

Riverdance | Sample answer

A piece I have studied by a 20th Century composer is "Riverdance" by Bill Whelan.

Riverdance is an Irish dance piece which tells the story of people moving to new places and changing over time, taking their dances and their stories with them. These people are faced with a choice between preserving their traditional barriers or going with the flow, but instead they choose to show off what they have learned in the past and throw it in the open. Riverdance reflects the evolution of Irish culture through fusions, adaptations and new frameworks, re-emerging into a new meaning and energy.

In Act 1 of Riverdance we see early Irish settlers who knew fear, joy and fire and worked stone and water to make a home. The stories of these people are about elemental forces. This is first seen in the opening dance "Reel Around the Sun". This is introduced by a slow air acting as a type of overture for the whole show played by Davey Spillane on low whistle. This is accompanied by string orchestra.

The theme of this dance portrays the sun bringing life, light and fire. This sequence represents a celebration of masculine power. There are two parts to this scene which are separated by a percussive section that helps to raise the tempo before the entrance of the male lead. The reel is danced by a soloist and then soloist and dance troupe. This scene is played by bodhrán, bodulka, accordion and fiddle accompanied by the Riverdance band.

Another scene in "Riverdance" is "Firedance". The theme of this dance is the sun, and how the sun invests itself in the passion of the dancers. This was the first composition written by Whelan when composing the show, and he envisaged a female dancer, personifying fire, being discovered by a group of Irish people. He used a Spanish idiom to represent the fiery and passionate nature of this music, and unusual time signatures for both Spanish and Irish music. The entry at bar 73 is extremely native Irish. The solo guitarist Rafael Riquelme plays guitar castanets, and Maria represents fire while Michael represents early settlers lured by the flame. Spanish guitar plays against sustained strings while the woman dances gently and enticingly. Castanets play a rhythmic obstinate while Spanish guitar plays a reel. Fiddle and Uilleann pipes are also present. When Flatley enters the music quietens while the traditional fiddle plays a reel.

Another scene in this dance I found particularly memorable was "Riverdance". This is inspired by the life of the river. "Cloudsong" begins the piece, telling the story of the river's journey towards the sea. The slip jig which begins the dance is then danced by a "river woman", Jean Butler, who vanishes temporarily when the male lead enters, with a faster reel. River and earth are united in

the 6/8 - 4/4 section, which turns into a jig for the finale. The melody remains the same, but the rhythm is changed to fit the 12/8 time signature.

A fourth piece in this dance I found memorable was “trading taps.” This was added later, and is a fusion of styles set in the streets of America. It features tap dancers dancing against Irish dancers, and shows a contrast between jazz and Irish music.

These scenes from the dance show “Riverdance”, composed by Bill Whelan, are an example of a piece composed by a 20th Century Composer I have studied.