

## O'CAROLAN THE HARPER

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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. It's no wonder that then, that the excellence of Irish harpers was recognized world wide. Dante praised them with rare admiration, as did Francis Bacon, who wrote, "*No harp hath a sound so melting and prolonged as the Irish harp.*" In 1165, Giraldus Di Barri wrote, "*On musical instruments the Irish are incomparably more skilled than any nation I have seen.*" Vincenzo Gallileci, famed opera master of Florence, revealed in 1581 that the Italians derived their knowledge of the harp from Irish masters.

Harpers were so highly respected that Irish Kings competed to maintain the best in service to their court, and there are many accounts in ancient Irish manuscripts that indicate the esteem in which they were held. One reads, "*At the banquet, there were nine seated in front, with nine blue flowing cloaks and nine brooches of gold. Nine crystal rings were upon their hands, a thumb ring of gold on the thumb of each, clasps of gold on the ears of each, a torque of silver on the neck of each, and nine shields with golden emblazonment above them on the wall. There were nine wands of white silver in their hands for they were the King's nine harpers.*"

Originally supported by Gaelic aristocracy, Irish harpers later found patrons among the Norman Irish families like the Butlers and Fitzgeralds. However, that was soon to change. One of the ways in which England tried to subdue Ireland, was by replacing her heritage, culture, and traditions with English values. But the bards and harpers kept that ancient tradition alive. Because their song and verse praised Ireland, freedom, and their Gaelic lifestyle, the English considered harpers, rhymers, and poets as 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 was 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 local woman named McDermott Roe felt that she could help, and had the young man trained on the harp. The young O'Carolan was inspired and truly motivated by music. It was obvious that he was gifted with a natural ability, and Mrs. McDermott Roe became his patron. O'Carolan 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 to take to the road to expand his learning and to share his ability with others, Mrs. McDermott Roe bought him a beautiful harp and a horse with which to travel.

O'Carolan seemed destined for his calling 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 with enhancements that made it a far superior composition - a feat that was later attributed to Mozart.

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 - more than 200 of which have survived to this day. Most have become a standard part of the musical repertoire of some of the most respected classical companies and artists in the world. Throughout the years, O'Carolan's melodies, originally composed for the harp, have been translated to dozens of instruments by hundreds of artists and used to support various sets of lyrics. One O'Carolan Planxty, used to support a poem written by the President of the Anacreontic Society, an 18th-century amateur musicians club in London, became their official song. In 1814, that tune was used to support a poem called the Defense of Fort McHenry which was published as the Star-Spangled Banner. In 1992, Shanachie Records released a CD entitled The Music of O'Carolan containing 14 of his works performed by classical guitarists.

O'Carolan remained a wandering minstrel until March of 1738. It was then that 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 by the surviving members of the McDermott Roe clan. "*I have returned,*" he said, "*I have gone through it all, and only death is left. Shall my patrons still provide 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 God's angels welcomed the master into the heavenly choir.

