

The Gaelic harping tradition

Music was an important part of life in ancient Ireland, and professional harpers were honored above all other musicians. In social position the harper ranked at the top of the *bó-aire* class of nobility, who were without land of their own, but whose wealth was in cattle. There may have been harp schools in Ireland, as there certainly were in Wales, similar to the bardic schools, where harpers spent several years in intensive training.



The Irish harpers gained a high reputation for their music. Even Geraldus Cambrensis, who rarely had anything good to say about the Irish, praised their music, adding, however, that Scotland was lately surpassing Ireland in musical skill.

There were links among the poets and harpers of Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Gryffydd ap Cynan, ruler of Gwynedd, whose mother was Irish, reformed Welsh music when he brought Irish musicians to his court.

On those occasions that compositions of the *fili*, or poet, were recited, the poetry would be accompanied by the music of the clarsach. A woodcut in John Derricke's *Image of Ireland*, 1581, shows an Irish chief being entertained by a *reacaire*, or reciter, while the harper plays. Another figure standing beside the chief, perhaps the *fili* himself, seems to be directing the performance.

In Scotland there is no evidence of a formal position as reciter, but a bard of lesser training than the *fili* would sometimes recite the *fili's* poetry, or his own poetry, and sometimes the recitation and harping would be done by the same person, thus blurring the distinctions of function.

The war in Ireland that ended with the Flight of the Earls in 1607 was a heavy blow to the Gaelic order, and resulted in the collapse of the Irish bardic schools. In Scotland the bardic schools stayed alive for about another hundred years.

The music of the harpers was the product of an unwritten tradition, transmitted orally from teacher to student. Although some of the old tunes were popular enough to make their way into manuscripts for lute and other stringed instruments, there was no organized attempt at this time to collect them, and most of the music was forgotten.

With the Anglicisation of the Irish nobility, the traditional harpers more and more were reduced to itinerant musicians traveling the countryside. The most famous harper in Irish history, Turlough Ó Carolan, lived during this time, 1670-1738. Ó Carolan adapted features of European Baroque music to his compositions for his Anglo-Irish patrons. Other harpers as well were composing in the popular idioms.

By the late 18th century it was clear that traditional Irish harpers were nearly extinct. In order to encourage and preserve the old harping tradition, a festival was held in Belfast in July of 1792, and newspaper advertisements invited all Irish harpers to come and play. Prizes were offered for the three best, but no one was to go away empty-handed. Even with this encouragement (and a large audience brought to town by the celebration of the fall of the Bastille) only ten Irish harpers and one Welsh harper showed up. The youngest was a boy of 15 years; the oldest was Denis Hempson, who was 97 years old.

The Belfast Festival of 1792 failed to stimulate the growth of traditional harping, but it was an outstanding success in preserving the last remnants of it.

Edward Bunting, a 19-year-old church organist, was hired to write down the tunes of the harpers. This he did with so much enthusiasm during the four days of the festival that he continued to collect traditional tunes throughout his life, publishing three collections, in 1797, 1809, and 1840.

Bunting collected not only the music, but much lore and technical information from the harpers. It is only through his work that many of the clues to the method and style of playing used by the old harpers come down to our own time.

Hempson was the last of the old harpers who played with the harp on his left shoulder, using his nails to pluck the strings. In the late 18th century he was considered a musical anachronism, a relic of another time, who played tunes so old and forgotten that they were unfamiliar to the other harpers. Hempson himself refused to play some of his tunes for Bunting; "There was no use in doing so, they were too hard to learn, they revived painful recollections."

Though much music has been lost, we owe Denis Hempson and Edward Bunting a debt of gratitude for preserving for us the last remnants of this once proud tradition.