Monhegan Suite – A Summer Day on Monhegan Island
Program Notes
Jill Dreeben and I have collaborated on several music projects in the past. We also share a love of Monhegan Island. Jill’s idea to commission me to write a piece of music for flute and guitar inspired by the island was born at the convergence of these shared experiences. Monhegan brings out the muse in countless visitors. It has been portrayed in pen and ink, paint and pastel thousands of times, so why not in notes and rhythms, flute and guitar? Monhegan has cold, windswept winters, soggy springs and quiet autumns, when birders arrive to see more than 100 species passing through on the Atlantic flyway. But I know Monhegan in August. Since Monhegan Suite is a personal tone poem, it is meant to evoke a summer day on the island my family and I have been visiting for more than 25 years. Monhegan Suite has nine movements. Although each movement describes a different time of day and location, the overarching structure and related musical themes work to produce what I hope is a unified whole. Wind and waves are woven throughout.
– John Kusiak

Prelude – 12 Nautical Miles – This movement opens with the guitar emulating the sound of distant bell buoys that gradually come closer. An introduction leads to a dreamy anticipation of the day; the main theme with its Lydian mode character is stated by the flute. Excitement over returning to Monhegan builds as I imagine the Elizabeth Ann ferry making the 12-mile trip from Port Clyde over open sea, a trip sometimes accompanied by dolphins, whales and seals.

Sunrise at Burnt Head – The summer day begins with a sunrise that can be best experienced by rising a half-hour before dawn, walking a half mile across the island to the eastern cliffs (in this case, Burnt Head) and waiting for the sun to appear over the ocean. The dawn is shared with seagulls and scrub pine. The flute gradually climbs as the sun ascends and the mood is serene and reverent, finishing with a chorale-like section in Eb.

Lobster Cove – Lobster Cove is on the southern tip of the island and is mostly flat and rocky. It sports a wreck of the D.T. Sheridan rusting peacefully by the surf. In the music, I have tried to create a feeling of the rolling waves with guitar arpeggios and odd meters. The flute melodies contain and develop some of the bird songs that I recorded while walking to the cove.
Day Trippers – This is a fun movement for mid-day that illustrates the chaotic and sometimes humorous activity found on the dock, Main Street and the beaches when tourists converge on Monhegan for a few hours.

The Trails to the Headlands – Monhegan is famous for its trails. This movement evokes the haunting beauty of the forest. It is quiet and dark with shafts of light illuminating green moss. In foul weather, these trails can be treacherous, but in August they are magical. The trail ultimately leads to the Headlands, opening onto bright sunlight and dramatic cliffs. Waves crashing against the rocks below are suggested by cascading flute arpeggios and dramatic guitar strumming. Few who fall in on this side of the island have been rescued. The danger is real for the reckless and the unlucky.

The Library/Jackie and Edward – Jackie Barstow and Edward Vaughan were two of the unlucky ones. In 1926, Edward was supervising Jackie’s eleventh birthday party picnic on a flat rock at the base of Black Head when she was swept out to sea by a rogue wave. Edward jumped in to save her. Both were lost. The Monhegan Memorial Library was dedicated to them and provides a quiet place to read and reflect. Here the main theme is stated and developed by both instruments in turn; a simple meditation on the tragic loss of two innocents.
Evening - Sunset at the Lighthouse – One of the great pleasures of Monhegan is viewing the sunset from lighthouse hill. This movement is related in tone and tempo to the Sunrise movement, building in intensity with the setting sun through quiet expectation, dramatic light and clouds, and vibrant colors. It reprises the reverent chorale of the Sunrise music as the sun descends into the horizon, ending with a promise of return through the use of unsettled seventh chord harmony.

Evening: Friends and Family – Here, the theme loses its Lydian character as it is set to a simple accompaniment in A Major expressing the warmth of family, friends and laughter. Music that describes the boat journey to the island is recapitulated in portraying the journey back to the mainland.

Epilogue – Dream: Winter on the Island – Back home on the mainland – “inshore” as year rounders call it – the island is still with me in my imagination. Dreaming about what the island is like in winter is reflected musically in a new theme played by solo guitar. When the flute enters, hints of previous themes return in an extended quasi-improvised section. As the movement concludes, guitar themes from the prelude are repeated. The bell buoy sounds a positive chord as it fades away beneath undulating flute arpeggios.