

Irish Isles Suite programme notes

The Irish Isles Suite is an orchestral composition written by Ailbhe McDonagh. It was completed and first recorded in 2023 by the RTÉ Concert Orchestra. It is a work in 3 movements with a duration of 13 minutes.

The natural raw beauty and power of the scenic Irish coastline has repeatedly been a huge inspiration in the compositions by Ailbhe McDonagh. Earlier compositions 'Skellig' and 'Valentia' - both for cello and piano - are also inspired by Irish islands.

Each movement of the Irish Isles Suite is based on one specific island off the coast of Ireland. The first movement is 'Achill Island'. This is the largest of the Irish Isles, is situated off the west coast of Ireland in County Mayo and it is visually awesome. The opening movement of the suite begins very quietly with a solo muted trumpet announcing the main motif from the first theme. This comes from the idea of seeing Achill for the first time through a slight mist. The second theme is played by the french horn and then flutes and violins. Following this, both themes are heard simultaneously before a fortissimo recapitulation of the first theme using the full forces of the orchestra.

The second movement is a theme and variations. It depicts the famous Blasket Islands off the Kerry coastline. The Blaskets were inhabited by an entirely Irish speaking population until 1954 when the government evacuated most of the remaining residents because of extreme weather conditions and an ageing population. It remains a Gaeltacht region today. The movement opens with the theme in its pure form played by the strings alone. Each variation explores a multitude of orchestral textures, keys and rhythmic explorations until the final variation which brings back the entire orchestra to enjoy the theme in its original form accompanied by septuplets on the harp and various other rhythmic motifs from previous variations.

The final movement is based on Tory Island which is a rather unique island almost eight miles off the coast of Donegal. It is the most remote inhabited island of Ireland. The island has a wonderfully wild nature to it and this is depicted by the opening theme which sounds like the wild sea around the island. The middle section has some beautiful solo melodies soaring out of the clarinet, oboe and flute against a rhythmic harp. After a return to the wild sea theme, the piece finishes with a giant crescendo as the whole orchestra joins together once more.

The Irish Isles Suite is dedicated to Anne McDonagh. This composition was funded by the Arts Council of Ireland.