

***UCD*scholarcast**

Series 5: (Autumn 2011)

Reflections on Irish Music

Series Editor: P.J. Mathews

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Style and context: Traditional Irish Harping

The music, cultural context, gender identities and modes of transmission of the Irish harp have undergone several phases of existence, revival and transformation over the past 120 years. In the early decades of the twentieth century the harp was identified with convent schools and was used for the playing of instrumental arrangements of popular Irish song airs, such as those popularized by Thomas Moore. From the 1920s to the mid-century the harp experienced its lowest levels of popularity, but from the 1950s revival, the Irish harp was popularized as accompaniment to song, most notably by singer and harpist Mary O'Hara. Two further phases are identifiable between the 1960s and the present day: the emergence of art-music style and traditional-music style for the harp, both of which continue to contribute to the contemporary harp scene. A further addition to harping today is the revival of the wire-strung or early-Irish harp, that has been gaining momentum in Ireland, particularly over the last ten years. Musically, the harp is now situated as an art-music, traditional-music and early-music instrument in its various guises, exhibiting features of both music revival and transformation. The focus of this talk is on the emergence of the traditional-music style of Irish harping that has developed over the past 30 years.

The third phase of the harp revival began in the early 1980s, during which harp players began to play the Irish traditional dance music repertoire on the harp, following the oral methods of transmission used in traditional music. They similarly made a break in terms of style, technique and approach from both the song and art styles that had gone before. Bruno Netti cites the introduction of new technology as a potential cause of musical change and the following description by Janet Harbison displays clearly how the introduction of a new type of Irish harp helped to precipitate changes in the tradition.¹

¹ Bruno Netti, *The study of ethnomusicology: thirty-one issues and concepts* (Urbana, 2005 (1983)), p. 179.

In 1968 or 1969, the dramatic visit of the three Japanese gentlemen to our harp room in Sion Hill, and a short time later the resulting first generation of Aoyama harps to arrive in McCullagh Piggot's [sic] music shop, was an event to prove of great significance. These were the first harps of real quality and tone to allow for greater effect and enjoyment in playing instrumental music. They differed in style from our existing harps in that they were a generally heavier, more strongly constructed instrument, with a string span of four-and-a-half octaves ... The new instruments were strung with nylon rather than gut with a consequently brighter ... sound ... I was happy to exploit all the new instrumental possibilities, accompany or arrange for my friends and indulge in the vast dance music repertoire which all my traditional musician friends outside school were playing nightly."²

This new model of Irish harp certainly had an impact on the tradition. The sound was significantly louder and the increased tension, combined with standardized string spacing, facilitated the playing of dance tunes at speed. Ensemble playing is a key characteristic of traditional-style playing, as highlighted by Harbison. In this context the harp is played with other traditional instruments, as either melody or accompaniment.

Harbison describes the introduction of the Aoyama harps as occurring in 1968 or 1969, however, the first main blossoming of the traditional-music style of harp playing was notable from the 1980s. Harper Máire Ní Chathasaigh similarly discussed her motivation for adapting dance music to the harp:

² Janet Harbison, 'Harpists, harpers or harpees?' in Fintan Vallely et al. (eds), *Crossbhealach an Cheoil. The crossroads conference* (Cork, 1996), pp 90-100

When I was in my early teens, I'd already been playing the whistle and the fiddle and lots of different things. I grew up playing both traditional and classical music, side by side. But what I wanted to do is play traditional music on the harp. I wanted to play dance music on the harp, which hadn't been done before ... There were hardly any teachers outside of Dublin. There was nobody decent at all outside Dublin, actually. The harp had become very much an urban instrument. It had become completely disassociated with the oral tradition, with people who played music in the countryside. The people who played dance music and slow airs, who were part of the oral tradition, learned the music orally."³

The type of harping pioneered by Ní Chathasaigh and Harbison amongst others represented a watershed in the history of the Irish harp. The dance repertoire associated with the oral instrumental tradition of piping, fiddle playing and other melodic instruments had never before been applied to Irish harping, which, as Ní Chathasaigh elucidated, was considered part of an urban rather than rural tradition. Philip Bohlman argues that the historic divisions between rural and urban in folk music are blurred in modernity: 'Urbanization topples one of the most sacred tenets of folk music theory: the distinction between rural and urban'.⁴ The development of traditional style harping brought the harp into a new musical context, and integrated it fully into the Irish music tradition, removing boundaries of rural and urban. Historically, in Gaelic, and subsequently Anglo-Irish, Ireland, the harper was a musician of high social prestige, who practised a solo art form, and whose only ensemble playing was at most accompaniment to song or courtly poetry. Dance music was not known to be associated with the harpers. More significant than the application of a new repertoire in the 1980s was the revival of an oral transmission for Irish harping. Art-music style harping had fostered literate methods of transmission, while the 1980s transformation demanded an oral approach in order to integrate with the mainstream Irish instrumental tradition.

³ Mairéid Sullivan, *Celtic women in music* (Kingston, 1999), p, 135. ⁴Philip V. Bohlman, *The study of folk music in the modern world* (Bloomington, 1988), pp 126-7.

This approach impacted technique also, as the classical technique of art-music style subsided in order to allow more fluent playing of improvised ornamentation and variation. Ní Chathasaigh's seminal 1985 album *The new strung harp* gave substance and credibility to this new style of Irish harping.⁵

This new approach of playing the dance tune, song air and harper-composer repertory by adapting ornamentation from other melody instruments allowed young musicians to engage with the mainstream instrumental tradition from which they had previously been excluded. There now exists a vibrant traditional style harp scene in which the instrument is used for the purpose of playing the traditional repertoire without recourse in performance to music notation or composed arrangements. This last stage of revival was in fact a transformation with the result that the harp was integrated into a tradition of which it had never previously been a part. However, the term revival can be applied to the learning style and approach which now encompasses both oral and literate methods.

Style

The concept of style in Irish traditional music has been subject to much debate in the academic literature. The main issues focus on the determining features of style in relation to musical materials, expression and sometimes repertoire. Moreover, notions of individual, regional and musical style remain central to the discourse of Irish traditional music in the 'lived' experience of musical interactions at session and concerts, through online media such as listserves and fora and informal discussion among practitioners.

Given the relatively static nature of the repertoire of Irish traditional music, considering that the vast majority of the repertoire is 'traditional' rather than newly composed, it is therefore unsurprising that style occupies such a central place in the musical, academic and interpretive discourse of Irish music. When discussing developments in Irish harping from the 1980s onwards, a contextualization of style will demonstrate that this branch of harping stylistically adheres to the principles of mainstream Irish traditional music.

⁵ Máire Ní Chathasaigh, *The new strung harp* (Temple Records, COMCD 2ti19, 1985).

Niall Keegan's article 'The verbal context of style in traditional Irish music',⁶ outlines five parameters or 'conceptual units' relative to Irish music. The first of these ideas conceptualizes Irish music in relation to a broader context of European or Celtic music. Its style and repertoire are identified as Irish because they are differentiated from any other musical culture, defined by what Irish music *is* or *is not*. Traditional-style harping is therefore 'traditional' because it adheres to the same musical principles (oral tradition, recognized repertoire, use of characteristic ornamentation, variation, phrasing, rhythm and approach) as Irish traditional music. Harping in this style can be defined by what it is not; that is, it is not newly composed or arranged art music that may or may not draw on Irish repertoire for the basis of its musical materials. Additionally, it follows the aesthetics and stylistic conventions associated with Irish traditional music rather than those of 'art', 'classical', 'Western' or any other type of harping. In this case Irish traditional music is the standardized set of styles, repertoires and performance practices. The unique position of traditional style harping is as a distinct entity or interculture (to borrow Slobin's term) to Irish traditional music.

Keegan's second formulation, 'the style associated with a particular instrument' refers to possibilities or constrictions due to instrument construction. The particular physical characteristics of the harp demand that attention be given to both the treble- (right) and bass- (left) hands. The construction of melodic style through ornamentation, emphasis, phrasing and variation is determined in traditional-style harping through the right hand while harmonic style is expressed through the left. Keegan's fourth category, 'the style of an individual musician', is relevant to discernible trends in the tradition. The influence that harpists, including but not limited to Janet Harbison and Michael Rooney have had can be observed in younger players who imitate the chordal progressions and ornamentation devices employed by these harpists to great effect. Furthermore, to date the most widely absorbed changes in the tradition have often been as a direct result of the actions (or style) of individuals. Keegan's fifth formulation 'The style of an individual performance' has special relevance to musical context. Performances associated with traditional-style harping share the contexts of Irish traditional music: sessions, music groups, concert performances, recitals, recordings and festival performances. Keegan's attempt to categorize the ways in which notions of style are formulated in the Irish music tradition are also applicable to traditional-style harping. This theoretically helps to confirm the place of the harp within the mainstream Irish tradition.

⁶ Niall Keegan, 'The verbal context of style in Irish traditional music' in Therese Smith and Micheal O Suilleabhain (eds), *Blas, the local accent in Irish traditional music* (Limerick, 1997), p. 121.

A second, standard source on style in Irish music is Lawrence E. McCullough's, 'Style in traditional Irish music'.⁷ McCullough focuses in more detail on musical materials:

The term 'style', as used by traditional Irish musicians, denotes the composite form of the distinctive features that identify an individual musical performance. The elements of style can be translated into four main variables: ornamentation, variation in melodic and rhythmic patterns, phrasing and articulation. These variables can be viewed as stylistic universals for this idiom in that their occurrence or non-occurrence characterizes every performance and serves as the basic evaluative standards by which an individual's performance is judged by other musicians.⁸

Once again, the constitutive features as outlined by McCullough both theoretically through specific musical examples can easily be appropriated for analysis of harp style. While some harpists compose new works for Irish harp, the majority of their musical expression is the interpretation of the dance tune, airs and harper-composer repertory. Therefore, stylistic affinities and differences manifest themselves in each player's manipulation of McCullough's 'variables'. A further aspect, unique to harping (and piano playing), is the use of the left-hand accompaniment which adds another layer of style to harp playing.

A third attempt at defining not only style but Irish music can be found in a publication by the Irish Traditional Music Archive (ITMA) entitled 'What is Irish Traditional music?'. Each of the 10 characteristics in the ITMA article can be used as a frame of reference for understanding the nature of traditional harping. The harp represents the fluidity of the tradition through its history and present state. In traditional-style harping, the favoured transmission method is generally oral and the repertoire follows mainstream traditional repertoire. The harp has one of the oldest living repertoires of all traditional instruments. The variety of performance contexts outlined by the ITMA article are similarly available to harp players. The aspects of 'what traditional Irish music is' apply to traditional-style harping. In terms of construction definitions, Irish harping can be said to have a branch of harping that follows the stylistic parameters of traditional music in terms of musical materials, repertoire, transmission and performance contexts.

⁷ Lawrence E. McCullough, 'Style in Irish traditional music' *Ethnomusicology*, 21:1 (1977), pp 85-97 ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Examples

Five key stylists, Máire Ní Chathasaigh, Janet Harbison, Kathleen Loughnane, Michael Rooney and Gráinne Hambly (amongst others) have published arrangements of their traditional tunes with written narratives about their understanding of the harping tradition.

The following extracts categorically demonstrate that these harp players are working from within the style and aesthetic of Irish traditional music. It is this aesthetic that fundamentally underpins their musical explorations and boundaries, as each player acknowledges the established tradition from the very outset. Five key themes are identifiable throughout their writings. These themes, namely transmission, ornamentation, variation, rhythm and harmonic accompaniment are also essential to general analyses and discussions of style such as McCullough's, Keegan's and the ITMA's. In relation to transmission Michael Rooney notes 'traditional Irish music is an oral tradition, one that is passed on from generation to generation.'⁹ Similarly, Gráinne Hambly argues that: 'I learned the harp "by ear" and now teach using this method ... This is the traditional way of learning Irish music'.¹⁰

The emphasis placed by the harpers on the traditional method of transmission highlights the importance of intrapersonal oral transmission. The topic of ornamentation likewise receives significant attention. Here Hambly's introduction is the most detailed and comprehensive wherein she provides important stylistic guidelines, directing readers to well-regarded sources on Irish music (Breathnach, Ó Cannainn and Vallely) with regard to reading further about ornamentation in this idiom.¹¹

⁹ Michael Rooney, *Harp tunes, volume 1* (Sligo, 2006), p. 23 ¹⁰ Gráinne Hambly, *Traditional Irish music arranged for harp* (Claremorris, 2001), p. 4.

¹¹ Breathnach, *Folk music and dances of Ireland*; Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional music of Ireland* (London, 1978); Fintan Vallely, *The companion to Irish traditional music* (Cork, 1999).

Michael Rooney links ornamentation with the creative process in traditional music:

The musical ideas presented here such as ornamentation, variation and accompaniment only apply to one 'round' of the tune. I try to vary each round of the tune for my own sake and for the listener's enjoyment. Adding subtle ornaments and variations to the melody and accompaniment on the 'spur of the moment' is exciting and it is this creativity which gives the Irish musician his/her own musical style."¹²

As does Kathleen Loughnane: 'There is nothing sacrosanct or final about the written arrangements and it is only by listening to traditional musicians, especially the solo player, that a sense of style and ornamentation is acquired.'¹³ This element of individual interpretation is one of the parameters by which style in Irish music (in general) is judged. Máire Ní Chathasaigh's cautionary tone also firmly establishes the importance of style and artistry in harp playing:

It is important to point out that ornamentation is an essential feature of traditional Irish music. The music must *on no account* be simplified and stripped of decoration in order to make it technically easier to play: the soulless hybrid which results from such a simplification is not artistically valid. Finally, no amount of detailed technical direction from me will make the music come alive on the page. An extensive programme of listening to solo recordings of traditional musician of a high calibre is most strongly to be recommended."¹⁴

¹² Rooney, *Harp tunes, volume 1*, p. iv ¹³ Kathleen Loughnane, *Affairs of the harp* (Galway, 2002), p. iv. ¹⁴ Máire Ní Chathasaigh, *The Irish harper, volume I* (Ilkely, 1991), p. 3.

Hambly describes the process of harmonic accompaniment as follows:

Performers should try to experiment with their own ornamentation and bass, as this is what Irish music is all about – spontaneous musical expression within a given melodic and rhythmic framework ... When approaching arranging, there are three important features of

Irish music to bear in mind. Firstly, this music is primarily melodic in nature and nothing in the arrangement or interpretation should distract from this. Many Irish tunes are modal ... It is important not to superimpose classical notions of harmonic ‘correctness’ on such tunes ... Finally, this was originally music for dancing ... I prefer to avoid full chords ...”¹⁵

The issues that permeate these introductions clearly demonstrate that these books are concerned as existing within the mainstream Irish instrumental tradition with an understanding of the harp as simply another traditional instrument. The theoretical discourse of style as it applies to traditional music in general is replicated here in relation to the harp.

While historically the Irish harp may not have been used for playing instrumental dance music, it is absolutely evident that these harp players encounter the same stylistic experience as do players of any other melodic instrument and that the notion and title ‘traditional’ harp has become synonymous with the particular playing style that has emerged in Irish harping.

With regard to musical style, it is the case that the harpists I have discussed, as representative of the broader harping tradition since the 1980s, approach the repertoire, both ideologically and stylistically, from within the musical, technical and educational parameters of Irish traditional music. The assertions they make in relation to the traditional process, prove true when their music is examined. This development in Irish harping can justifiably be described as a transformation of the tradition. Art-music style continues to exist and thrive, while the traditional style has developed as a distinctive branch concurrently.

¹⁵ Hambly, *Traditional Irish music arranged for harp*, p. 7.

The popularity of this style is witnessed most visibly in the main fora for the development of this style: summer schools and competitions. The harp has now reached equivalent levels of completion entry as other instruments at the CCÉ Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Success at this competition offers prestige to the winners as it a well- established and respected competition. The number of festival catering for harp students is also increasing: the annual Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy added harp to its schedule in 2008 and now has four harp classes. Twenty-two out of twenty-nine summer schools and festivals cater for harp students and competitors annually. One further aspect of the development of traditional-style harping is that the harp has, at times, been integrated into music groups as both melody and accompaniment instrument. The most notable instance of this is harpist Derek Bell who performed with the Chieqains from 1970 until his death in 2002. Bell's virtuosic solo playing (which owed much in terms of technique to the concert harp) helped to substantially raise profile of the harp by the very merit of its visibility.

All of this serves to show that this branch of Irish harping has become established within Irish traditional music. Furthermore, the context in which this harping occurs is identical to the context and experience of other traditional musicians.

Context and experience of traditional harping

John Tomlinson, in his book *Globalization and culture*, argues that 'Globalization distrusts the way we conceptualize "culture". For culture has long had connotations tying it to the idea of fixed locality.'¹⁶ Tomlinson's arguments have relevance to Irish music, particularly in his use of the term 'deterritorialization' to describe a fundamental impact of globalization on the (post-) modern condition in which experience is not fixed to place. This concept is applicable to the experience of traditional-style harping in the twenty-first century. The locations where his music is experienced are varied and far-reaching, as the music is not fixed to certain locales or landscapes.

The participation of today's harpers in such Celtic events as the Festival Interceltique in Lorient, Brittany, and the Pan-Celtic harp competitions follows from earlier harp players' participation in Celtic congresses and interaction with other Celtic traditions, such as the Ní Shéaghdha sisters' regular participation in these congresses and Mary O'Hara's sustained engagement with Hebridean folk song. However, participation in the Celtic music network of festival and concerts does not

negate a musician's Irish music identity, rather as Porter outlines: "'Celtic", unlike "Breton", "Gaelic" or "Welsh", is a third-order ethnic label based on a language group (cf. Germanic, Romanic, Slavic) rather than on a specific primary region (e.g. Munster Gaelic). Thus a layered notion of identity emerges, that individuals display variously depending on context')".¹⁷

I agree with Porter's identification of a 'layered' identity, and using this interpretation, an Irish harpist can be described as being a 'harper' within 'Irish traditional music', which may or may not fall into the category 'Celtic'. Of all the so-called 'Celtic' instruments, the harp offers particular associations of romanticism. This in itself is a common trope in the myth of Celticism, which Bohlman describes: 'Romanticism is not primarily a creative process, but a re-evaluate process... Romanticism is a re-evaluation, in the centre, of peripheral features.'¹⁸ Furthermore, he pinpoints the harp as the most commonly employed musical realization of 'Celtic' identity¹⁹ and also refers to the layered identity at play: 'Musicians acquire credibility as Celtic by emphasizing authenticity, on one hand, and by consciously recontextualizing authenticity through revival, on the other'.²⁰ That is, by emphasizing the very *Irishness*, and *traditionalness* of their music, Irish harp players can avail of the potential Celtic markets. This is done not through a hybridization of their music, but by situating it firmly in the mainstream Irish traditional music, a ready-made cultural currency.

The focus of this paper was on defining and analysing traditional-style harping as it has developed over the past thirty years and as it exists today. The musical places and spaces occupied by this strand of the tradition are shared with mainstream Irish traditional music, but are, in ways, also shared by other branches of the Irish harping tradition, such as the art and song styles. Traditional-style harping as conceptualized here is a subculture of traditional instrumental music. I have attempted to demonstrate that traditional-style harping occupies a central role within 'harping' in general but also 'traditional' music. It is through the experience of style and context that the harp can be interpreted as operating within the particular musical system that is Irish traditional music. The harp shares the conceptual framework of stylistic features appropriate to traditional music in general and harpers share the experiential performance styles, processes, contexts and demands of mainstream traditional Irish music.

- 16 John Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture* (Cambridge, 2000 (1999)), p. 27
- 17 James Porter, 'Introduction: locating Celtic music (and song)', *Western Folklore*, 57:4 (1998), p. 216.
- 18 Malcom Chapman, 'Thoughts on Celtic music' in Martin Stokes (ed.), *Ethnicity, identity and music: the musical construction of place* (Oxford, 1994), p. 41.
- 19 Bohlman, *World music: a very short introduction*, p. 80
- 20 Ibid.