

The Origins of the Celtic Harp, Re-Imagining History

"Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent." – Victor Hugo

In my musical journey I have yet to find someone who wasn't moved by the sound of a harp. There is something about the harp that evokes what I call "drift" – being carried away on currents of sound to calmer emotional waters. As a student of anthropology, linguistics, and music, the impact of sound on the psyche fascinates me- the urge to get up and move to drumming, the cadence of Sean Nós, or the purity of medieval polyphony. I played piano and violin growing up and loved them, but it wasn't until I had the opportunity to learn the harp that I felt a true affinity for an instrument as an extension of myself, my culture and my ancestors.

The Celtic Harp is, of course, associated with the Gaelic cultures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales and surrounding areas, but its development continues to be veiled in some mystery. The harp as we know it today is believed to have evolved from the three-sided structure that appears in the 8th-century art of continental Europe and the British Isles. These images depict a simple triangular design, only a few strings, and it likely evolved out of the bowed harps and lyres of Egypt and the Middle East. The earliest examples of a harp-like, stringed instrument come from ancient Egypt circa 2500 BC and these "kinnors" were shaped more like bows. The lyre, or "giparu" appeared in Mesopotamia around the same time and its construction consisted of a box with two arms connected by a crossbar and the strings connected to the soundbox with a bridge. Kinnors were played seated or standing and they could reach up to 6 feet in height with up to 19 strings.

Kinnor and Giparu

After the withdrawal of Rome from the British Isles, imprints of lyre harps were discovered on the coinage of pre-Christian Gauls, pointing to their introduction to Northern Europe. Current theories posit that the lyre was introduced to Northern Europe from the Middle East through trade routes where the Scandinavian cultures altered it and introduced it to the Britons. There it evolved further into the Anglo-

Saxon lyres such as the one found at the 7th century burial site at Sutton Hoo. In fact, the word “harp” or “harpa” has its origins in Old Norse meaning “to pluck”. The lyres of Scandinavia evolved further to become the Tagleharppe- with a long soundbox, only a few strings and played with a bow. In the British Isles and France, early medieval harps had added a column and first appeared in Western Europe in the 8th to 10th centuries AD. There are few physical examples remaining, but art from that time indicates they had around ten strings. In Celtic cultures it further evolved the pillar and soundboard by the 9th century, with this more solid frame allowing for additional strings to be added and the prototype of the modern Celtic Harp was born. The Utrecht Psalter, written in the early ninth century, has the earliest depictions of these sturdier, more recognizable harps.

Anglo-Saxon Lyre and Tagleharppe

The introduction of the column was the beginning of the modern harp’s development. The column allowed for more strings and string tension without warping or cracking the body of the instrument and made tuning simpler. By tuning each string individually (and the subsequent introduction of pegs for this purpose) harps could support more strings, which meant more octaves, tonal quality, and volume. Larger, stronger harps could support either wire strings or gut strings, creating more variation in sound and tone. By the 12th century the Gaelic word “cruit” was coined to refer to this type of harp and clarsach or cláirseach became terms used in Scotland and Ireland to refer to this specific type of harp by the 15th century. The Troubadours or Trouvères of the 13th century traveled from court to court with their harps telling stories and sharing news. At this point, European harps were still relatively small and portable.

Early Medieval Harp

The first harp to feature a hollowed soundbox that amplified the instrument's sound dates back to 14th-century Ireland. It also included a sturdier neck and up to 36 brass strings.

During the Renaissance, the small, portable medieval harp became larger, resting on the floor to accommodate a supplemental range of strings to become completely chromatic. By the 15th century German instrument makers had added levers to the tops of the strings to change the pitch by changing the tension on that string and the modern Celtic Harp as we know it was created. Today, traditional Celtic Harps are still primarily defined as lap harps, lever harps or "folk harps" can be larger and rest on legs or directly on the floor.

From distant Egypt to the British Isles the creation and development of the harp is an intriguing tale of exotic trade routes, invasion and occupation, status and cultural identity. Archaeologists have re-created the ancient kinnor and giparu, learning to play them as a way of learning more about those cultures from a place of emotion and intuition. We can only guess what their music sounded like, but the sounds of these instruments guide us from a deeper, intuitive place to compose what might have been pleasing to ancient ears. The music played today was built upon those foundations and it is worth an intellectual exploration at the very least.

To that end, some musicians have embraced the instruments of their ancestors, and their compositions reach back in time to bring forward interpretations of music long lost over the millennia. Artists such as A Tergo Lupi, Heilung and Wardruna have breathed new life into the Tagħleħarppa and Anglo-Saxon Lyre, introducing them into the modern world where their music resonates deeply with people seeking ancestral connections and roots. In my own practice with the harp, I consider the sounds of the first plucked string instruments, adding those interpretations to my music to give it depth and an organic feel. The results have been varied and intriguing, always deeply moving as I reach back through time to touch my own origins. It feels like going home.

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