

Bill Whelan at 75

Friday, 21 November 2025, National Concert Hall

A full house was present to celebrate the music of Bill Whelan at the National Concert Hall in the year of his 75th birthday, coinciding with thirty years of Riverdance and, as Bill himself lovingly proclaimed, fifty years of marriage. The honour of being celebrated in the National Concert Hall with National Symphony Orchestra Ireland (under Gavin Maloney) was noted and signals Whelan's importance to music in Ireland, that goes beyond the discussion or musical programme on the night.

Introducing the concert, Paul Herriot welcomed Bill himself to the stage and was challenged to cover several topics within a tight timeframe, with the composer in celebratory mood and the audience responding with warmth. The convivial chat brought murmurs of agreement from the audience, noting the impact of Riverdance but pointing out the extent of Whelan's career that was captured, only in part, by the evening's programme.

Amongst the audience was Sir James Galway, whom Whelan acknowledged from the stage, with reference to the piece 'Linen and Lace', which was not programmed this evening but exemplifies Whelan's engagement with local themes and stories for his compositions. Also present was a younger generation of Irish composers including Michael Gallen, winner of the 2025 Fedora Opera Prize and Donnchadh Hughes who was awarded the 2025 Seán Ó Riada Composition Prize at the Cork International Choral Festival. Spanning generations, the mix of regular NSOI attendees, traditional musicians and people with close personal relationships with the composer, reflected how Whelan's career has crossed audience boundaries and become part of popular culture, and how he himself has become a popular figure amongst the Irish public.

While accepting recognition for his own work, Whelan graciously acknowledged other individuals who were part of his success and development. Beginning with the theme from *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1998), Bill made a point of referring to the oboist Matthew Manning, whom he had in mind when composing the piece and who was still part of the orchestra. The warmth of the strings provided a fitting opening to the evening, much as they did for the beginning of the film.

For the second piece, Herriot welcomed traditional musicians Tara Howley, Zoe Conway, Séamus Ó Flatharta and Damian Mullane to the stage, with Whelan himself joining them on piano for 'Timedance', a composition by Whelan with Dónal Lunney of Planxty. There was remarkable tightness in the opening duet on tin whistles by Howley and Ó Flatharta, with each roll and inflection remarkably in sync, exemplifying an aesthetic grounded in the Irish tradition. The rhythmic piano interrupted and introduced the sense of journey into other musical worlds. Unfortunately the orchestra tended to overpower the soloists as the piece developed, with the melody sometimes lost in the balance.

It was the return to traditional music aesthetics and the sean nós singing and lilting of Ó Flatharta in 'An Chistin' from the Conemara Suite that again highlighted Whelan's ability to engage and evoke a local sound, inspired by the community and musicians of the west of Ireland. Dancer Colin Dunne drew an enthusiastic response from the audience, appearing to be under physical pressure to respond to the music but executing each step with accuracy. His dance style fell between the close-to-the-floor style of sean nós and the sharp movements of the 'riverdancer' and while his feet were near flawless in providing a percussive contribution to the sound, his upper body, and particularly his right arm, appeared confused, neither relaxed nor controlled, perhaps embodying the sense of rupture by which Whelan took music from the kitchen to the concert hall.

'Caraçena' from The Seville Suite (1992) was announced by its powerful brass fanfare. This evocative piece that provides a precursor to the more commercially successful Riverdance, was performed with great energy. Originally performed by flamenco dancer María Pagés and Irish dancer Michael Murphy, there was no dancer for this performance. Having danced to the piece in many performances myself, I was somewhat relieved as the traditional musicians took a quick tempo, revelling in the energy of the night. Sharing glances with a smile on their faces, the traditional musicians seemed in comfortable control but with a vivacity that was not always matched by the entirety of the orchestra. An exception perhaps was the percussion section, especially the tambourine, which added greatly to the energy and verve of the piece.

An enlarged orchestra took to the stage for the second act. First up was a piece described as a present to the orchestra by Whelan, a newly composed piece with the challenging but descriptive title *Bowed, Batoned and Blown*. Commissioned by the NSOI, the piece provided a tour of the desks with recognisable Whelan-esque motifs recurring. The strong opening on percussion was followed by piccolo and flute, which were evocative of elements from earlier in Whelan's career that drew on Irish and eastern European sounds. The visit to the brass was less successful, with a lack of clarity on some phrases. Like the extract from Seville Suite earlier in the evening, the tambourine was prominent and contributed to the stability of the piece. The use of hemiola rhythm was notable but at times the rhythm and tempo of the orchestra felt insecure. There was no doubting the energy brought by everybody to the piece but, like a family opening presents on Christmas morning, it wasn't clear if every desk was as happy with their gift.

Everybody seemed more at ease when it came to the climax of the evening and the orchestra's dynamic capabilities for the Riverdance Suite were immediately evident in comparison with the new commission. The audience responded to the familiarity of the piece, at times wishing to break into applause at climaxes that would otherwise have marked the end of a scene in the stage show. Romantic passages, such as those evoking the vocal components of the stage show, were most successful and elements like 'Lift the Wings' highlighted Whelan's ability to write a lyrical melody. Elsewhere elements were evocative of continental composers such as Bartok and, although the orchestra struggled to maintain rhythmic integrity, they were met with a standing ovation.

Like a boxer under pressure, at times the NSOI gathered themselves to land powerful punches, revelling in slower passages and encouraged by an enthusiastic audience out to mark a significant occasion. As with their concert with Martin Hayes earlier this year, aspects of the concert appeared unrehearsed or insecure with the compositional creativity that Whelan has employed to bring together Irish and other traditional music sounds and ideas to the orchestra score. Whelan has been a valued supporter of young talents and the traditional musicians – Conway, Howley, Mullane and Ó Flatharta – did not disappoint. That their performances were overpowered and unmatched by the NSOI presents a challenge for future performances of Whelan's music so that audiences in less celebratory mood can enjoy its full artistry and ensure a fulfilling appreciation for the musical conversations on shared stage.