WireStrungharp
The complete resource for the wire-strung harp™

Lost Chords

by Keith Sanger

Wind and string players on the 10th century Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice. Some inventive suggestions have been made that the stringed instrument is a triangular harp, but Dr Ann Buckley has described it as an assymetric lyre having noted the presence of a bridge, which stereographic photography by Michael Billinge has since confirmed. (See Buckley, Ann "Musical instruments in Ireland from the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries: a review of the organological evidence" in: Irish Musical Studies 1 (Dublin 1990)
(Photo by Michael Billinge, ©2012 WireStrungharp.com.)

While research into the Irish and Scottish wire strung harps has continued to advance, a process greatly helped by the fact that there are some surviving instruments upon which to base recreations, the question of the music played on them is still a very speculative subject. Even for the eighteenth century, from which compositions by known harpers have survived, they are no longer in the form in which they were originally sung and played, while for the earlier centuries it is virtually a blank canvas.

Whether it will ever be possible to fill in the blanks is questionable, but before even attempting to speculate on the answers the historical evidence that remains has to be assessed and placed in context. Claims have been made that the pipers took over the harp music. This is a point to return to, but taken at face value it merely shifts a question from one instrument to another. If it is true what then were the pipers playing before 'adopting' the harpers music?

Therefore to begin at the beginning we have to start by looking at what is known from contemporary sources about the function of the harp during its classical period from circa 1000 to 1600 AD, when it was very closely tied into the performance of Gaelic verse. This in turn requires an examination of that verse and its performance, a very large and still developing subject which is impossible to deal with adequately in a short overview of this type without making numerous generalisations only achieved by qualifying them with copious references.

It is generally agreed that according to contemporary references, the poet or File composed the verse which in turn was then declaimed by a reciter or 'reacaire' to the accompaniment of the harp, or possibly the tiompan. Beyond that we enter into considerable speculation, not with the nature of the verse but in how it was performed. The File composed his verse using a number of complex Syllabic Metres, the complexity of the metres used increasing with the higher the grade and status of the poet. How the reacaire performed the verse is uncertain although there have been some plausible academic suggestions, but the whole subject still tends to be viewed against an outdated and somewhat simplistic background view of Irish history.[1]

Detail of the “harp” or lyre from the Cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice
(For more information please refer to the image of the Cross above).
(Photo ©2010 by Michael Billinge, ©2012 WireStrungharp.com.)

Before the Norman incursions which commenced in 1167, Ireland had for over three hundred years been subject to varying degrees of Scandinavian influence. This had left its mark, not just in political terms but also in material ones; for example, the introduction of the coastal towns which through their ancillary harbours encouraged trade and the introduction of coinage. Even when the native Irish leaders were in the ascendant in the constant power struggle between them and the incomers, the advantages of these ports were appreciated and the ‘new’ towns were retained but now placed under native Irish overlordship.

A Scandinavian influence on Irish boat building is one obvious development from this period along with a change in the Irish language where numerous words especially relating to shipping and fishing are derived from Old Norse [2] In the material arts especially metal work, motifs and methods were also adopted by the native artisans. It has been noted that following the Battle of Clontarf in 1014;—

> One of the consequences of the defeat of the Vikings and of the slow assimilation into the framework of Irish life of the now Christian Scandinavian cities, Dublin, Limerick. Waterford and Wexford, seems to have been the strong influx of northern elements into Irish art which gives its special flavour to the decoration of some of our manuscripts.[3]

There is evidence that even before that period Irish poets had composed praise poetry in honour of some of the Viking leaders which, whether understood or not, would have needed to be performed to the object of the praise if the poet was to receive his reward.[4] It is unlikely in that milieu that Irish musicians would have remained unaware of the incomers’ own entertainers with their gut strung instruments.

Unfortunately with music, especially music which was not written down any signs of cross fertilisation are hard to find therefore little academic work has been done on that subject. In terms of the physical evidence of the Scandinavian stringed instruments things are slightly better served and the most recent overview of Irish music during that period notes numerous finds of tuning pegs from that time which have turned up in excavations in Dublin, Cork and Waterford.[5]

In reality the Scandinavian settlers became just one more element in the constant power struggles between the native Irish ‘Kings’ forming fluctuating alliances with those Irish leaders, depending on which way the local political tide was flowing. The appearance of individuals with mixed naming patterns testify to some degree of ‘social’ mix but in the customs of that period, the forming of alliances would have involved entertainment and feasting; arenas where cross cultural fertilisation would occur.

Any attempt to explore this subject involves tracing a path through areas littered with traps which catch even the experts. For example, the opening paragraph in an important article on ‘Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland’ provides a very succinct summary of the period from the Norman incursion in 1167 to the reign of the Tudors but falls into one of those traps in its very last sentence.

> The ‘Gaelic Ireland’ of the title cannot always be strictly defined in ethnic or territorial terms, indeed there are circumstances in which it could best be described as a state of mind, but it is an undoubted fact that between the Norman invasion of the twelfth century and the Tudor reconquest of the sixteenth, the Irish language, culture and traditions continued and developed side by side with the newer, Anglo–Norman culture of the towns and the more heavily colonised areas along the east coast. Indeed the Irish element came to predominate, so that by the end of the medieval period ‘Gaelic’ society included not only the Irish chiefs and their followers but to a greater or lesser degree many of the Old English families, such as the Burkes and Fitzgeralds.” [6]

‘Old’ those families may well have been but of ‘English’ origin they were not and it is an important aspect that has to be considered when trying to resolve the cultural background and development of the harp in Ireland. The real background to that period was best explained by the authors of the introduction of a series on the The Administration of Ireland for the Irish Manuscript Commission when they stated that;—

> For all these men linguistic boundaries did not exist: everyone of importance spoke the same tongue as his fellows, wherever duty and his career might call him. If we do not appreciate that Ireland and South Wales, the Lowlands of Scotland, Flanders, Brittany and many other lands, not excluding England, were in like case, we shall not understand Irish mediaeval history. All these lands were part of a great congeries ruled by French knights and French clergy who, though living under different lords, were linked together by innumerable ties of blood and marriage, education, ecclesiastical office, homage and fealty. We may, for want of better words, speak of their world as that of French feudalism, though the element that can be termed feudal in any precise sense was small. Their world was, in any case, that of French culture, of the French way of life, which dominated and transformed native institutions and customs.
>
> To speak of ‘the English occupation’ of Ireland is, then, historically meaningless if we apply the term to the twelfth or thirteenth century or even a later period. The kings of England who became lords of Ireland were not even Normans: they were as French as Frenchmen could be. It was their preoccupation with France and French affairs that left them so little time for any thought or care for Ireland, except as a source of profit. We might, therefore, with propriety, have chosen for this volume some such title as The French Administration of Ireland. Unfortunately such a title might have been misunderstood, even by professed historians.’ [7]

It follows therefore that in the early stages of the ‘Norman’ period in Ireland when they started to interact with the native population, those incomers would have developed a bilingualism, having both French and a newly acquired Irish Gaelic (and for many, Latin, the language of the church and eventually the Law). This tended to mirror what was happening in England where the Norman elite also started to become bilingual but in their case French and Anglo Saxon, (and Latin). In time in England French disappears leaving just ‘English’ and Latin, while in Ireland as French fades away through the close ties with the English crown bilingualism remains but now being Gaelic and a newly acquired English.[8]

It is difficult to place firm dates on exactly when these changes occurred and in any case it was more a gradual process rather than a sudden event, but in Ireland the move from French to English probably occurred

A Norman Harp on the 'Shrine of St Patrick's Tooth', made circa 1350 for Thomas de Bermingham, Lord of Athenry. The inscription on this reliquary is in Latin but for a discussion on the probability that the same goldsmith also worked on the 'Shrine of the Stowe Missal', made around the same time for Philip O'Kennedy, King of Ormond, which has its inscription in Irish Gaelic and shows a player of a Lyre (Tiompan), see Raghnall O'Floinn, Irish Goldsmith's work of the Later Middle Ages, Irish Arts Review Yearbook. Volume 12 (1996) p 40.

towards the latter part of the 14th century. It is in that respect illuminating to consider the 1366 Statutes of Kilkenny which was the first attempt to arrest the integration between the native Irish and the Normans along with exerting control on the movements within the 'Pale' of those, both Normans and native Irish coming from outside its fluctuating boundaries.

The Statutes make many references to 'England and English' which suggests, especially when simply read in modern translations that what it was ordering included the imposition of the spoken English language. But the language of the 'parliament' which produced the statutes was French and the statutes themselves were written in French. Likewise those to whom they were in fact addressed, the 'English' of the pale, were themselves also French speakers. Clearly therefore those references to 'England and English' were simply geographical, meaning the normal customs of the Normans in England.[9]

Throughout that period this French speaking hierarchy maintained their own minstrels. They too were part of that wider French cultural milieu and their origins lead back to the Troubadours. They played, among other instruments, the gut strung harps commonly used throughout that whole French speaking world. Examples of some of their songs popular in Kilkenny in the 1320s are recorded in the Red Book of Ossory. They appear there because Richard Ledrede, Bishop of Ossory from 1317 to 1360 quotes the opening lines to indicate the tunes to which his Latin Hymns were to be sung.[10]

In time the minstrel's songs and music had a marked impact on Irish verse. This first seems to have begun when some of the aristocratic 'Norman French' exemplified by Gerald Fitz Maurice, the 3rd Earl of Desmond, (1357–1398), or 'Gearoid Iarla' in his Gaelic persona started to compose songs of courtly love in Gaelic but based on the existing structure and music of their minstrels. Eventually the music simply became part of a common pool of airs with multiple variants. An example is given by William Matheson when he traces the air of one of the Blind Harper's Songs back to a French song dating to the fourteenth century.[11]

With such a mixture it can be difficult determining specific origins, although one authority on Irish music has stated that 'As in the folk music of other lands, love songs constitute the most numerous class of folk–song in Ireland. Unmistakably deriving from the popular poetry of the Middle Ages, the themes and types prevailing are a legacy of the Norman invaders.' [12] Unfortunately a clear view of these other minstrels and their music usually referred to in its Gaelic form simply as abhran or 'song', only emerges around 1600 following the decline of the professional poetic orders.[13]

During the classical period of what is usually referred to as 'Bardic Verse'[14] the professional poets or File could not have been unaware of the other, in their view inferior performers. Indeed as the File were quite happy to seek patrons from both sides of the linguistic divide the poems they composed for some of the Anglo Norman Lords must have been performed in front of them so the File who would have overseen the performance of his own poem must have noted those Lords normal minstrels. Occasionally there are comments decrying what in one poem are described as 'wretched abhrans' and in 'misshapen crooked faulty poetry',[15] but on the whole the professional poets continued at the top of the artistic tree. A position they appeared to expect as of right.

Since the File were literate a considerable number of their compositions have survived in manuscript form, often written into 'poem books' kept by the families of their patrons.[16] This means that the poems have been subject to a considerable amount of academic study over the years with a large corpus of publications. They are well beyond the scope of this overview other than to note that along with the publication of edited versions of the verse there has also been much analysis of the various syllabic metres used by these poets and its origins. What is generally agreed is that from around 1200AD, when the language used was to some degree codified until the end of the Classical period of syllabic verse, the method of its performance involved a recaire who sang or recited the verse accompanied by a harp or tiompan player.[17]

However this does pose a few problems especially in regard to the identity of the 'recaire'. The contemporary records provide the names of many individual poets and musicians but nobody is actually described as a recaire which suggests that the term was a technical description of a function rather than a regular position. The accounts which give some indication of the rewards obtained by the File, recaire and musicians suggest that the recaire was at least on par with if not a little above that of the musicians. This would fit with the credible suggestion that the position was filled by any junior member of the chief poet's entourage with a suitable voice.

Turning to the musical accompaniment there are also some problems regarding the nature of the musicians as it is clear that there were two different instruments in use. These were the harp and the tiompan, both of which were wire strung but differing in structure and numbers of strings. The tiompan seems to have had around six strings and was what in modern terms would be described as some sort of lyre. The tiompan declined in use until by the latter part of the 'classical bardic' period around 1500 it was almost completely replaced by the harp, which judging by the three extant specimens from that time had by then around thirty strings.

Trying to estimate the relative usage of the two instruments over time is difficult. One problem is that editors of the contemporary verse still tend to simply translate 'tiompan' as 'harp', despite it now being some time since the identity of the instrument was resolved by the work of Dr Buckley.[18] However this can be resolved by always comparing the translations with the original Gaelic source. A larger and possibly insoluble problem concerns the large number of poetic references simply to 'string players' or variations on that theme where an instrument, (or musician) is implied without any exact definition. Once again many editors of the poems have translated these too into 'harp' or 'harper', a presumption on which going back to the Gaelic source does not help.

A number of modern attempts have been made to try and re–create a 'recitation' but while plausible they are academic experiments and by their nature speculative.[19] Curiously, although they reflect the considerable amount of thought that the topic has engendered, little consideration seems to have been given to the

reacaire as a performer. What training did he have (and as far as the classical period of Syllabic verse is concerned it appears to have been mostly a masculine world), where was his voice pitched and how was it applied. In other words was his aim to produce a sweet melodious sound or to aim for maximum vocal carry with all that implies for tone and volume?

Some possible answers can be drawn by comparison with research into early music in general. It would seem unlikely that the relatively modern singing voice derived from using the 'lower larynx' position would have been used, especially as the trade off in greater volume involves sacrificing the clarity of the vowels. Certainly not a desirable situation for proclaiming verse based on syllabic metres. Modern systemised breathing is also not thought to have been introduced before the late eighteenth century so the 'reacaire' would most likely have fitted the description that 'the voices of earlier generations were probably lighter and more agile, smaller and less able to project but with a more speech–like clarity of vowels'.[20]

This in turn raises the question of the size of the audience to which the verse was performed. It is another important factor in regard to how loudly the recaire was expected to project his voice but also an area in which little research seems to have been undertaken. Whether it is possible to actually draw any firm conclusions is debatable as the evidence is somewhat contradictory. In 1351 William O'Ceallaigh invited 'all the Irish Poets, Brehons, bards, harpers, Gamesters and others of their kind of Ireland to his house at Christmas', and according to the poem composed to celebrate the occasion a temporary town of wattled huts was erected besides his castle with a separate street for each profession.

Detail of the harper from an image taken from *The image of Irelande, with a discoverie of woodkarne, wherin is most lively expressed the nature and qualitie of the saide wilde Irish woodkarne* by John Derricke (1578)

An even more lavish occasion was held in 1433 by Margaret, daughter of O'Cearbhaill and wife of O'Conchobhair Failghe, in which a roll said to have listed 2700 people was claimed. Even with allowance for the usual poetic exaggeration such large numbers must be questionable when it came to the individual performances and something more like the picture in John Derricke's Images of Ireland showing the Chief of the MacSweynes must have been more usual. Here there are four people seated at the table with one standing behind and these include MacSweyne and his wife and presumably also the poet. Immediately in front of the table are the four performers, the reciter, a harper and two of what in medieval England were known as 'musical farters'.

The scene is out of doors and in the background food is being cooked in quantities which suggest that we are only looking at the top table and not included in the scene are the rest of the diners. The reciter or recaire is quite close to the table with the harper right behind him which given the circumstances of the open air performance is likely to be a more accurate reflection of the carrying power of voice and harp. Although it would be almost impossible to prove, the fact that the File received the highest reward for his verse suggests that the verse had to be presented in a form that could be both heard and understood which in turn points towards a relatively intimate performance.

The presence of the professional farters or braigetoir is rarely commented on, indeed many reproductions of the picture either crop them out or in the case of the version printed by R. B. Armstrong in his work on the

Image taken from *The image of Irelande, with a discoverie of woodkarne, wherin is most lively expressed the nature and qualitie of the saide wilde Irish woodkarne*, by John Derricke (1578)

Irish and Highland Harps the dimensions of the picture are retained but the wind section has been 'airbrushed' out in some way.[21] It does however provide another insight on the performance, apart from the attraction of the feast being out of doors.

A part of the File's 'armoury' was the use of 'dispraise', a vindictive satire against those who incurred his wrath, often through not providing a sufficient reward for his poems. These satires lie behind the references in most of the 'edicts' seeking to control the poets and others which refer to 'their slanders' because to be effective the 'dispraises' needed to be heard by reciting them to some of the subjects peers.[22] Even better if during that performance the castigation of the person being 'dispraised' is enhanced with suitable contributions by the wind section of the musical accompaniment.

The suggestion that the music of the harp was in someway taken over by the pipers has often been made although usually with little attempt to examine it against the historical background of the bagpipe. The case basically revolves around the argument that with the end of the classical arrangement with File, recaire and 'harper' the bagpipe somehow inherited or copied the harpers music. This raises more problems than answers. The music which according to that argument the pipers acquired is what is known today as 'piobaireachd'; the 'classical' music of the highland pipe, but a word which in itself simply means 'piping'.

Detail of the same illustration as it appears in The Irish and Highland Harps by Robert Bruce Armstrong. Note the braigetoir have been replaced by stones.

Part of a ninth century Cross Slab at Ardchattan in Argyle showing a harper, triple pipe player and a possible third musician, (playing a rattle or horn have been suggested). Features of the design are said to point to a close familiarity with Pictland and Pictish cross-slabs of the later eighth or ninth centuries. (see Lloyd Laing, T*he Date and Significance of the Ardchattan Stone* in Pictish Arts Society Journal, number 8 (Autumn 1995)
Photograph by Keith Sanger, ©2012 WireStrungharp.com.

Piobaireachd or to give it the alternative name Ceol Mor is historically firmly linked with a number of named practitioners of piping families who appear as relatively high–status musicians in the highlands and islands. The earliest piobaireachd repertoire, in so far as the 'stories' behind the tunes are concerned, although these are not always accurate, also reflects this geographical spread. In origin the music is firmly linked to Gaelic song or amhran, (modernised as oran). This has been well demonstrated by a recent study[23] and places it as has been stated 'amhran belongs to a musical tradition that is international. It has historical affinities with the mediaeval chanson'. [24] This should not be too surprising when examined against the history of the bagpipe in Scotland.

The earliest form of 'pipe' appears at the same time as the stringed instruments shown on the pre 1000AD stone carvings of both Scotland and Ireland.[25] The depicted instrument seems to have been a mouth blown triple pipe similar to the Launeddas still played today in Sardinia. In many of the carvings it is shown apparently being played in association with the string player and this would seem to be confirmed by a line in a twelfth century composition referring to an event of dubious historicity that supposedly occurred around 944 x 976.

Crotta cuisleanna co cuibhdhi	Crotta and pipes playing in harmony
filidh faibhli	lively poets
la dan ndathghlan teighdis co righ	let them go with a pure fine poem
athmhar Raighne	to the prosperous king of Raighne[26]

The triple pipes shown on the stones playing along with a stringed instrument would certainly have been quiet enough to accompany the strings but also from the hint in the poem both instruments playing together may have supported the poets. The potential change from a Launeddas type of instrument using the mouth as the air reservoir and circular breathing to adding a bag for a reservoir is technical rather than musical. By providing a bigger reservoir it simply allows the instrument to increase in size and therefore volume and

there is certainly some evidence in Scotland that the bagpipe may have still been growing in size over the course of the 16th century.[27]

Exactly when the 'bagpipe' first appeared in the British Isles is not easy to determine. Some have argued the case for a bagpipe in Ireland by the eleventh or early twelfth centuries having appeared in Britain and Europe at that time.[28] Actually these claims are based on references using various words translatable as 'pipe/piper' with no indication of a bag. But comparison with later sources suggests that a bagpipe could be covered by these terms. Investigation is showing that of some 300 contemporary references to named Scottish bagpipers pre 1800, none of them actually mention a bag;[29] however the earliest firm reference which does comes from the household accounts of Edward I of England in 1285/6.[30]

Certainly if the bagpipe had reached the court of Edward I by then it would also have been present among the Norman French minstrels in the rest of the British Isles. Finding traces of them as far as Scotland is concerned is a problem, not because the minstrels were not there but the record sources in which they might have appeared are not. Both Edward I and later Cromwell removed Scottish records to England. They were returned at the restoration of the crowns following the death of Cromwell but unfortunately a ship on which they were sent sank somewhere in the North Sea.[31]This means that we are left with the odd mentions among the English State papers of minstrels who were in some way connected to Scotland.

One called Johannes de Kingorn, *fistulator Regis*, 'Kings piper', was in St Andrews circa 1303. Which King he served he is uncertain, but as Kinghorn is also in Fife and there is no sign of him among the English Court minstrels he had probably been a retainer of King John de Balliol before he was removed by Edward I. Whether the pipe involved was a bagpipe is also questionable but a surer identification is possible with the case of 'Janin le Cheueretter' who received payment at Berwick in 1311. A 'Chevrete' was a bag of a bagpipe made of goatskin.[32]

What nationality lay underneath Janin's French name is impossible to determine, This applies to many of the Norman French minstrels; they were all simply part of that large multinational French speaking minstrelsy. However by the time that contemporary Scottish record sources become more plentiful and named pipers appear, there is little distance in time between the first Lowland and Gaelic references. It is also worth stressing that as far as the Gaelic geographical area was concerned the pipers who turn up in the records were a peaceable lot, at least as indicated by the reasons for them appearing in the records.

From the start of the sixteenth century we find them acting as foster parents and witnesses to various documents, which points to some degree of status. However towards the end of that century and the beginning of the seventeenth references start to appear in all parts of Scotland to a 'Large' or 'Great' Pipe and the pipers now feature in the records mainly in connection with armed bodies of men, not necessarily restricted to just Highlanders.[33] It is possible that this also represented the final stage of the evolution of the bagpipe in Scotland into a large powerful instrument suitable for Military and Burgh pipe use. Certainly it is about then that the poets start to notice it and comment on the volume.

It may well be more than a coincidence that the earliest piobaireachd with associated words along with evidence which supports the 'history' traditionally associated with their composition also seem to fit into the first part of the seventeenth century, a period of many conflicts affecting most parts of the UK and Ireland.[34] Although they are associated with Gaelic song or amhran and a musical heritage which ultimately leads back to the medieval minstrels, the treatment of the music is uniquely connected to the instrument, the bagpipe.

The bagpipe has a number of technical limitations. It cannot vary the volume and therefore use the contrast of playing loudly or softly to provide musical colour. It has a limited number of potential notes governed purely by the number of fingers and even although they are sounded against the drone or drones, those are 'fixed' once tuned. Finally it has an open ended chanter with a continuous flow of sound so it cannot use 'rests' or play staccato, in fact a piper would have to invent 'grace notes', (very short notes which take little time from the main melody), simply to be able to separate two consecutive notes of the same pitch.

However, the bagpipe does have just one technical advantage. The notes change immediately and consistently the moment a finger hole is opened or closed, unlike stringed instruments where the notes have an 'attack and decay' change in both volume and pitch. Since the fingers lie straight across the finger–holes the movement required is rather like a series of levers with minimal movement other than up/down. The required movement is both anatomically and physiologically very efficient and as pipers set out to employ it to maximum effect it has been shown that the speed and clinical control of pipers fingers are ahead of the other musicians tested.[35]

Conclusions

During the period from circa 1200 to 1650 the harper was a musician of some status, although this was linked to the prestige held by the File and the performance of his verse. A connection which was summed up by an early thirteenth century poet with the verses,

Ni bhiadh muna mbeith an dan	Were it not for poetry
ag cruit teidbhinn na ag tiompan	sweet tongued harp or tiompan
fios deighfhir arna dhola	would not know of a goodly hero after his death
na a einigh na a eangnomha	nor of his reputation nor his prowess.
Fios a seanchais na a saoire	Noble men would have no knowledge
ni fhuighbhidis arddaoine	of their traditions and nobility
eigidh so i ndan do dheanaimh	l allow these to be composed in poetry
no no slan da seinsgealaibh.	or else bid farewell to their ancient histories.[36]

The role of the harper in that performance so far as the nature of the musical accompaniment is concerned does not seem to have survived the demise of the Bardic orders. This presents a problem for the modern players of reproduction harps based on the three instruments that have survived from that period. Those instruments were made during the last few centuries of the Classic period and would have been designed to meet the demands of that poetic performance. Although the three harps still pose many questions of their own; it would help to answer some of these if we knew how the harps were expected to perform during the 'recitation' of the poems.

Answers have been sought by comparison with other instruments from that period, notably the 'highland bagpipe', but this is not as simple a solution as it appears. Firstly the assumption that Ireland and Scotland formed one uniform Gaelic world is increasingly being challenged. Trying to directly compare what happened in Ireland to Scotland even with just the poets and harpers presents problems.[37] Certainly both countries shared the Gaelic language but the more archaic form used by the File does not seem to have had such a firm foundation in Scotland.

With a shared language it is not surprising to find evidence for a common corpus of Gaelic musical terms but it is not yet clear how far this can be used as musical evidence. For example, the term Feaghan Geleash used by both the harpers and pipers to mean a 'tuning phrase' owes its origin to a scribal use meaning to try out a newly cut pen.[38] Nor is it totally clear if its musical application occurred first in Ireland or Scotland as it certainly was first on record in the latter. In terms of the actual music used in the harpers performance prior to the collapse of the 'bardic' orders the problem has to be treated in a logical rather than emotional fashion.[39]

Piobaireachd was the final result of a process that commenced with the introduction of the bagpipe into the British Isles in the hands of Norman French minstrels. Irrespective of whether there was any transmission of music from the earlier mouth–blown pipes; the basic limitations of the instrument are intrinsic and the solution of using the one advantage in terms of fast fingering of decorations must have been around in both Ireland and Scotland from circa 1200. To place that in context, the bagpipes and the classical period of bardic verse with File, recaire and wire–strung instrumentalist had coexisted, for that same period of time.

Furthermore for an initial period of some centuries the piper would have had more in common with his fellow Norman minstrels playing and singing to their gut strung harps. A milieu from which finally emerged the Stressed metre vernacular song forms to which the piobaireachd grounds are linked and whose ultimate form appears to be strongly linked to piping families in the North and West of Scotland. The wire–strung instruments however were firmly tied into supporting the declamation of Syllabic verse composed by families of poets primarily based in Ireland.

In his work on the Blind Harper, William Matheson, when discussing the nature of the poetry composed by the File and its performance supported by a harper noted that, 'what the nature of the accompaniment was there is now no means of knowing'.[40] There is still little reason to contradict him but it is possible to suggest the most sensible direction to explore when looking for an answer. It has now become increasingly clear that blanket comparisons between Gaelic Ireland and Scotland can no longer be justified, either with bardic verse or especially with the history of the harp. Looking to the music of a different instrument altogether in Scotland to provide an answer to the conundrum of how in its classic period of circa 1200 to 1600 in Ireland the harper accompanied the recaire in the performance of the work of the File makes little sense.

It is clear from the contemporary references that the accompanying music was played by the harp or what was known as a Tiompan. Over time the tiompan was eclipsed by the harp but tracing that process has been made difficult, firstly by the common miss–understanding of the nature of that instrument, which was a form of what we now call a Lyre with around six wire strings. Secondly, the tendency by the editors of published Gaelic verse to automatically translate references to a player of a stringed instrument as a 'harper' has obscured any comparisons of the relative references to both harp and tiompan over time.

What it is possible to determine is that the harp certainly over time displaced the tiompan and so it is possible to suggest that the harp must have had some superior qualities over the instrument it displaced. Some of these are easy to spot, a much larger range of notes for example, around 30 strings compared to the tiompan's six. Likewise the harp would have been a more powerful instrument which in turn suggests that contrasts between playing loudly and softly would have been both more obvious and more likely to be used to full effect along with a much longer sustain than the smaller tiompan. It would seem that exploring these attributes of the wire–strung harp are more likely to come closer to how the harp was actually used during the performance of syllabic verse.

Last Chords

From the start of the Scandinavian incursions until the last trace of the Norman minstrel harpers, for a period of some 700 years plucked gut strung instruments had been present in some parts of Ireland. The last firm reference to a harper who would have been playing on gut being early in the sixteenth century although the customs duties given in The Booke of Rates...., issued by the Ireland Court of Exchequer in 1631 still included Harpe strings or Catlings.[41] This has a number of implications; for example, in 1513 the Treasurer's Accounts of James IV of Scotland noted payments incurred in the visit to his court by Aodh Dubh O'Domhnaill, (Hugh Dubh O'Donnell of Tyrconnell). Among the payments recorded was one on the 11 July to 'Odonelis harper quhilk past away with him.

Previously, Sanger and Kinnaird noted that in the Treasurer's accounts where in the Scottish Court both harpers on gut strung harps and players of the 'clarsach' or wire strung harp were quite common the scribes keeping those accounts were quite adept at differentiating between the two instruments. This was a puzzle because at that point it was assumed that O'Donnell's harper was Irish and should therefore have been playing a wirestrung 'clarsach'. So it was treated as an odd scribal aberration.[42] Further consideration however suggests that may have been an unwarranted presumption. Just two years prior to his visit to the Scottish Court, Hugh O'Donnell had, according to the Annals of the Four Masters, visited Rome and twice staying for four months once in each direction at the English Court of Henry VIII, so he certainly had a travel broadened mind. Taken together with evidence of the finding of a gut strung harp peg from medieval layers of an excavation in Donegal this now suggests the possibility that the Scottish scribe really did have a gut strung harp in mind for 'Odonelis harper' must be considered.

This along with the question of those other gut strung instruments are just two examples of how the established 'history' of the Irish Harp needs a serious modern re–evaluation. The evidence is increasingly pointing towards a total disruption following the end of the period of high status poets with their recaire and harper supporters. Over possibly less than one hundred years, from circa 1550 to 1650, a number of events came together. The wire strung tiompan disappears from the scene along with any remaining Norman minstrels with their gut strung harps. It is during this time that harpers with names of Gaelic origin seem to have been moving outside of Ireland for employment while wire strung harpers with Anglo–Norman names start to appear in the records. This may have been a factor in the move away from playing with fingernails which was well underway by the end of that period along with signs that chromatically strung harps were being made.[43]

In the past it has been usual to attribute some of these events to the poets loss of patronage following the flight of the northern earls. This undoubtedly had some effect but a study of patronage on Irish cultural change has suggested that there was a far wider background which affected all fields of the arts.

> Conditions in the early seventeenth century, even though it was an era of peace, made patronage of any branch of the arts difficult. This was true within both the settler and native Irish communities in Ireland. The output of literature in English from the Irish printing presses, for example was very low and almost no creative writing in English was published in Dublin. Similarly, only a few could afford to patronise literature in Irish. During the late seventeenth century as conditions stabilised and a financial surplus became available for patronage so literary activity re–emerged. However, within the Gaelic community the old lordship system had disappeared and with it the bardic poetry which had been the propaganda mechanism bolstering the image of each particular lordship.[44]

It has long been recognised that there was a resurgence in the transcribing and recopying of older manuscripts in the eighteenth century.[45] However, the authors of the previously quoted work do not see the emergence of what they describe as a 'vibrant tradition of folk poetry in the early eighteenth century' as evidence of the catastrophic decline of Gaelic Society and as such was 'poor' poetry compared to the earlier classical compositions. Instead they argue that 'folk poetry' was by definition poetry without patronage and was a distinct cultural tradition not dependent on aristocratic patronage. Of course in that study the poetry was being considered within its literary tradition but since at that period the 'folk poetry' would have been sung, then by implication the same arguments apply to the resurgence of the harp albeit as a larger and somewhat changed instrument compared to the three examples that survive from the classical period of Bardic verse.

---

[1] Boydell, Brian, Music before 1700, *A New History of Ireland*. vol 4. (1986), 542; Ellis, Steven G. Nationalist Historiography and the English and Gaelic Worlds in the late Middle Ages. *Irish Historical Studies,* Vol. 25. No. 97 (May. 1986), pp 1–18; Cosgrove, Art, The Writing of Irish Medieval History. *Irish Historical Studies*. Vol. 27. No. 106 (Nov. 1990) pp 97–111; Dunne, T. J, The Gaelic Response to Conquest and Colonisation: The Evidence of the Poetry. Studia Hibernica. No. 20 (1980). pp 7–30. The author basis his study on edited material but makes the emphatic point that,—

> The difficulties of using Gaelic poetry as historical evidence are increased by the lack of modern scholarly editions and literary criticism for most of it, and the non–specialist has to rely on work done in the early years of this century by Dinneen, Knott, Bergin et al, much of which was coloured more than a little by the philosophy of the Gaelic revival, and its imaginative, not to say inventive reconstruction of the Gaelic past.

[2] O'Corrain, Donncha, *Ireland before the Normans*, (1972), 105.

[3] Henry, Francoise and Marsh–Micheli, G L, A Century of Irish Illumination, (1070—1170). *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, volume 62. (1961–1963), 106.

[4] O'Croinin, Daibhi, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 400–1200, (1995). 260

[5] Buckley Ann, Music in Ireland to c.1500 in *O'Croinin, Daibhi*, ed. A New History Of Ireland, 1, (2005), 774, pl 138.

[6] Simms, Katharine, Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*. Vol. 108 (1978), 67.

[7] Richardson, H. G and Sayles, G. O, The Administration of Ireland: Introduction (Reprint), *Analecta Hibernica,* No. 29 (1980), 5.

[8] Curtis, Edmund. The Spoken Languages of Medieval Ireland. *Studies, An Irish Quarterly Review*. Vol 8. No. 30 (Jun. 1919). pp 234–254.

[9] Frame, Robin, 'Les Engleys Nees en Irlande': The English Political Identity in Medieval Ireland. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, Vol. 3 (1993), pp 83–103.

[10] Mullally, Evelyn. Hiberno–Norman Literature and its Public. *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland studies presented to Francis Xavier Martin* edited by John Bradley. (1988) p 334. The songs indicated started;—

Harrow! jeo su trahy
Par fol amour de mal amy

—and—

Heu alas par amour
Qy moy myst en taunt dolour

[11] Matheson, William. *The Blind Harper, (An Clarsair Dall).* (1970). 153–154

[12] Breathnach, Brendan. *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*. (1977). 21.

[13] Putting a firm date on the end of the old poetic orders is a far from simple exercise. The flight of the Northern Earls in 1609 is often stated to have been its cause, but it is clear that the system was already in decline well before then; see, O Riordan, Michelle, *The Gaelic Mind and the Collapse of the Gaelic World,* (1990). Certainly the removal of the poets patrons from what had become the most Gaelic part of Ireland and the dilution of Gaelic due to the English and Lowland Scots planters would not have helped. The events of the Cromwellian period then providing the final destruction of the system the File had dominated.

[14] 'Bardic verse' is a common but slightly confusing label when applied to the work of the File. For a short account of the background see Murphy, Gerald. 'Bards and Filidh', *Eigse*, vol. 2, (1940), 200–207.

[15] McKenna, Lambert, ed. *The Book of Magauran–Leabhar Meig Shamradhain. (1947). 379–380*

[16] Simms, Katherine, *Literacy and the Irish Bards,* in Pryce, Huw, ed. Literacy in Medieval Celtic Societies. (1998), 238–258

[17] Mac Cana, Proinsias, Praise Poetry in Ireland before the Normans, *Eriu*, vol. 54, (2004), 13; Bergin, Osborgin, Irish Bardic Poetry, (1974). 5–8

[18] Buckley, Ann. What was the tiompan? A problem in ethnohistorical organology. Evidence in Irish literature. In *Jahrbuk fur musikalishe Volks und Volkerkund*, ix (1978), pp 53–88; For an example of a recent unhelpful translation see *Eriu* volume 53, (2003), pp 28–29 verse 12 first line 'Ingne corcra ar chliathaibh *tiompan*' translated as 'Crimson nails on strings of *harps*'.

[19] For a discussion of the various possibilities see, Bruford, Alan, Song and recitation in Early Ireland. Celtica, 21, (1990); O'Madagain, Breandan, *Caointe agus Seancheolta Eile— Keening and other Old Irish Musics*, (2005); Gillies William, Music and Gaelic Strict–metre Poetry and Blankenhorn, Virginia, observations on the Performance of Irish Syllabic Verse, both in *Studia Celtica*, XLIV, (2010), pp111–154.

[20] Knighton, Tess & Fallows, David, eds, *Companion to Medieval & Renaissance Music*, (1992). 312.

[21] Ramsey, Greer, A Breath of Fresh Air: Rectal Music in Gaelic Ireland, *Archaeology Ireland*, vol. 16. No 1. (Spring 2002). 22–23.

[22] For example from the 'Calendar of the Irish Council Book', 1581–1586, (ed), Prendergast, John and Quinn, David, *Analecta Hibernica*, 24. (1967), 133.

> Item. we find it requisite that everybody shall be an officer for taking of whores and arlotts, vagabonds, sturdy beggers, harpers, carrows and other naughty members that slander gentlemen when they deny them anything they demand and send them to her majesty's goal to be punished according to the lawes provided for such persons.

[23] MacDonald, Alan, *The Relationship Between Pibroch And Gaelic Song: Its Implications On The Performance Style Of The Pibroch Urlar*. Edinburgh University Thesis, 1995. online at www.cl.cam.ac.uk/~rja14/musicfiles/manuscripts/allanmacdonald.front.pdf

[24] Matheson, William, *The Blind Harper (An Clarsair Dall)*, (1970). 152

[25] Ramsey, Greer, The Triple Pipes on Irish High Crosses: Identification and Interpretation, *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, Third Series. Vol. 61, (2002), 26–36.

[26] Harrison, Alan, Seanadh Saighre, Eigse, *A Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol XX, (1984). 143–145; The editor notes an alternative manuscript reading with *Cruide* rather than *Crotta* which he has translated as 'Harps'. At the period the events in the poem were supposed to have occurred 'harp' was still being used in its original Germanic sense for a form of 'lyre'. Even by the date of the poems composition it is uncertain that the terms *Crotta/Cruide* always referred to a triangular harp as we now know it. It is safer therefore to take it that some form of stringed instrument was involved.

[27] Sanger, K, The Origins of Highland Piping, *Piping Times*. vol 41. No. 11, (August 1989). 46–52;

[28] Breathnach, Brendan, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland*, (1977), 69; Donnelly, Sean, *The Early History of Piping in Ireland*, (2001). 1–3; Cannon, Roderick. D. The Highland Bagpipe and its Music, (1988), 7.

[29] Sanger, K. work in progress

[30] Sanger, K. Border Lines, *Common Stock*, Vol 10. No. 2, (December 1995). 6–7.

[31] Imrie, John, *Guide to the National Archives of Scotland*, (1996). x–xi.

[32] Bullock–Davies, Constance, *A Register of Royal and Baronial Domestic Minstrels 1272–1327*, (1986). 76, 91.

[33] Register of the Privy Council of Scotland, volume 5. 27–28. 'with twa bagpypis blawand befoir thame', 14 December 1592.

[34] Sanger, K, Newspaper Report Sheds New Light On 'The Piper's Warning', *Piping Times*. vol. 61. No. 5, (February 2009); Cannon, Roderick, Who got a kiss of the King's hand?: The growth of a tradition. in Defining Strains, *The Musical Life of Scots in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. James Porter. (2007).

[35] Walsh, E. Geoffrey, Timing of Finger Movements in Musicians, delivered at the Galpin Society Conference held at the University of Edinburgh, 9–11 July 1999. The late Dr Walsh had developed his measuring devices during his career investigating clinical neurophysiological problems before deciding to examine the finger responses of musicians. After further work an article by him was published in the Piping Times, vol 55. No 4, (January 2003), under the unfortunate title of 'Scientific Tests Prove Pipers Surpass All Others in Fingering', the title was probably not his choice and implies that rather than simply looking at technical proficiency of movement, this makes for superior musicianship, not quite the same thing. After all the most brilliant violinist does not need the fingers of his hand holding the bow to move at all.

[36] McKenna, L. A Bardic Poem, *The Irish Monthly*, vol. 47. No. 558, (Dec 1919), 682, verse 29. The editor has translated *Tiompan* as 'cymbal'. and had attributed the poem to the early seventeenth century. The version quoted here and its attribution to a thirteenth century poet comes from Williams, N. J. A, ed. *The Poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe,* Irish Texts Society, (1980), 212–213, where the editor has translated *Tiompan* as 'psaltery'.

[37] O'Baoill, Colm and Bateman, Meg, *Gair nan Clarsach – The Harps' Cry*, (1994). 21; McLeod, Wilson, *Divided Gaels – Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c. 1200–1650.* (2004); O'Baoill, Colm, Highland Harpers and their patrons, in Porter, James, ed. *Defining Strains – The Musical Life of Scots in the Seventeenth Century,* (2007). 181.

[38] Donnelly, Sean, Feaghan Geleash, *Ceol Tire*, 25, (February 1984), 5–12.

[39] Buckley, Ann, Music in Medieval Irish Society, *Harpa*, No 11 (3/1993), 29-30. Two paragraphs from this reference are copied below for the convenience of the reader:

> The history and nature of this enthusiasm needs also to be analysed and understood, for while it has enriched and delighted the visitor, and consequently boosted the status of many musicians, it has also contributed to a self–engendering movement which can sometimes inhibit scholarly enquiry. A sentimental romanticism about the past, directed towards those "remote" regions of Europe untouched by the great industrial expansion of the 19th and early 20th centuries, has contributed to a kind of museum culture whereby any change is viewed with disapproval, and where the mythology of the Celtic twilight is kept alive in order to reassure the displaced urban visitor. This is not to say that pilgrims of all kinds need – and are entitled – to their own personal spiritual fulfilment. But the heavy industry of romanticising folklore, supported by the highly influential and centralising role of radio, television and journals, leaves little room for open–ended enquiry, for those who attempt to seperate fact from fiction in the service of research in order to establish what really were the dynamics of music–making in Irish society.
>
> In spite of all appearances, from the plethora of books, jounals and discs, much of the systematic work of charting the cultural (and musicological) history of Ireland is only just beginning. Nobody – neither the musicians nor interested readers and listeners – can benefit from an excess of enthusiasm, often masquerading as scholarship, or as "serious" writing, unless it is based on solid and reliable research. We should not be afraid of examining the past on critical rather than praise terms. Reality is always at least as interesting as fiction!

> Let us try to maintain an emotional distance in attempting to uncover it. Only under such circumstances can the particulars of music in Ireland emerge in their full significance and in their rightful place on the cultural map of north–west Europe.

[40] Matheson, William, *The Blind Harper, (An Clarsair Dall)*, (1970). 149.

[41] Fleming, Michael, Some Points Arising from a Survey of Wills and Inventories, *Galpin Society Journal*, vol. 53. (April 2000). 307.

[42] Sanger, K and Kinnaird, Alison, *Tree of Strings – Crann nan Teud*. (1992). 85.

[43] Billinge, Michael and Shaljean, Bonnie, The Dalway or Fitzgerald harp. *Early Music*, vol. XV, No. 2, (May 1987).

[44] Cunningham, Bernadette and Gillespie, Raymond, The Purposes of Patronage: Brian Maguire of Knockninny and His Manuscripts. *Clogher Record*, vol. 13. No 1, (1988) 38–39

[45] McLeod, Wilson, *Divided Gaels; Gaelic Cultural Identities in Scotland and Ireland c. 1200–c. 1650*, (2004). 61.

Submitted to WireStrungharp.com by Keith Sanger, 29 February, 2012