

CRUIT AGUS CRUITIRE

# HARP

AND HARPER



# The Irish Harp



Lá na Cruite  
Harp Day

Saturday 18 October 2025

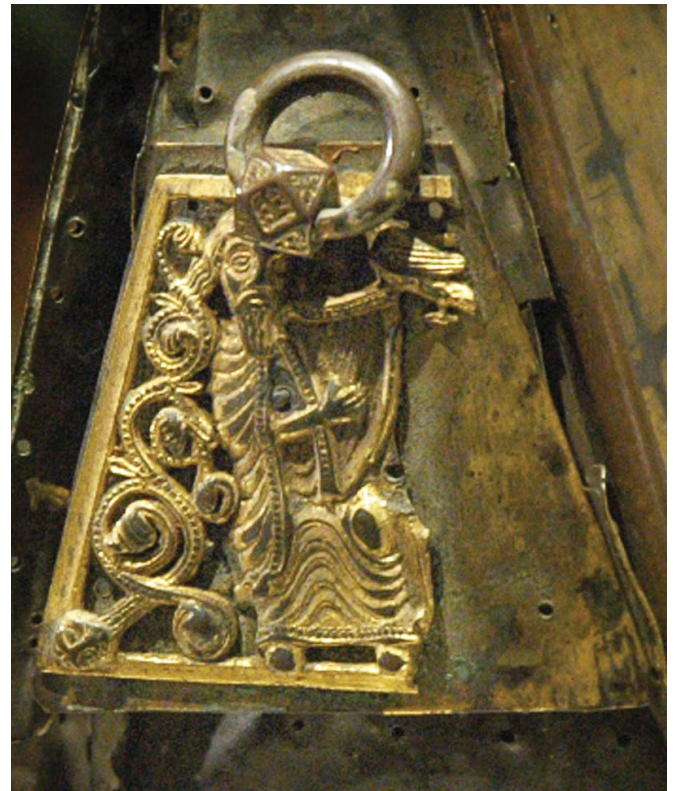
## Ireland's national instrument

The harp has been played in Ireland for more than 1,000 years. You will see it on early stone crosses where it is shaped like a triangle with strings made of brass wire. It was generally made from a native Irish wood called willow. Every High King and chieftain in ancient Ireland had a harper to play for them and a poet to write poetry in their honour. The harper played to accompany *filíocht na mbard* - bardic poetry. The harper (an *cruitire*) played beautiful music while the reciter (*an reacaire*) performed a poem. As far as we know, harpers were mostly men in those days



From John Derrick's *Images of Ireland*, 1581

Harp music had magical powers in ancient Ireland. Legend has it that when a harper played a *suantraí* (lullaby: soft slow music), he soothed everybody to sleep. When he



The St Mogue bronze relic box has what might be the oldest image of a harp! It is thought to date from the 10th or 11th century.

played a *caoineadh* (lament: sad, sorrowful music), people were filled with sadness and when he played a *geantraí* (a fun tune; bright and joyful) people became very happy. The harp has always had a very special place in Irish society and is Ireland's national emblem. You will see it on our coinage, on letters from the government, on our Garda uniforms and the uniform worn by our army.



In 1792, the harp was in decline in Ireland and a group of people in Belfast organised a harp festival there to save the harpers' music from being lost for ever. 10 Irish harpers and one harper from Wales attended the festival and played their favourite harp music. The oldest harper there was from Co Derry, **Denis Hempson**. He was 97 years old, and better again, lived until he was 112! He played the harp with his nails rather than the finger pads. The youngest harper at the festival was **William Carr** who was only 15 years old, and only one woman, **Rose Mooney**, performed.

**Edward Bunting**, a young organist from Co Armagh was only 19 years old when he was asked to go to the Belfast Harp Festival and write down the music played by the harpers



Portrait of Edward Bunting (© National Library of Ireland)

# **Lá na Cruite Harp Day** Saturday 18 October 2025



A page from Bunting's notebooks which are in Queen's University Belfast. They had no way of recording the music in 1792, so he wrote down the music notes as they were being played by the musicians.

there. He collected lots of information about the harp from the harpers as well as many harp tunes and songs at the festival. After the festival, he travelled all over Ulster, and as far west as Mayo collecting from harpers and singers. He published the tunes in three volumes of music called *The Ancient Music of Ireland* in 1796, 1809 and 1840. He moved to Dublin, where he lived with his wife and family in Baggot Street. He took an active role in Dublin musical life and played the organ in several churches including the well-known Pepper Canister Church. Bunting is buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

# The Story of Turlough Carolan

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Turlough Carolan was born in 1670 in a small village called Nobber in County Meath in the east of Ireland. His family was poor, but they loved to sing, dance, and celebrate together. When Carolan was still a boy, his family moved to County Roscommon, where he spent his childhood, surrounded by the beauty of the Irish countryside. When Carolan was 18 years old, something very sad happened — he became sick with smallpox, a common illness at the time. Although he survived, the sickness took away his eyesight, and Carolan became blind. He felt upset and unsure of what his future would hold.



*Statue of Carolan in Co. Leitrim*

But Carolan was not alone. A kind woman named Mrs. MacDermott Roe, from a wealthy family, saw his talent and wanted to help. She sent him to learn how to play the harp. Although he couldn't see,



*Late 17th Century harp which might have belonged to Turlough Carolan (National Museum of Ireland)*

Carolan could still hear beautiful melodies in his heart. After three years of learning, Carolan didn't just play the harp — he started writing his own music! His very first composition was a tune called *Sí Bheag, Sí Mhór*. This song was inspired by an old Irish legend about two hills where magical fairies lived. According to the story, the fairies from each hill had a big battle, and the music of *Sí Bheag, Sí Mhór* tells the tale





*Carolán, the Irish Bard, James Christopher Timbrell, 1844.  
(© The O'Brien Collection)*

of this magical fight. The tune is soft and enchanting, just like the fairies themselves.

Carolán became a travelling harper, riding across the Irish countryside on horseback, together with his guide, and carrying his harp on his back. He visited castles, mansions, and cottages, bringing joy to everyone who heard his music. One of Carolán's most famous compositions is *Carolán's Concerto*. The story goes that, in Dublin, Carolán met a talented Italian violinist called Francesco Geminiani, who played a beautiful piece of music. Carolán, feeling inspired, said, "I think I can write something just as good!" And he did! *Carolán's Concerto* is a lively, cheerful tune that shows off his musical skills.



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*Portrait of Turlough Carolán, by Francis Bindon c.1720 (© National Library of Ireland)*

Later in his life, Carolán wrote a very special piece called *Farewell to Music*. By this time, Carolán knew that his life was coming to an end. This song was his way of saying goodbye to the music he loved so much. It is a gentle, peaceful tune,

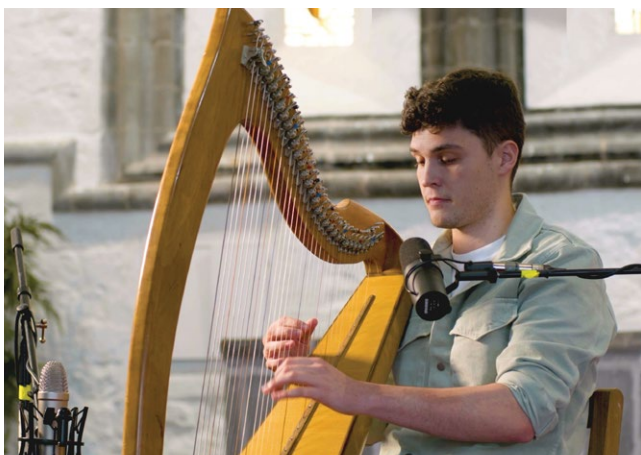


A page from Edward Bunting's notebooks showing a reference to Carolán's name. These were handwritten around 1792. They had no way of recording the music in 1792, so Bunting wrote down the music notes as they were being played by the musicians. Thanks to him, we have a record of Carolán's music today. They are stored in Queen's University Belfast.

filled with both sadness and joy, and it remains one of his most moving compositions.

Carolan wrote over 200 pieces of music during his life. His melodies were so beautiful that people still play them today. He wrote songs not just for the rich, but for everyone, and his music was filled with happiness, sorrow, love, and laughter. He wrote tunes for weddings, birthdays, and even for friends he admired. Many of his songs were about the people of Ireland and their stories. He lived a long and happy life, traveling, playing, and composing until he passed away in 1738.

Today, Turlough Carolan is remembered as one of Ireland's most famous musicians. His music is still played at festivals, in concert halls, and by people all around the world who love Irish music. So, the next time you hear the sweet sound of a harp, think of Turlough Carolan, one of Ireland's 17th century blind harpers, whose heart was filled with music that will live on forever.



*Séamus Ó Flatharta*

## The Irish Harp

Nowadays, Irish harps can be made of wood such as maple, cherrywood and walnut, and it usually has 34 gut, nylon or carbon fibre strings. There is a great interest in reviving the ancient style of playing with the nails on brass wire strung harps. There are 15 harp makers in Ireland and they make harps for harpers in Ireland and all over the world. There are hundreds of young people playing the harp in Ireland today. Irish harping has received special recognition from UNESCO; it is a unique part of our cultural heritage that continues to grow and develop in Ireland and all over the world.



*Lisa Canny*





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*Moya Brennan and Cormac de Barra*



*Máire Ní Chathasaigh*



*Catriona Cannon and Kathleen Loughnane*



*Gemma Doherty, Saint Sister*



*Maeve Gilchrist, Harp Day 2020*



*Gráinne Hambly*





*Bridín*

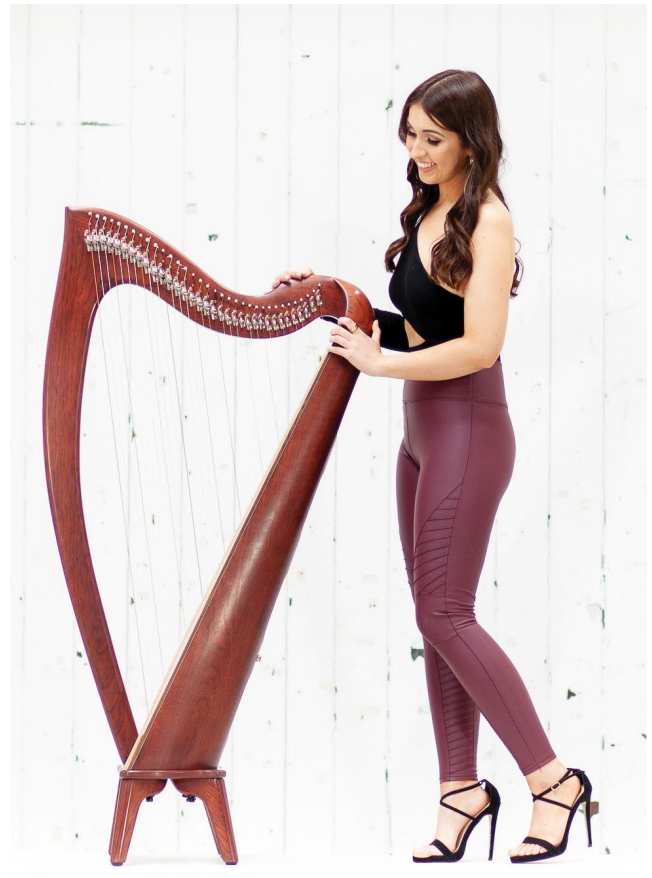


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*Alannah Thornburgh*



*Éadaoin Ní Mhaicín*



*TG4 Gradam Ceoil Musician of the Year 2020, Laoise Kelly*

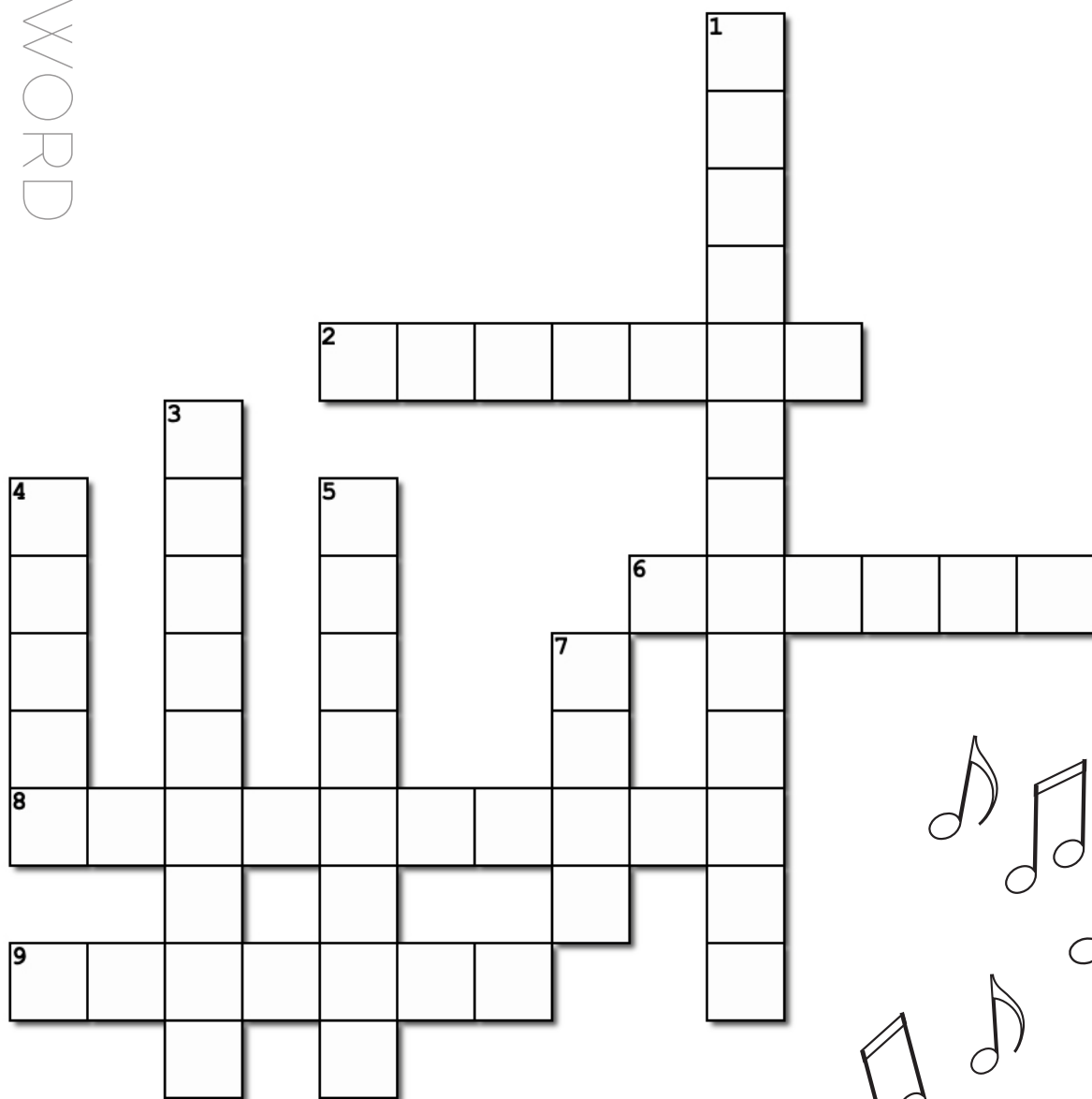


# Crossword



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## Across

2. How many harp makers are there in Ireland? (7)
6. Where was Turlough Carolan born? (6)
8. How many strings does an Irish harp usually have? (9)
9. You play the harp with your \_\_\_\_\_ (7)

## Down

1. What was the surname of the woman who helped Carolan? (13)
3. What was the name of the Italian musician who inspired Carolan? Francesco \_\_\_\_\_ (9)
4. The Irish word for harp is \_\_\_\_\_ (5)
5. What age was Edward Bunting when he wrote down the music he heard at the Belfast Harp Festival? (8)
7. The body of the harp is made of \_\_\_\_\_ (4)



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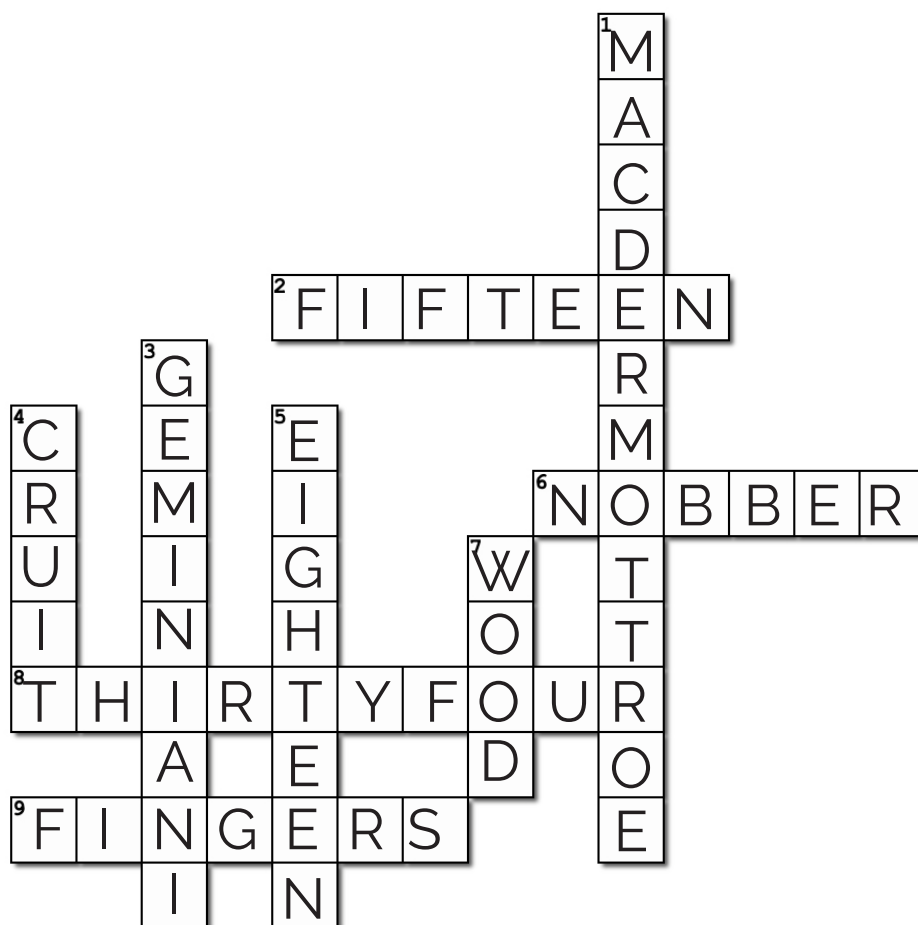
# Quiz Questions

1. Who collected the ancient music from harpers at the Belfast Festival?
2. What was the name of Turlough Carolan's first song?
3. Name the only woman who played at the Belfast Harp Festival.
4. Where did Edward Bunting live before he moved to Dublin?
5. What is the Irish word for a lullaby?
6. What illness caused Turlough Carolan to lose his sight?
7. Where is Edward Bunting buried?
8. Which international organisation has recognised Ireland's special harping culture?
9. How many pieces of music did Turlough Carolan write during his life?
10. Name a well-known Irish harper.

1. Edward Bunting 2. Si Bheag, Si Mhór 3. Rose Mooney  
4. Armagh 5. suantraí 6. Smalhpox 7. Mount Jerome Cemetery  
8. UNESCO 9. over 200 10. any included in the worksheet

Answers





## Send Us Your Story

We hope that you've enjoyed learning all about the harp and its story in Ireland. Now we want YOU to tell us about the harp! Write a short story or poem about the harp. You can include as much or as little detail as you want and your story/poem can take whatever form you like.

You can type it out or write it by hand, you can even include some drawing or illustrations.

Ask your teacher, parent or favourite grown up to scan and send it to us at [info@harpireland.ie](mailto:info@harpireland.ie) so we can share your stories with the world!

All stories sent to us will be displayed on the Cruit Éireann | Harp Ireland website Harp Day 2025 page.



## Labhraí Loingseach

A long time ago in ancient Ireland there lived a king named Labhraí Loingseach. He was a great and strong king who had won a lot of battles and wars. There was something strange about Labhraí Loingseach though - he only cut his hair once a year. And stranger again, year after year, the barber who cut his hair disappeared without trace!

In King Labhraí's kingdom, there was a young man named Dónal. He dreamed of becoming a famous barber but his mother did not approve.

"You are my only son. What if our cruel king asks you to cut his hair? You will be killed!" Dónal's mother wanted him to become a great hero instead. Then one day, a messenger from the king's court knocked at the door. Dónal had been chosen to be the next unfortunate barber to the king.

His mother became very worried. It wasn't fair that Dónal should suffer. She raced as fast as she could to the king's palace but the guards would not let her pass. So she knelt at the palace walls, weeping and wailing all day and all night. Her cries could be heard for miles around and the king's dogs whimpered at the sound.

Eventually, King Labhraí thought his eardrums would burst with her terrible screeches, and he marched out to speak to Dónal's mother: "Why are you screaming and crying outside my palace? I haven't slept a wink all night!" he shouted. She pleaded with the king: "I am in despair because my son Dónal is to cut your hair. Please, do not have him killed! He is my only son. If you do not spare his life, I will stay here and weep for him for the rest of my life!"



King Labhraí was moved by the woman's grief. Also, he could not imagine having to listen to her cries any longer. He promised to spare Dónal's life on one condition:

"Your son must swear not to tell anybody what he sees when he cuts my hair. Not a word to anything with eyes or ears!" Dónal promised to keep King Labhraí's secret. He cut the king's hair and no harm came to him. However, shortly afterwards, he became very ill.

His mother was very worried and asked him what was wrong. "It's the king's secret, and now my secret too. I can't think about anything else and I can't sleep. Worst of all, I can't tell anybody!"

His mother took him to see a druid, who had magic powers. The druid listened to Dónal's dilemma and said to him: "The cure is obvious! If you can't tell this terrible secret to anything with eyes or ears, you must tell it to an old willow tree. This will solve your problem for you."

Dónal went to a nearby river and whispered King Labhraí's secret to an old willow tree, like the druid told him to. He

immediately felt better. Around this time, it happened that King Labhraí's favourite harper was looking for a new harp. He had searched for one throughout the land, but he could not find a harp with the perfect sound. He was walking by the river when he saw the willow tree. He thought to himself: "The wood of this tree would make a beautiful harp!" He cut down the tree, and spent many months making his harp.

Some time later, the king was having a royal banquet and ordered his harper to play some music to entertain his guests. The harper walked to the middle of the room with his new harp, and everyone congratulated him on how beautiful it looked. It had a tall, majestic pillar, a graceful curve for the strings, and a soundboard to help the music sing; all made from the ancient willow tree in the wood beside the river.



As soon as he played the first note, the harp suddenly started to chant, all by itself!

'Labhraí Loingseach has horse's ears,'  
Labhraí Loingseach has horse's ears,  
Labhraí Loingseach has horse's ears..!'

King Labhraí jumped out of his throne in a furious rage. His crown went tumbling off his head and fell to the floor with a crash! There was silence in the room as the king's soft, furry horse ears stood tall and proud for all to see.

The king soon discovered that he felt much better now that his secret was out. While, nobody took any notice of his tall, furry ears. He realised that it was no big deal after all. He also realised that there wasn't any point trying to keep a secret in Ireland. He felt happier and more relaxed than ever before. In fact, the whole kingdom was a happier place.

Thanks to Dónal, all the barbers in the kingdom were saved from certain death. This made him a great hero, just as his mother had always wanted. Dónal was delighted too because his own dream of becoming a famous barber came true. He was given the title of Royal Barber to King Labhraí, and everybody lived happily ever after.

That is my story and it wasn't I who made it up!

Listen to the Labhraí Loingseach story at  
<https://www.harpireland.ie/labhrai-loingseach-english/>







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# Labhraí Loingseach Audio File



**<https://www.harpireland.ie/labhraí-loingseach-english/>**



## Labhraí Loingseach Quiz

- 1 What was the name of the famous warrior king?
- 2 Why was Dónal's Mam so worried?
- 3 Why did Dónal become sick?
- 4 What did the druid tell Dónal to do?
- 5 What wood was the harper's harp made from?
- 6 Name the three parts of the harp in the story
- 7 What words did the harp sing?
- 8 What did the king do when he heard the song?
- 9 Why did they all live happily ever after?
- 10 Why was Dónal's mother so happy at the end of the story?

1. Labhraí Loingseach 2. She was worried that her son, Dónal, would be killed by the king if he had to cut his hair. 3. He was anxious about keeping the king's secret and could not tell anyone. 4. The druid told Dónal to whisper the king's secret to a willow tree. 5. Willow wood 6. Front Pillar, Curve, Soundboard 7. "Labhraí Loingseach has horse's ears" 8. He was embarrassed at first, but then felt relieved that the secret was out and realised it was not a big deal. 9. Dónal became a hero, all barbers were safe, the king was happy, and the kingdom was full of joy. 10. She was happy because her son was safe, became a hero, and achieved his dream of becoming the king's barber.



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## Recommended Listening



**Lisa Canny | 'Helvic Head'**  
Harp Sessions at the  
Sugar Club



**Séamus & Caoimhe  
Uí Fhlatharta**  
'Molly na gCuach  
Ní Chuilleanáin'



**Maeve Gilchrist and  
The Harp Ireland Ensemble**  
'Four Hundred Fingers'