



# Lá na Cruite Harp Day

Saturday 17 October 2026



## Schools Resource Pack

# The Story of the Brian Boru Harp

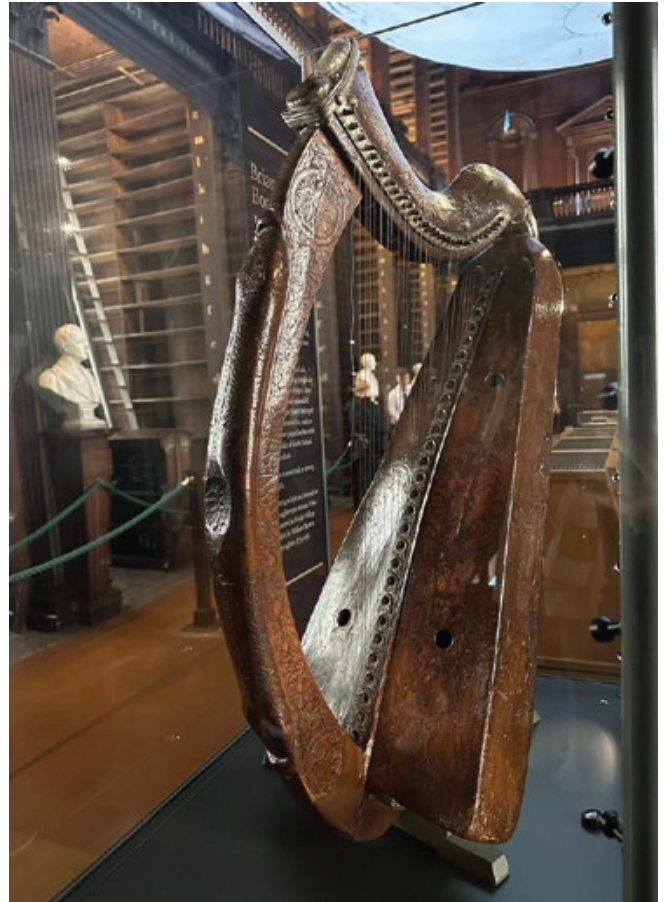
**L**ong ago, in the Ireland of the eleventh century, there lived one of Ireland's most famous kings: **Brian Bóroimhe**, or **Brian Boru**, known as the last High King of Ireland.

Brian was a powerful king who was said to have had a great love of music and the harp. In those days, the harp was not simply an instrument for entertainment. The harper held an honoured place in society, and music was an important part of the life of kings and noble households.

Legend has it that on the eve of the **Battle of Clontarf in 1014**, Brian Boru had his harp with him.

On Good Friday, 23 April 1014, Brian's forces fought a battle involving the King of Leinster and Viking forces associated with Dublin. Brian's side won the battle, but Brian himself was killed after the battle.

Later generations imagined the old king and his harp together on that dramatic night on the eve of battle. But there is an important twist. The harp we now call the **Brian Boru Harp** could not have been Brian's harp. The surviving instrument is generally dated to the **14th or 15th century**, several hundred years after Brian died.



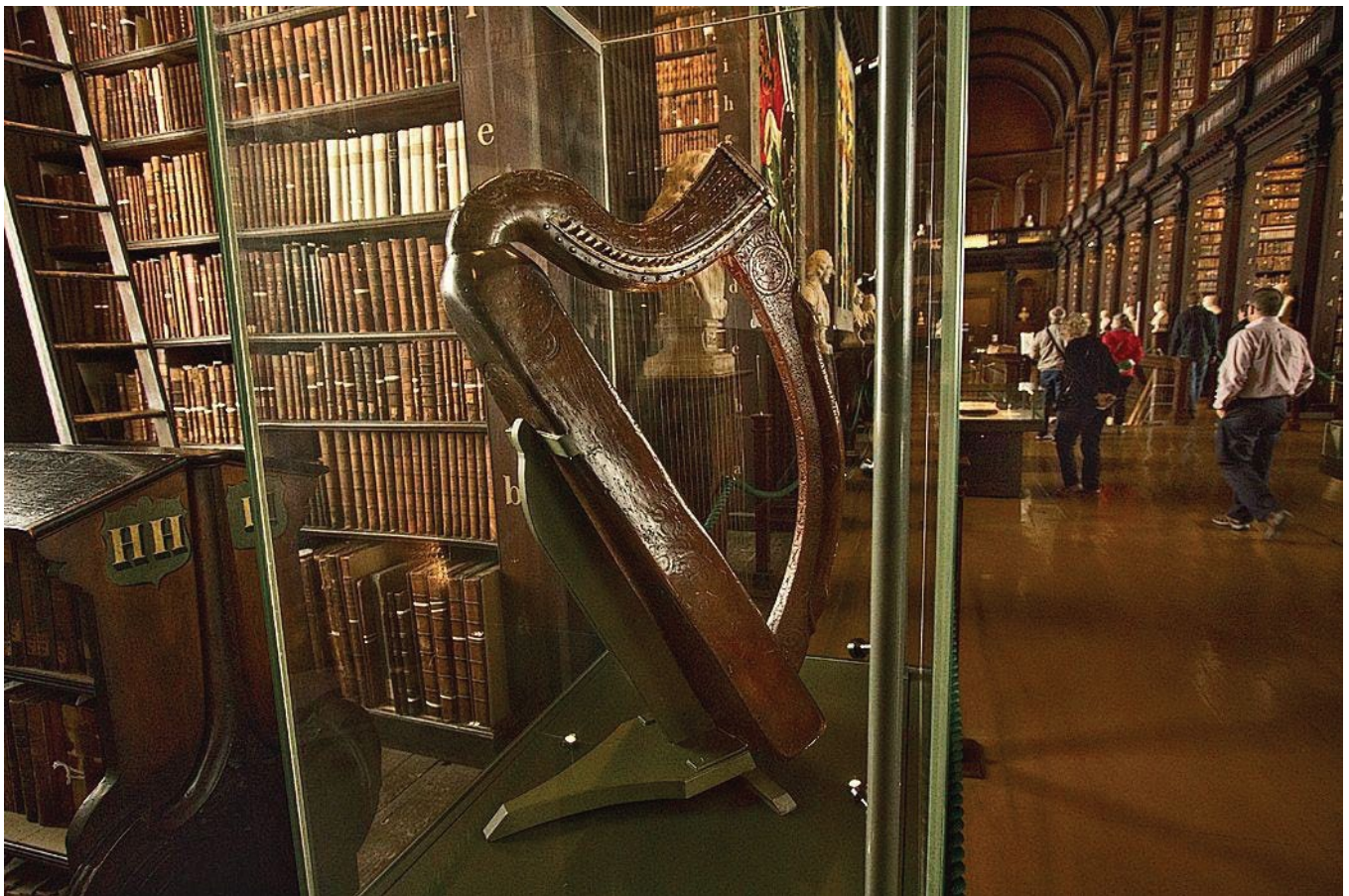
So how was this harp, now housed in the Long Room of Trinity College Dublin, called after the last great High King of Ireland?

One story tells that after Brian's death his son **Donnchadh** travelled to Rome. He had killed his brother Tadc and later went on a pilgrimage to seek forgiveness from the Pope. He supposedly brought with him some of his father's royal possessions – including Brian Boru's crown and harp. He presented them to the Pope. The harp, according to the legend, remained in Rome for centuries.

Eventually, during the reign of Henry VIII, the story says that the harp came into the possession of the English king. It was then supposedly given to an Irish noble family, the Clanricardes.

Eventually it came into the possession of the MacMahon family, County Clare

The harp itself is a **wire-strung Gaelic harp**, with 30 brass strings and a soundbox carved from wood. Trinity College describes it as probably dating from the fifteenth century. We have never discovered who owned the harp or who made it, and a mystery surrounds it to the present day.



who gave it to Counsellor MacNamara of Limerick and, eventually, to the Right Hon. William Burton Conyngham, who in turn presented it in 1782 to **Trinity College Dublin**, where it remains today.

The 19th century antiquarian and scholar George Petrie rejected the Brian Boru connection as a fabrication.

There is even evidence suggesting that what we see today may not be entirely one original instrument: the harp has been repaired and reconstructed over its long history. It was repaired in the British Museum and last played there in 1961 by Mary Rowland.

There are similarities between it and other surviving medieval Gaelic harps such as the Queen Mary Harp in Scotland.

So, we can only conclude that the name **Brian Boru Harp** is part of its identity and the legend itself became part of the history of the harp.

The distinctive shape of the Brian Boru or Trinity harp became the model for **Ireland's national harp emblem**. It appears on Irish government documents, passports, official seals and coinage.

It also became the familiar harp associated with Guinness — although if you look closely at this harp, you will see that it faces in the opposite direction from the State harp because of trademark requirements.

The Brian Boru Harp or Trinity College harp represents a much older tradition of Gaelic kings, poets, harpers and musicians. It connects the medieval world with modern Ireland. And although the actual instrument is centuries too young to have been Brian's harp, its story has helped make the harp itself symbolic of the Irish identity.

If you have a chance to visit the Book of Kells in Trinity College, be sure to have a look at the Brian Boru Harp and spare a thought for the last of the High Kings of Ireland killed after the Battle of Clontarf in 1014.



# The Dagda and His Magical Harp

**L**ong ago, in the Ireland of ancient storytellers, before there were towns and cities as we know them today, people told stories of a mysterious and powerful people called the ***Tuatha Dé Danann***. They were said to be a race of warriors, poets, craftsmen and magical beings who lived in Ireland in a time when the boundary between the human world and the Otherworld was not always so clear.



Among them there was one figure who was truly remarkable. His name was the Dagda. The Dagda was not a small or delicate man. He was enormous. He was immensely strong, a formidable warrior, and a leader of his people. But the ancient stories tell us that his power was not simply the power of strength. The Dagda also possessed wisdom.

And he possessed something else that mattered greatly in the world of the ancient Irish storytellers: Music. For the Dagda was a harper. He had a harp unlike any other. Its name was ***Uaithne***. Uaithne was no ordinary instrument. It was a magical harp, and the stories say that it had a will and a mind of its own. It belonged to the Dagda. And, more importantly, it recognised him.

It would not simply play for whoever happened to pick it up. It knew its master. But the most extraordinary thing about Uaithne was the power of its music. The Dagda could play different tunes upon its strings, and each tune had a different effect upon those who heard it.

One tune could make people laugh. Another could make them weep. And another could bring a deep and peaceful sleep.

Think about that for a moment. Imagine walking into a great hall filled with warriors, and hearing music that suddenly made everyone burst into laughter.

Then imagine the music changing... and the laughter disappearing... until the whole room was filled with sadness.

And then imagine one final melody, soft and quiet, until the warriors' eyes grew heavy and, one by one, they fell asleep. That was the extraordinary power attributed to the Dagda's harp.

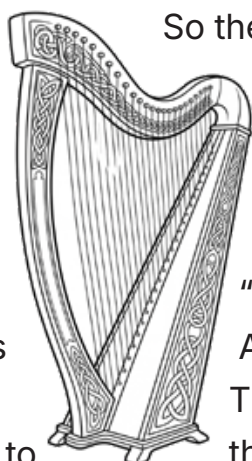
One day, during a great battle between the Tuatha Dé Danann and their enemies, called the **Fomorians**, something terrible happened. The Dagda's harp was stolen. His enemies seized it and carried it away. They took it back to their fortress and hid it there, thinking that they had captured something precious and powerful.

Perhaps they imagined that because they had taken the harp, they had taken its power too. But they had misunderstood something important. Uaithne was not an ordinary harp. And it would not answer to just anybody.

When the Dagda discovered what had

happened, he set out to recover it. He travelled with two companions until they reached the fortress where the enemy warriors had hidden the harp. The fortress was guarded. The doors were watched. There were warriors everywhere.

The Dagda could have demanded his harp back. He could have tried to fight his way inside. But the Dagda was not only strong. He was clever. And sometimes wisdom is more useful than strength.



So the Dagda stood outside the fortress.

He called out:

"Uaithne!"

Nothing happened.

He called again:

"Uaithne, come to me!"

And then — **WHOOSH!**

The magical harp came flying out of the fortress. Through the air it travelled, straight towards the Dagda... and into his waiting hands.

The enemy warriors could only stare in wonderment. They had taken the harp. They had hidden it. But they had never truly possessed it. The harp knew where it belonged.

The Dagda now had Uaithne back and he knew exactly what to do. He began to play. The first tune was the **Geantraí** or the Tune of Laughter.

Suddenly, the warriors began to laugh. They laughed so much that they could hardly stand. The men who had been ready for battle could no longer think about fighting. All they could do was laugh.

Then the Dagda changed the music. He played the **Goltraí** or the Tune of Sorrow. The laughter faded away. The warriors became quiet and began to weep. The music reminded them of those they had lost, of old griefs and sorrows, and of all the things in life that cannot be held onto forever.

Then the Dagda played the third tune. **Suantraí** or the Tune of Sleep. Slowly, the warriors became tired. Their eyes grew heavy. Their heads began to droop. One by one, they fell asleep. And while the enemy warriors slept, the Dagda and his companions escaped, carrying Uaithne safely with them. The magical harp had returned to its master.

Now, when we hear this story today, we might wonder: Why did the ancient storytellers give a harp such extraordinary powers?

Perhaps the answer is that they understood something very well. They knew that music can do something remarkable. It can change the way we feel. A lively tune can make us want to dance. A beautiful melody can make us

remember someone we love.

A sad song can bring tears to our eyes. And a quiet piece of music can make us feel peaceful.

So perhaps the magic of the Dagda's harp was not really about spells and enchantments. Perhaps the deeper magic was simply music itself. The ancient Irish placed great importance on the harp. It was not merely an instrument for making beautiful sounds. It could carry stories. It could preserve memories. It could express emotions that words sometimes cannot express. And it could bring people together.

That is why the story of the Dagda and Uaithne has continued to be told. Inside this ancient tale is an idea that still feels true today:

Music has the power to move us.

It can make us laugh.

It can make us remember.

It can make us feel sad.

It can make us dream.

And sometimes it can make us feel that we are part of something much older and much larger than ourselves.

So, the next time you hear a harp being played, close your eyes for a moment. Imagine the Dagda standing before you, holding Uaithne in his hands. Imagine the first note sounding through the air... and ask yourself:

What magic might this music have?





# Suantraí



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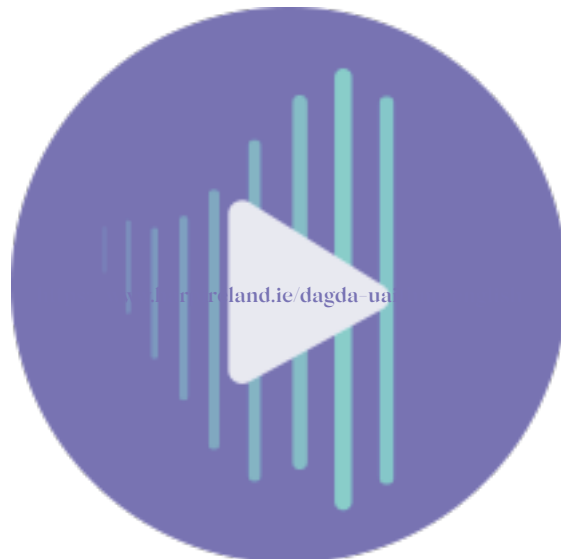


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# The Dagda and His Magical Harp

Listen to the audio file



<https://www.harpireland.ie/dagda-uaithne-english/>

**Narrator: Nuala Hayes**

Member of Poetry Ireland's Writers in School Scheme

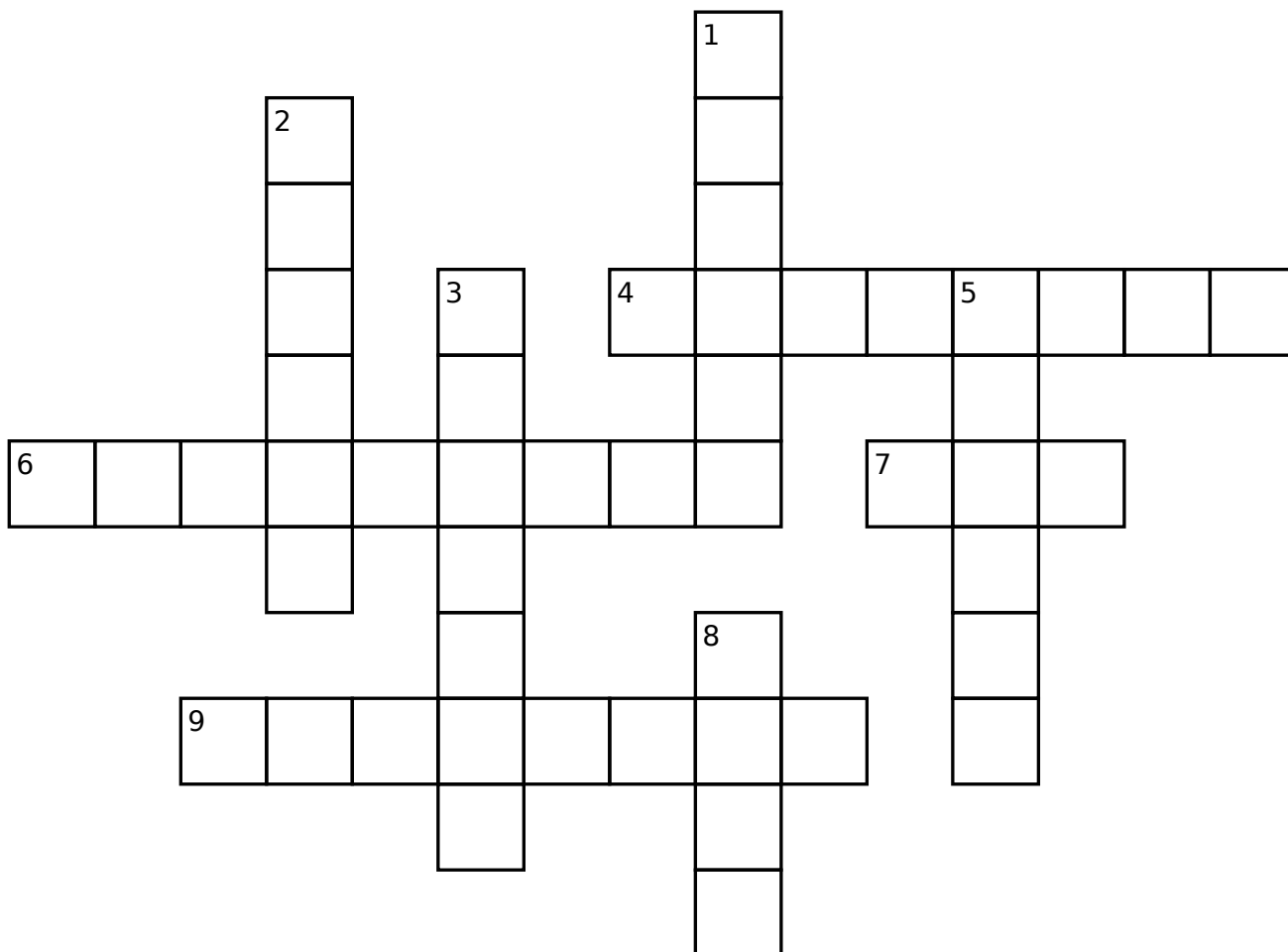
**Music: Tríona Marshall and Cormac de Barra**

# Crossword



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## Across

4. A tune that made warriors laugh (8)
6. The enemies who stole the Dagda's harp (9)
7. What the warriors felt when the Dagda played a 'Goltraí' (3)
9. A tune that made warriors fall asleep (8)

## Down

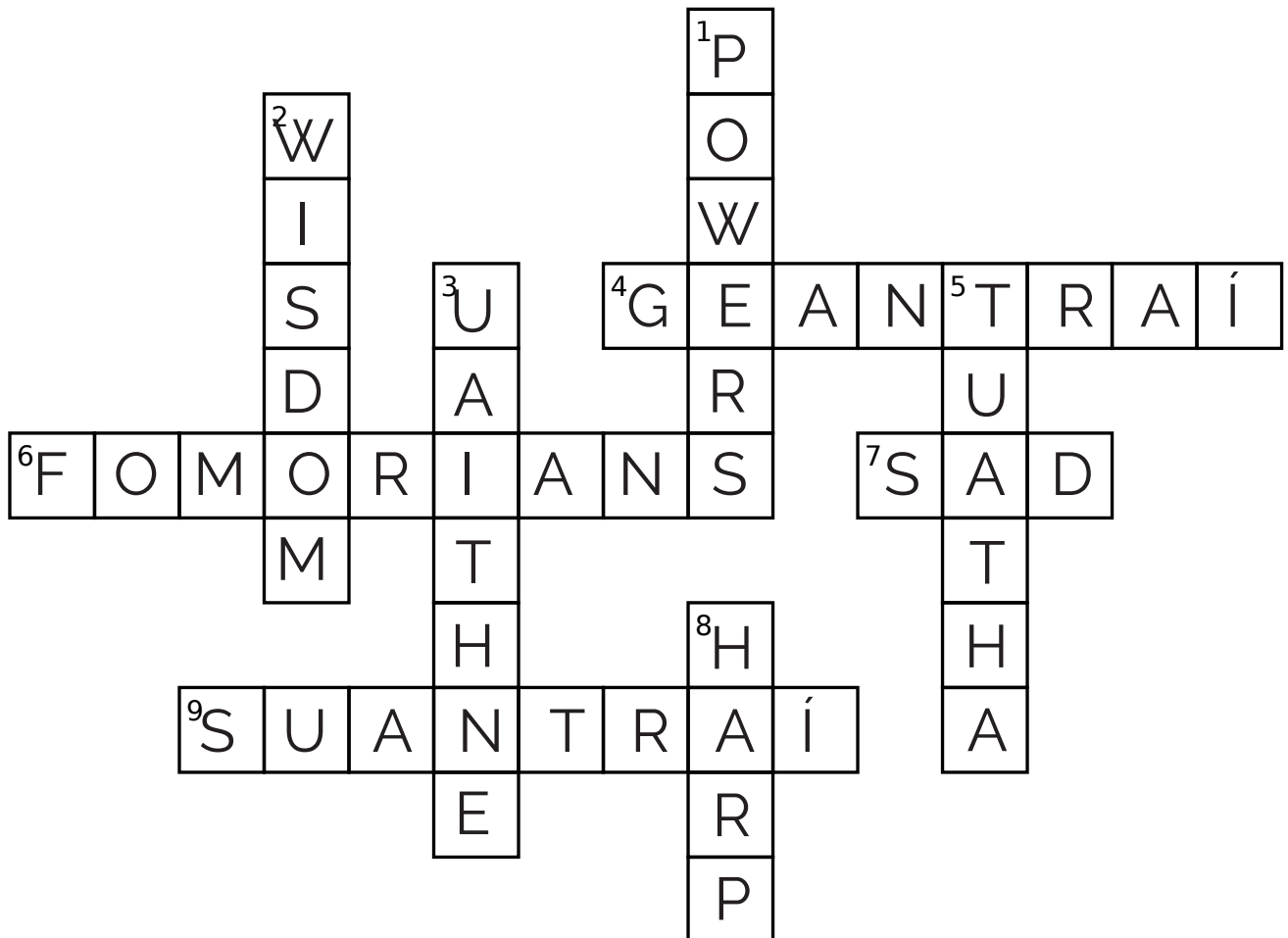
1. The Dagda's harp had special magical \_\_\_\_\_ (6)
2. The Dagda was not only strong, he also had great \_\_\_\_\_ (6)
3. What was the name of the magical harp (7)
5. The Dagda was the chief of the \_\_\_\_\_ Dé Danann (6)
8. A magical instrument played by the Dagda (4)

# Answers



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# The Irish Harp

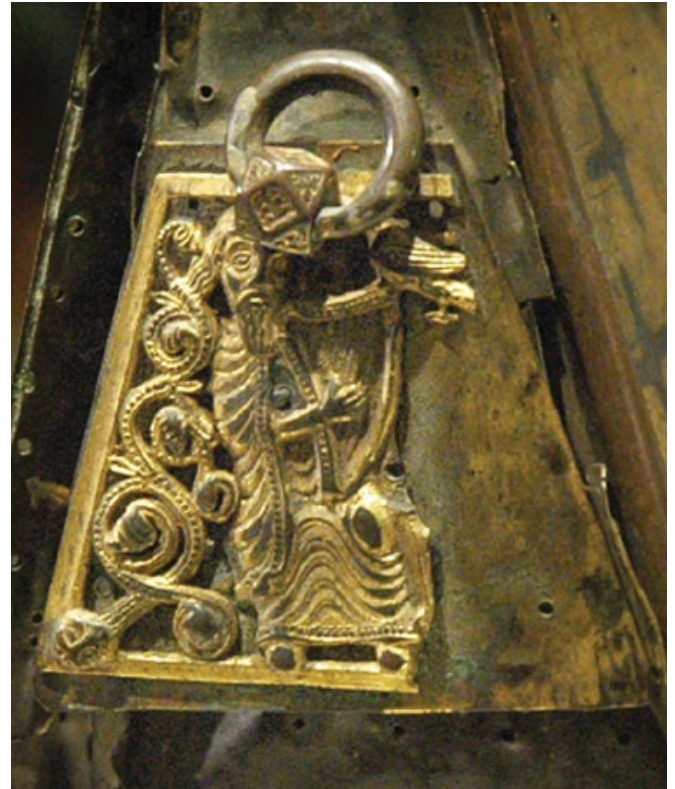
## Ireland's national instrument

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)



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*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



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*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.



*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,*



*Gráinne Hambly*



*Bridín*



# Lá na Cruite Harp Day

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*Éadaoin Ní Mhaicín*



*Alannah Thornburgh*



*Michael Rooney*



*Laoise Kelly*



*Oisín Morrison*

# 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. Smallpox 7. Mount Jerome Cemetery  
8. UNESCO 9. over 200 10. any included in the worksheet*

**Answers**



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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'