

Ireland's culture grim  
take on the dark  
ages: traditional  
music received blow  
aft...

[History](#)



The history of traditional music in Ireland is a dark and troubled one, consisting of a lot of battle, death, and loss. The group that felt the most heat from the events, however, were the harpers. Irish harpers, prior to Queen Elizabeth I's rule, carried out many of the traditions passed down through the ages. But much of this ended when Queen Elizabeth ordered "Hang all harpers where found and burn the instruments". This was a major blow to the musical culture of Ireland, as it was a rather effective order. Many harpers were killed at this time, and their instruments burned by the dozens. Only two harps survived this era, one being preserved at Trinity College, particularly the harp that is modeled on the back of the Irish Euro. This started a major backlash from the Irish people, and caused much of Ireland's music to turn underground. This meaning that the Irish, being proud of their music and culture, went against the British rule by playing in secret and hiding their activities. While this didn't stop the British from finding and massacring those decreed treasonous, it did manage to preserve Irish music through this troubling time. Much of the traditional music involved a harp in its scores, so in an effort to unite and band together the underground movement kept the traditions alive, finding the scarce number of harpers left in Ireland and having them play in secret. Once this order was lifted harpers were no longer hung on site, however this only saved a few people at best due to the sheer number of lost harpers (Williams, 53).

Much of this destruction came from Oliver Cromwell, an English military leader, who made it his duty in the 1650's to destroy all harps and organs where found. This was a continuation of Queen Elizabeth's orders, and Cromwell seemed to take a personal vendetta against the Irish musical

traditions. Just in Dublin alone he managed to confiscate and burn around 500 harps, and he forbid any congregations of traditional Irish musicians. By the end of his terror in Ireland harpers were nearly extinct due to the fact that it was a mostly oral tradition. This is where the phrase “ The Curse of Cromwell on you” comes from, as it was for a time the worst curse you could put on a person (The Irish Harp, 1).

One of the most famous harpers to come out of Ireland was Turlough O'Carolan. Having been blinded by smallpox at the age of 18, he was taught to play harp under Macdermott Roe, the employer of his family. Roe spent time teaching the blind O'Carolan how to play the harp without using his eyes, and soon thereafter gave him a harp, horse, and money to take his skills across Ireland. And that is exactly what O'Carolan did. O'Carolan would travel around Ireland composing tunes named after his patrons. His first patron, George Reynolds, was the one who inspired O'Carolan to compose, which he did during his journey between Patrons. O'Carolan would typically compose his tunes before adding lyrics to his work. His ability to do both stemmed from his natural talents, not only as a harper but as a poet. Many considered this to be opposite of the “ Irish practice” as in the Irish tradition poetry would take precedence before music. Much of his work was inspired by previous composers such as Vivaldi and Corelli, and survives only as single line melodies. The only surviving record of O'Carolan's work was preserved in the National Library of Ireland. O'Carolan himself was considered cheerful and enjoyed the oral traditions of Ireland, such as stories and jokes. He drank quite often, though was advised by doctors to stop for a time, but this only made him feel worse of illness. He found that drinking

more had the reverse effect, making him feel better and happier, possibly suggesting that O'Carolan had a form of depression. Near the end of his life he returned to Macdermott Roe's estate, where he composed "Farewell to Music". His last composition was to his butler who gave him his last drink. O'Carolan's funeral was attended by many and lasted nearly four days (Nelson-Burns, 1)

With O'Carolan being a leading pioneer in the rebirth of the Irish harp tradition, many took after him to continue learning and teaching their skills. This led to one of the biggest events to happen in traditional Irish history, the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792. The harping tradition was still on the brink of extinction in this time, and without someone to revive it there was a chance the traditional harp music would be lost and forgotten. That's when Henry McCracken and James McDonnell invited all the harpers of Ireland into Belfast to throw a festival. This festival happened on July 14th, 1792 and was one of the only times a group of harpers came together to pass on their traditions. There were in total ten Irish Harpers and one Welshman of numerous ages, and six of these harpers were blind much like O'Carolan. They offered prizes to those who played, the grand prize being given to Charles Fanning, who played An Chuilfhionn, a composition by Thomas Connellan who died around 1700 (Belfast Harp Festival, 1).

The most important part of this festival was the contributions of Edward Bunting. Bunting was an 18 year old organist who was tasked with notating the tunes played by the near dozen harpers. His collection not only consisted of the tunes, but also technique and traditions of the players. These were

later published and available for purchase, but without Bunting's contributions many of the traditional tunes of the harpers may have been lost in time (Belfast Harp Festival, 1). His first collection of the three books he created was published in 1796, only a few years after the festival, and was later pirated by a publisher who made some changes. For instance the overall quality was lacking compared to the original. Regardless of this, it still aided in spreading the music and traditions abroad (Cathcart, 1).

The festival was rather successful in its goal, as in the time after the festival, due to many Irish families moving away from the island or otherwise passing, the traditional method of teaching the harp came to an end. Harpers became much scarcer and no one existed to pass on their ways. However, thanks to Bunting's collection the music was never lost, but with modern day harpers there is a difference in tradition. For example, traditional harpers of the past played with their fingernails, while many today will play with the flesh on their fingertips. Many harpers in the past had messed up fingernails due to their methods of playing, much like many modern harpers will have calloused fingertips (Haggerty, 1).

In modern times, the early traditions of Irish harping has been revived in a few forms, however this adopts many other traditions from around the world. The neo-Irish harp is one of the most common variation seen today, created in the 19th century and having similar designs to the orchestral pedal harp. It is often used to play the traditional music recorded by Bunting and other collectors, and is seen in various places such as playing on the street, pubs, or concerts. The more traditional variation, though less common, is the

Gaelic harp. The Gaelic harp being a more direct recreation of traditional harps from Ireland's past, it is seen as a high-status instrument, found mostly in places of royalty. Many players of this type of harp specialize in its style due to the differences in the traditional methods of playing. For example, most who play this instrument adopt the early tradition of using their fingernails instead of fingertips, and typically play using a left orientation. Much of this is due to the harp's metal strings instead of nylon, causing long resonance. This is what is used to play the older Gaelic songs in old tradition, and is much more common in Ireland than anywhere else (Chadwick, 1).

While the Irish Harp's past is rather troubled, it is apparent that many fight for the life of these traditions and the music that accompanies them. Nearly having gone extinct a number of times, it was the passion and power of Irish traditions that kept the music alive. Even with this passion, if collectors or composers such as Bunting or O'Carolan didn't exist there is a strong chance the music would have lost anyway. Whether the musicians had to go underground or seek help finding ways to record their scores, the Irish musical traditions will continue to live on to ensure nothing is lost.