

The Harping Tradition

In the Middle Ages in Ireland, harpers were highly respected members of society. They were professional musicians employed by the nobility in castles and Big Houses.

At the banquets, the harper (*cruitire*) provided musical accompaniment, while the reciter (*reachtaire*) proclaimed the poem, which had been written by the resident poet (*file*). These performances usually took place following the banquet and the highly esteemed poet guided proceedings from a place at the Master's table.



As well as providing accompaniment, the harper also composed tunes and songs. Sometimes they celebrated achievements of the patron, such as a victory in battle. Others marked events in the life of the family, such as a wedding, or a piece of music might be composed for a funeral to mourn a death.

Tunes composed in honour and praise of the patron were often named after the person. These were called **planxties**, e.g. Planxty Irwin, Planxty Kelly.

However, following the Battle of Kinsale (1601), many of the chieftains lost their land and went into exile. This left many harpers with no livelihood

because the estates were taken over by English/Scottish planters. Some harpers got positions with the new landowners and had to adapt their music accordingly. Many became travelling musicians who visited the houses of the nobility. They began to include music of the ordinary people in their repertoire.



Turlough O'Carolan

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Turlough O'Carolan (1670–1738), Harper

- Born in Nobber, Co. Meath.
- Moved as a child to Roscommon, where his father was employed by the McDermott-Roe family.
- He contracted smallpox when he was 21, which caused him to go blind. This meant he could not work as a labourer.
- Mrs McDermott-Roe provided him with an education, including harp lessons.
- She then provided him with a guide and horse and he began life as a travelling musician.
- O'Carolan is known for his compositions, which were influenced by the music of Italian composers Corelli, Geminiani and Vivaldi.
- He heard this music when he visited Dublin. Dean Swift was among his friends there.
- He also played traditional dance tunes and airs.

O'Carolan's tunes have been published in collections of Irish music. They are played today by many harpists. Some of his most famous pieces are 'Carolan's Concerto', 'Carolan's Farewell to Music' and 'Planxty Irwin'.