fate of many a composer, producer, arranger or orchestrator: a good number of artists in his line of work achieve recognition only posthumously. "It's a curious thing, the way the composers sometimes vanish," says Whelan.

"It has its pluses," he says of his relatively low profile. "I don't see it as a negative. Sometimes, if somebody doesn't credit you, you say, 'Hang on a second'. But that doesn't happen to me a lot and I'm happy with what I've got out of it. Obviously, financially it has been good. Equally, in terms of opportunity, it has opened other things to me and given me accessibility to try other projects that I wouldn't have had if I was still trying to make a living in the Irish music business, which as we all know is difficult enough."

Even as a child growing up in Limerick, Whelan dreamt of becoming a composer. From a young age he was intrigued by the challenge of combining rhythmic and melodic complexity without making the music inaccessible. It is a tie that binds all of his work. The success of Riverdance, for example — and a degree of its criticism — was attributed to its potpourri of influences, from Russian folk to Spanish flamenco. This fascination with musical fusion dates back to the 1960s, when Whelan composed songs in the recording studio his father built for him in an attic on Barrington Street in Limerick.

Although Whelan was not exposed to much traditional music at the time, preferring to listen to jazz, orchestral work and rock'n'roll, a cultural shift in Ireland during the 1960s gave Irish musicians new ways to communicate. Whelan attributes the revival to Seán Ó Riada, the composer he honoured in *The Ó Riada Suite* in 1987.

"When Ó Riada made [the 1969 live

album] *O Riada sa Gaiety*, he placed traditional music in a slightly different position in the Irish consciousness," says Whelan. "Cór Chúil Aodha [the choir founded by Ó Riada in 1964] came out of his time in Cúil Aodha [in Cork], as did the Chieftains. All that growth and new confidence in expressing the tradition came out of that. Then the state became more confident and felt less need to hang onto badges of Irish nationhood."



Bill Whelan



Whelan's experiments with tradition began with *Time*dance, which melded modern dance with Planxty's baroque-influenced traditional music, illustrating his skill at composing for performance. He also worked on films — *Lamb and Dancing at Lughnasa*, for example — writing music with the images in mind, further honing his craft as composer for a festival of WB Yeats's theatre in 1989.

For five years, across 15 Yeats plays, Whelan worked with directors and actors, analysing the text in fine detail in order to create an organic score. "At the time, you didn't really get a chance to be so expressive with music," he says. "It was a time of my life when I was struggling with where I was going in terms of my music. It was instrumental in what came afterwards."

After the success of *Riverdance*, however, Whelan's experiments with tradition came under fire. Some critics found the show's sophistication soulless, and purists were horrified at the distillation of Irish music and dance. Whelan, however, had heard it all before after *Time*dance.

"At that time I wasn't aware that the purist view of traditional music was quite so vociferous," he says. "Today, there's an enormous

sense that the tradition is very much alive. It's robust. There are young people who continue to carry it on. In among that, there is the expectation of innovation: it's no longer cool to adopt a siege mentality to the music. It should be allowed breathe free in the world. It's always lovely to hear it performed purely, but equally we shouldn't be afraid to pick threads out of the tradition and weave them into a different cloth."

*Riverdance* also attracted more sinister opposition. During one performance in New York, audience members walked out because the show featured African-American singers and dancers. "People turn up with preconceived notions," says Whelan. "They think if we're not green the whole way, they don't want to be part of it. We also got picketed by anti-gay campaigners in the southern states. Why? I have absolutely no idea. Because there are men dancing or something. You will inevitably collide with the crackpots. I feel sorry for people who have difficulty with the international elements of *Riverdance*. It's about putting Irish music and dance on the stage with other cultures, and saying that there are links to us all here."

*Riverdance*, however, was also something of a poisoned chalice for the composer. Although it earned him a fortune, it distracted him from his other creative endeavours and did not always help subsequent projects come to fruition.

In recent years, though, Whelan has turned his attention to more intimate and personal projects, such as *The Connemara Suite*, which placed traditional musicians within the context of a chamber orchestra. He is also working on a project for the Metropolitan Opera in New York but there is no escaping the shadow of *Riverdance*. Having played almost every corner of the globe, the show is now set to tour China, a nation with a fascination for Celtic culture.

Whelan might feel as creatively energised as he was 15 years ago, but to a large degree his legacy is already written. In a famous *Simpsons* episode, Homer converts to Catholicism and discovers that *Riverdance* is performed in heaven. Given the proliferation of Whelan's creation — official and unofficial productions alike — is this what we can expect from the afterlife? Whelan laughs. "I'm not so sure," he says. "Where are all the purists going to go?" ☐



Top of the Bill: Whelan, main; Brendan de Gallai and Joanne Doyle perform with members of the cast of *Riverdance*, top; Meryl Streep in the film version of *Dancing at Lughnasa*, above

*A Celebration of Bill Whelan, National Concert Hall, Dublin, August 27*