

Janet Harbison **Harpists, Harpers or Harpees?**

The Irish harp often finds itself lying awkwardly between traditions, expectations and prejudices. The dilemma is in its place and identity in Irish music making and the debacles lie between the energetic revivalists, the romantic sentimentalists and historical purists. Here in its own microcosm, folk versus classical, oral versus literate, court versus kitchen, old versus new, history versus innovation. This presentation explores the dilemmas and poses the question as to why we view the issues of history, place, tradition and identity in our music-making with such importance.

The harp is the most ancient, the most famous, the most romanticised, the most political, and the most dismissed of members in Irish music family. The fact that the story of Irish harping extends a considerable distance into the past, with at least 10 centuries of documented history, if viewed beside the evolution of the 3 to 4 hundred year old dance music tradition, or the 2 hundred year old uilleann piping tradition, is inevitably going to present a widely varied and often fragmented repertoire. Since all aspects of what might be called 'national' music in Ireland - until the last 30 years or so - has remained firmly based in the oral tradition, naturally, all our inherited notational evidence was penned not by the musicians themselves for their own purposes, but by outsiders - by onlookers (or listeners) from the European Art Music tradition whose motives were generally predatory and mercenary (if also romantic) and directed toward the repackaging of the music for their own tradition. The notators wrested the basic contours of the melodies, struggled to encase what they heard into the limited grammar of their notation system and reproduced it often in a form only distantly recognisable from its original, on flutes, clavichords, hautboys, and piano-fortes.

The few resources then of notated music in published edition or manuscript collection offer only some and often suspect impressions of the actual music. Documents, however, that are the reports or presentations of the harpers themselves, such as the small edition of O'Carolan's music published by his son in about 1748, or the personal memoirs of Arthur O'Neill, do offer crucial starting points. The widely (and in my opinion, very wrongly) discredited manuscript evidence of Edward Bunting also offers a wealth of information if viewed through the limitations of his medium and against the background of Art Music understanding of the time.

It is evident, nonetheless, that gigantic evolutionary changes punctuate every century of harping in Ireland. From the depictions of two distinctly different types of harp on the high stone crosses, to the religious figures performing in the manuscript glosses, the professional courtly harpers in the accounts of Giraldus Cambrensis, the allusions in epic poetry, through to the many literary accounts themselves - all testify to a phenomenally rich diversity in repertoire, performance and professional situation, along with an emotionally charged romanticism and political significance particularly from the time the harp was established as the national emblem. All these have mesmerised modern commentators who, rather than address the depth and variety and each period of significance individually, consistently generalise in the global negative (except for the glories of the early middle ages).

Perhaps it is that the tradition is too wide, too ancient, too highly evolved in convention and complexity when the old court harpers were enjoying their elevated

social position in medieval Ireland for dance musicians to comprehend; or that their tradition was too hybridised or compromised to appeal to the lesser educated nobility of the planter English and Scottish patrons of the 17th and 18th century; or was it that their tradition was too romanticised, ethereal and poetically political when cloaked in the heady sentimentality of Thomas Moore's songs, the Celtic Twilight and Gaelic Revival period to the turn of the last century; or perhaps, is it that the tradition of the harp has been too contrived, effeminised and commercialised in its association with the winsome wenches working the 'begorrah' cabarets of famous Dublin hotels and the medieval castles in the Southwest? Or, is it because the current fever in energetic and articulate 'traditional' Irish harp playing started with the introduction of the Aoyama Japanese-made, nylon strung 'Irish harp' which became available to harp players in Ireland in 1969?

While I present a plea for Ireland's oldest formal music tradition to be allowed to grow, evolve and find its own intrinsic relevance and voices in today's music-making environment, it will become evident to any observer that there are indeed a number of 'voices', 'styles' or 'traditions' of Irish harping, each quite distinct from each other although a majority of players in what I call the 'classical' Irish tradition, do not consider there to be any differences - indeed would scorn those who declare as much. One essential difference is between those who learn and transmit the music by the oral tradition, i.e. taking the tune in its elemental form and then improvising, ornamenting, varying and arranging the melody as has been the method from the beginning, and those who cling to the literate tradition.

My harp teacher, Máirín Ferriter (née Ní Shé) taught the harp players of Sion Hill Convent by ear. She could not read music and those of us, her harp students, who also learned piano, were often called upon to sound the music she had in books. While she enjoyed to discover this music, she taught us as she herself was taught by Caroline Townsend, and her most famous students rising to fame after the Tostal post war celebration of Irishness in 1953 were Mary O'Hara, Deirdre O'Callaghan, and Kathleen Watkins. These were still the stars of our harp room in the mid sixties. The tradition that we inherited came directly from the drawing rooms of the 19th century and primarily featured the use of simple arpeggiated chordal accompaniments to both Irish and Anglo-Irish song. There were some simple instrumental tunes such as Brian Boru's March. However, the only other tune I remember that we played instrumentally was O'Carolan's Concerto and that was arranged by myself for Mrs. Ferriter from a recording of American harpists.

In 1968 or 1969, the dramatic visit of the three Japanese gentlemen to our harp room in Sion Hill, and a short time later the resulting first generation of Aoyama harps to arrive in McCullagh Pigott's music shop, was an event to prove of great significance. These were the first harps of real quality and tone to allow for greater effect and enjoyment in playing instrumental music. They differed in style from our existing harps in that they were a generally heavier, more strongly constructed instrument, with a string span of four and a half octaves (34 strings) from bass C to treble A. This allowed us to play effectively in the keys of C, D and G while the older harps started with E flat in the bass. Access to the lowest D allowed for a great deal more satisfaction in playing traditional dance music which was almost always in the tuning of G or D. The new instruments were strung with nylon rather than gut with a consequently brighter (less mellow) sound. The Japanese harp also had a slightly wider and even (rather than fanned) string spacing. (This spacing is still considerably narrower than is common on Concert Harps today). I had been discouraged from singing anything rather than the seconds part in the schools concerts as my voice was

low and I was often mocked for singing in the country style(!). Therefore, the much improved sound of the Japanese harp was a boon to me and my harp room colleagues. I was happy to exploit all the new instrumental possibilities, accompany or arrange for my friends and indulge in the vast dance music repertoire which all my traditional musician friends outside school were playing nightly. While revelling with the new plaything, before long we became aware of the critics. Our first misdemeanour involved our professional engagements. It seemed that our association with the Irish cabaret scene earned us a sleazy kind of reputation. My first summer job as a self supporting music student, was as a harp player in Knappogue Castle (the sister castle of Bunratty) in County Clare. The label of Bunratty Bunny was occasionally levelled to my great amusement - but we merrily played our Japanese harps, perhaps lying occasionally to maintain the myth. Then there was the dismay at the fact that we played Japanese rather than real Irish made Irish harps. Could we perhaps be unwitting traitors? Why should players of the Irish harp be expected to more patriotic than fiddlers, concertina or melodeon players who were always at liberty to acquire their instruments from Germany, England or Italy or elsewhere - and the more foreign they came, the more exotic they were? Along with these rather silly, if niggling opinions, from early in my harping career, the first significant disapproval seemed to come from the other harp world in Dublin. The old prejudice of Art Music versus Folk Music was to feature discernibly in our small harp world. This was a harping interest that courted the Art Music tradition and its champions set about instituting a classical method of teaching the Irish harp complete with graded exams and diploma courses. Up until the 1960s, there was no body of published Irish harp music for the Irish harp since the tradition to this point had continued to be oral. Now, it had to become literate to acquire the respectability and meet the requirements of the Art Music world.

The history of the literate tradition of Irish harping, as I have mentioned, is very recent. But for the exceptions of the book of at least 19 tunes published by O'Carolan's son in the 18th century mentioned earlier, and a small number of published harp accompaniments in sheet music published by Charlotte Milliken Fox in the 1920s, the first harp music published for Irish harpers in the 1400 years of its known history, was in 1967 by Nancy Calthorpe. This was a small collection of arrangements of O'Carolan's music. Shortly after this, Waltons published their 'Irish Airs for the Irish Harp' arranged by Eamonn O'Gallagher. The only other book of harp music known to me in the 1960s was Mildred Dilling's 'Old Tunes for New Harpists' published in the USA in 1934 in which only three of the 92 tunes were Irish. The most significant volume that was published to meet this need was Sheila Cuthbert Larchet's Irish Harp Book published in 1975. This volume contained a number of contributions from various harp players and teachers, a series of technical studies reduced from the classical tradition, and a number of new very avant garde compositions by such notables as Brian Boydell, Seoirse Bodley, James Wilson, A.J. Potter and Gerard Victory. A considerable number of new volumes have been published in the 1980s and 1990s.

Waltons' music shop in Dublin continued to play a central role in the re-publication of volumes of crucial interest and resource to modern harpers and harpists. In 1969, they republished Edward Bunting's three volumes of the Ancient Music of Ireland in which music of the harpers who attended the Belfast Harpers' Assembly in 1792 was notated. However, Bunting's published music, it must be remembered, was arranged for the piano-forte as, naturally, he needed to achieve sales for his volumes. They also sold new editions of the two volumes of Donal O'Sullivan's mammoth work on the music of O'Carolan (first published in 1958). Waltons had also continued to

manufacture harps styled on the old Belfast McFall models from the 1940s or 50s.

The volumes of Bunting and O'Sullivan were essential to encouraging an historical interest in the harp, however limited the resources, and a number of us were indeed inspired. However, there is no contemporary tradition of playing historical music on today's Irish harps in anything of an authentic historical fashion. Nevertheless, there is significant interest among traditional musicians and their audiences to hear music from the historical repertoire played in a respectful manner (and traditional style). Another world of harping emerged in the early 1970s directly in response to the American folk music revival which cross-fertilised with and energetically animated Irish music making at this time. The first explosive moment on the scene was the release of Planxty's 'The Well Below the Valley album'. As well as the obvious inspirations from Woodie Guthrie and Bob Dylan relevant to the folk singing, on this album, plucked string instruments find a new relevance. Donal Lunny introduces the bouzouki and Andy Irvine plays the mandolin. A small number of us younger harp players in Ireland who already had Aoyama harps, responded with playing instrumental music featuring the trendier traditional jigs, reels and hornpipes. These would include Máire Ní Chathasaigh of Bandon in Cork, Noreen O'Donoghue of North Dublin, and myself. I preferred the challenge of playing the harp rather than another instrument in sessions (I also played the tin whistle fairly competently and the flute to a degree) and I was always welcomed with it whether as melody player or accompanist.

For all the novelty and welcome that greeted the harp, it was always essentially the music that provided me, as I am sure it did everybody else that was involved, with a social life and sense of belonging in a community of music makers. It was for this reason, and not because of the harp's professional, political, historical or sentimental associations that I played it. I was, in fact, all the while, a student of piano and Classical music at a Dublin university and my life as a formal art musician with the piano and as a social traditional musician with the harp were clearly defined and never intermixed. (I expect, however, that there will be discernible influences crossing over into my own personal style of arranging and composing.)

Essentially, what has evolved into the 1970s are three distinct styles (my words) of harp playing. Each is distinguishable from the other, and each, very often, has been disparaging of the other(s). In describing the 'styles', I use the euphemisms with which they are often described:

- 1/ The singing harpee with her simple three chord accompaniment and trained voice performing in the stage-Irish tourist-oriented cabarets;
- 2/ The hippie harper who plays jigs, reels and hornpipes participating in traditional music sessions in pubs and homes frequenting fleadh and festivals;
- 3/ And the classic(al) harpist who performs in more formal surrounds with the background training of a classical musician reading from texts. These harp players also have often considered the Irish harp as a preparatory instrument for the orchestral concert harp.

All these styles should attest to the long and varied history of the illustrious instrument and its music. This history is itself fascinating and points clearly at the variety of aspects in today's tradition. In Anglo-Irish circles and generally in the urban environment, the harp is cherished with generosity, but in the broader world of traditional music, because of its associations with the Anglo-Irish in its mainly middle-class urban environment, the harp has struggled to be accepted. Whatever about the competitive elements within the collective harp world itself, the greatest

dismissal comes from the revered writers on, and heroic champions of, Irish traditional music. It is at this point that I become defensive of the whole tradition.

In 1962, Sean Ó Riada made a number of RTE radio programmes entitled 'Our Musical Heritage' after which a book was published based on the content of the programmes in 1982. While this gives a wonderful portrait of Irish music-making in our generation up to that time, Ó Riada opens on the subject of the harp with the declaration that:

the harp, in former times, was our outstanding glory in music [Sean Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage* (1982) p77]

He continues with confirmations of this with the famous quotations from Stanihurst (1580) and Sir Francis Bacon (1627). Then, within the parameters of his own wish for the instrument, he offers:

I think, .. that a harp played in the traditional fashion would lend an edge, [with] occasional touches of harmony to his ideal band in the contemporary family of true authentic original Irish music makers....

Here, I find myself dismayed and wounded by the most significant hero of my youth. What followed this already limiting opener, was three tight paragraphs of devastating dismissal:

but the harping tradition died. It was seriously ill at the time of the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, among the first of many attempts to revive it. All attempts were unsuccessful, and we may take it that the true harping tradition, by the year 1845, was quite dead.

He continues:

At the end of the last century, attempts were made once more, mainly by the infant Gaelic League, to get it going again, but by this time the nature of the tradition had been forgotten. It was not until the early twenties, when a Miss Townsend [my own teacher's teacher] of Castletownsend in Co. Cork put her mind to it, that any progress was made. To revive the true harping tradition was impossible: instead, a style of harping was developed which was based mainly on Welsh harping, quite different from the Irish style. The only thing traditional about present-day harping is the instrument itself [?] However, though we know very little about traditional Irish harping, we do know that the strings were plucked by the finger-nails, not by the fingers. [Back to the tradition up to the end of the 18th century] This means it must have sounded not unlike a harpsichord (where the present-day harp sounds more like a guitar)."

He concludes with his criterion for inclusion:

I think it is a pity we do not try to reconstruct a style closer to the traditional style, instead of propagating an invented style which has nothing to do with tradition [ibid., p78]

Is Ó Riada's suggestion for his ideal band of musicians not in itself another invention? The unfortunate invented style, which we now generally refer to as parlour music, has in my opinion, everything to do with tradition. Its evolution in the late 18th / early 19th century was clearly the result of the combination of earlier traditions even if some of the influences were art music and Anglo-Irish in origin. The songs of Thomas Moore were newly composed poetry married to old airs - half of which were directly lifted from the first two volumes of Edward Bunting. This is a totally consistent practise with song makers of every generation. In this instance, the audience was mainly urban middle classes and the singers accompanied themselves with harps. How well known was the tradition of accompaniment of song with guitars in the early 19th century in Ireland?

I fear that Sean Ó Riada's presumption of what is acceptable as traditional music today is relatively restricted to sean-nós singing and dance music. If he considers these to be at the essential core of the tradition, how does he reconcile the recent origin of dance music? Formal dance music, as we have been well taught by Breandán Breathnach arrived with the dance masters and their fiddlers who visited the houses of the Irish, Anglo-Irish and planter nobility from the 17th century. As Breandán Breathnach also attests, while there may have been some form of physical response to music before

this time, there were no words specifically describing dance in Ireland before this time. We learn that the two words in new usage: damhsa and rince were derived respectively from the French danse and the old English (or Saxon) rink meaning to skate on ice. The Irish dance tradition, then, will have started as an aristocratic, not a folk art.

Breandán Breathnach is also dismissive of Irish harping. It is evidently only of significance to mention again up to the time of the Belfast Harpers' Assembly in 1792 where the last of the itinerant minstrel harpers gathered to have their music written down:

Efforts were made after the Belfast festival to have some blind boys taught the instrument, but these proved unavailing. The frayed and wasted link, joining these poor, blind, itinerant harpers with the professional artists who had so excited Giraldus in the twelfth century, parted in the opening decades of the nineteenth and the old traditional manner of harping passed into oblivion" [Folk Music and Dances of Ireland (1971) pp 68,69]

Thus ends the chapter on the harp, and apparently the tradition. In his chapter on songs, Breathnach dismisses Carolan's work of any relevance:

"the compositions of Carolan and other harpers have been ignored here since by definition they cannot be regarded as folk music and since, with one or two exceptions, they are known only through printed texts" [ibid, p34]

Breathnach's definition of 'folk' is apparently limited to the labouring native classes, as he obviously considers any aspect of music (and not dance) associated with the aristocracy to be unacceptable. In this regard, I pose the question: despite the often aristocratic origins of a tradition, does it only qualify as 'folk' when it has filtered through the social classes to the lowest orders? It seems that the spokespeople for Irish music are class restrictive. Then, there is the question of how relevant is the music if it is retrieved through printed text. I bring to mind the very significant role played by O'Neill's Music of Ireland (1903) and the widespread and wholesale resource that this album of tunes presented to a majority of dance musicians in Ulster in the 30s and 40s at least.

Ciarán Carson, in his contribution to the Appletree Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music (1986), follows ÓRiada's sentiments:

"... the harp is not regarded as a traditional instrument by traditional musicians; it was hardly a folk instrument anyway, since in its heyday it depended on an elaborate system of aristocratic patronage ..."

He then continues with a declaration that those of us who dare to take an interest in dance music must be warned off:

"Granted, there are those who play dance music on the harp; the result, however, is confused and disordered to many ears"

No doubt there are poor players on every instrument, but the poor old harpers are generically incapable. Finally, Carson concludes:

"If the harp is a symbol of Ireland, it is an Ireland that finds itself uncomfortably balancing between two stools" [Ciarán Carson Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music (1986) pp 36,37]

The class distinction is obvious. Uilleann pipers of the past two centuries might well be insulted as they considered themselves to be cultured gentlemen, often presenting upper or middle class backgrounds. Many respected musicians have emerged from every social stratum, but fortunately for them, it was not the harp they chose to play. It seems they have become honorary 'folk', a club not evidently open to harpers.

However, Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann, the institutional champions of the tradition have accepted harpers and, as well as including appropriate categories in their annual championship competitions with exactly the same criterion of music judgement as for

any of the other instruments, they also include the harp in their courses for teachers. It is evident that there have been exceptional developments in the world of Irish harping just as there have been in Irish music making in general since the 1970s. Ó Riada died (in 1971) just as the renaissance was about to take off. He had been well acquainted with my father, but unfortunately he died before I had the wit to enjoy his presence. I wonder what he would say now, twenty years on. In his last years, Breandán Breathnach became a strong supporter of the new breed of traditional harper and just before he died in 1985, he invited the newly founded Irish Harpers' Association to base itself in the Pipers' Club in Henrietta Street (where it remained for a number of years).

Despite the dramatic developments in Irish harping over the past 15 years or so, many that are well acquainted with the newer sounds and who espouse a more radical contemporary approach to Irish music, still hold to the old dismissal. Whether harpee, harpist or harper, whether playing on wire, gut or nylon strings, or on an Irish, English or Japanese instruments, what harp players are playing is not for the purpose of making a self-conscious political statement, is not to advertise an Anglo-Irish upper class heritage, nor a self-conscious divesting of the urban middle-classes to be seen to be hip and trad. but a participation in a living tradition that will continue to evolve and respond to the same influences affecting all other aspects of Irish music making, from Andrew Laurence King to Riverdance. In respect of all our harp repertoires, we may always chose our favourites, but to condemn an aspect of the tradition because of a personally held opinion or social prejudice, does not negate its validity. Irish harping is alive and well and continues to contribute to the panoply of Irish music, for which we are all the richer.