

Review

Harp Studies

Sandra Joyce & Helen Lawlor (editors)

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016

ISBN 978-1-84682-588-0

Harp Studies is a publication of fourteen articles presenting new research on the Irish harp covering many areas such as history, musicology, sociology and arts. Written by musicians, historians, academics, researchers and artists, the wide approach brings new perspectives in the understanding of the historical and the modern period of the Irish harp. By publishing *Harp Studies*, Sandra Joyce and Helen Lawlor tackled the difficult task of dedicating a book entirely to the instrument with well-studied historical elements but also bringing new perspectives on a modern era often ignored. The fourteen articles in chronological order were written by an impressive list of authors gathered around the publishers. It begins here only in the 12th century – relaying the previous periods sometimes considered as the golden age of the harp of the Celts to the introduction of the book – one should not forget that it is not a *history* but rather *studies* devoted to the instrument.

It is therefore in 1188 that the journey begins, by one of the oldest writings referring to the Irish harp written by Giraldus Cambrensis (1188). This has been the subject of numerous previous studies and it is by a systematic approach, abundantly supported by sources, that Paul Dooley proposes his analysis of the famous quote. His research on iconography and playing techniques in the medieval period, especially from Welsh manuscripts, sets us on a genuine quest for the origins of the instrument. Without any other possibility of comparison with other descriptions of the same period, Dooley's conclusions are appropriately cautious, far from the outlandish claims made elsewhere. At the end of the 18th century, Edward Bunting was already enthusiastic about Giraldus' quote on harping and he published the most important collection of historical tunes of Irish music for harp, known today under his name. In her article dedicated to Bunting, Colette Moloney traces the life of this musician who was entrusted with the task of saving the last vestiges of the old harp tradition at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In spite of the mobilization, in spite of the fund-raising campaigns such as the astonishing subscription named the *Bengal Subscription* by Irish philanthropic expatriates in India, despite the recruitment of teachers such as Arthur O'Neill, the various harp societies failed to revive an instrument condemned to oblivion. *Harp Studies* opens then the darkest, most crucial and yet the most unknown period of the instrument: the pivotal period between the Belfast harp festival in 1792 and its revival in the 20th century. The fate of the Irish harp then seems to escape the protagonists. The transition is assured by Harry White, who skillfully illustrates in his article the transformation of an instrument which became metaphor in the works of Thomas Moore (who will popularize the collections of Bunting), William Butler Yeats and Seamus Heaney.

Moore's ultimate icon of Irish culture became not only a symbol but also a burden full of prejudices. Ruan O'Donnell argues that this vector of a fragmented community in

search of stability throughout the world remains nevertheless clearly the symbolic tool of exacerbated nationalism, in conjunction with the music made. In the mid-twentieth century, Donal O'Sullivan published *Carolan: The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper* (1958). Sandra Joyce warns musicians who are quick to draw from this type of publication without taking into consideration the alterations to which the originals have been subjected. The *secondary orality* – when the music is transmitted no longer by a musician but via an intermediate medium – of which these musicians are victims, can distort and therefore betray the author of this music.

Still, the Irish harp seems to be reborn at this time. First as an instrument primarily to accompany singing, especially that of women, whose most famous archetype remains Mary O'Hara, then as an autonomous musical instrument within emerging Irish traditional music groups. Unlike Seán Ó Riada, for whom the sounds of the modern Irish harp move away from the historical sound (he preferred the harpsichord), a number of groups gave it its chance with the success we know today (*Ceoltóirí Laighen, Chieftains, Clannad*). With one foot in tradition thanks to the historical repertoire, the other one resolutely turned towards the modern era thanks to an increasingly efficient mechanism of levers, now is perhaps the explosion of an assertive popularity, a new golden age, but this time well anchored in reality. This harp, which has survived many centuries, which has evolved and recreated itself, now arouses the interest of today's composers such as Eibhlís Farrell who reveals to us some secrets of her piece *An chruit dhraíochta* (*The Magic Harp* 2002), and the harpist Michelle Mulcahy, as she explores the musical bridges between Irish music and Burmese music.

The history of the Irish Harp could have stopped there as it seems that, now, it is saved from oblivion and, better still, that its vitality leaves no doubts of its capacity to respond to current issues of the modern world. *Harp Studies* partly tells the tumultuous story of an instrument with the power to be reborn. In the final chapter, the harp born from the cauldron of Dagda comes back to life in the skilful hands of a contemporary artist who, from a common supermarket trolley found in the depths of the water, causes the mythical instrument to spring forth (Lawless, NicGhabhann, Ó Súilleabháin and Phelan). It's on this very positive conclusion that the book ends and the loop is completed. Throughout the articles, the reader is faced with multiple questions. The story told here weaves uninterrupted bonds between the periods in spite of the historical events, until this last *supernatural* loop. It is precisely the question of the link between the modern instrument and its illustrious ancestor that regularly confronts the harpists of today. If the ambition of *Harp Studies* was not to answer precisely this question, the reading of this book will certainly allow them to find some partial answers.

Tristan le Govic

Bibliography

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