# The Irish Harp

To tell the history of the Irish harp is to tell the history of the Irish people. This ancient folk instrument with its beautiful, delicate sound is played today despite being ignored, derided, and proscribed for centuries. Harpers, who in earlier days would have been hanged for their art, now flourish throughout the world, as do the Irish themselves.

[Legend](http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/forharp.html) tell us the first harp was owned by Dagda, a chief among the Tuatha De Danaan. At one time during a war with the Fomorians, the gods of cold and darkness, his harp was stolen but later recovered by Lugh and Ogma. When it was returned it had acquired two secret names and the ability to call forth summer and winter. From then on, when Dagda played, he could produce a melody so poignant, it would make his audience weep, he could play an air so jubilant it would make everyone smile, or bring forth a sound so tranquil, it would lull all who listened to sleep. So thus did the harp became the dispenser of Sorrow, Gladness and Rest.

Harps are played throughout much of the world. From ancient artworks, epic tales and poetry, we learn of harps in Babylon and Mesopotamia. We see them in the tomb of Pharaoh Ramses III, votive carvings from Iraq and sculptures of ancient Greece. From Africa, which has more than 100 harp traditions, the instrument traveled north to Spain and soon spread throughout Europe. Strung with sinew, silk or wire, harps vary in size, structure and decoration according to the physical and technological environments of their origins. African harps have been made from wood and gourd covered with cowhide, the Burmese sang auk has an arched soundbox similar to the Turkish ceng while European harps feature a triangular frame, There is one feature that all harps share: the strings run vertical (rather than parallel) to the sound box.

Griffith of Wales employed harpists in his court at the end of the 11th century and the monk-historian Geraldus Cambrensis admired the great skill of the Irish harpers and remarked that some even considered the Scots to be better players. For Irish and Scottish harpers commonly visited each other’s countries to study, to learn and exchange tunes and their music was admired throughout Europe. Another twelfth century archivist, John of Salisbury, wrote that "... had it not been for the Irish harp, there would have been no music at all on the Crusades."

These harps were quite different from the large pedal harps we see in modern symphony orchestras. They were much smaller, originally held on the harper's lap, leaning against the left shoulder, had no pedals, and usually were carved in one piece from bog wood. [The Trinity College Harp](http://earlygaelicharp.info/harps/trinity.htm) and [Queen Mary's Harp](http://earlygaelicharp.info/harps/QM.htm) are the oldest surviving Celtic harps and both date from the 15th or 16th centuries and illustrate the similarity between the Irish and Scottish harps. A distinguishing characteristic of these Gaelic harps was that they were wire-strung, rather than gut strung. The word "harp" has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon, Old German and Old Norse words which mean "to pluck." In Gaelic they were known first as cruit and later as clarsach or cláirseach.

The harp isn't peculiar to Ireland but subsequently became its national emblem. (Nowadays you can even see it on the Guiness label) Harpers were highly trained professionals who performed for the nobility and enjoyed political power - so much so that during the 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I issued a proclamation to hang Irish harpists and destroy their instruments to prevent insurrection.

Sadly, while this oldest emblem of Ireland is still with us today most of the ancient airs and melodies it once produced are long gone, but younger harpers are taking up the challenge to reawaken *the pride of former days*.

**Πηγή:** <http://www.chiff.com/a/music-irish-harp.htm>

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