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HARP PERSPECTIVES

AN INTRODUCTION TO DIVERSITY
IN IRISH HARPING | A MEMOIR

JANET HARBISON

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 December edition, Janet Harbison takes us through the triumphs, pitfalls and prejudices she has experienced throughout her career as a harper and her aspirations for a diversity across styles of music and teaching methods for students of the harp. Janet's book of arrangements for harp ensemble has recently been published by Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking. We wish all our readers a very Happy Christmas and a peaceful New Year. Nollaig shona agus Athbhliain faoi mhaise.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

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AN INTRODUCTION TO DIVERSITY IN IRISH HARPING | A MEMOIR

Janet Harbison

I am now in my late sixties and over the past half century, it has been a delight to watch the surge in interest in Irish harping. Because of the visibility that all the new technologies have given us, our diversity is in the spotlight. But, just as the appearance of the images of harps on the high stone crosses tells us as much about man's ability to carve the images in stone, it's not that the harp arrived on the scene then, rather that it was already in common use. This is the same for the harp in today's world. There is indeed new energy in our tradition now – but there also was a great deal of harping going on in Ireland a half century ago. The new visibility and our capacity for mass communication presents the opportunity to address some of the hidden issues that lie unaddressed in our collective celebration of our evident diversity. Ours is a proud, old, and multi-faceted tradition.

I started my great harp adventure at Sion Hill Secondary School in south county Dublin in 1968 – which before my arrival, had already produced many star players who were nationally and internationally celebrated artistes. Harps were commonly seen in our communities, at weddings, in church, at concerts and during summer seasons in entertainments for tourists.

This wasn't the only style of harping in Ireland as, over the last 6 decades, the more classical tradition of harping also flourished, promoted by people who believed that to be regarded seriously, the Irish harp needed to follow the classical music model, become literate and align with the established concert (orchestral) harp method. To progress to the concert harp was often regarded to be the purpose of the 'small' or 'folk' harp – and to limit oneself to just the Irish tradition was also seen to be retrograde. This opinion obviously met with a mixed response.

Then, there was the extraordinary decade of the 1970s where a new energy infused traditional Irish music with plucked stringed instruments such as the bouzouki,

mandolin and guitar being embraced in the ‘traditional session’. Of course, in the traditional music world, there was also resistance to the new developments and I attended an ‘Ard Chomhairle’ conference at Comhaltas Ceoltoirí Éireann where there were motions presented about whether the harp and the guitar should be allowed to play in Comhaltas sessions! This fresh energy inspired a number of harp players to become more involved with regular traditional music, even if the instrument was a tad more awkward to bring to the sessions.

So, at least from the 1970s, three distinctive styles of Irish harping co-existed – if not comfortably. As is a common occurrence when there is a ‘new development’, there are protective posturings and a dividing of the contemporary from the conservative. But, in the harp world, there was also the concern that what we presented in our music for tourist entertainments was an embarrassing caricature of the ‘real thing’ – and thus prejudices abounded and smouldered where diversity could have been celebrated.

But we live in more enlightened times now – and this is surely the time to dust off the old opinions and embrace the diversity that history has gifted us. Each of the ‘styles’ of Irish harping present us, our audiences and our students with a magnificent choice – and what I hope to achieve with this article is to articulate these choices and present some of the history from my own experience.

I expect that my mixed musical background is fairly typical of many suburban homes in Ireland of my generation. The different versions of ‘Irish music’ belonged to different groups of people, different kinds of venues, and perhaps, even different political backgrounds! My home was eclectic. My father was a celebrated classical pianist who also loved playing jazz and ragtime music. Both my grandmothers were accomplished classical pianists; my maternal grandmother was a pupil of Cortot in Paris, and my paternal grandmother was a Montessori teacher who also worked as an inspector of music in Primary Schools in Connaught. My father was also involved in traditional music. One of his fellow music students was John Reidy (who is known to the world as Seán Ó Riada, composer of ‘Mise Éire’), and their social circle included Éamonn De Buítléir (producer of *Amuigh Faoin Spéir*, a well-known RTÉ nature programme) and members of the group The Chieftains. They used to have sessions together on Sundays – and after the ‘holy hour’ when the pubs shut for an obligatory hour, my father and

his friends used to play late into the night at home (in the room beneath my bedroom). In south Kerry where we spent our summer holidays, our pub sessions featured mostly songs accompanied by guitars – the songs of Tommy Makem and the Clancy Brothers, of bands like the Wolfe Tones and the Dubliners. In other more sedate company, we would have afternoons with the songs of Thomas Moore and Herbert Hughes. It didn't seem that these worlds liked to mix – and it would have been quite improper for someone to ask the traditional musicians to play 'Danny Boy', or the folk musicians to sing 'The Spinning Wheel', or the drawing room musicians for 'a rake of reels', or the singers' accompanists for 'The Mason's Apron'... Each style of music had its place.

The styles of music in the harp world also had 'their place'.

At Primary School summer camps we were taught Irish and singing with the famous Máirín Ferriter who also taught harp in the Secondary School. My father loved the idea of my learning the harp, so on my return from my boarding year between Primary and Secondary School in Coláiste na Rinne in the Waterford Gaeltacht (Irish speaking district), I was signed up for lessons.

Figure 1: Máirín Ní Shé (top left) in a group of harp players in the 1930s



Máirín Ferriter was one of the dynamic Ní Shé sisters of Dublin – 5 illustrious *fíor gaelgóirí* (native Irish speakers). All of them played the harp. Their ‘style’ was of singing to their own harp accompaniment and Máirín had become a renowned teacher from the 1950s producing some of Ireland’s most iconic artistes: Mary O’Hara, Kathleen Watkins and Deirdre O’Callaghan. Our harp room was a temple to their success with brown and aging newspaper cuttings pinned over the entire surface areas of the walls in our back-stage haven. And, if we proved ourselves dedicated to our art, fame and fortune beckoned to us also.

Song was at the core of our style of harping. Many of us were encouraged to take singing lessons with Sister Angela in the convent – and as well as learning a generic programme of songs, we also eagerly learned the special songs that would get us into the team that played the summer tourist’s cabaret in Dublin’s Jurys Hotel. Here the songs were ‘polished’, many arranged as vocal duets (by Prionsias Ó Ceallaigh) and these had an established (or fixed) harp-accompanying arrangements by Mrs Ferriter. These fixed arrangements were a contrast to Mrs Ferriter’s normal practice which was to encourage that we should arrange our songs ourselves. Once we had mastered chord-playing, we could add instrumental intros and interludes between verses.

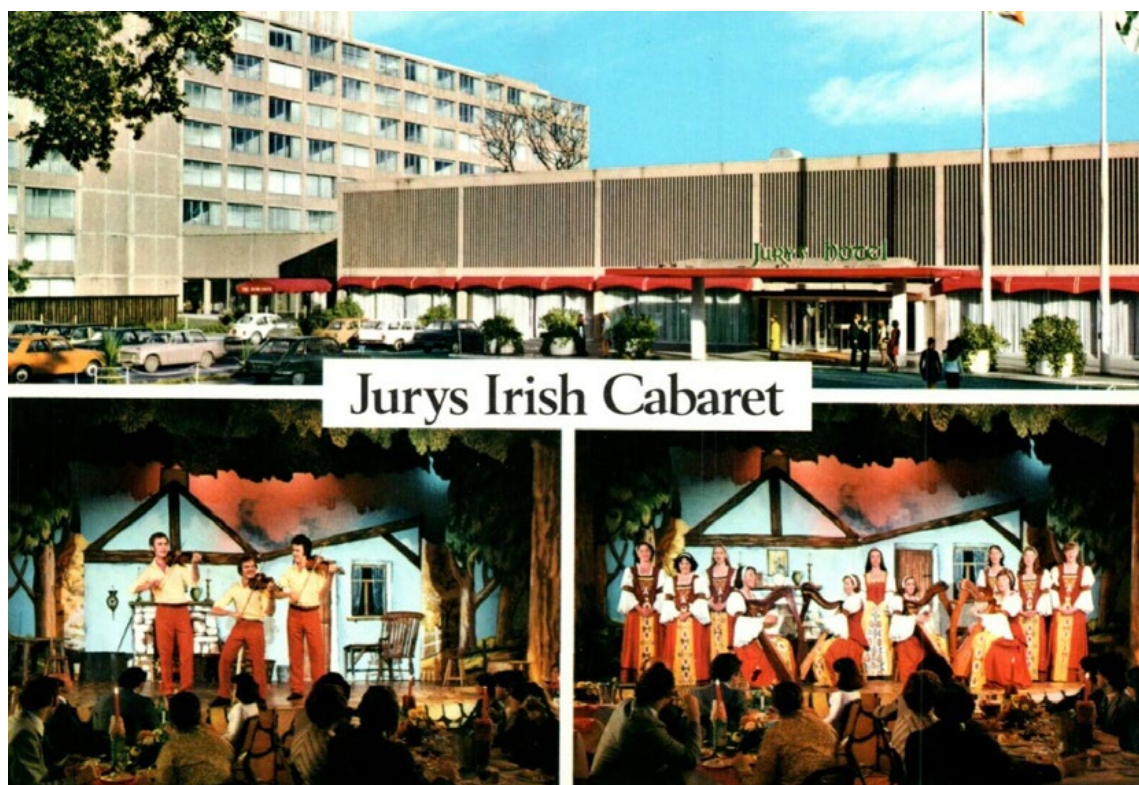


Figure 2: Jurys Irish Cabaret postcard

With Mrs Ferriter, we learned all our music ‘by ear’, without scripts. Mrs Ferriter would indicate what we should play and play along with us until we had memorized the piece. Our notebooks contained only our song texts and no more. Our lessons involved 2 or 3 of us at a time for a class period of 40 minutes weekly and at the morning ‘break-times’ (a 10-minute mid-morning class break), we scrambled for access to the 8 harps that were kept in the harp room. It was a very social place – and we were ‘allowed’ (within reason!) to skip class to practice or rehearse. (I didn’t do this within reason particularly, so my father bought me a harp in my 5th year so I could practice at home). Mrs Ferriter prepared us all to compete at the Feis Ceol annual competitions.



Figure 3: Group of harp players from Sion Hill School

At the Feis Ceoil, all of Mrs Ferriter’s students competed in the ‘Corn Uí Shé’ competition – a competition I expect she placed herself in the programme. I competed over 3 years and I clearly remember my crippling nervousness at performing the songs I attempted to sing. I was a lot more comfortable with ‘instrumental’ music and over my 4 years learning with Mrs Ferriter, I delighted in playing impromptu arrangements of anything and everything I knew. I also explored all the books of music that Mrs Ferriter

had in her cupboard – mostly sent to her by her friend Mrs Paulson of America – and there were a few other mainly British publications with a handful of Irish tunes in them. There was one Irish book of harp music – a book of O’Carolan arrangements by Nancy Calthorpe and as I was well able to read music from my piano training, she looked to me to play the music from the books so she could choose if she liked it.

It was only gradually that I became acquainted with the other ‘styles’ of harping.

Immediately after the Corn Uí Shé competition at the Feis Ceoil, was the An Chruit



Figure 4: Janet in cabaret costume in 1977

competition for solo Irish harp and in 1971, I stayed to hear the competition. I was fascinated with the performances of Noreen O’Donoghue and other harpists of Mount Sackville school in Chapelizod, Dublin, all taught by Sister Eugene McCabe. They played instrumental music and learned from books – quite differently to how we learned at Sion Hill. I understand that they learned from a concert harp syllabus, with Grossi for technical training and the classical tradition for small harp solos. I was delighted to hear this more instrumental music and the following year I entered the Cruit competition myself.

I finished school in 1973 and after a year boarding in St Anne’s College (the domestic science school in Sion Hill) I became a full-time music student at the Dublin College of Music where I took on a number of other instruments including the concert harp with Caitríona Yeats. Only a few months into this adventure, where I was also working on a scholarship programme to progress to the Royal College of Music London, my father became ill and died. While I won the scholarship to London, my sponsors allowed me to

transfer its value back to Dublin, but I would have to earn money to put myself through university. So I joined a few friends and headed off to Bunratty and Knappogue Castles for two summer seasons and they supported my first year at Trinity College.

This was also the year that Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann moved their headquarters to Belgrave Square in Monkstown, near my home in Blackrock. It was a year of all kinds of music! While I delighted in my adventure, there were evident problems for my various teachers and peers. At Trinity College, I thought to delight my classmates with a traditional programme for my first student recital – but I earned their disdain and the nick-name of ‘diddle-ey’. My music was branded ‘Mick and Paddy music’ – which stuck with me for the remaining years of my undergraduate degree. I didn’t play traditional music again in that milieu. Then at Comhaltas, my traditional music friends were quite dismissive of my playing the harp in Knappogue Castle – that I was ‘prostrating myself’ for the tourists (I didn’t understand what that meant at the time!).

It was evident at the College of Music that my non-literate learning of harp with Mrs Ferriter, that was also ‘technique-training-free’, fell a long way short of the standard ideal of classical music training (even though I had won a number of traditional music competitions and was touring the world with Comhaltas). At Trinity College, when we were

choosing our subjects for our final year thesis, I wanted to choose a topic in Irish music, but was advised by my professor not ‘to waste my time on this as it would lead me nowhere’. I completed my thesis on the works of the British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Over the following years, I proceeded very gingerly, keeping my harping



Figure 5: Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann *Echoes of Erin* record cover

worlds quite separate. One word of gratitude however: when Caitríona Yeats moved abroad to work in the Spring, my year of concert harp lessons was completed with Mercedes Garvey who encouraged me to continue with my interest in traditional music – acknowledging that my technique was appropriate for what I was playing (good even!).

For this essay, I don't purport to know enough about the classical approach to learning the Irish harp other than it is the standard classical model similar to learning piano. It is a literacy-lead method with examinations at the end of the school year involving the performance of 3 or 4 pieces, a range of scales, sight-reading and aural tests.

My experience at learning traditional music after my school years with Mrs Ferriter deserves a paragraph. At this time in the 1970s an early '80s, there was no formality in learning traditional music – no classes, no self-professed teachers, no 'Scoil Éigse' at the Fleadh or summer schools. You sat in the session and 'just picked it up' over time. Until I was confident of knowing the tunes, I played chords in the way a piano played with a céilí band. This is not 'self-taught' – rather, I was shaped by the community of musicians at the sessions in Monkstown. I regularly sat between the fiddlers Sean Coyle and Máire Glackin, and the flute player Mícheál Ó hAlmhain often called to my house before the Tuesday and Friday evening sessions and he would give me new tunes he wanted me to play with him in the session... I have had a lot of teachers, as indeed all traditional musicians had in those days.

This leads me to a paragraph or two on why it is important that people recognize what the diversity in Irish harping offers.

We have an enormously rich tradition of song with harp accompaniment. We have a world of music in 'traditional' music – dance music but also slow airs and lamentations, planxties and praise music, folk and song airs played as instrumental music. And there is also what I call the 'New Irish' music as the art of composing is still alive and well. But it is interesting that modern harp music composers compose complete compositions – complete with fixed left hand parts and fully arranged right hand parts with ornamentation included. This is in contrast to the music of 17-19th century harper-composers such as Carolan who only passed on their melodies. It was up to the performer to develop the 'arrangement' of the tune.

I recently presented a keynote speech at a Harp Ireland symposium titled *Irish Harp by note, rote and reason* – recognizing the three learning methods. ‘By note’, I mean the classical tradition of literacy-lead and technique focused training commensurate with the standard classical method. The lack of technique-focused resources has been significantly addressed in recent years with the many publications of Irish harp music for Irish harp players – all since Sheila Larchet-Cuthbert’s *Irish Harp Book* published by Cairde na Cruite in 1975.

The second method of teaching/learning Irish music today is not as I experienced it, where it was unselfconsciously learned while sitting in a session, but ‘by rote’. This is where students will be placed with ‘a teacher’ who, if they are ‘traditional’, will generally teach a fixed version of a traditional tune – complete in arrangement with both a left hand and already ornamented right hand part. ‘Rote’ learning is similar to the ‘Suzuki Method’ where learning is by direct imitation from the teacher. Indeed music learned this way is taught orally, but it is fixed and behaves like a scripted piece.

The third method of learning is ‘by reason’ where teachers teach their students ‘the language of traditional music’. It is about teaching players to ‘make their music their own’ – to learn how to arrange, accompany, ornament and vary a tune. This is the method that I aspire to teaching as people’s lives have become too busy to accommodate regular session nights in their weekly schedules. Parents prefer to send their children to ‘a teacher’ to be taught – and often don’t know what style of harping they will receive – but are keen that students pass exams and compete in competitions, presuming that this is going to provide their children with harp mastery.

In summary, I offer that there are three main styles in Irish harping today: the ‘singing with self accompaniment’ style, the ‘traditional style’ and the ‘classical style’. All are Irish harping but are distinct paths and experiences in Irish harping.

I also offer that there are three methods of learning: ‘by reason’ meaning orally through the creative and intuitive construction of impromptu, self-generated playing (traditional), ‘by rote’ which is also orally but by learning by imitation of an already constructed piece of music where the arranger as well as the composer (if not one and the same) should be acknowledged; and by ‘note’, as a recital of music in the classical way.

All of these are valid styles in our playing of Irish harp music, and in our teaching and learning of it. So, I invite my fellow harpers and harpists to examine where they see themselves; and to own whatever style they perform, teach or learn. In this way, no-one will be confused, disappointed or frustrated and we can thrive, fully embracing this delightful diversity with the confidence of knowing that all students are clear and content with their teacher choice and direction.

Finally, I wish to thank my colleagues, students and former students for their confidence in me, their patience and friendship as I have evolved as a player and teacher through the years. In the publication of my first Tutor Book (in 2004), I profusely thanked my students for having taught me so much and I hope that my experience of journeying through the years, through the triumphs, pitfalls and prejudices, that this article will help with identifying the challenges, articulate the explanations, and clarify the choices that we can consider and delight in. For the diversity is indeed a delight – and I wish you lots of joy, connection and companionship in whatever style or method you choose for your journey.

Janet Harbison



Dublin-born Janet Harbison is a dynamic figure in Irish harping and has performed throughout the world. She is also an acclaimed composer. In 1984, Janet moved to Belfast with a Research Fellowship at the Institute of Irish Studies, Queens University to study the Bunting manuscript collection. As Curator of Music at the Ulster Folk Museum (1986-1994), she directed festivals, conferences and exhibitions, including the Belfast Harpers' Bicentenary and the World Harp Festival Belfast (1992), while continuing to direct the Glencolmcille and Belfast Harp Festivals and summer schools (1986-2002).

Most notable was her cross-community Belfast Harp Orchestra (1992-2002) featuring more than 20 teenage harpers who also performed with James Galway, Alfie Boe and The Chieftains. Personal awards include The Flax Trust award (peace and reconciliation), BPW (Federation of Business and Professional Women) Woman of the Year award, and an honorary doctorate from Ulster University.

In 2002, Janet established the Irish Harp Centre in Limerick until in 2016, when she returned to Ulster University as Visiting Professor of Music. Janet is currently an Irish Research Council scholar at TU Dublin Conservatoire of Music, where she is undertaking doctoral research on the history of the Belfast Harp Orchestra.

In November this year Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland published *The Belfast Harp Orchestra – Arrangements for Harp Ensemble* by Janet Harbison, a book of arrangements for Harp Ensemble in 2, 3 and 4 parts from Edward Bunting's *Ancient Music of Ireland*, transcribed from the 1792 Belfast Harpers' Assembly.