

The Irish Harp Today

Ancient, Diverse and Still Evolving

A paper by

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30 word summary:

Irish harping today presents many challenges: including its definition, transmission, testing and qualification. This paper examines the result of 12 centuries of evolution and suggests a solution for transmission respecting its diverse repertoires and styles.

200 word resume:

More than any other instrument playing Irish traditional music, the harp presents the most challenging aspect of our heritage – both in its performance, styles and repertoire as well as in its teaching and examination. While it generally evokes gentility and enjoyment worldwide, it also provokes a range of prejudices at home. These include whether the word ‘traditional’ should apply at all to the instrument, to calling the instrument a ‘Neo-Irish’ or ‘Irish’ harp; to the debate between the ‘folk’ and ‘classical’ styles, through to debates on technique and teaching methods, harmonisation and accompaniment.

Judiciously stepping around prejudices to accommodate the totality of the tradition, the teacher as well as the audience is presented with a number of repertoire specialisms – should the teacher be able to offer all repertoires or define and advertise only their particular specialisms?

This paper offers a suggestion that an understanding of the history and a recognition of the diverse repertoires and skills arising from it can be accommodated in an integrated teaching system that also respects its continued orality and the student’s aspiration to participate in group playing as well as seeking to become a coherent, creative and articulate individual performer.

Ancient, Diverse and Still Evolving, the Irish Harp Today

Subtitle: The Harper's Challenge

Many challenges face musicians in the world of Irish music today. Great debates are animated on issues of traditionality, on modernisms, on new instruments, on old, on many aspects of classical versus traditional, on playing techniques, wrist positions, on bow holds, on flute keys, on the modes, on sharpened 7ths in the minor keys, on flat instruments in sessions, on the names of ornaments, on the criteria of judgement in examinations and competitions, on methods of teaching orally, on systems of notation, on the acceptability of particular instruments – and on the rainbow of vagaries concerning Irish harping.

Debate is of course a healthy thing – because evolution demands interest, appreciation for the music form, respect for tradition, and innovation in creativity. Otherwise, the music would become stagnant before dying into a caricature of itself. For those of us who are active traditional musicians, our living tradition is integral to our social lives. Going to our sessions constitutes our first choice of pastime on workday evenings, winter weekends and summer holidays at gatherings or festivals anywhere in the world. The buzz we get from communing musically with friends brings us excitement and enrichment – from the prolific creativity of new compositions and the haunting performance of old slow airs to the injection of new tunes and energy of new players in established sessions. In order to survive with integrity and be equally relevant to future generations exactly as it has with ours, the tradition will evolve with as much energy, enjoyment, argument and debate as much as is constant in the fashion industry or international politics.

The story with Irish harping is that, for those who care to look in, it probably offers the richest ground for all the debates on the evolution of Irish music– for those who care to look in – for, in some circles, it is still a debate that at best evokes a passing intrigue or at worst, quick dismissal. Until now, the debate on harping issues has rarely even happened within the harping world. Occasional panel discussions have taken place at harp festivals but none have addressed the dilemmas facing harpers specialising within differing styles of harping. At least understanding on this subject with the institution of the new examination systems, such as the London College and Comhaltas Ceoltoiri Eireann is starting to right the question even if understanding of the idiom is slow to filter through to the Schools Examinations Boards both North and South of the border.

At the last Crossroads Conference in 1996, this speaker discussed the harp's place in Irish music and debated the prejudices and perceptions from harpist to harper and harpee. On this occasion, I wish to present a case for a wider consideration of the harp debate, explore aspects of harping that in the past gave rise to the prejudices, that in my opinion are more symptomatic of personal preferences and musical taste than understanding of the tradition and its history.

So what do we consider to be the tradition of Irish harping?

To pose the question another way: What do we expect harp players to be able to play?

Firstly, what do we expect ‘traditional musicians’ to be able to play?

A traditional musician would be expected to be a competent, tasteful player of dance music in all the dance rhythms – to dress the tunes with tasteful ornamentation and variation, to play with energy and style and to perhaps be able to play the odd slow air.

But, what do we expect harp players to be able to play?

To play dance tunes and melodies with all the improvised ornamentation and variation expected of any other traditional music player

(This would ordinarily be enough to expect of any traditional musician – but the harper is also expected:)

To simultaneously create a tasteful accompaniment to the ornamented tune mindful of harmony, rhythm and balance.

The harp player as well as a tune player is also expected to provide a harmonic and rhythmic support:

To accompany –
dance music played by other musicians in the sessions
slow and popular airs, tunes by O’Cahan or O’Carolan and
singers (both classical, Irish popular and traditional)

Accompaniment is in fact a skill entire to itself, but harpers are automatically expected to serve any situation as accompanist...

To perform solo harp arrangements knowledgably and tastefully from the historical tradition

And it is a vast history of melody including the tunes of O’Carolan, the transcriptions of Edward Bunting, the various O’Neill’s Collections to name at least some of the transcribed texts;

To play slow airs, arranged with respect to the song texts when there are texts

From An Chuilfhionn to Clár Bog Déil!

To sing and accompany one-self on the harp

Everything from the popular ‘Danny Boy’ to a Sean ‘Ac Donnacha slow air;

To play background music for general entertainment, for corporate, restaurant and tourism venue engagements

with a repertoire embracing old and new popular Irish ballads and stage hits - including Irish-American, and other British and European folk music;

To play music for weddings and other religious services

with everything from ‘Ag Críost an Síol’ to leading and accompany choirs or congregations in church with ‘Be Thou My Vision’;

And, to keep 34 strings in perfect tuning!

For harp players to be expected to perform in all of these areas with all of the requisite skills and repertoires is a tall order but almost always expected nevertheless. It is difficult enough to achieve high standards in playing traditional dance music alone – but to carry the weight of all the other expectations automatically is an enormous burden – that, whatever by the audience, is often not appreciated even by the harper themselves.

To return to my question: So what do we consider to be the tradition of Irish harping today?

It should be sufficient for the purposes of this paper to summarise the history of the prevalent styles of Irish harping today. I have chosen the labels for convenience and use the word ‘traditional’ purely in its connection with session dance music (not meaning to imply that other styles are not also ‘traditional’):

1 ‘Sean Nós’ Or ‘Old Gaelic’

This style of playing harks back to the 16th and 17th centuries before the influence of European Art Music made a significant impact on the music. This is mostly associated with the playing of ‘Slow Airs’ and particularly of lamentations and epic pieces that have survived well in the uilleann piping tradition.

2 Classic Irish

This evolved from the 17th to 18th centuries, and is associated with the hybrid style of Irish music composed for the new English and Scottish patrons recently established in Ireland who favoured the music of the Italian masters popular in Dublin at the time. The music of Turlough O Carolan (1670-1738) was foremost in this period.

3 Romantic Irish

This evolved through the 19th and 20th centuries and is associated with the music of the ‘Celtic Twilight’, a sentimental and romanticised repertoire dating from Thomas Moore’s ‘Irish Melodies’ to the stage Irish production of ‘Finnegan’s Rainbow’.

4 Traditional Irish

From about 1970, after the improvements in harp making allowed for solo instrumental music and developments within traditional music generally moved to include plucked stringed instruments such as the mandolin and bazouki – and harp - into the ‘session’.

5 ‘New Irish’

After Sean Davey’s exploration of the uilleann pipes in the Brendan Voyage, Micheál O Súilleabháin’s adventures with the piano and the influence on dancing from ‘Riverdance’, the fusion of traditional Irish music with jazz, classical, rock and world music has given rise to new influences and energy that have infused the general public with a new enthusiasm for the native arts – even if they have been ‘crossed’ with the other music genres. Whatever the general views on these developments, they are a testament to the continuing vibrance of the of the art form....

The reason for this stylistic diversity is the professional aspect of Irish harping that endured many phases of political, social, economic and stylistic upheaval according to the fortunes and misfortunes of the harper's patron classes through the centuries. More than any other instrument involved in Irish music, it has bequeathed a diverse heritage of styles and repertoires which present players with awesome choice, and teachers with awesome challenges.

So, how might we teach the harp when our students have a wide diversity of aspiration in their harping interests? Should a student aspiring only to playing their harp in church be persuaded that playing ornamented and varied traditional dance music be necessarily at the core of their study programme?

The argument could be presented that if you wish to become a traditional player, you do it the traditional way – the classic way for a classic harper and so on. But, should students be limited at the outset – either by their own aspiration or the specialism of the teacher? At the present time, for most Irish harp teachers that I am acquainted with, students are expected to follow their teacher's orientation whether it is their choice or not.

In the early phases of music education with any instrument in traditional music, the teacher's role is surely to coach the student in all the repertoire possibilities, into the basic skills of technique on their chosen instrument, and into listening, analysing and making choices on ornamentation and variation for their own performance. For harpers this also includes recognising harmonies and choosing chording patterns and arranging their accompaniment.

In classical music, the written teaching system of a number of examination bodies has evolved over many years, each espousing a highly controlled course content with graded progressions in prescribed set pieces, technical exercises, aural and sight reading tests. Because it is catering to a written tradition, this is an obvious and relatively easy way of creating, controlling and monitoring a teaching course. Irish music presents very different challenges however.

For us to have such a controlled system would surely raise cries of shock and horror countrywide. Or would it? At the moment levels of progress are entirely in the control of the traditional music teacher who will inevitably bring their students to their own level of understanding – which can be good or otherwise. The graded examinations of Comhaltas and the London College give recognition to the main stages of development in traditional dance music playing — and for traditional one-line melody instruments playing dance music, this will suit well. But, while the harp is included in their examination syllabi, there is little credit promised for the skills of arrangement or accompaniment - or treatment of historical music which comprises a significant skill complimenting or killing the music.

In 1994, a system was devised by this author that aimed to cater to the many expertises sought by harpers which was published by the Harp Foundation (Ireland) Ltd, a registered charitable organisation set up in recognition of 'the arts' and to support the creation of standards in Irish harping. This comprised a graded system for harp players addressing a variety of general skills up to a level of 'competency' when the student is invited to choose particular areas of 'specialism' at 'Advanced' levels. Succeeding at five advanced levels in different areas of specialism automatically achieves 'master' level. These twelve areas of specialism which are referred to as the 'Arts of Harping' are:

1 Goltraí, Geantraí, Suantraí – the Art of Spontaneous Improvisation

Improvising in the moods of Goltraí, Geantraí, Suantraí harks back to the music of the ancient harpers who would accompany the *reacaire* (reciter) reciting the poet's epic verse. The harper was expected to illuminate the moods of the text according to the conventions of composition at that time. This style of harping is completely lost to us now, but the art of improvisation can and does play a significant role in expanding the emotional impact of a story or recited text – in exactly the way a modern film score does. These skills of improvisation, sympathetic observation and human sensitivity are, by extension, the prerequisite for (palliative) music therapists that involves taking a familiar, simple melody or harmonic progression, and setting it in various rhythmic accompaniment patterns working the energy from intense to dissipated, and from complexity to singularity.

2 The Historical (or 'Classic Irish') Repertoire (16th to 18th Centuries)

This is a substantial repertoire of primary as well as secondary sources of harp music up to 1870; for example, the contents of the Bunting Manuscripts as well as the published works. An appreciation for the historical style is important in the interpretation of the music and a critical knowledge of the historical scripts is also expected as many of the texts were harmonically 'corrected' according to contemporary musical grammar. Rory Dall O'Cahan, brothers Thomas and William Connellan, O'Carolan and their contemporaries are the primary composers of this period. Their repertoire is considerable and easily found in the many published resources of the last 200 years, many of which have been recently reprinted. Some of this music has survived in the oral repertoire of uilleann pipers.

3 Lamentations and Slow Airs

As well as the old harper's lamentations and epic pieces, which are readily found in the uilleann piping repertoire, the 17th century 'aisling' song tradition is also a rich resource for this repertoire.

4 The Romantic & Folk Repertoire (19th and 20th Centuries)

The industry of music publishing gave rise to a passion for sheet music collections of popular Irish songs arranged with piano accompaniment. Thomas Moore set his poetry to already published airs creating his 'Melodies'. This period extends through the collections of Petrie and Stanford, Ferguson and Percy French in the 20th century.

5 The 'New Irish' (or Modern Harp Composition) Repertoire

There has been a significant revival in composition for the harp in recent times. The music is in formal ('fixed') arrangement, some written and much still in the oral medium (but fixed and accessible in recording none-the-less. Much of the music draws on the influences of all the harp's heritage as well as from the general musical environment today. Among significant modern composers would be Michael Rooney, Bill Whelan, Janet Harbison.

6 Dance Music

Traditional Irish dance music comprises the greater part of today's traditional music repertoire. The repertoire here is enormous. Among the important resources are O'Neill's 'Music of Ireland' (1903) and Breandan Breathnach's volumes published between 1963 and 1985, but the most crucial is the live session which should provide the source of the music and the experience of participation and accompaniment.

7 Song and Harp Accompaniment

Harpers orientated to singing will find a ready audience as these two performance arts are combined. This genre of harping was predominant through the 19th and 20th centuries until

harp manufacture significantly improved in the 1960s allowing for the re-emergence of the instrument in its own right.

8 Sacred and Ritual Music

The role of the harp in the Christian tradition predisposes this instrument to find its place in all Irish churches. Here, not only is a knowledge of the repertoire needed, but also a capability to lead choirs or soloists, and to understand the differences between the denominations in the structures of their services. Performing at weddings as well as regular Sunday services is now very common.

9 Music for Comfort and Healing

The role of the harp in healing has been long established and many 'Harp Therapists' are finding wide acceptance for their work in 'palliative care' in the medical professions. The skills of improvisation are fundamental to this specialism in partnership with a sound knowledge of how tone, pulse, rhythm and melody impacts on all aspects of 'well-being' and life transition.

The last '3 Essential Arts' should be considered to be central to the development of all harper's skills and understanding:

10 Composition

Music is a language, and as much as we are capable of being creative and adventurous in the telling of stories, we should also be able to be creative in music. The common perception about the study of Composition is that it is a skill reserved for the especially talented; but to be able to express one-self creatively is enormously beneficial to personal development and well-being.

11 Arrangement

The simultaneous harmonization of a melody has often presented enormous challenges to harpers – often to the extent that players will prefer to resort to the performance of fixed arrangements rather than start from the simple improvised arrangements of the basic 1-4-5 or 'one-below' chordal bass. The process of arrangement starts from choices that the student makes in the early phases of learning not only in the decoration of the melody and in the harmonization, but also to the development of independent and personal style.

12 Accompaniment

The role of the accompanist in older traditional music is to provide moral support, and the more subtle and uncomplex, but harmonically and rhythmically supportive the accompaniment, the better. However, in more recent music forms such as Polkas, and Airs where the natural harmony of the tunes are less obvious, the role of the accompanist is essential to make sense of the music. This specialism calls for sensitivity in the support of the melody player.

This categorization of the Irish harp tradition has provided the basis for the establishing of the Irish Harp College training and examination system which has operated for almost ten years now and is still evolving. The system aspires to embracing the totality of the harping tradition giving recognition to the different aspects without requiring the performers to embrace more aspects than is their wish.

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