

Seóirse Bodley, *Islands* (2006)

Islands is Seóirse Bodley's first solo guitar composition. His first foray into writing for guitar was *Configurations* (1967), a modernist orchestral work with electric guitar that provoked a strong audience reaction when the conductor Tibor Paul and Radio Éireann Symphony Orchestra premiered it in the Gaiety Theatre Dublin on 29 January 1967. It is now considered one of the composer's most important orchestral works.

Seóirse second work for guitar, *Zeiten des Jahres* ('The Seasons', 2004), is a setting of one of Goethe's Venetian epigrams for soprano and guitar. The song was composed for the launch of my essay collection *Goethe: Musical Catalyst, Musical Poet* in the Abbey Theatre Dublin on 25 November 2004. This setting was composed for the Irish soprano, Lynda Lee, and classical guitarist, John Feeley, who premiered the work on this occasion. The inspiration for this work began to take shape when Seóirse and I flew to Farranfore, County Kerry on 19 August 2004 for a performance of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* given by Lynda Lee, with countertenor, Jonathan Peter Kenny and the Irish Baroque Orchestra in a vast cave with wonderful acoustics on Valentia Island. The cave had been a nineteenth century slate quarry and a grotto to the Virgin Mary in 1950s Ireland, both of which can be seen in this photograph:



In this breathtaking natural scene, the Irish artist Dorothy Cross, in collaboration with Opera Theatre Company, staged a magical production. The performance took place just before dusk, its beginning heralded by a trumpet voicing Pergolesi fragments from the back of the cave. Seóirse and I stood, along with the rest of the audience behind the railings in the above photograph, like church-goers at pilgrim masses in 1950s Ireland. Singers and orchestral players, dressed in dirty work overalls, emerged from the darkness of the cave as if coming off a shift. It was from this scene that the beauty of Pergolesi's music gradually emerged, a dream-like visitation of impassioned prayer, which disappeared with the singers when they retreated back into the cave at the end of the *Stabat Mater*.

Following this performance, Seóirse decided to compose *Zeiten des Jahres* for Lynda's voice. He had already been interested in writing a solo work for classical guitar for John Feeley. *Zeiten des Jahres* is his first composition for John, with whom he discussed the playability of the work.¹ Due to a flurry of other commissions, it was two years before Seóirse began composing *Islands* (2006), a larger virtuoso modernist solo guitar work for John, with whom he again discussed the various possibilities and techniques of the guitar.² *Islands* was composed the year we married, on which occasion John performed his transcriptions of the 'Prelude' and 'Allemande' from Bach's Cello Suite no.1 in G major BWV 1007.

Seóirse is widely recognized for his ability to write music in a number of different styles, ranging from serial works to those that use elements of traditional Irish music, while retaining his unique compositional voice. By his own admission, this exploration of styles was usually occasioned by his desire to try out something different. In keeping with this composition approach, *Islands*, is an exploratory work which arose out of his absorption in the works of the Austrian-British philosopher, Karl Popper (1902–1994), in particular the *Poverty of Historicism*, the ideas for which were first explored in a paper in 1936, three years after Seóirse was born, and developed into the book published in 1956, the year in which the composer moved to Stuttgart. Although he was not a logical positivist, Popper was later taken by his contemporaries to be representative of this approach. In this treatise he advanced the idea that the aim of scientific enquiry is not to try to confirm or verify one's theories, but to be so concerned for truth that one tries to falsify them, recognizing this as a truer form of intellectual honesty. In email correspondence with John in early summer 2006, Seóirse endeavoured to distill something of the kind of critical stance that Popper demands of science as he shared with John how Popper held up scientific enquiry as a standard by which to judge all forms of enquiry:

If you examine the Darwinian view of the evolution of the human race, you are reviewing a history, not a scientific proof. Essentially a scientific approach is involved when you put forward a hypothesis and then see if it is true or what can

¹ Lorraine Byrne Bodley, *Goethe: A Musical Poet, Musical Catalyst* (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2004), 360–64.

² The work was published in John Feeley (ed), *Contemporary Irish Music for Classic Guitar Solo* (Missouri: Mel Bay Publications, 2012), 81–88.

be said against it. You then make whatever corrections are necessary and you end up with a new problem. That is the manner in which science proceeds.

Applying this to modernism, his own compositional approach in particular, Seóirse continued:

Essentially Popper pointed out that modernism is based on a false interpretation that arises from the belief that one can use a quasi-evolutionary approach in order to predict the future. I have been aware of this for some time. So, in this particular piece, *Islands*, I wished to see what effect a use of consonance would have in terms of bringing my music closer to a general audience, without losing what I have gained from experiences with modern or even avant-garde music. That is what I was trying to do in *Islands*. It is like an experiment. People always assume that experimental music must be highly dissonant, but it is also possible to have a type of personal experiment where you try an approach that is quite simply different from what you have done in the past – and that is what I have explored here.³

Seóirse's reference to consonance is a relative term in comparison to some of the modernist works he composed in the 1960s, and to which he had returned at the beginning of the twenty-first century, for example in *An Exchange of Letters* (2002) and his cycle of Mignon and the Harper settings from *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (2004), composed for the *Goethe: Musical Poet, Musical Catalyst* conference in Maynooth 2004, and *Zeiten des Jahres* (2004) which launched this essay collection.

The six-string chords predominantly in fourths at the beginning of *Islands* (2006), are much less discordant than modernist minor second chords. While there are elements of tonality, *Islands* still could not be described as a tonal piece. The rising sequences, for example – from E flat major seventh, B flat major, E flat major, A major (bars 39–40) and from A major to F major, G major, A major, finally hovering around B flat major (with a sharp 4, bars 42–47) – explore tonal chords without being anchored in any particular tonality. A further example is the beautiful b minor interlude in bars 50–51 interrupted by the minor 9th dissonance in bar 54. Such recurring figurations (bar 111–112, for example) illustrate the composer's desire to hold onto the sort of music he wanted to write while at the same time exploring more consonant chords or intervals than Bodley had hitherto used.

In contrast to *Zeiten des Jahres*, which is a very linear, serial composition, *Islands* exploits more of the harmonic and chordal possibilities of the instrument, interjected with short contrapuntal passages (bb.16–19; 21–24; 69–72; 89–94; 97–100; 105–110; 125–128; 138–140). These two-part contrapuntal passages, which echo early lute and vihuela repertoire, reflect Seóirse's cognizance of the guitar's history.

While the work uses many consonances, the spirit of irregular structure that pervades much of Bodley's music is greatly in evidence throughout the work. The many contrasting sections range from sustained dotted minim chords (bars

³ Seóirse Bodley to John Feeley, 30 June 2006.

56–58; 58–62; 67–69) which are interjected with single line melodies. As the piece progresses, the sustained minim chords expand to *rasgueado* chords, which are juxtaposed with contrapuntal passages or virtuoso single-line runs. Seóirse's title, *Islands*, alludes to the nature of the music, performer and audience journeying through the composer's exploration of contrasting textures.

Islands explores an abundance of textures, which vary between half-note, open-string chords and running semiquaver passagework that incorporates triplets, quintuplets, sextuplets, septuplets and octuplets along with frequent use of harmonics, rapidly repeated chords and demisemiquaver tremulando passages (which can be played with the *i* finger or with more conventional flamenco *rasgueado* technique). Much of the harmonic and melodic material derives from the guitar's tuning, with many of the chords predominantly in fourths (bars 1-9, for example) along with some of the passage work (bars 5 and 9, 16, for example). All of the *rasgueado* chords use the natural tuning of the guitar, transposed to different pitches through the use of *barré* chords. Such musical features are illustrative of the composer's desire to write in the spirit of the guitar tradition, without sacrificing his own musical approach. The result is a composition which emerges from the instrument, acknowledges John Feeley's virtuosity, and reflects the composer's individual musical voice. Although challenging, it is a very integrated twenty-first century guitar work that intellectually, musically, and technically, is deeply rewarding to perform. On first hearing, *Islands* typically transcends an audience's horizon of expectations of what a modernist guitar work can be; the more one plays, the more one listens, a deep appreciation and fascination with *Islands*' enigmas emerges.

Lorraine Byrne Bodley in collaboration with John Feeley
for Seóirse's Bodley's 93rd Birthday, 4 April 2026

The score, with John Feeley's fingering,
is shared below for performance, teaching and research.

Lorraine Byrne Bodley, who holds the copyright,
welcomes performances of this work and simply asks that you let her know:
Lorraine.ByrneBodley@mu.ie

45 *mp* *ppp* i nail pont.

50 *mp* *mf* norm. II₂ II

53 *f* *mf* II

57 *mp* *mp*

63 *mp* *mf* i trem. (nail) norm. 12th

69 *mp* *mf*

73 *mp* *mf* III

77 *mp* *mf* *mf* *f* II simile II

81 II_2 VII_6 VIII_6 X_6

ff *f*

84 V_6 VIII_6 IV_6 7th

ff *f* ⑥ *ff* *mp*

88 12th

p *mp*

93 VII_6

mp

97

mp

101 V_6 V_6 IV_6

mp *mf*

103 V_6 VI_6 VIII_6

fff

118 I_6 non arp. *ppp* *pppp* *mf* *norm.* *tasto*

125 IV_3

129 I_3 *mp* *p*

133 I_6 *pp* *mp* *ppp*

136 II_6 IV_6 *mp*

138 I *mf* *p*

142

146 12^{th} 9^{th} 12^{th} non arp. *p* *pp* *ppp*