

O'Carolan

The ancient Irish harpers were professionals of the highest order. Because their status was one of great honor, their training was long and rigorous. It generally began before the age of 10, and the student had to become the absolute master of three forms of Irish music, the history of the instrument, its maintenance, and all of the scales and arpeggios related to it. The excellence of Irish harpers was recognized far and wide. Dante wrote of them with rare admiration, as did Francis Bacon. He said, "No harper hath a sound so melting and prolonged as the Irish Harp." Giraldus Di Barri wrote in 1185, "On musical instruments the Irish are incomparably more skilled than any nation I have seen." Vincenzo Galleleci, famed opera master of Florence, revealed in 1581 that the Italians derived their knowledge of the harp from Irish masters.



Harpers were also valued by Irish Kings who competed to maintain the best in their service. There are several accounts in ancient Irish manuscripts that indicate this, including one that reads, "At the banquet, there were 9 seated in front, with 9 blue flowing cloaks and 9 broches of gold. 9 crystal rings were upon their hands, a thumb ring of gold on the thumb of each, ear clasps of gold on the ears of each, a torque of silver on the neck of each, and 9 shields with golden emblazonment above them on the wall. There were 9 wands of white silver in their hands for they were the King's 9 harpers."

Originally supported by Gaelic aristocracy, Irish harpers later found patrons among the Norman Irish families like the Butlers and Fitzgeralds. Because they kept alive an ancient tradition, and because their song and verse praised Ireland, freedom, or their Gaelic lifestyle, the English considered harpers, rhymers, and poets dangerous and seditious persons. By the close of the 17th century, laws were enacted forbidding Norman or English homes from supporting Bards and Harpers. As Gaelic aristocracy were gradually subdued or disenfranchised, many of the harpers lost their patrons and took to the roads in an effort to keep their tradition alive. Across the face of Ireland, they composed and sang of their Gaelic past in return for a night of food and shelter.

Of all the Bards Erin ever produced the last and perhaps the greatest was Turlough O'Carolan. Born in 1670 in Co. Meath, he was blind - either from

birth or from a childhood bout with smallpox. A kindly woman named McDermott Roe became his patron, and had the young man trained on the harp. He was a natural, and absorbed not only the sean nos or old style singing of his forebears, but the contemporary music of his own time. He became renowned as a poet, musician, and composer, singing his own verses to his harp. When he decided on the career of a wandering bard, Mrs. McDermott Roe bought him a beautiful harp and a horse with which to travel. O'Carolan seemed destined by nature for his profession for he was gifted with an extraordinary memory. Once when challenged by another musician to a test of skill, O'Carolan played back the challenger's composition note for note - though he'd never heard it before - with enhancements that made it a far superior composition.

O'Carolan married once in his career and had several children, but when his wife died in 1733, he took to the road again, gladly received and provided for in return for his beautiful compositions - over 200 of which have survived to this day.

In March 1738 the ailing 68-year old Bard returned to the Alderford, Co. Roscommon home of the McDermott Roe family, where he was met at the door. "I have returned, he said, after having gone through it all, for only death is left and my patroness provides like when I got my first learning and my first horse." The old Bard was led to an upstairs bed to be cared for. On the 25 of March, he called for his harp, and lifting his beloved instrument he composed his last beautiful melody - O'Carolan's Farewell to Music. Then he died.

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