

Excerpt from: "A Portrait of Janet Harbison" Fiona Tucker, PRO, Shannon Development

"Although best known as a traditional harper, Janet Harbison considers herself first and foremost a creative musician – with a significant body of original composition as well as arranged works now standard in the Irish choral repertoire as well as Irish ensembles, harp solos and harp ensembles with some piano and organ solo and ensemble pieces in her body of work to date. While she studied composition for a number of years with James Wilson (2 yrs) and Eric Sweeney (2 yrs) and Dr Joseph Groocock (4 yrs); and in her piano studies became particularly specialized in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach (and there would be very little of his considerable mass of work she would not know), Janet's style also belies the influence of her love of pop music (which she played every day as resident pianist in the Shelbourne Hotel to fund her studies) and jazz (she was also the Friday night resident pianist at Connolly's Jazz Club). A particular source of inspiration came from the essays of English symphonic composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (which Janet was directed to study when her choices of thesis subject would not achieve approval from professor Boydell!), which affirmed her resolve to follow her heart against the prejudices of the day and explore Ireland's historical harp and traditional music. So, inspired by the traditional but presenting always in a fresh contemporary sound with odd, innovative and constantly changing or absolutely absent rhythms; long and florid or pithy melodies in large formal structures, basically, the harmony and tonality in her work is simple. The modal nature of Irish music is maintained - mainly because the diatonically tuned harp, her first choice of instrument, can't easily employ semitones in the course of performance. Also, every part in her orchestral or harp ensemble scores is crafted as a logical and satisfying independent solo which is designed for orally trained traditional music performers. When played in the ensemble context, the complexity of the fabric is thrilling and the testament to the popularity of her works is the frequency in which they are performed the world over today. In fact, it is widely acknowledged that her energy and creation of the 'harp orchestra' idea has played a leading role in the re-energisation of Irish harp in Ireland - and the creation of a new form of chamber ensemble that is animating a surge in harp playing throughout the western world."