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# HARP PERSPECTIVES

A ROAD TO PHD RESEARCH  
AS AN ARTIST AND  
REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

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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 August edition, Fiona Gryson describes how she combines her career as a harpist, harp teacher and facilitator with her research for a PhD. She imparts some valuable advice on time management and applying for grant funding for PhD research.

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

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# A ROAD TO PHD RESEARCH AS AN ARTIST AND REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Fiona Gryson

## Introduction

Bright, early morning sunlight beams in through the crystals hanging in the windows, causing rainbows to dance around the harps, bookshelves, and walls. A cacophony of delicate, yet persistent birdsong sounds in the air, interrupted by the occasional crow of a rooster, gobble of a turkey, bark of a dog, impatient bray of a donkey or rumble of a plane overhead. The grass outside is still wet with glistening, overnight dew.

This is my favourite way to start the day. The bright, spring and summer mornings when the hours feel longer than later in the day and jobs done all the sweeter. The darker and colder autumn and winter months have their own charm; when I work with the curtains drawn until the sun rises, wrapped in many layers, but the feeling in these early hours is the same. I am reminded of when I would arise early, to get in a little extra practice time before school and then again in college when I would arrive early enough to the building that I would greet the porters as they arrived for work or meet the cleaners as they were finishing up and leaving to continue their day.

There is just something about the feeling of being up early and getting stuck into a task. A sense of satisfaction, achievement and productivity that I don't get at any other time of day. I have, of course, had my fair share of working through the darkness of the night, blinking through and rubbing tired eyes, desperately finishing a task that is due the next morning. It feels great to hit the send or submit button at any time of day (just as long as it meets the deadline!) but my preferred way of working is the early morning. Even better, when harping is the first order of the day.

PhD research seemed like a fanciful idea to me when I was completing my undergraduate degree and an almost impossible notion when I was undertaking my master's degree. I remember playing the harp during that time at the graduation

ceremonies in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin and marvelling at the PhD graduates as their dissertation titles were read out to those present. Each project marked a significant accomplishment and a unique contribution to society. At the end of each graduation ceremony, Professor Brian Norton, the then President of Dublin Institute of Technology, would say in his closing address how he thought PhD students would 'find more hours in the day than they thought possible' in order to complete their work. I could only imagine, but there was always something very appealing about the colourful robes and floppy caps.

## The Beginning

Harp and harping are such important parts of my identity and have been since I started harp lessons aged eleven. I was very lucky that when I started, my teacher Dearbhail Finnegan encouraged me to join the Meath Harp Ensemble and to attend An Chúirt Chruitireachta International Harp Festival very early on. After the initial decision to play the harp, these have been two of the most impactful and influential decisions of my life. It took a lot of commitment from both my family and me to attend all the rehearsals and performances. It was at that early stage that harping and performing became central to my life and I would choose harp over almost every other activity.

In my late teens I took lessons with Emer Kenny in Dundalk before commencing my harp studies with Denise Kelly-McDonnell in Dublin Institute of Technology Conservatory of Music and Drama (now TU Dublin Conservatoire). I am sure it is possible to imagine the importance of those years and the impact those lessons with Emer and Denise and the entire experience of attending the Conservatoire had on me. It was with Denise that I studied for my undergraduate and master's degrees and prepared for my teaching diploma and even after Denise retired, I continued at the Conservatoire with PhD research.

Most of my closest friends are harp players and it's wonderful to be able to relate to each other's experiences and support each other. We enjoy diverse careers as freelance musicians; performing solo, as part of ensembles, chamber music, with orchestras, choirs, on recordings, broadcasts and ensuring the harp's place in the community by facilitating workshops and playing in schools, nursing homes, libraries, festivals, camps and at every other opportunity.



When it came time to choosing what I wanted to do after secondary school, I knew it was either going to be music or primary school teaching. I always knew I wanted to teach. I deliberated and sought the counsel of family, extended family, family friends to determine what would be the best path for me. After much thought and discussion, I decided that I would give music my best effort and see where it would lead. However, now I get to do both, as I combine my love for teaching and performing in my career as a harpist, harp teacher, facilitator and researcher.

## Sowing the Seed

There are a number of reasons why I decided to pursue PhD research, but the initial idea came about in a weekly lesson with a student when we were going through the Royal Irish Academy of Music syllabus for her next Irish harp exam. I was sight-reading and playing through some options to help her decide what pieces she might like to learn. I do this for all my students at every grade as it gives a sense of the music, but we had now arrived at Grade 8 and some of the works were not easily sightread on



the spot. I tried then to find recordings of these pieces for the next lesson but to no avail. Now, that's not to say that recordings of these pieces did or do not exist but rather that I could not access them easily. My students and I are more inspired and inclined to learn music having heard it performed or having listened to a recording of it. I have always enjoyed, and felt it was important to play, the music of the Irish harpers as well as works by Irish contemporary composers such as Brian Boydell and T.C. Kelly and have taught many of the pieces included in the RIAM and ABRSM syllabi to my students. An idea came to me to record the music of *The Irish Harp Book: a tutor and companion*

by Sheila Larchet Cuthbert in its entirety, to make the recordings easily accessible to all so that more students and harpists would know what they sound like and would be interested in playing and performing them.

The seed was sown. I approached Professor Cliona Doris with my idea in December 2019 and she suggested expanding on this idea for a potential PhD project. I didn't pursue the idea for a while, so it lay dormant, and it was only when Cliona emailed me about applying for a Government of Ireland Postgraduate Scholarship in August 2020 that I really considered it and decided to go for it. I am indebted to Cliona for all her support and guidance. Her help was invaluable during the application process and ever since.

With hindsight, I think PhD research was a natural progression for me. I thought my academic research journey had come to an end after my master's degree in music performance but when I found a topic that I was interested in researching and studying, it just made sense. I have always loved learning and improving my skill on the harp and acquiring more knowledge and information about the history of the harp in Ireland. A harp pedagogical focus felt right and important for me as a harp teacher and performer of the harp in Ireland. It also helped that I knew several friends and harpists who were undertaking PhD research at the time, so I had an idea of what it entailed. It seems to me that my generation of harpists are integral to our harping community, we are like chainmail, looking up to and being inspired and mentored by the older generations and, in turn, passing on what we know and bringing on the next generations. We are all part of the fabric that is the transition of what went before and what is coming next.

## Sprouting

Before pursuing PhD research, I first undertook BMus and MMus studies. In 2015, I graduated with a First-Class Honours Bachelor of Music Degree, specialising in Pedagogy. Following this I graduated in 2018 with a Master of Music Performance degree. These degrees developed my artistic, pedagogical and research skills simultaneously and in doing so, prepared me for PhD research by training me to think differently and critically, to constantly evaluate my teaching and performance, and the performances of my students, to consider everything as a reflective practitioner and to be an active listener and learner.

In addition to my bachelor's and master's degrees, I have pursued further professional development in performance, musicology, research and pedagogy. Training with some of the world's leading harpists such as postgraduate studies in harp performance with Dr. Irina Zingg at Civica Scuola di Musica Claudio Abbado, Italy, and repeated

participation in the International Harp Summer Academy 'HarpMasters' PRO, Switzerland and the Catrin Finch Summer Course Academy were inspiring and advanced my performance practice and pedagogical approaches as I worked continuously on repertoire, style, ensemble, sound production, technique perfection and detailed interpretation. Through these I connected with a wonderful international community of harpists. Attending and working at An Chúirt Chruitireachta International Harp Festival as a member of the Cairde na Cruite committee, as well as participating and performing at symposia and workshops organised and facilitated by Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland and Liz Doherty of I Teach Trad, have always been wonderful for inspiring creativity and further connecting, collaborating, learning and exploring with the harping community in Ireland.



Siofra Ní Dhubhghaill, Clíona Doris and Fiona Gryson performing at the Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland Symposium in TU Dublin Conservatoire, Grangegorman, Dublin, November 2022

## Challenges

The first challenge I faced in entering a doctoral programme was applying for funding. Having received advice from friends who were already doing or completing PhD research, I told myself that I would only undertake the research if I received funding to do so. I worked part-time in music and gave private lessons while I studied for my other degrees, but I knew PhD research would not be an option for me without funding.

The process of applying for Irish Research Council (IRC) Government of Ireland Postgraduate scholarship requires intensive work over many months. I was in almost constant communication with Cliona via email, messages, phone calls and many meetings from when we started the application in August to the date of submission in October. It requires a great deal of time and effort with no guarantee of success as the process is difficult and highly competitive. Applicants work on new skills and must learn how to present and write about themselves and their work in a way that is relevant and shows them in the best light. Two important aspects of the IRC application are firstly, details of the applicant and how they are best suited to a career in research and the specific project and then, a thorough specification of the project itself. We had to create a very thorough and structured four-year plan for the PhD research, from year one to thesis submission. My entire PhD research project had to be well-prepared and mapped out through detailed proposals, schedules, timelines and charts indicating annual and monthly goals, which covered all the various aspects of the project from an initial abstract, the central research questions, aims and objectives, training requirements, research design and methodologies, planned dissemination and artistic outputs to examinations and evaluations. Developing this detailed plan made the project come to life and feel real.

I was getting excited about undertaking the research and getting started. Even after submitting my application with additional requirements from my potential supervisors and references, it was still several months of waiting, and uncertainty before we heard the outcome and decision from the IRC. I am now very grateful and thankful to have received funding from the Irish Research Council to pursue PhD research at TU Dublin Conservatoire. My advice to potential future candidates is to start early, a minimum of six weeks in advance, work with an experienced and supportive mentor and be prepared to put in a lot of time and energy.

Once I received news about the funding and my acceptance to the postgraduate programme in TU Dublin, I had to make the very difficult decision to let go of some of my students and recommend they continue their lessons elsewhere. I knew I needed to prioritise time to work on my research from the beginning and I would need to cut back on my teaching hours and freelance work. It was very hard to say goodbye to students and families I had known and taught for years but I knew it was the right thing to do at the time.



In one sense, starting a PhD was a big change but in another, it felt like the next step. It put into practice the skills and training I had received up to this point and it was an exciting new chapter. I found the transition from bachelor's to master's level more challenging, as I had to adapt to being in charge of my own time after years of following a set schedule since primary school. By the time I started the PhD, I had learned to manage my time better. I am still working on this and think I always will. The hardest part of doctoral study for me at the moment is starting writing tasks, working out the layout and structure of writing (the fear of the blank page) and beginning a task. Once the layout and structure is set it seems more like filling in the gaps and, although challenging, more manageable than starting. Having said that, since adopting the phrase 'done is better than perfect' and with the ever-encouraging support and guidance of my supervisors Prof. Cliona Doris and Dr. Helen Lawlor, these too are becoming easier.

Another challenge, relating to time management, is deciding what to do on any given day and getting started. My favourite part of doing PhD research is the multi-faceted nature of it but this can also be difficult to manage. I am grateful that my research draws on the three main areas of my work; research, performance and pedagogy. In any given day, I could be teaching, practicing, performing, recording, writing, researching, planning projects while always trying to stay on top of the endless administration tasks and correspondence. The various strands scaffold each other, providing structure and support, broadening my perspective and a more complete understanding of the field.

For instance, when I am working on a piece for performance and reflecting on my approach and evaluating my performance, I am also thinking about the potential challenges for students and how best to teach the piece to students, while also considering the context of the pieces and how it might relate to my research. This way of thinking developed through the training I received during my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. This may be why it seems like everything I have done and all the experiences I have had, have led me to this PhD research. This project brings together all the various aspects of my learning and experience.

I am currently a year and a half into this research journey and the next big step is preparing for my Confirmation exam in the autumn. The Confirmation exam is a formal progression milestone for PhD students. I must submit a significant piece of written work and undergo an oral examination.

The biggest struggle in the first year was figuring out where to start and what to do first. I was eager to learn more about the harp and work on the contextual background of my research but the amount of reading required was a little overwhelming. As it was the very beginning, I didn't know what would be relevant and what would not, so I tended to take notes on everything. I learnt a lot more about the history of the harp in Ireland and how to critically evaluate what I was reading. There are certain training requirements undertaken in postgraduate research study. In year one, I focused a lot of energy on training and upskilling. It was encouraging to meet with fellow researchers who were at a similar stage to share experiences and support one another. Having to focus on smaller, achievable tasks like weekly reading for class discussion or writing assignments, while continuing to work on the larger, more long-term research project helped with a sense of achievement and progress. The modules on research integrity, data management and starting research allowed me to familiarise myself with how to approach research at doctoral level while other modules on issues in musical scholarship and technology in music were relevant to my project and further developed my critical thinking and analytical skills.

Students are also granted the opportunity to develop communication and dissemination skills through regular postgraduate research presentations and more formally through the annual evaluation, a confirmation exam and the final *viva voce* processes. In year one, I had the pleasure of collaborating with fellow PhD researcher Rachel Duffy for a performance as part of her paper at the inaugural 'Perform Live Festival' at the National Concert Hall. This was my first academic conference so it was wonderful to experience it with a friend and colleague, and see what is involved at these events and how to prepare and present a paper. I had been to a few academic conferences as a volunteer during my time as an undergraduate but it was different to experience it as a researcher. I have experience in performing and attending harping events, symposia and concerts, but this was a whole new world with a new community of academics from varying fields. It was a lot to take in but enjoyable to learn more about music research in Ireland. I then, with the support of my supervisors, presented my first paper at the joint ICTM and SMI annual conference in January 2023.

Conferences and symposia can be inspiring, daunting and exhausting in a similar yet different way to performing. The days and sessions are full and long with papers on varying topics and ways of research and thinking. My favourite aspect of presenting the research is the actual presentation or 'performance'. I am ever-grateful to my former speech and drama teacher, Avril Molloy for instilling these skills in me from

a young age. I continued to develop them as a performer and now again in research presentations. The intimidating part for me is having to field questions about your research and methodologies immediately afterwards, as you have no idea what people might ask and whether you will be able to answer them sufficiently. The questions are useful, offering new perspectives about your research and can help direct future plans and ways of thinking.

## Journeying

Through PhD research, I am continually developing my academic skills and building a research, performance and educational career through a commitment to Irish harping. I am advancing my knowledge and understanding of historical and contemporary harp practice in Ireland and I hope to make an important contribution to this tradition through my engagement with pedagogical transmission, practice and repertoire. PhD study provides the environment, both to develop my research career and to contribute to the preservation, performance and awareness of the harp in Ireland. In turn, I want to challenge myself to discover more about harping in Ireland and to advance its research and practice.

So far, a lot of my research has centred around *The Irish Harp Book: a tutor and companion* by Sheila Larchet Cuthbert. I have been researching the background and context for the *Tutor for the Irish Harp* and *27 Studies from Five Finger Exercises by Czerny, Etc.,: adapted and fingered for the Irish Harp* by Mother Attracta Coffey (M. A. C.). which are incorporated in *The Irish Harp Book*. I am carrying out detailed study of the music included in these publications and considering their value and importance on harp pedagogy in Ireland.

Concurrently, I have been learning, studying and performing the pieces from these three publications and increasing my knowledge of the history and pedagogical landscape of the harp in Ireland. I have learned that M. A. C.'s reasons for choosing the '27 Studies' were pedagogically-focused. The studies not only strengthen technique by working on finger placement, dexterity and agility, they are also a useful tool for teaching, and learning to recognise rhythmic patterns, understanding harmony in chords and inversions while also covering dynamics, articulation, ornamentation and harp-specific techniques such as lever changes and harmonics and musically speaking, they are very engaging for students.

Furthermore, these publications grant us an insight into M. A. C.'s and Sheila Larchet Cuthbert's pedagogical objectives and understanding their harp pedagogical practice. As a crucial link to our harping history, they confirm the influence of European music style on the harp pedagogy of Ireland at that time and showcase influential harpists, composers, musicians and arrangers of the time. In 1975, Larchet Cuthbert deemed the '27 studies' relevant and important enough to merit their place in *The Irish Harp Book*. Today, *The Irish Harp Book* remains a significant pedagogical resource. The inclusion of it and the studies in the current RIAM syllabus demonstrates their continued pedagogical value to the harping community and contemporary pedagogical practice in Ireland today.

Like many contemporary harpists today, I now divide my time into strands and focus on what is coming next. I have realised that this type of career is similar to the careers of many harpists in Ireland today, juggling a variety of different responsibilities and commitments whilst always actively engaging with the harping community and being an advocate for the harp in our own ways. The journey to PhD research is a winding road with many diversions, changes of direction and stops along the way but ultimately it's about the experience, the research and the contribution to knowledge.



## Fiona Gryson



Fiona Gryson is an award-winning harpist based just outside Ashbourne, on the border of Meath and Dublin. Fiona enjoys a varied career as a freelance harpist and teacher, and has performed as Principal Harpist with the National Symphony and RTÉ Concert Orchestras, the Irish Chamber and the Ulster Orchestras. As a soloist and member of ensembles, she has performed extensively nationally and internationally, both live and on television and radio. She is in demand as a teacher of both Irish lever harp and concert pedal harp and is director of the Fingal Harp Ensemble and co-director of the TU Dublin Conservatoire Harp Ensemble with Rachel Duffy.

Fiona recently received funding from the Irish Research Council to pursue PhD research at TU Dublin Conservatoire. Fiona completed postgraduate studies in Harp at the Civica Scuola di Musica Claudio Abbado, Milan with Irina Zingg. She graduated with a Master Degree in Music Performance from the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama with Denise Kelly-McDonnell having previously graduated with a First Class Honours BMus degree in Performance and Pedagogy and the Nuala Levins Perpetual Award for Pedagogy from the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama.

Alongside Rachel Duffy, Fiona was delighted to co-direct An Chúirt Chruitireachta International Harp Festival 2023 which took place for its 38th year at An Grianán, Termonfeckin, Co. Louth in June.