

The Old Woman of Beare (1981)

Nicola LeFanu

A monodrama for soprano and eleven instruments.

*The Old Woman of Beare* is an Irish poem of the ninth or tenth century. Bui, the old woman, is from the wild country of Ireland's West coast. She has spent her life as courtesan and is now ending it in a convent. She reflects on her age, her sexuality, her memories of a life she recalls with pride. Imagery of the sea runs through the poem: the high tides of her turbulent life are followed inexorably by the slow ebbing of old age.

The libretto draws on a number of translations of the Irish, but most particularly on that of Brendan Kennelly.

For the composer it is a favourite among her works because of the way it integrates the lyricism of the chamber works into the larger forms and textures of the orchestral music. It is a tempestuous, passionate work contained within a single dramatic span lasting just under twenty minutes. It was conceived as a concert work, but it has also been successfully staged.