

The Harping Tradition

The harping tradition in Ireland flourished from medieval times until the seventeenth century. It was fostered and developed among the powerful and wealthy Irish and Anglo-Irish families. Harpers were employed along with poets and orators, known as reacoirs, to provide entertainment for the families. As the families acted as patrons to the harpers, they would often have solo pieces, known as planxties, written in their honour by their harper. One famous song is Planxty Kelly. The occupation of a harper was a very prestigious one. The harping tradition was passed on, father to son, for many years and was one of very few viable career options for blind boys at the time. However, after 1600, as the great families went into decline, there was a loss of patronage and harpers were left unemployed. The harping tradition then became a nomadic one, as harpers would travel from county to county, playing for money and food.

There were two styles of harp: the Bardic harp and the Neo-Irish harp. The Bardic harp had between 29 and 31 strings made of wire, which were played with the nails. Usually around 70cm in height with a curved pillar and a hollow soundbox, the Bardic harp was the more resonant of the two. The Neo-Irish harp typically had 34 strings made of nylon or cat gut, which were played with the pads of the fingers. They were taller (about 91cm in height) than the Bardic harp, but less resonant.

In 1792 the Belfast Harp Festival was setup with the aim of preventing the decline of the harping tradition. It consisted of eleven harpers from the age of 15 to 97, playing pieces in their own particular style. One player that was the light of the day was Denis Hempson, age 97, being the oldest player there. Edward Bunting was commissioned by the Belfast Harp Society to record the lifestyles of the harpers as well as recording and writing down the music from the festival to preserve it for future generations. This method, unlike the oral tradition which had existed up until then, did not allow for particular nuances in style and some of these were lost. There was a harping revival in the second half of the twentieth century. The role of the harp as a traditional instrument was led by Máire Ní Chathasaigh, who had solo albums such as "The New Strung Harp" and Laoise Kelly who release the album "Just Harp"