

Sean O’Riada | Sample answer

Discuss the music of Sean Ó Riada. Show how he has combined traditional Irish music with another musical style in his compositions. (2010 Q5B i)

Sean O’Riada was an important figure in the 20th Century, in both the revival of interest in harp music and the sound of the Irish harp.

O’Riada did not like the sound of the neo-harp, and also disapproved of the fact that no one played in the old style. He therefore added the harpsichord into his group “Ceoltoirí Chualann” because he considered the sound nearer to the old harp.

In his early life O’Riada studied classics but moved to music. He started learning violin and piano at a young age, and while he was a student he played piano with jazz and dance groups in Ireland.

In 1960 O’Riada was commissioned to write the music for the film “Misé Éire”. He was inspired by traditional song airs of Ireland in writing this piece of programme music, scored for orchestra. The film for which this was written is about the founding of the Republic of Ireland. At this time Ireland was not a country with an established film industry and because of this the public were immensely proud of this composition. Through this O’Riada raised the status of Irish music so that many who had never taken interest before came to know it.

O’Riada also did a series on Radio Eireann which was immensely successful. Through this he had an influence on groups such as Plenty, and revived the music of composers such as O’Carolan. O’Riada made the recording “O’Riada’s Farewell” months before his death, and he died in October 1971, but his influence is still felt today.