

Harp in Irish Traditional Music – SCT Notes for students at Mulroy Bay Music 2019

The Harp in Irish Music

The Irish term for Harp is Cruit (Clairseach). History has recorded harp playing in Ireland as far back as the 9th century. Ireland's earliest surviving harp, from the 11th century, is the Brian Boru Harp and is on display in Trinity College Dublin.

The Harp is the emblem of Ireland and the present day emblem is designed on the Brian Boru Harp. There are numerous accounts of famous Irish Harpers in Ireland going back to the 12th century.

Harp Playing in Ireland

The Harp is the most important instrument in Irish Musical History. For centuries, Harpers were especially respected at home and abroad for their skill as musicians and the beauty of the music. Gaelic Monarchs and Persons of High Nobility employed a Harper as part of their household to provide entertainment. However, as the occupation of the English in Ireland grew stronger the Gaelic Monarchs finally left Ireland in the early 17th century (Flight of the Earls) leaving the harpers and musicians without any support. Professional Musicians became itinerants, travelling from place to place trying to make a living. They suffered greatly under English rule in the centuries that followed as England tried to suppress Irish culture in a bid to take over Ireland.

In the 17th century Penal Laws were introduced against Catholics in Ireland and Irish Language and culture in general was oppressed. During Oliver Cromwell's rule of Ireland on behalf of Britain in 1650 he ordered that all Harps and Organs throughout Ireland to be confiscated and destroyed.

A small number of Harpers received support from the new Anglo Irish nobility in the 17th and 18th centuries among them, Rory Dall O'Cahan (Born 1645) and composer of "Give Me Your Hand". Also, Turlough O'Carolan (1670 to 1735) a blind harper from Co. Meath. Many of O'Carolan's tunes are documented and have become part of the tradition.

Oppression of Irish culture continued through the 1700's. Also, changing tastes in music among the upper classes saw European music, not suitable for the Irish wire strung harp becoming popular and by the end of the century it was clear that traditional Irish harpers were nearly extinct and with them a millennium of oral tradition.

Belfast Harp Festival and Edward Bunting

In a bid to preserve the old harping tradition a festival was held in Belfast in 1792. Cash prizes were offered but only ten harpers, ranging in age from fifteen to ninety seven, could be found. Edward Bunting, a nineteen year old Armagh church organist was in attendance to notate the music. Bunting went on to travel all around the country collecting tunes and folklore and he became the first archivist of Irish music. He published three collections of traditional tunes, in 1797, 1809, and 1840 and saved hundreds of old Irish airs from being lost forever. All the surviving O'Carolan tunes are part of his work.

Harp in the 20th Century

Harp playing declined in the first half of the 20th century amongst the general population. Convent Schools were a good resource for harps and many young women learned harp to accompany the singing of Irish Songs. One of our more famous exponents being **Mary O'Hara**.

Other well known musicians to use Harp in song accompaniment are **Maire Brennan** of Clannad and Jolene Mc Laughlin of the Henry Girls

Cairde na Cruite

Cairde na Cruite was set up in Dublin in 1960 and has played a central role in the the promotion of Harp Playing in Ireland and abroad. The organisation promotes teaching, teacher training and music collecting. And publishing

Gráinne Ni hEigearthaigh (Grainne Yeats) from Dublin was one of the organisers and founder members of Cairde na Cruite.

The Irish Harp Centre

The Irish Harp Centre at Castleconnell, Co.Limerick was a residential harp college and music school directed by Dr Janet Harbison to facilitate teaching and promotion of harp playing.

Janet Harbison

Janet Harbison was born in Dublin in 1955 and studied classical and traditional music. Janet has won every national Irish harp competition including the All-Ireland Fleadh Cheoil Competition (1981). She, along with Maire Ni Chathasaigh were among the first to popularise the playing of dance music (jigs and reels etc) on the harp.

Maire Ni Chathasaigh

She was born in West Cork in 1956 and learned traditional music and went on to study and teach music. She won the All Ireland Fleadh competition three times during the 1970's.

Other Well Known Harpers

Derek Bell played Harp with the Cheftains group for many years.

Laoise Kelly, Cormac de Barra and Michael Rooney.

To Do

- Explore further the topics and people listed in this document
- Become familiar with the Music of Turlough O'Carolan. (6 pieces) and Rory Dall O'Cahan's composition "Give Me Your Hand"
- Listen to the music of the modern day harpers listed above. (Youtube etc)
- View the T na G programme "Mna An Cheoil" (Harp). This programme is available until end of March 2019
- Find out about Harp Playing in your own area