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HARP PERSPECTIVES

HARPING ON THE PAST

KEITH SANGER

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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 January edition, Keith Sanger addresses two conundrums: the nature and background of the harp as a musical instrument and how harps were used in the past. He considers a time where punishments were harsh, medical attention limited and famines frequent, and asks how accurately we can recreate the sound and structure of harps in medieval times.

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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HARPING ON THE PAST

Keith Sanger

One certain way of writing an article designed to stimulate is simply to be provocative. It also helps if in that process, as in this case, questioning the limits of research into the background of the early history of harping in both Scotland and Ireland, you are also putting yourself in the same target zone. Having spent close to fifty years of research, especially among archive sources, it is possible to describe the process as like doing a crossword, which does not have the 'black' squares filled in or numbered questions, but with multiple choice answers. In other words, it is impossible but does provide some intellectual exercise, and some of the answers can in themselves be interesting.

Therefore, to start with a short question and answer before elaborating, 'is it possible to re-create the past including the more recent past?' The answer is an emphatic 'No'. I lived through the period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, so therefore, I am a living witness. However, even if you gave me an unlimited budget, I could not accurately create that era again. Leaving aside the question of accuracy of memory, the world I lived in then was shaped less by me but by those far older people around me. There is no way of now knowing how they thought or why they lived as they did, without resurrecting the dead.

Turning to research regarding the history of the harps, it is possible to divide it into two questions: The nature and background of the harps themselves, and secondly, how they were used. In neither case is there enough evidence to give answers which if genuine accuracy is the aim, are not buried under multiple layers of qualifications. For example, starting with attempts to make 'accurate' replicas of the surviving early instruments the process falls at the very first hurdle. No two pieces of wood are the same, (even if taken from the same tree), but if it was possible to identify not just the species of tree from which those old instruments were made, and where it was grown along with the age of the tree on felling, then find another tree of the same age and in that same area today; the 'modern tree' would have been shaped through a totally different series of climatic years.

Or to put that another way round, as the climate of the growing seasons determines how a tree grows, and in turn, the speed of growth and size of the growth rings, which

in turn determines the density of the wood along with how that section of wood will shrink with age.[1] Hence if modern techniques along with research were to answer the interesting question of where the timber for those early instruments actually came from, it would still not be possible to copy it. Shrinkage introduces another unrepeatable aspect. It is possible, with or without modern techniques, to accurately measure those old harps; that simply provides accurate dimensions for how they are now, not as they were when first made.

The implications of that shrinkage, although not completely irrelevant to the rest of the harp, is more pronounced with the soundboard. Theoretically, as the wood of the soundboard shrinks it should become denser and stiffer and all factors being equal should lead to it becoming more responsive. Therefore, if the measured thickness of the sound board of one of those old harps is used to make a 'modern copy', as the modern copy ages, it will move even further away from the original 'response' of the instrument it is supposed to be copying. The alternative is to try and estimate what amount of shrinkage has occurred with the original instrument, but then it is no longer an exact copy but becomes a theoretical possibility.

Figure 1: The Lamont Harp, 15th century Scottish Gaelic medieval harp

At the time those early harps were made they were not trying to copy an existing instrument. They were commissioned as individual instruments; no two harps would have been the same and each represented the state of the art at that time. They were designed to meet the demands of the then musical requirements as understood by their makers of a constantly evolving art form. A further problem is that the number of surviving harps is statistically so small that we cannot know how reflective of the harps of that period they really are. Of the three earliest harps the re-built Lamont does provide an insight into parts of more than one instrument while the Trinity and Queen Mary, although having a

1 To give an example, when what is now Cape Town was first set up as a staging post for the Royal Navy on route to places further east, the ships were as the song goes, 'heart of oak'. Therefore, to provide timber for repairs to the vessels stopping at the Cape, acorns from English oak trees were shipped out and planted there. Of course, to quote Robert Burns, as with 'the best laid schemes o' mice an' men' by the time those oak trees were of a suitable size metal was replacing wood for naval vessels. But once planted in that milder climate those oaks grew more quickly reaching a size in 100 years that would have taken around between 150 to 200 in their native England, however their speedy growth meant that they were weaker and tend to blow down in the Cape winds and never reach the size and strength of mature English oaks.

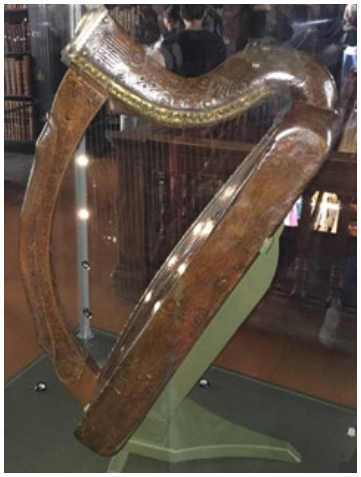

Figure 2: The Trinity Harp

Figure 3: Queen Mary Harp

superficial resemblance are in fact quite different from each other. Whether that means they were designed for different purposes or simply reflects a lack of standardisation in design it is impossible to say, but if it is the latter then such a variation makes trying to reproduce a copy of a 'typical' harp based on one of them rather pointless.

The next problem could be placed under the heading of 'Aural' and that is the question of what exactly the harps were strung with and the sound expectations of the people hearing those harps at that time. Other than being wire strung, regarding the sizes and nature of those strings we are still in the dark with very little chance that a light will be switched on. Those early harps continued to be played over several centuries, and even if it had been possible at the time they were first strung to provide an assay of the nature of the metal used, (several centuries later a leading authority on 'metals' still thought brass was a combination of a metal and a mineral);[2] any belief that strings could have been replaced during the course of that length of time with like for like belongs in the realms of fantasy. There was a considerable reuse of metals and although, at least for Scotland various kinds of 'stock' metal was imported, incorporating it with reused scrap without suitable assays to maintain quality control led to contemporary medieval metalwork which with modern assays shows considerable variation.[3]

From the nature of the strings to the sound as heard by the contemporary audience moves to another part of the equation to which we know we do not have an answer. Modern studies comparing how digital or analogue sound recordings are perceived show hearing 'tastes' vary. For instance, earlier audiology studies in the late 1980s showed changes in hearing sensitivity among the younger generation, linked to exposure to louder and louder music, but although there are several publications on how our medieval ancestors 'heard', the consensus seems to be that apart from the fact that it was different, we do not know the answer.

2 https://www.wirestrungharp.com/material/metal/g

3 See especially footnote number 4 here: https://www.wirestrungharp.com/material/strings_and_things/

Moving on from the question of 'sound' naturally comes to the purpose of the music produced by those harps which primarily was to support the declamation of the poet's verse. How that worked is again a case of knowing what we don't know, or as it has been put, 'One aspect common to all medieval poetry, which is obviously irrecoverable and accordingly gives rise to a limitation of our capacity to appreciate the genre on its own terms, is the aural/oral dimension'.[4] If there is a problem simply restoring the contemporary written verse back into its original oral form then trying to resolve how it was accompanied by the harp, and lyre (the tiompán was still around towards the start of the 1600's), stops before it even starts. Indeed, if as is quite possible some or all that accompaniment was extemporized it simply adds to the problems. In fact, the problems in attempting that exercise are like those of recovering the sung verse and are neatly encapsulated by Pekka Toivanen in the introductory chapters of his *The Pencerdd's Toolkit*.[5]

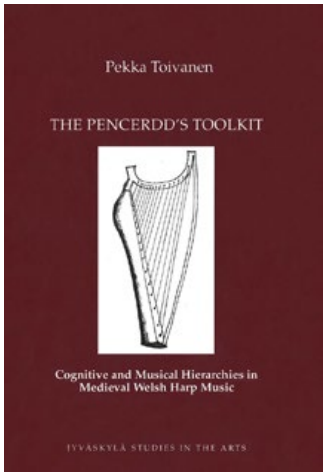

Figure 4: *The Pencerdd's Toolkit* by Pekka Toivanen

So far, this discourse has been negative and raises the question is there any point to historical research into this specific subject and fortunately the answer is 'Yes'. Apart from the satisfaction that comes from finding every new piece of evidence and exploring how that fits into or changes the existing database, some aspects do lead to firmer answers, although these are usually solid material based. For example, those harpers wore clothes and between the Scottish Court Treasures Accounts for musicians' clothing, some surviving clothing artifacts and the odd portrait it would be possible to reconstruct what at least those harpers at court wore. A similar argument can be applied to where they lived in that the tangible evidence of many dwellings still exists along with contemporary furnishing inventories. There is however an inbuilt bias for this sort of reconstruction as it leans towards the upper strata of society rather than the lower.

One paradoxical aspect of the harp related, (or any similar) historic database is that although it may not help resolve the questions raised by a more ephemeral subject like music, it can help to understand how our ancestors did not think or live. For example, judging by the contemporary evidence of named harpers surrounding those early harps, the professional harp world was masculine, possibly more so in Ireland than elsewhere.

4 Breatnach, Pádraig. The Aesthetics of Irish Bardic Composition: An Analysis of *Fuaras iongnadh, a fhir chumainn* by Fearghal Óg Mac an Bhaird. In Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies. Number 42 Winter 2001. p 52.

5 Toivanen, Pekka. *The Pencerdd's Toolkit, Cognitive and Musical Hierarchies in Medieval Welsh Harp Music.* (2001). Downloadable from here: https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/66228?fbclid=IwAR1UIod6lxWO8GC5IcPEWiJzMIIJupYglCw3x3Fn8W627k907-JjdeVzT_4

The evidence is limited but the earliest female harpers appear firstly in Scotland with Meg of Abernethy in Aberdeen circa 1400, though she was probably playing a gut rather than wire strung harp[6]. Then second was the Welsh poetess Gwerful Mechain (c. 1462 – 1500), who when not composing bawdy verse managed to address a poem to Ifan ap Dafydd asking for a harp, which she presumably could play.[7] Indeed this was not just the case with harpers, the evidence for female poets has been noted as being earlier in Scotland than Ireland.[8]

The previous example of a masculine world is also a very good demonstration of when historical accuracy meets the modern world where today most harpers are female. Does it matter if it is a modern female harper who is trying to reproduce that ancient world? This is a question that for illustrative purposes I am prepared to ask, but definitely not to pursue. There are of course other examples of where ancient and modern clash even when we do know the answers, but they are not compatible with re-introduction into our current standards of living.

Those early harpers cannot be separated from the rest of the world in which they lived and performed and those very unsanitary and harsh conditions also for accuracy need to be recreated, including the fact that most of those harpers would have had fleas or tapeworms, or both. In a society where punishments were harsh, medical attention was limited and famines frequent. Even if you could find volunteers who were prepared to fill those parts, the laws would prevent you from treating them in what today counts as inhumane ways.

So far in this article more than a considerable degree of pessimism has predominated leading to the question is there any point to research? Fortunately, the answer is 'Yes', otherwise, like a lot of people, I have for some years been wasting my time. Pursuing knowledge for the sake of knowledge is never a bad thing and an interest in the past is inherent in most humans of my acquaintance, whether they realise it or not. People indulging in a discussion about whether they enjoyed last year's holiday are exploring and reliving past history. What is necessary, the further back in time the research takes you, is to understand the limitations of how close you can get to life as it was. This in turn depends on the nature of the research where newly found material artifacts, and this includes written material counts as a fact.

6 Sanger. K and Kinnaird A. *Tree of Strings*. (2016), p. 93

7 Gramich K and Brennan C. *Welsh Women's Poetry. 1450- 2001*. (2003). pp. 20-21.

8 MacCurtain M and O'Dowd M. *Women in Early Modern Ireland*. (1991). p. 153-154.

Facts can exist in a number of ways even before trying to interpret them, at the simplest just on its own with no context and just a vague dating. A harper mentioned in a contemporary and dated account provides little more information than that he existed, but we usually have no idea how old he was or what he looked like or what he played. If he turns up again then it might be possible to contextualise him but that is already moving away from fact onto informed speculation. Or to take another example, a medieval painting can be contextualised on several levels. The basic one being simply as an artifact, that is on its merits as a picture, is it any good as an artwork, do you like it, is it in good condition or needs conservation. Then treating it as contemporary evidence, what does it tell us about the dress of any people in the picture or the rest of their lifestyle?

Pictures whether paintings, carvings or drawings in documents, especially if they include musicians can provide a lot of reasonably solid evidence. However, the one thing they can never do is provide sound and the sounds of the past prior to the invention of recording devices, are impossible to re-establish. Although some of the work of the poets was written down in or near contemporary times, as mentioned early there is a problem transposing that into the original oral form, just as early musical notations are problematic in terms of how far they do reflect what was played. As far as we know at the time those early harps were in use, any transmission was aural rather than written so leaves no record at all.

Although it is possible, as has been done, to construct academic arguments regarding how the verse to musical accompaniment worked, given the lack of surviving 'historical' sound they do not change the fact there are limits to research in that direction. Added to the focus on the history of the Irish Harp as one continuous timeline it diverts attention from the wider musical implications which surround those early harps. For example, when the arrival of the Scandinavian influence on Ireland is touched on by historians, rarely, if ever is it mentioned that they brought with them their own stringed instruments, versions of the North European lyre. A similar problem occurs with the treatment of the arrival of the 'Norman' influences on Ireland. Gerald of Wales is over quoted but usually misunderstood. He was describing for a Norman readership how, especially with musical instruments, the Irish use differed from their own. This did not mean that there were no gut harps in use in Ireland, he and his readership would have understood there were gut strung harps among the musicians who came with them.

That these 'other' harpers existed is evident from their appearance in the records and from archaeological finds of gut harp tuning pins. The possible interactions between the wire and gut strung harpers are another under researched area despite its leading to at least one unresolved question. When towards the start of the seventeenth century

the names of harpers become more prolific in the contemporary records, a surprising number of them have Welsh-derived names. Is this a musical-derived reflection of the argument by Seán Duffy that, rather than the Norman Conquest of Ireland, it should in fact be regarded as The Welsh conquest of Ireland?[9]

Another factor which should also be taken into consideration is the interaction which must have occurred with the wire strung member of the lyre family known as a tiompán. It too was used to accompany the performance of verse and although in slow decline was still a valued instrument when circa 1552 the O'Brian Earl of Thomond made a present of a tiompán worth twenty merks to a member of the O'Conmee family of musicians.[10] Although the tiompán was still around at the end of the 16th century assessing the actual numbers is not helped by the tendency by many editors of Irish Gaelic verse of translating tiompán as a 'harp' and then assuming when a poem simply refers to a player of 'strings' it has to be a harp, when in fact it could have been a tiompán.

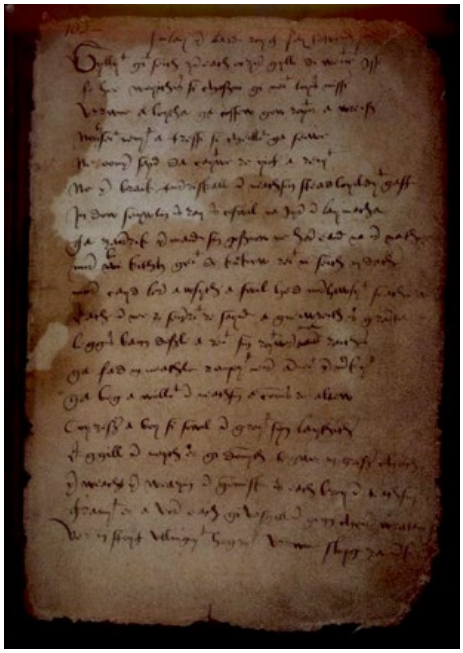

Figure 5: The Book of the Dean of Lismore

The use of the tiompán also has relevance as another case where Ireland and Scotland seem to differ. There is no evidence for its use in Scotland[11] other than just one player, who was Irish and appears in a list of entertainers in the Book of the Dean of Lismore, compiled between 1512 - 1542. His name was *Conchubair Ó hAngluinn* and it has been suggested he belonged to the same family as *Fionn Ó hAngluinn* whose obit of 1490 described him as 'chief tympanist of Ireland'. The reason that a tiompán player appears among the entertainers in the Deans book is probably related to the appearance also of the poet Lachlann Mac an Bháird specifically said to be from Ireland.[12]

9 Duffy Seán. The Welsh conquest of Ireland, in Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter, Julianne Nyhan & John Sheehan (eds), *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: essays on medieval Ireland in honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin* (Dublin, 2015), pp 103-14

10 Communication from Sean Donnelly via Barnaby Brown (September 2008), citing R.I.A catalogue MS 1236 (Ciii 2). F. 6v.

11 A well-travelled Gaelic proverb regarding a tiompán player (albeit again usually translated as a harper), caught in snow burning his instrument to keep his love warm, only for her to dump him for someone else, has been associated with Island of Mull. That association does not stand as the geographical name on Mull, tiompán is being used in an alternative meaning for an anvil or saddle shaped hill pass.
See https://www.wirestrungharp.com/culture/legends/harper_mull/

12 Bannerman, J. The Clarsach and the Clarsair. In *Scottish Studies* volume 30. (1991). p 14. Notes 11 and 12.

This broader picture of music in the late medieval period along with evidence that at the start of the seventeenth century semi chromatic Irish harps were beginning to be made,[13] suggests that concentrating simply on the diatonic wire strung harp ignores the other influences that were part of a dynamic and evolving musical culture. How this would have continued to develop during the first half of the seventeenth century was unfortunately halted by the traumatic events that then dominated Irish lives until the restoration. During that period the wire strung harp was brought close to extinction and when the recovery came post 1660, (which really should be counted as the first 'revival'), it was a very changed background. The 'new' harps being made were larger, the music being played on them was now heavily influenced by Italy and there are signs that female harpers were also becoming part of the mix.

Clearly the events around the middle of the seventeenth century add to the difficulties of research looking for continuity back to earlier times, but the main limiting factor remains that there is no oral/aural evidence, nor can there ever be. Without recording devices, even the performer could not hear themselves as their own listeners would. Being close to their instrument they would feel the direct vibrations, but also hear the higher frequency harmonics which would not have travelled as far as the listeners. Each performance would have been newly created since their previous one, even if brilliant, was lost as soon as it was played, with the only faint echo through their human memory, which is notoriously unreliable.

Which brings it back to where we started with acknowledging the limits of historical research and a quote from Pekka Toivanen[14]. 'In our quest for authenticity the only authentic music from the past is such music that has remained and been practised as a living tradition — literally as a part of the present. In that sense most of medieval music is completely out of our reach, because its cognitive world is so different to ours. We may and should enjoy medieval music but acknowledge that we experience it differently from medieval people. The past is a foreign country to us, and since it is foreign, we invent ways to alter it to our present needs'.

13 Billinge, M and Shaljean, B. The Dalway or Fitzgerald harp. *Early Music* Volume XV No 2 (May 1987)

14 See link to online book at reference number 5. pp. 24-26

Keith Sanger

Keith Sanger has been studying the historical background of the harps and bagpipes of Scotland and Ireland for close to fifty years. This has resulted in a number of publications including *Tree of Strings: A History of the Harp in Scotland*, co-authored with Alison Kinnaird in 1992, and *Donald MacDonald's Collection of Piobaireachd, vols 1 and 2* (2006, 2011), co-edited with Roderick Cannon.