

# HARP PERSPECTIVES

HOW DID IRISH HARPERS  
ACCOMPANY THEIR MELODIES?

A PRELIMINARY LOOK AT PRE-1800 PERFORMANCE PRACTICE EVIDENCE

DR SIOBHÁN ARMSTRONG

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 June edition, Dr Siobhán Armstrong addresses the question of the supposedly lost art of the early Irish harpers: how they accompanied their melodies. Working only from transcriptions made live in the field from Irish harpers in the 1790s, she argues that vernacular Irish harpers didn't operate within an 18<sup>th</sup>-century European context, with a separate 'bass line' or 'chords' supporting the melody, but rather that Irish-harp performance practice was quite different, operating within its own distinct, non-European aesthetic.

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

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

June 2022

*Harp Perspectives* is the Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland online journal. Views expressed in any article published belong to the author only. Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland accepts no liability or responsibility for the validity or accuracy of the information provided.

# HOW DID IRISH HARPERS ACCOMPANY THEIR MELODIES?

## A PRELIMINARY LOOK AT PRE-1800 PERFORMANCE PRACTICE EVIDENCE

Dr Siobhán Armstrong

### Introduction

In the last decade of the 1700s, in the north of Ireland, a nineteen-year-old church organist met a virtuosic, elderly harper who said he was in his nineties. The surviving evidence of their encounters has now enabled me to come to some conclusions about my decades-long question to myself about a vital, and supposedly lost, aspect of the old Irish harping tradition: how did harpers ‘accompany’ their melodies, i.e. what did their lower hand play?<sup>1</sup>

The prevailing narrative has long been that the idiom of vernacular Irish harpers in the aristocratic, Gaelic tradition – which had largely died out by the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – is lost to us; that the ‘bass lines’ that they played to accompany their melodies have not survived, and that we have no option therefore but to play these with newly composed accompaniments.<sup>2</sup> I would like to share with you some conclusions, from my recent PhD research addressing this question, that show that this is not the case. Concrete examples of lower-register texture from the early Irish harping tradition were notated at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and these can inform us about the distinct performance practice of that tradition before it collapsed and died out shortly afterwards. This idiom, it turns out, is very different to the accompaniments now most often heard in contemporary performance of pre-1800 Irish repertory.

---

1 In the vernacular Irish harp tradition, harps were placed on the left shoulder with the left hand striking the shorter, higher strings, and the right hand the longer, lower ones. We could, therefore, call the accompanying hand the ‘right hand’ but this could be confusing for readers who play harps held on their right shoulders – a position in which the right hand plays the melody, not the accompaniment. For this reason – and for others I will come to later – I will use the term ‘lower hand’ to describe the hand that plays the ‘accompaniment’.

2 By ‘vernacular’ I mean a performer in the ancient Irish harping tradition, documented from the 1100s to the 1800s. The early Irish harp was also indigenous to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, where it might more appropriately be called an early *clarsach*.

An Irish-harp lower-register was very different to a European art-music bass line of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Vernacular Irish harpers didn't think in a European-art-music way, with treble and bass delineated into separate spheres of 'melody' and 'harmonic accompaniment'. Rather, they focussed primarily on the melody, in a much older, non-harmonic fashion; their lower-register texture was derived from that melody, mainly echoing it or commenting on it.

The evidence for my thesis comes from field transcriptions made by Ireland's first systematic music collector, Edward Bunting (1773–1843), of the playing of the early Irish harper from north county Derry, Dennis O'Hampsay (?1695–1807), in the 1790s. Importantly, his way of playing is not contradicted by evidence captured by Bunting from O'Hampsay's contemporaries. An understanding of this venerable harper's performance practice therefore has enormous implications for a new, and better, understanding of Irish-harp performance practice pre-1800. This will help anyone interested in trying to get as close as we now can to a historically plausible performance style for harp composers whose compositions have survived in incomplete form – the Scotts, Ferriter, Connellon, Carolan, Lyons, Mungan etc. – and for the reconstruction of additional repertory played by vernacular Irish harpers.

A note about nomenclature in this article: Despite Bunting's use of the term 'bass' – a term also used by some of the harpers themselves in discussing the vernacular melodic accompaniment idiom<sup>3</sup> – I don't use the terms 'bass', 'bass line' or 'bass hand' as these may suggest an omnipresent lower texture, perhaps horizontal and linear, independent and separate in function, providing an underlying support structure and harmonic basis for a melody. None of that describes what I now understand of the early Irish harping idiom. These terms hinder understanding of the new knowledge that my research brings to the fore. So I write instead of the 'lower register', 'lower texture', and 'lower hand'. The primary role of this lower hand was to bolster and to reinforce the intentions of the treble hand rather than to provide an independent accompaniment. So I offer these new terms as commensurate with the evidence I present, and to help us all to think about the historical reality as clearly as possible.

---

3 See, for example, Sanger, Keith. 2014. 'Echlin O'Cathain, Clarsair'. <http://wirestrungharp.com/>

## A European Approach

In 1959, Colm Ó Lochlainn wrote that

*‘[t]he truth is that we know as little of the harpers’ lower register work, unison, harmony or counterpoint, as we do of ‘what songs the sirens sang’*”<sup>4</sup>

Forty years later, the same narrative was still being articulated by Douglas Gunn in *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*.<sup>5</sup> Though Aloys Fleischmann and Gráinne Yeats articulated information to the contrary, over the same period,<sup>6</sup> arrangements of pre-1800 repertory still systematically use European harmony. Some use a chordal idiom:



Figure 1. Hambly, Gráinne. 2003. *Traditional Irish Music Arranged for Harp. Vol. 2.* Mayo Abbey Press, 2:37 Carolán's Kitty Magennis, extract  
Image Courtesy Gráinne Hambly

while others use a more contrapuntal texture:



Figure 2. Loughnane, Kathleen. 2009. *The Harpers Connellon: Irish Music of the Late 17th Century. New Harp Arrangements by Kathleen Loughnane.* Galway: Reiskmore Music, 31 Éirighe an Lae, extract.  
Image Courtesy Kathleen Loughnane

- 
- 4 Ó Lochlainn, Colm. 1959. 'Review. Carolan: The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper by Donal O'Sullivan'. *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 48 (190): 218–22. My thanks to Simon Chadwick for bringing this review to my attention.
- 5 Vallely, Fintan. 1999. *The Companion to Irish Traditional Music*. Cork: Cork University Press, 56.
- 6 See Fleischmann, Aloys, ed. 1952. *Music in Ireland: A Symposium*. Cork University Press, 3; Yeats, Gráinne. 1980b. *Féile na gCruitirí Béal Feirste 1792: Belfast Harpers Festival 1792*. Dublin: Gael Linn, 37; Yeats, Gráinne. 1992b. *The Harp of Ireland: The Belfast Harpers' Festival, 1792, and the Saving of Ireland's Harp Music by Edward Bunting*. Belfast Harpers' Bicentenary Ltd, 32.

These approaches echo European-art-music practice of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, including the increasingly chordal style of melodic accompaniment to be seen in this example, underneath, from the famous harpist and harp-composer, Jean-Baptiste Krumpholtz (1742–1790):

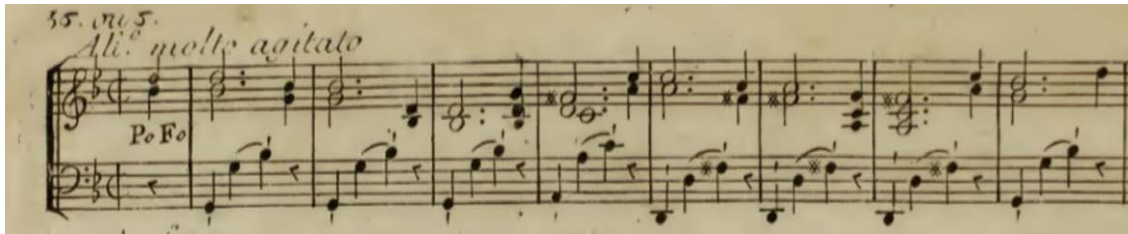


Figure 3. Krumpholtz, Jean-Baptiste. 1788. *Collection De Pieces De Différens [sic] Genres Distribuée En Six Sonates d'une Difficulté Graduelle Pour La Harpe Et Praticables Sur Le Fortepiano*. Paris: H. Naderman, 36, extract

## An Older Paradigm

Surviving evidence of harp performance practice from 1790s' Ireland points in a different direction. This is found in field transcriptions made by the music collector, Edward Bunting, who initially encountered vernacular Irish harpers in Belfast at the famous harpers' assembly there in 1792, and who went on to visit the most venerable of the Belfast performers, Dennis O'Hampsay, several times over the next four years.<sup>7</sup> This meeting between a perhaps 97-year-old and a 19-year-old has given rise to the main body of evidence of what a vernacular harping idiom was before the tradition died out.

<sup>7</sup> Bunting most often called the harper 'Hempson' when referring to the harper. L.A. Walkington, however, who visited the harper's own townland in Magilligan, county Derry, in 1905, wrote that he was 'generally known as O'Hampsay, not Hempson' Walkington, L.A., and Francis J. Bigger. 1906. 'Irish Harpers'. *Ulster Journal of Archaeology* 12 (3), 103.



Figure 4. Dennis O'Hampsay (1695–1807)<sup>8</sup> and Edward Bunting (1773–1843)<sup>9</sup>

In analysing this evidence I have examined only the field transcriptions, i.e. the first drafts that Bunting notated of O'Hampsay's performances, ignoring subsequent manuscript, or published, piano arrangements. I have divided this material into three main categories. In this article I will not show exhaustive examples of each, or the sub-categories I have identified, but will, rather, give a shorter, outline sketch of the vernacular idiom as I understand it.

## Lower-register Texture During Melodic Inactivity

There is ample evidence of lower-register echoing of melodic pitches, performed directly afterwards. The two examples beneath, in compositions by Cornelius Lyons (c. 1680–post 1750), show off-beat echoes, an octave lower, that blend with the sonority of the previously sounded melody notes. On a resonant, brass-wire-strung, early-Irish harp, these would continue to sound unless deliberately damped:

8 Bunting, Edward. 1809. *A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland...* London: Clementi & Co., plate following iii.

9 Pencil sketch by Henry Griffiths (died 1849), published in Petrie, George. 1847. 'Edward Bunting'. *The Dublin University Magazine* 29 (169): 64–73.

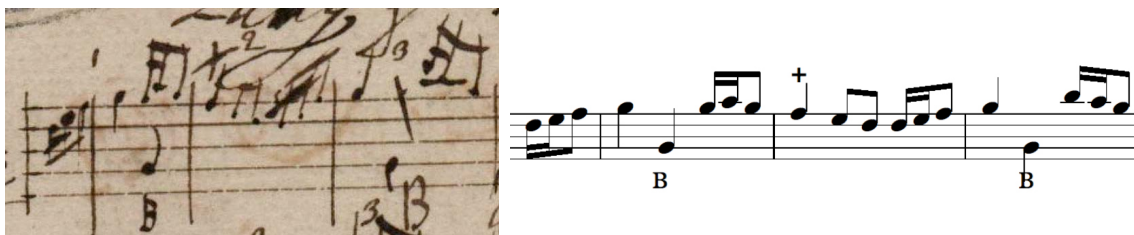


Figure 5. IRLN-Bu MS 4.29, 52 *Lady of the desert*, theme extract and transcription

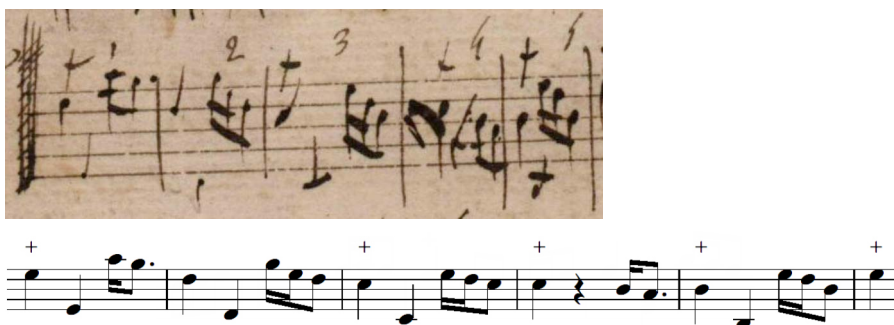


Figure 6. IRLN-Bu MS 4.29, 50 *A chailíní, a' bhfaca sibh Seoirse?*, division extract and transcription

Images Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

Bunting often delineated lower-register notes by marking them 'B' [= 'bass']. He also used a common, European-art-music ornament symbol in these examples to show where the harper added a melodic ornament.

Echoes at the octave are sometimes also part of a melodic interval, generally outlining melodic fourths and fifths, which may be ascending, or descending as in this example from the theme of *Lady of the Desert*:



Figure 7. MS 4.29, 52 *Lady of the desert*, theme, transcription<sup>10</sup>

A close associate of these couplets are those with an added passing note, creating short, linear figures:

<sup>10</sup> Treble clef implied

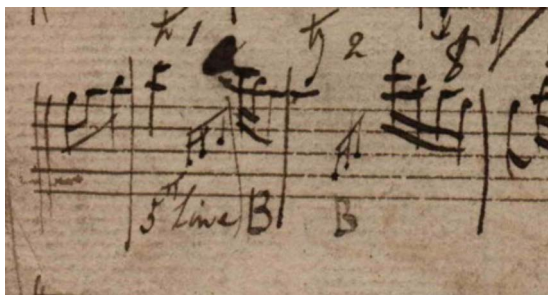


Figure 8. MS 4.29, 164 *A chailíní, a' bhfaca sibh Seoirse?*, extract and transcription

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

## The Lower-hand's Role in Producing the Melody

O'Hampsay's lower hand sometimes assumed a more prominent role, involving itself in melodic production. This resulted in role reversal between the two hands, with the treble hand assuming a more subservient, non-melodic role at these moments.

There is some evidence of single, lower-hand notes assuming a more important role, on strong beats, combined with short interspersions by the treble hand between these, on weak beats, in a reversal of what we saw in the first category.

This example shows the lower-hand sounding an on-the-beat *A*, continuing from the preceding treble note, displaced by an octave. An unusual, lower-register voice-leading then takes place with the next, on-the-beat, lower *G*. The following treble note echoes the lower-register, in a reversal of roles from O'Hampsay's usual practice.

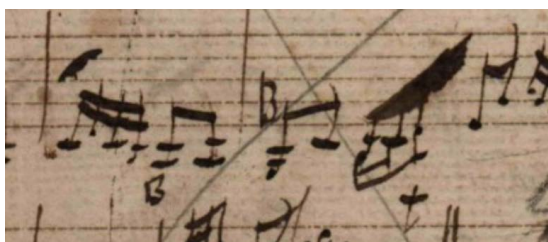


Figure 9. MS 4.29, 45 *Lady Letty Burke*, extract and edition extract

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

*Burns's march*, a study consisting of a recurring refrain interspersed with different episodes, shows a continuous lower texture in the episodes.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 10. *Burns's march*, edition, extract

But this is not a ‘proper’ bass, providing no functional harmony or counterpoint to a melody; nor is it even a consistent drone, since the prevailing broken-octave B drops to an A in the fourth unit each time; this in turn drops to a G in the refrain that recurs at the end of each of the episodes (of which this example, above, is one such). Rather, the lower texture here offers the only melodic / voice-leading aspect of the composition: B to A to G. The main purpose of this lower-hand material seems to be to provide a rhythmic framework to allow the treble hand to practice technique in each different episode.

The next example, in a composition by Thomas Connellon (c. 1639–ante 1700), shows an example of lower-register couplets continuing the melody: *d'* – *e* in the first bar, and *a'* – *b* in the following one:<sup>12</sup>



Figure 11. MS 4.29, 53 *The Jointure*, extract and edition

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

Bunting's field transcriptions also contain examples of short, consecutive melodic phrases, in separate registers, that answer each other, primarily in compositions by Turlough Carolan. For various reasons, this important,

11 *Burns's march* is a unique survivor of a seminal didactic genre: a study designed to allow the treble hand to practice idiomatic passages and melodic ornaments. This might explain why the lower hand's role is to mark the main beats: perhaps in order to provide context and pulse in this unusual composition.

12 I identify specific pitches using the Helmholtz system, with all pitches within any ascending octave similarly identified: C' C c c' (middle C) C'' C'''

intrinsic characteristic of his compositional style has been lost from modern performance practice, but evidence for it can still be found in Bunting's field transcription pamphlets.

The following example is from the earliest dateable Irish harp composition from c. 1600: *Cumha caoine an Albanaigh* ['the mournful lamentation of the Scott'] by John Scott (c. 1570–c. 1650).

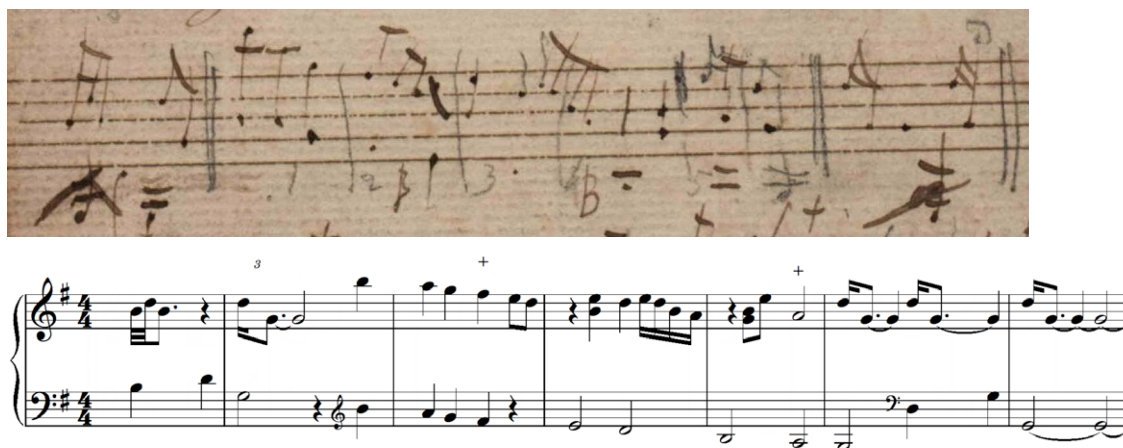


Figure 12. MS 4.29, 158 *Cumha caoine an Albanaigh*, extract and duple-time edition

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

The opening measures appear to possess some continuous lower register but, on closer examination, this can be seen to provide neither counterpoint nor a harmonic underpinning. The two registers often sound in unison or, as can be seen in bars 4 and 5 in my edition, above, the lower register takes over the melodic role from the treble, with voice-leading of its own, while the treble provides only ornamental commentary on unaccented beats. This, therefore, is not an example of a melody-supporting bass line but an instance of melody in the lower-register commented on by a complementary treble hand.

## Simultaneous Melodic Reinforcement by the Lower Hand

The lower-hand can sometimes act as a reinforcing hand to the treble, sounding simultaneously with it.

The beginning (see Figure 12 above) and end of *Cumha caoine an Albanaigh* provide the clearest examples of O'Hampsay's lower hand acting as a reinforcing hand for the treble, producing parallel movement at the octave, struck simultaneously, in scalar passages.

One variation in a variation set composed by Cornelius Lyons, displays a continuous, lower-register sequential pattern.



Figure 13. MS 4.29, 49 *A chailíní, a' bhfaca sibh Seoirse?*, second variation, extract and edition extract  
Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

On the surface, this looks somewhat promising as a 'real' bass. But, on closer inspection, it can be seen to be merely a treble-dependent shadowing with no hint of an independent harmonic underpinning of the melody. This 'bass' simply replicates the significant treble pitch in each phrase in a lower octave, adding only the interval of a fourth under the third beat in each.

O'Hampsay may have emulated his contemporary, the harper, Patrick Quin, who is recorded as having played consecutive dyads, i.e. two notes played together, in the lower register of the recurring refrain of *Burns's March*.



Figure 14. MS 4.33.1, 72 *Burns's march*, extract and transcription (Quin setting)  
Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

These look somewhat akin to a European-art-music bass: they are continuous, harmonic, and provide an accompaniment independent of the melody. But they are harmonically static, and it is only the first of each four that actually outlines a harmonic triad with the treble.

One piece in O'Hampsay's repertory shows unique evidence of richer lower-hand textures: his *féachain gléis* ['a preliminary test or tuning trial'], a unique survivor of an otherwise extinct genre of Irish harp preludes. This composition offers rare evidence of lower-hand shapes sounded in close coordination, or together, with the melody. It deserves a lengthier discussion than it can receive in this article.



Figure 15. MS 4.29, 54 *A féachain gléis*, extract

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

I will point out here only that all the lower-register examples in this piece display a conservative approach to use of the lower hand: none uses pitches outside the pentatonic scale of the composition; lower-hand notes and shapes are all derived from their treble contexts; and they add no harmony beyond the most conservative solution implied by the treble's melodic outline.

## Conclusion

I have presented some of the surviving evidence of harper Dennis O'Hampsay's lower-hand performance practice using, as my source material, only transcriptions notated by Edward Bunting from O'Hampsay's live performance. I have excluded from consideration all of Bunting's later manuscript – and published – piano (and voice) arrangements, seeing this as the only way to establish O'Hampsay's lower-hand practices with any certainty. Using this methodology I contend that Dennis O'Hampsay's lower-register idiom was not the same as that of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century pedal-harpist or keyboard player. Rather

it was sparser and more sporadic, relying on the long resonance, and selective damping, of the brass-wire strings of the early Irish harp to create harmony indirectly if at all.

I find, in his idiom, no evidence of the continuous, independent, contrapuntal bass lines of European art music, nor the rhythmically arpeggiated chords common to European harp and keyboard music of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later. Though O'Hampsay's lower hand did play two-, three- and four-note shapes, these are far removed in style and function from the harmonic accompaniments to be found in European pedal-harp performance practice since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and in modern-Irish-harp practice.

There was considerable parallel movement between his hands, the lower hand most often functioning as an 'echoing' or 'reinforcing' hand, supplementing the melody at the octave simultaneously, or in moments of treble inactivity. O'Hampsay's lower hand sometimes assumed a more prominent role, involving itself in melodic production; this resulted in role reversal between the two, with the treble hand assuming the more subservient role at these points. His hands sometimes answered each other, playing short melodic motifs, in turn, antiphonally.

The question of whether O'Hampsay's idiom was antique, and unique to him, needs to be addressed if we wish to consider whether his way of playing exemplified a wider, vernacular-Irish harping idiom. Could he have been a musical fossil in his own time, playing in an out-dated style while his younger contemporaries adopted more modern, European-influenced ways of accompanying the melodies they played? Significantly, his idiom is not contradicted by Bunting's field transcriptions from other 18<sup>th</sup>-century Irish harpers contemporary with O'Hampsay, suggesting that evidence of his performance practice is, in fact, indicative of wider performance practice in the vernacular Irish harping tradition. In addition, one other source of information suggests that his idiom was not exceptional but that it was more widespread, geographically, and that it can be traced at least to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Early examples of the *port*, a musical genre in Scotland suggested to be connected with harping, survive in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish manuscripts, primarily for Renaissance lute.<sup>13</sup> These are interesting because the tablatures in which they were notated deliver complete textures including lower-register material. They show features in common with O’Hampsay’s idiom, but distinct from the French and English repertory in the same collections. The latter use European functional harmony, bass lines, and counterpoint. But the *port* examples in the same sources are thinner in texture, without independent, continuous bass lines, offering, for example, frequent parallel octaves between the melody and the lower-register pitches (see Figure 16 beneath), features that have everything in common with those found in Irish harping in the 1790s, but documented in Scotland some 170 years earlier.



Figure 16. Graham, George Farquhar. 1847. “GB-En MS Adv. 5.2.18 Robert Gordon of Straloch Lute Book (1627-9) Transcription”, 4, extract transcription.

This suggests the possibility that 17<sup>th</sup>-century lutenists may have been emulating Gaelic harp performance practice in their settings, and pushes back the existence of such an idiom plausibly to the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at least, and suggests a pan-Gaelic spread throughout Ireland and the Scottish Highlands and Islands.

To conclude, I suggest that Irish harpers more generally, in the vernacular tradition pre 1800, thought in a ‘top-down’ way: the melody was the most important feature of the compositions they played, and lower-register texture arose from this, and was closely dependent on it. An independent bass line, continuous, and harmonizing with the melody, was alien to the old Irish harping idiom. It was also inappropriate and unnecessary. Thanks to the long resonance of the early Irish harp’s brass-wire strings, the sparse, lower-hand texture found in Bunting’s transcriptions delivers a much fuller texture in performance than

13 Graham, George Farquhar. 1847. “GB-En MS Adv. 5.2.18 Robert Gordon of Straloch Lute Book (1627-9) Transcription.”; Skene, John. Early- to mid-17th century. “GB-En Ms.Adv. 5.2.15 Skene Mandour Book.” Wemyss, Lady Margaret. 1643–1644. “GB-En Dep. 314 No. 23 Wemyss Lute Book.”

the source material would suggest; a fuller, European-art-music bass line was not needed for a satisfactorily complete aural texture.

My new understanding of vernacular Irish harp performance practice pre 1800 has important implications for modern performance of old Irish harp music, encouraging those of us who are interested in a historically-informed approach to this repertory to re-evaluate how we reconstruct and perform it. I hope that my work in this area will assist Practice-Research performers on early Irish harps, but it may also be of use to players of modern-Irish- or other harps, if performers on these instruments also wish to approach more closely the performative idiom of the vernacular Irish harpers of long ago.

You can listen to my performances of some of the repertory referred to in this article here: <https://siobhanarmstrong.bandcamp.com/> and here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/historicalharp>

## Appendix

Here follows Edward Bunting's field transcription of Dennis O'Hampsey's performance of *Tá mé i mo chodladh 's ná dúisigh mé* ['I am asleep and don't wake me'] followed by my edition. N.B. The symbols used by Bunting in this transcription to indicate where O'Hampsey played melodic ornaments are – as these symbols usually are – highly ambiguous; my suggestions for how to realise these ornaments are speculative and should not to be taken to be in any way definitive.



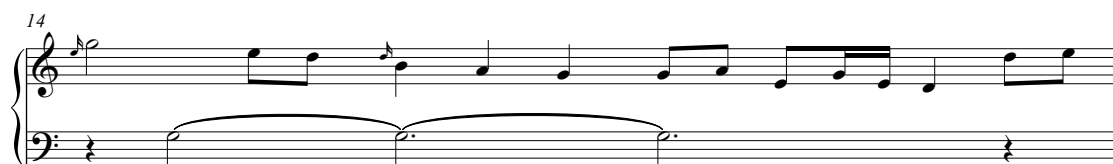
Figure 17. IRLN-Bu MS 4.29, 171, extract, *Tá mé i mo chodladh 's ná dúisigh mé*

Image Courtesy Special Collections and Archives, Queen's University Belfast

# Tá mé i mo chodladh agus ná dúisigh mé

[I am asleep and don't wake me']

IRLN-Bu Special Collections MS 4.29, 171  
From Dennis O'Hampsey (?1695-1807)  
This reconstructed setting: Siobhán Armstrong © 2020



2

21

25

30

33

37

## Dr Siobhán Armstrong

Siobhán Armstrong is a performer, speaker, educator, mentor, and artistic director. She is an Occasional Lecturer at the School of Music, University College Dublin, and one of Europe's foremost harpists playing pre-1800 repertory, on copies of harps from different countries and centuries, performing with prestigious singers and instrumentalists (European art music and vernacular Irish music), period-instrument ensembles, orchestras and opera companies throughout Europe. As founding director of The Historical Harp Society of Ireland, Siobhán is spearheading the international rediscovery of Ireland's ancient harp, strung in brass wires.



In 2014 she located a lost historic Irish harp and, in 2016, Siobhán commissioned the first ever 3D-laser scan of a musical instrument (the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Mulagh Mast* harp) at The National Museum of Ireland. Her recent PhD (Middlesex University, London) has unlocked new information about early-Irish-harp performance practice. The debut CD of Siobhán Armstrong's ensemble, The Irish Consort – *Music, Ireland and the Sixteenth Century* – was an *Irish Times* international classical-music recordings top-five pick of 2021. Siobhán would like to acknowledge The Arts Council of Ireland, Music Network and the Dept of Culture, Heritage and Gaeltacht for their kind support for her work.