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HARP PERSPECTIVES

Ceolchair sin, a' chruit an ríogh
Reflections on the harp in
Gaelic Bardic Poetry

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Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal. One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our January edition, Lauren O'Neill considers the historical significance of the harp in Gaelic bardic poetry, and discusses how its poetic richness might act as a catalyst in re-imagining this unique performance practice in contemporary harping.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking.

Athbhliain faoi mhaise.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

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CEOLCHAIR SIN, A' CHRUIT AN RÍOGH: REFLECTIONS ON THE HARP IN GAELIC BARDIC POETRY

Lauren O'Neill

Introduction

The harp holds considerable symbolic and historical significance in Ireland, a significance which can aid our understanding of the functioning of Irish society in earlier times, as well as the role of music within it. As one of the earliest instruments documented in Ireland (Scahill, 2009), the harp holds UNESCO recognition on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*ⁱ (UNESCO, 2019), a recent honour that marks the historical significance of the harp and its music, and which in turn influences and promotes interest in the harp within society today.



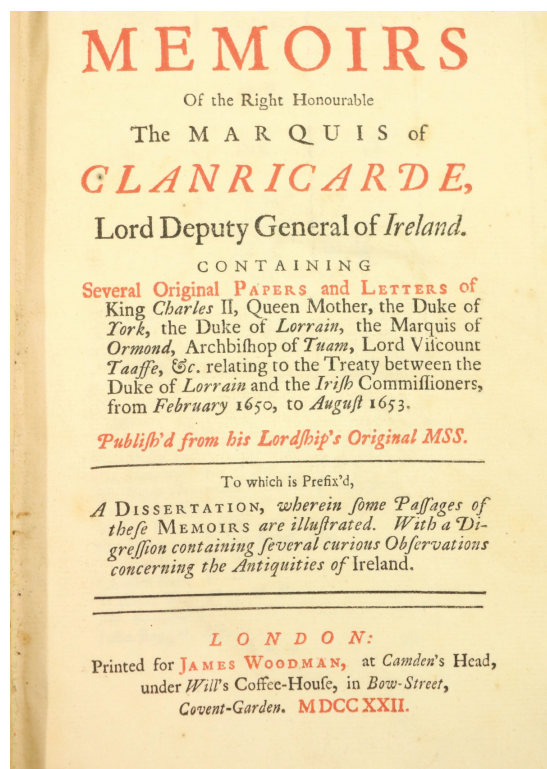
Toner Quinn's 2014 *Report on the Harping Tradition in Ireland*, notes that the Irish harping tradition represents “an exciting niche scene in contemporary Irish musical life, undergoing a new wave of performance, composition, collaboration and experimentation...enriched by world-class Irish and international practitioners.” (Quinn, 2014). There is no doubt however that the contemporary prosperity of the harping tradition is rooted within its rich past, with the combination of *an file*, *an reacaire agus an cruitire* often alluded to as one of the earliest and perhaps most well-known artistic trios in early modern Ireland:

The harper performed in various contexts – accompanying the words of the file or poet that were recited by the reacaire or reciter, and composing and performing instrumental music also.

(Quinn, 2014 p.20)

i The Irish harp was awarded UNESCO recognition in 2019 following a strong campaign led by Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland.

Steady reference to this performance practice throughout historical and contemporary literature marks the merit and magnitude of this famous early Irish trio, such as Ó hAllmhuráin's description of harp music as "a vital corollary to the delivery of verse..." (2003) and Seathrún Céitinn's (ca.1634) description of "*oirfideach ré seinm agus ré gabháil duan agus dréacht do láthair an ríogh...*" - "a musician to play music, and to chant poems and songs in the presence of the king..."ⁱⁱ (Céitinn, ca.1634). The prevalence of this performance practice throughout Gaelic society, and particularly the bardic era in Ireland (ca.1200-ca.1650) therefore highlights harp music as a core component of Gaelic life, combined in performance with the spoken, or sung word of bardic poetry, and performed for the aristocracy. *The Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* provide perhaps the most vivid description of this popular performance practice throughout the bardic era:



The last Part to be done, which was the *Action and Pronunciation* of the Poem, in Presence of the *Maecenas*, or the principal Person it related to, was perform'd with a great deal of Ceremony, in a Comfort of Vocal and Instrumental Musick. The Poet himself said nothing, but directed and took care, that every body else did his Part right. The Bards having first had the Composition from him, got it well by Heart, and now pronounc'd it orderly, keeping even Pace with a Harp, touch'd upon that Occasion; no other musical Instrument being allow'd of for the said Purpose than this alone, as being Masculin, much sweeter, and fuller than any other.

(O'Sullevane, Färber 1722, 2010 p.clxx)

Whilst historical literature clearly recognises the popularity of this tradition and the three core performative elements within it, the type of music performed as well as the role of the harper remains obscure. Unlike Gaelic bardic poetry which has survived in

ii Céitinn's ca.1634 *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* has been translated and added to the *Corpus of Electronic Texts* (2002, 2010, 2014).

*duanairí*ⁱⁱⁱ, the musical element of this performance practice appears to have received less transcriptive attention, which is evident in the absence of notated musical examples throughout known manuscripts from the bardic era. Furthermore, the latter separation of Gaelic words and harp music in the post-bardic transcriptive processes of Bunting (1796, 1809, 1840) and John and William Neal (1724) for example, whilst crucial in saving the music of the harp, further divided the earlier, seemingly inseparable coupling of Gaelic words and harp music. The application of the harp and the harper's role in collaboration with Gaelic bardic poetry therefore represents a somewhat grey area in Irish harp research, known to have been of great importance and popularity historically, but of which little is known. This article, therefore, attempts to build upon our understanding of the harp, harper and their music throughout the bardic era in Ireland, by exploring Gaelic bardic poetry as a vital source in this harping conundrum.

Gaelic Bardic Poetry - The Core of Bardic Performance Practice

Gaelic bardic poetry is an elaborate form of strict-metre, syllabic poetry composed in both Ireland and Scotland between approximately 1200 and 1700^{iv}. Requiring extensive training of up to twelve years (Cusack, 1868; Caerwyn Williams, 1972; Joyce, 1906) and thus representing “the nearest thing in Ireland to University life” (Bergin, 1970), the complex metres of bardic poetry dictated the number of syllables within each poetic line, the syllabic quality of the end-word of each line, as well as the frequency and positioning of poetic ornamentation such as alliteration and rhyme. The *file* belonged to a “hereditary caste in aristocratic society” (Bergin, 1970), with their role in narrating the functioning of Gaelic society held in great esteem. It is widely accepted that the metre entitled *deibhidhe* was the most popular of all the bardic strict metres in Ireland (Knott, 1957), a metre which currently has one-thousand and seventeen poems attributed to it on *The Bardic Poetry Database* (2010), and which was required to pertain to the following strict rules of composition:

iii The *duanairí* represent anthologies of verse, from which much Gaelic bardic poetry can now be sourced.

iv Gaelic bardic poetry is thought to have flourished in Ireland between ca.1200 and 1650, and in Scotland between ca.1200 and 1700. These two regions are closely connected, not only in their geographical proximity, but also through shared elements of their language and artistic practices, particularly that of the harpers. Many Irish harpers such as Ruaidhrí Dall Ó Catháin (late 16th – mid-17th century) and Denis Hempson (1695-1807) spent time performing harp music in Scotland.

The stanza is composed of four heptasyllabic lines, a riming with b, c with d. These *deibhidhe* end-rimes are between words of unequal syllabic length, the final of the second line of the couplet having a syllable prefixed to the syllable or syllables forming the rime with the final of the first, e.g., *seach : uaigneach; labhra : ealadhna*. A monosyllabic word ending in a long vowel may rime with a dissyllable ending in a short vowel, as *mná : locha ; sé : duine*. This rime between words of unequal syllabic length is called by the old prosodists *rinn* and *airdrinn* ; *rinn* being the shorter word, *airdrinn* the longer... The other requisites of *deibhidhe* in its full *dán díreach* style are alliteration between two words in each line, the final of *d* alliterating with the preceding stressed word, and at least two internal rimes between *c* and *d*.

(Knott, 1957 p.18-19)



John Derrick's 1581 illustration of the reacaire, file and cruitire

Knott's subsequent acknowledgement of *deibhidhe* metre as "the easiest of all metres in the strict style" (Knott, 1957) assuredly emphasises the complexity of this form of Irish literature at a relatively early period in Ireland. The strict rules pertaining to Gaelic bardic composition in turn highlight the importance of the content and specific vocabulary used in each poem, which underwent careful consideration and scrutiny in composition. As a result of this, bardic poetry represents a critical source in revealing aspects of the functioning of the harper throughout the bardic era, as well as characteristics of the role, repertoire and sounds associated with the harp in practice.

The Noble Harper

In contrast to *an file* who studied and qualified through various poetic grades^v, little is known about the specific training required of the harper within Gaelic society. Whilst literature subsequent to the bardic era clearly regards the harper as a highly regarded member of the Gaelic retinue^{vi}, references in bardic poems provide unambiguous insights, written by those witnessing the performance of harp music as an accompaniment to Gaelic bardic poetry, into the functioning and perception of the harper and their music throughout the bardic era. The endorsement and praise of the harp by *an file*, one of the elite members of Gaelic society, firstly signifies the admiration for the harp, harper and their music amongst even the highest ranks of Gaelic society. Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, the famed sixteenth century Connaught poet writes of the harp's esteem, it being a possession of the aristocracy:

Tug Conchobhar an gcruit sídhe;

Conchobhar gave the magic harp;

Séad buadha nách bronnfadh rí;

Such a precious jewel as even a king
would not bestow.

(Ó hUiginn, 16th century)



The Trinity Harp, Dublin

These lines of *Tánag adhaigh go hEas gCaoille* underline the tangible esteem of the instrument, which aligns with the elaborate decoration and embellishment of early Irish harps, such as the Trinity College harp and the Scottish Queen Mary harp, both dating from the 14th to 15th centuries. Similarly, Mac Bruaideadha, the sixteenth century Munster born author of *Ceolchair sin, a' chruit an ríogh* (16th century) addresses the harp as “a' chruit an ríogh”, “o royal harp/harp of the king”, depicting the noble connotations of the harp, an instrument owned or more likely performed for the King within the *tuatha* of Gaelic society. Further indication of the aristocratic nature of harping historically

v The highest ranking of *an file* was *ollamh* and the lowest *Fochloc*, of whom “four soundly-constructed *díán*-metres are attempted (maintained?), whose origin is proper.” (Breatnach, 1987 p.47)

vi Joseph Cooper-Walker (1786), Hume (1594) and Gunn (1807) for example are amongst those who have written about the high esteem of the harper and their music within Gaelic society.

in Ireland can be seen in the personification of the harp throughout MacBruaidealha's compositions, where he often engages in dialogue with the harp. Stating that he is "greatly placed in the weaving of the prolonged musical sounds of your strings" - *ro-m-chuir i sníomh sian do théad* (Mac Bruaidealha, 16th century) – MacBruaidealha gives us an insight into the mindset of the poet, the revered perception of harp music by even the most elite members of society and the resonance of the harp. Furthermore, the harp is additionally described in Gaelic bardic poetry as having supernatural capabilities, with Ó hUiginn's *Tánag adhaigh go hEas gCaoille* for example describing the "healing" power of harp music, as seen below:



The Queen Mary Harp preserved in the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh

“ar luibh íce, ar n-órtha chodail”,

“our healing herb, our sleep charm”

le n-íochtar neimh go nuadh-luit

by whom poisoning is cured
by means of fresh wounding;

(Ó hUiginn, 16th century)

The personification and supernatural attestations of the harp here, seen frequently in Gaelic bardic poetry, whilst undoubtedly superficial, endorse the power, high ranking and appreciation of the harp and its music within Gaelic society. Underlining the adoration afforded to the harp and its music by both *an file* and the aristocracy, references like these by extension imply that the harper was also highly regarded throughout the bardic era. Ann Buckley (2000) discusses the ranking of the harper in Gaelic society, with specific reference to the 14th century *Yellow Book of Lecan* and the 12th century *Book of Leinster*, both of which position the harper above all other musicians. Gaelic bardic poetry strongly supports this discussion, as is seen in the below lines from both Céitinn's *Cia an saoi le seinntear an chruit?* and Mac Bruaidealha's *Ceolchair sin, a' chruit an ríogh*:

<i>Cia an saoi le seinntear an chruit?</i>	Who is the expert by whom the harp is played?
<i>Mo chnú is mo chiste-se,</i>	My blood and my true love,
<i>An siollaire geanamhail grin!</i>	Of a good musician. (Céitinn, 17 th century)
<i>A chruit faoidhe fuair gach geall</i>	O harp whose music has surpassed everything. (MacBruaideadha, 16 th century)

Once again, Gaelic bardic poetry here shows us personal, internal perspectives of the harp and its music, which argue further for its authority and importance within Gaelic society. Ó hUiginn intriguingly adopts the word *ollamh* in conjunction with the harp, a term defined as “An ollave, the highest grade of fili” (eDIL, 2019), and which is thus considered primarily as a qualification of the poet. Its use by Ó hUiginn in *Tánag adhaigh go hEas gCaoille*, however, marks this qualification as a potential level of ranking within the harper’s profession, stating “*Cruit ollamhan fhola Búrcach*” - “the harp of the ollamh of the Burkes” (Ó hUiginn, 16th century). Suggesting either that the harper was esteemed to the level of the poet and thus received *ollamh* status within Gaelic society, or that the poet and harper may have been combined within one individual, this description clarifies the elite status of the harper, whilst prompting the notion that the three distinct roles within this performance practice may not have necessarily been conducted by three separate individuals. Broader consideration of the term *ollamh* across historical literature underlines its primary use in poetic practice, but with further reach across some professions, including that of the harper:

“Amhlaeibh Mac Innaighneorach, chief ollamh of Ireland in harp-playing...”
(*Annals of the Four Masters* 2)

“The brehon Ua Duileannain, airchinneach of Eas-dara, ollamh of law, and chief of this territory...”
(*Annals of the Four Masters* 2)

Therefore, Ó hUiginn’s composition may indicate the historical crossover between disciplines within the bardic arts that are often separated in modern artistic practices. This possibility has obvious implications upon the logistical functioning of this performance practice which may not be easily fulfilled within contemporary society given that this mode of practice and poetic composition is now obsolete. It does however strengthen the intertwined relationship between the spoken word and harp music historically, and the highly regarded functioning of the harper as a member of

the Gaelic retinue. As such, perhaps Ó hUiginn's view of the crossover and intrinsically connected nature of harping and literature can inspire the further development and re-imagination of the harping tradition in this direction in Ireland.

The Music Performed by the Harper

As has been stated, little is known about the specific music performed as an accompaniment to Gaelic bardic poetry, however the poems themselves provide insights into the sounds created on the harp, and how they were perceived by listeners. *Cia an saoi le seinntear an chruit?* compares the harp to “*sruth bhinn fhoghar n-orgáin*”, “the melodious stream of sounds from an organ” (Céitinn, 17th century). Whilst referencing another instrument at first sight, this description may in fact compare the sound and perception of harp music to that of the organ, perhaps in relation to the prolonged resonance of both the organ and the early Irish harp. Similarly, Gaelic bardic poetry provides us with an indication of the tempo and approach of music performed on harp as an accompaniment to recitation, with Céitinn describing the “quick, fluent and pure movements” of the harpers fingers in performance that are “swift as lightening” (Céitinn, 17th century). Whilst this description does not on the one hand clearly identify the specific tempo or approach of the music, it does suggest that music performed as an accompaniment to bardic recitation may not have been represented by a single chord or note at the beginning of each line of poetry, as has been previously suggested by scholars^{vii}, and rather may have been more melodic and moving in response to recitation. Reiteration of the “dexterous” harper whose performance was “flawless and error-free in its timing” (Céitinn, 17th century) alongside their elite standing within the ranks of Gaelic society suggest that the tremendous skill and elite standing of the harper marks the unlikelihood of a single chord or note at the beginning of each recited line in performance. Likewise, the emotive influence of the harper upon those listening, as will be discussed below and which the poet Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh describes could “make my flood of depression to ebb” (ca.1640), further re-enforces the likelihood of an accompaniment which intertwined with the words of the poem, and as such could deeply connect with those listening.

Whilst the harp, harper and their harp music, as explained above, were undoubtedly highly regarded within Gaelic society and as such adopt primarily positive connotations

vii Virginia Blankenhorn intriguingly suggests the harper's potential to “simply be used *arpeggio* to mark the beginnings of lines and impose a simple harmonic structure on the stanza as a unit.” (Blankenhorn, 2010 p.144)

in bardic poetry, references also suggest the multifaceted adaptation of harp music in accordance with the poetic content and wider societal occurrences in Ireland. Whilst Mac Bruaidealha describes the sound of harp music as “melodious” he also describes the mournful expression of the harp as a result of continued pressure upon Gaelic society stating:

ó so a leith ní chuala cruit;

henceforth no-one has heard any harp

nach beith foghar guil n-a glór.

that will not have the sound of
lamentation in its voice.

(MacBruaidealha, 16th century)

Stating that “everyone’s delight and joy in music has subsided”, MacBruaidealha shows the changeable character of the music performed on the harp, and its importance as a musical narration to each individual poem performed. Additionally, vocabulary such as *gotha* (*gothach*) defined as “vociferous, resounding” alongside *ciúin* meaning “calm, quiet” in both Céitinn and MacBruaidealha’s compositions further imply the contrasting capability of the harp to perform music both emotively and dynamically responsive to each individual poem. Therefore, the multifaceted sounds perceived indicate the role of harp music within Gaelic society as not only a logistical accompaniment to recitation, but also an emotive extension of the meaning of the words and poetry, having the ability to make deep connections with those who perceived it within Gaelic society, and which thusly added to its significance throughout the bardic era. This multifaceted characteristic of harp music highlighted in bardic poems is supported in turn by the aspects discussed thus far in this article, primarily in relation to the power, esteem, and importance of harp music within Gaelic society. It is clearly this aspect of harp music, experienced by these famed bardic poets, that influenced their written record of the harp, harper and harp music within their Gaelic bardic poems.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this brief reflection upon references to the harp in three Gaelic bardic poems^{viii} provides a greater understanding of the functioning of the harper throughout the bardic era, as well as characteristics of the role, repertoire and sounds associated

viii *Ceolchair sin, a’ chruit an ríogh* (MacBruaidealha, 16th century); *Cia an saoi le seinntear an chruit?* (Céitinn, 17th century); *Tánag adhaigh go hEas gCaoille* (Ó hUiginn, 16th century).

with the harp historically in practice. It is clear from Gaelic bardic poetry that the harp, harper and their music were greatly appreciated and adored throughout the bardic era, whilst also suggesting that the roles within this performance practice may have been shared between *an file agus an cruitire*. Furthermore, as a “vital corollary to the delivery of verse” (Ó hAllmhuráin, 2003), Gaelic bardic poetry indicated that harp music may have emotively enhanced the narrative found in bardic poems, as well as having an array of dynamic capabilities in performance. It is the richness of this poetic medium as a source of harping which inspired my recent PhD research to explore the re-imagination of this performance today. Gaelic bardic poetry has the ability to act as a catalyst in re-imagining this unique performance practice which can at times be overlooked in a modern neo-Irish harping world. Whilst the repertoire of the early Irish harp has broadened our contemporary practice, exploring the collaboration of words and music within a bardic performance setting and with guidance from Gaelic bardic poetry may inspire our contemporary approach to harp performance. Therefore, re-engagement with this performance as a re-imagined, current mode of practice has the potential to crucially signify and draw attention to the historical harping of our ancestors, whilst also broadening our own contemporary parameters of traditional Irish harping.

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