

HELEN LAWLOR, *IRISH HARPING 1900–2010: 'IT IS NEW STRUNG'* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012). ISBN 978-1-84682-367-1, xvi+198pp, €35.95.

Helen Lawlor's recent monograph, *Irish Harping 1900–2010: 'It is New Strung'*, is a welcome addition to the body of literature on traditional Irish music. It presents a detailed chronological account of the instrument's phases of 'existence, revival and transformation' (9) in the period, and, in particular, it establishes in academic discourse the separation of 'art' and 'traditional' styles of harping in twentieth-century Ireland. The diversity of harp music performance styles and repertoire is the most significant revelation in the book, and many significant teachers, composers, arrangers and performers are identified and contextualized. Lawlor's discussion is enhanced by detailed musical analyses of several tunes and compositions from both styles, as well as twenty-three colour photographs in the centrefold.

Following her introductory opening chapter, Lawlor discusses, in Chapter 2, the first fifty years of the book's period of study. After painting an apocalyptic view of harping in the early twentieth century, she establishes two important pedagogical figures, Mother Attracta Coffey and Mother Alphonsus O'Connor, who are continually referenced throughout the book. She weaves together a discussion of the common stylistic traits of the 'art' and 'traditional' performance idioms, while establishing the technical difficulty of the arrangements created by both Mother Attracta and Mother Alphonsus. Lawlor's performance-informed style is engaging, though at times she makes certain presumptions about the reader's knowledge of the technical terminology associated with the harp: a short list of these terms (e.g., 'blade changes') in the appendices would perhaps help the uninitiated reader. Gender is a constant theme throughout the book and is established early in this chapter. The fact that the harp was taught, almost exclusively, in convent schools in this early period established a gender imbalance in performance that is even more pronounced today. Also interesting is the role played by the Roman Catholic Church, mainly through the nuns of Loreto Abbey, Rathfarnham, in preserving and promoting traditional forms of Irish music. While the Church's attitude toward traditional music making has sometimes been portrayed in a negative light, this revelation adds to growing evidence that numerous individual elements within the Church sought actively to promote forms of Irish music throughout the twentieth century.

Chapters 3 and 4 give a social and performance background to the revival in harp playing during the 1950s. Lawlor provides ample evidence for this revival, arguing that it was built on the use of the instrument as an accompaniment to singing, as exemplified by the work of Mary O'Hara; and she arrives at a clear definition of the 'art' style on the instrument through her discussion of the composer-arranger Nancy Calthorpe. The first part of Chapter 3 provides a systematic exposition of the harp as

an icon, covering everything from its use as an abstract symbol for advertising to its specific function as the emblem of the Irish government.¹ Even for those who have grown up within the Irish musical tradition, the harp can be a challenging instrument to comprehend. It exists both in the present and the past in a way that no other instrument in the tradition does: on the one hand it has close associations with various historical Irish revolutionary movements, on the other it has become a symbological representation of Irishness on everything from the royal standard to a pint of Guinness. These last two examples of its use are demonstrative of the harp as both an imposed symbol of colonial Britain and a badge of Irish identity in the postcolonial era, and some consideration of this paradox would have added further weight to Lawlor's lively discussion in this section.

Nevertheless, Lawlor's thorough examination of performance records in the 1950s is impressive, as is her account of the founding of *Cairde na Cruite* in 1960, which makes for interesting comparisons with more recent revivalist groups such as *Cairdeas na bhFidiléirí* in Donegal. Perhaps influenced by the nationalist fervour of the newly formed Irish Republic, *Cairde na Cruite* served a useful purpose in returning Irish harping to the stage. Although the author does not articulate this directly, this section of the book illustrates the more general vacuum of traditional music-making in 1950s' Ireland, and some further discussion about this lacuna might again have served to elucidate non-specialist readers.

The discussion in Chapter 5 of the development of the 'traditional' style is engaging. This well informed and copiously referenced section of the book may come as a surprise to many Irish musicians who have grown up with harpists as reasonably common participants in traditional sessions. However, the harp has not always been integrated into the session scene, a fact that is underpinned by its absence from Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann competitions before 1974. Lawlor cites Máire Ní Cathasaigh's 1985 album, *The New Strung Harp*, as the key opus in the reinvention of the harp as a viable conduit for Irish traditional dance music.² She quotes various luminaries of the harp world (Michael Rooney, Gráinne Hambly and Ní Cathasaigh) on their own stylistic approaches, and transcribes musical examples from these harpers as supporting evidence. However, these examples are quoted directly from published books rather than transcribed from live performances, and as such surely provide only

¹ For another recent discussion on the symbolism of the harp in contemporary Ireland, see Mary Louise O'Donnell, 'Death of an Icon: Deconstructing the Irish Harp Emblem in the Celtic Tiger Years', this journal, 8 (2012–13), 21–39; <http://www.music.ucc.ie/jsmi/index.php/jsmi/article/view/100>

² Ní Cathasaigh won the first All-Ireland Harp Competition in 1975.

theoretical ideals of what each of these expert performers expresses in a live setting. For example, Lawlor provides two settings of the same tune, 'The Tailor's Twist', from Hambly's book, *Traditional Music Arranged for the Harp* (102). While these illustrate the differences between simple and complex accompaniment figurations, the first setting is only a variation (heard only once) in Hambly's recordings of the tune.³ The implication here is that Hambly switches between a simple and a complex style of arrangement from tune to tune, when in fact she maintains a single idiom that incorporates the simple arrangement style as material for variation. Perhaps the reader would have gained more at this point from a full transcription of each tune, rather than the four bars we are given in each instance; Hambly's lively recording of 'The Tailor's Twist' is, in itself, worthy of such treatment. Lawlor concludes that these examples fit the established conceptual criteria of what may be considered 'traditional' in style, despite the fact that they demonstrate clearly a style of accompaniment that is inherently syncopated, and, in the case of Rooney, one that is so harmonically complex that it warrants analysis. Her justification for this is the necessity of individuality in establishing a 'traditional' performance aesthetic, as has been proposed in numerous paradigms.⁴ This conclusion coheres with the reception of other innovators, such as Tommy Potts and Martin Hayes, and leaves us with an excellent impression of dance music performance on the harp.

Chapter 6 deals with the revival of the early Irish harp or *clairseach*. This instrument has been the subject of much painstaking research on the part of enthusiasts, many of whom are quoted (Anne Heymann and Siobhán Armstrong, to name but two). Lawlor undertook study on this instrument, which is different from the modern Irish harp in a number of ways, not least in that it requires a different performance technique. Her ability to draw from her own experience greatly enhanced this chapter; its content is reflective of a growing level of interest in historically informed performance of older harp repertoire. As Lawlor points out, this practice is a highly intellectualized area of the Irish musical tradition and relies on Edward Bunting's tables and descriptions of harping at the end of the eighteenth century to aid in the reconstruction of its performance aesthetic.

Having concluded her narrative history of harping, Lawlor turns to transmission and gender/identity issues for the final two chapters. There is plenty to admire in these lively discussions, and the harp, with separate 'art' and 'traditional' styles, serves as a

³ See Gráinne Hambly, *Between the Showers* (CD Baby: ASIN B0017HDR1E, 1999).

⁴ For instance, see Niall Keegan, 'The Parameters of Style in Irish Traditional Music', *Inbhear: Journal of Irish Music and Dance*, 1/1 (spring 2010), 63–96.

very useful case study for a comparison of pedagogical techniques within the Irish tradition. Perhaps the discussion of gender—essentially the transition of the harp as an instrument dominated by male performers in the eighteenth century to one dominated by female performers in the twentieth century—might have been addressed in an earlier chapter, although, in fairness, it is also difficult to see where her analysis of CD art and depictions of performers could have been replaced without holding up the earlier success of her narrative.

There are a few small proofreading errors, such as 1870 appearing as the date of Thomas Moore's centenary when the subsequent quotation gives the correct date of 1879 (18). The twenty-eight musical examples that are found throughout the book are in general accurate and well-presented, but there are some issues of consistency with the house style: for instance, examples from earlier in the text are given in piano stave format with bar lines running from the treble through to the bass clef, while later examples are presented with the staves joined only before the clefs. There is also a small issue with consistency in the use of final double barlines in examples where the music obviously continues. It is disappointing that the publisher has mistakenly cut off the top of at least one musical example: Example 4 (31) has nearly a full beam missing from the third bar, while the tops of the treble clefs on pp. 57 and 62 are also missing some ink. However, these are all small issues and do not detract from Lawlor's thorough examination of her subject matter.

In summary, Lawlor's book is a valuable resource for harp enthusiasts, while it also makes a fine contribution to scholarship, more generally, in the field of Irish music. It is wonderful to see the harp receive such thorough academic treatment as reflections on this topic have all too often been left to the concert stage in recent years. There is also plenty here to satisfy those with an interest in aspects of cultural revival in Ireland and in the field of gender studies. Although the book flirts with some more complicated theoretical issues towards its conclusion, it is written in such a way as to make it accessible to the scholar and the non-academic reader alike.

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