

Brendan Voyage | Sample answer

A 20th Century composer that uses modern elements in his work is Shaun Davey. I have studied “The Brendan Voyage”, in which this use of traditional Irish elements is evident.

This work is introduced by an ominous motif on low strings, which is then imitated by woodwind, which depicts the boat setting sail from Kerry Harbour. This moves on to a very traditional sounding uilleann pipe melody which is used to represent the beginning of St. Brendan’s journey. In this movement the mood is solitary and tentative. The strings enter later, which makes the work feel modern, and they represent St. Brendan meeting the open sea in his boat. There is also traditional Irish ornamentation used by the uilleann pipes, which give it a distinctly Irish sound.

The second movement, “Water Under the Keel”, is written with the fast paced 6/8 time signature of a double jig. This is a more stable, enjoyable part of St. Brendan’s journey in the boat. Dialogue occurs at this point between the uilleann pipes and the orchestra. I hear a great contrast at this point from the first movement in the strong dynamics, steady beat and happy, non modal feel.

The third movement, “Journey to the Faroes” shows a huge contrast to “Water Under the Keel”. I hear a sense of foreboding, created by the isolated motif on clarinets, oboes and bassoons. Clouds are building up on the horizon above the islands at this point of the journey. The boat is pulled by powerful tides as it nears land and is drawn towards the hidden coast. The mist then rises to reveal the Cliffs of Mykines. I hear imitative, sequential entries on cello, violin, oboe, bass clarinet, and piano which represent new territory being discovered by the minute wooden boat. There is also a strong, unconventional drum rhythm, which provides an element of fusion and represents the gathering of single clouds which merge slowly into a swirling mist. A “bird cry” can also be heard on woodwind towards the end of the movement.

“The Cliffs of Mykines” shows the boat moving onwards with a strong, opening orchestral theme used to represent the immensely high cliffs and powerful wind and tides. In order to stay away from the cliffs, the boat has to run the gauntlet of a rip tide. As the boat rounds the headland the pipes return bravely. Pitched voices in the woodwind section can also be heard in this movement, representing the many birds which swarm around the cliff face.

At the beginning of the fifth movement, “Mykine’s Sound”, I hear a fast flowing reel played by the pipes. This depicts the boat rushing down the narrow channel to the Faroe Islands, unable to turn safely into a harbour. The frantic pace of the boat is created by the drum kit. Turbulence in the boat

is created by the frantic changes of time signature from the traditional 4/4 to 7/8. The combination of orchestra, drum kit, and uilleann pipes create a very exciting syncopated sound.

The movement “Journey to Iceland” tells the story of the boat, which has been to the Faroe Islands, setting sail for Iceland. The haunting melody played by the pipes warms the cold atmosphere. A chanter is used to play in a mellow lower key, to depict a dialogue between “The Brendan” and layers of fish in the waters below.

The next movement, “The Gale” depicts to me the most ferocious storm encountered by “The Brendan” and her crew, off the coast of Greenland. Low cellos are heard at the beginning of the movement, with the double basses in an ominous motif. The uilleann pipes in this movement show how the boat bent to the pressure but was not overwhelmed. An aggressive percussive section can be heard on the marimba, congas and drum kit at this point. This suggests relentless gale force winds.

Next on the journey for St. Brendan is the challenge of the packs of ice which have to be overcome, as heard in the movement “Labrador.” The dense fog and icebergs are represented by the slow tune of the tuba and contra bassoon. The lament played by the pipes represents the fact that the boat has been damaged. The woodwind returns at this stage, again representing birds, to indicate that land is nearby.

The final movement, “Newfoundland”, shows the arrival of the boat in the New World. Many motives and ideas are repeated from other movements to recall sights and dangers seen along the journey. The pipes play a variation of the main theme at this point, and this represents the end of the voyage.

“The Brendan Voyage” is a very enjoyable work to listen to. It launched Davey into the international and traditional music scene. It is said to be unorthodox as the pipes are at the center of a classical orchestra. There is still traditional improvisation heard within the orchestrated work, and it is this unusual combination of instruments that makes it an appealing work to listen to.