



Summary of the 1792 Harpers' Assembly

Northern Star, 18 July 1792, page 3

THE HARPERS

Although these partial representatives of the ancient BARDS and MINSTRELS of Ireland, to the number of ten, did not afford a very high treat to the lovers of modern Music, yet we may venture to affirm that they gave entertainment to the musical critic, who delights in tracing the combination and progress of sounds, from the first simple touches of melody, up to the full tide of refined harmony.

It appears that the principal reason for assembling them here, originated in a wish to rescue from total oblivion such NATIVE AIRS as were supposed to be in their possession alone, and which might prove an acquisition to the musical world, and an ornament to the Irish nation: But in this they have not succeeded to any great degree, for they played very few tunes but what were generally known, though not all committed to print; which is a kind of proof that the ancient Music of this country is not suited to the genius and disposition of its present inhabitants; or, that the incursions of neighbouring barbarous nations interrupted its progress and improvement, and finally terminated the usual practice of it, with its utility, when the nation become subject to a foreign empire – in fact, Poetry and Music are long since separated, and the BARD of former times, who recited to his Harp, or his Lyre, the achievements of heroes, the beauty of the fair sex, and the splendour and hospitality of Kings – who related their history in his songs, and inspired the martial ranks with intrepidity and courage, to rush into the battle's rage, and bleed for their country, is but very faintly represented by a modern IRISH HARPER.

WAR was then a trade – Literature had not yet drawn the film from the mind's eye, and the BARD was at once Poet, Musician, Historian and Philosopher. The customs of the times rendered his services important, and he was not only considered highly necessary, but ranked in the highest degree; for a knowledge of the Harp was one of the indispensable requisites to form a gentleman and a freeman – but these times are past and the IRISH BARD is no more!

It is a question, not yet discussed, whether or not the revival of the ancient Music of Ireland, were it even attainable, would be productive of any peculiar advantage, either to the nation or to the musician; especially at this period, when it is superceded, as well by the circumstances of the age, as the great variety of instruments which genius and experience have brought so near to perfection? – Be this as it may, the IRISH HARP, from which the Welsh borrowed the construction of theirs, was the most complete instrument in use for several years after the Norman conquest; and Doctor Burney, who certainly is no incompetent judge of Music, speaks of it in very high terms.

The history of the Harp of Brian Boiromhe Monarch of all Ireland, who was slain by the Danes, in the famous battle of Clontarf, in the year 1014, is somewhat curious: – His son, Donagh, who was obliged to fly to Rome, for the murder of his brother Teige, carried it thither, and made a present of it to the Pope, in order to obtain absolution. The Pope presented it to Henry VIII of England when *he* created him *Defender of the Faith*; it afterwards passed through the families of Clanricarde, De Burgh, Mac Mahon, of Clenagh, Mac Namara of Limerick; and lastly it was presented to the Right Hon. William Conynham, who, in the year 1782, deposited [it] in the library of Trinity-college,

Dublin, where it now remains, in tolerable preservation, although upwards of 678 years since it was made; and shews evident marks of skill and ingenuity in the artist who constructed it.

The Harpers were assembled in the Exchange-Rooms, and commenced their probationary rehearsals on Wednesday last, and continued to play about two hours each succeeding day till Saturday; – after which the fund, arising from subscriptions and the sale of tickets, to a considerable amount, was distributed in premiums (or donations) from ten to two guineas each, according to their different degrees of merit.

The highest premium was adjudged to CHARLES FANNING, (from the County of Cavan) who, from having the advantage of sight, and opportunities of acquiring a knowledge of the taste and fashion of modern music, has arrived at a degree of perfection not easily attained, and which must have given the hearers a very high idea of this kind of Music, in producing, alternately, the most lively, plaintive and pathetic sensations.

The following* are the names of the tunes that were played:

Coulin — Fairy Queen — Molly Veagg O — Miss Moore — Planksty Kingsland — Gra Go Nish — Dennis Dealy — Miss Fenning — Collough an Tinnie — Collin Doon — Carolan's Concerto — Lady Latitia — Planksty Reily — Baccaugh Buie — Scarant na Gompanaugh — The Dawning of the Day — Pearla an Vroley Vaan — Cauher Vac Aough — Mable Kelly — Lady Veagh — Tierna Viyoc — Patrick's Day — Aelion na Ruaen — Mailin Guidey Uyain — Nancy Cooper — Gracy Newgent — Carolan's Cap — Thomas Burke — Lady Bleany — Mrs. Maxwell — Plearurca na Ruarc — Doctor Hart — Carris a Nuienish — Shiely ni Conolan — Mrs. Crofton — Sir Festus Burke — Cionn Dhu Dielish — The Humours of Whiskey — Denis Aily — Cathilieu Treall — Trugh

Professional gentlemen are now employed in taking down some of the above airs, and, it is said, they have a pleasing effect when applied to the harpsichord, violin, &c.

* What follows is a straight transcription of the list, given the poor quality of the original print. No attempt has been made to correct the writer's transliteration of either the Irish or the English titles!