

Historical Harps

Dennis Hempson and the Old Harp Music

The image of Dennis Hempson in his hat, with chin resting on his harp, is a revered portrait of a much respected traveling harper from eighteenth century Ireland. Itinerant harpers, often blind, as Hempson was, went from house to house by horseback, providing music in the great houses of Ireland. Dennis Hempson's fine playing was much admired, and he has become somewhat of a legend, partly due to circumstances of history, and partly because of his resistance to change. Hempson faithfully stuck to playing the old Irish harp music; he didn't think much of the new popular O'Carolan tunes. Dennis Hempson entered many harp competitions, but he never won a prize. At the age of 97, he was one of the ten competitors at the Belfast Harpers' Festival of 1792. He was the only competitor to play the wire harp with the traditional long sculpted nails, catching the string between the nail and the flesh. While other harpers were including pieces in the newer style of the day, Hempson preferred to play the ancient harp music.

Edward Bunting, a nineteen-year old organist, was hired by the Belfast Committee to record the harp tunes at the Festival of 1792 for posterity. Prior to this time, the harp music was not written down. For generations, the music was passed from master to pupil in the oral tradition. The style, the "graces," and the harp tuning, all were passed down orally. Many of the old blind harpers were dying out, and the music was in danger of being lost. Society was changing, and a new musical style was becoming popular. For the purposes of preservation, Bunting was engaged to notate the tunes at the last great harp festival. If it had not been for Dennis Hempson's stubborn adherence to the old music, and the efforts of Edward Bunting, much of the ancient Irish harp tunes, theory, and terminology would have been lost forever.

Dennis Hempson lived to the remarkable age of 112. He had the distinction of living in three centuries! He was born in 1695 at Craigmore, Co. Derry. Known as Dennis Hempson, Hampson, and O'Hampsey, he was also known as "the man with two heads" because of a wen, or a benign growth on the back of his head. Hence, he always wore a hat. At the age of three, he lost his eyesight due to smallpox. Becoming a traveling harper was a viable

profession for a blind person, so at the age of twelve, he began studying the harp with a female teacher, Brigid Ni Chathain. Hempson's second instructor was John Garragher, a blind traveling harper. He also studied with the masters Loughlin Fanning and Patrick Conner. When Hempson was eighteen years of age, he began traveling as a musician, and was taken in at the house of Counselor Canning, at Garvagh.

For many years, Hempson traveled throughout Ireland and also Scotland. In 1745, while in Edinburgh, Hempson, in his fifties, played for Bonnie Prince Charley. A description in Bunting's book says, "He was called into the great hall to play; at first he was alone, afterwards four fiddlers joined."



Dennis Hempson
from Bunting *Ancient Irish Music*, 1809

The year after hearing Hempson play at the Belfast Festival of 1792, Edward Bunting visited him, to further record his tunes and to study the manner of his playing. Bunting wrote:

“The pieces which he delighted to perform were unmixed with modern refinements, which he seemed to studiously avoid; confining himself chiefly to the most antiquated of those strains which have long survived the memory of their composers, and even a knowledge of the ages that produced them.”

When Hempson was asked why he played in that particular style, he said, “That is the way I learned it,” or “I cannot play it in any other.” Bunting describes his playing as, “an admirable method of playing *Staccato* and *Legato*, in which he could run through divisions in an astonishing style.” He had a technique of striking a string with one finger, and another finger was instantly ready to stop the vibration, so there was clarity and perfection in his *staccato* passages.

Through Hempson’s music, Bunting had glimpses of the older, noble system of harp playing that had existed for centuries in Ireland. In medieval times, Irish harpers were admired on the continent for their performance and compositions, and were thought of as superior players. Literary references by Cambrensis and Galilei of, “the tinkling of the small wires under the deep notes of the bass” were, according to Bunting, recreated in Hempson’s skilled playing. Hempson himself said, “When I played the old tunes, not another of the harpers would play after me.”

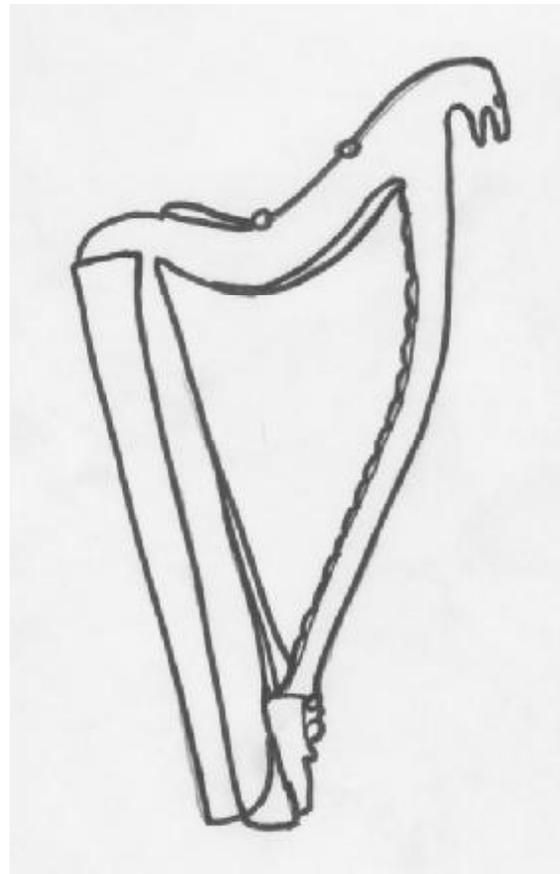
It was with some difficulty that Bunting was able to obtain the old harp music from Hempson. When asked to play the ancient music, Hempson replied that “there is no use in doing so, they were too hard to learn, they revived painful recollections.” Bunting was able to record only part of an ancient Irish prelude, *Feaghan Gleash*, reluctantly played by Hempson, who said, “What’s the use of doing so? No one can understand it now, not even any of the harpers now living.” The harmonic structure of the prelude was striking to Bunting. He noted the omission of the subdominant chord, and the fourth and the seventh of the scale are missing. It has downward arpeggios, typical of the old style.

Hempson was also known for sleeping with his harp! He had a wry sense of humor in telling stories of his travels. Eventually, in his later years, he married and settled down in Magilligan and had several children. In maturity, he was described as always sober, “his

favorite drink, once beer, now milk and water, and his diet chiefly potatoes.” On the day before he died, hearing that a gentleman had come to visit him, he asked to be raised up in his bed, and the harp placed in his hands. The description in the Bunting book says:

Having struck some notes of a favorite strain, he sunk back unable to proceed, taking his last adieu of an instrument which had been a companion, even in his sleeping hours, and was his hourly solace through a life protracted to the longest span.

Hempson’s Harp. After Dennis Hempson’s death, for a time, his harp was preserved in Sir Henry’s mansion at Downhill. Known as the Downhill harp, it now belongs to Messrs. Arthur Guinness, Son and Co., Dublin. The harp was made by Cormac Kelly. It has thirty-two string holes, and was wire strung. Curiously, the surviving harp does not exactly match



Hempson’s Downhill Harp

the one pictured in the portrait. There are similarities, such as the decorative hexafoils, which are actually pierced soundholes on the soundboard.

The fluted inside edge of the column is shown, as well as some decoration on the neck. The most striking omission is the zoomorphic head on the top of the column of the extant harp. For comparison, I include an outline drawing I made from an excellent photo of the harp in Joan Rimmer's book, *The Irish Harp*.

Like the old harp music that was patiently learned through years of study, the harps themselves were painstakingly made. The soundboxes of the Irish harps were each carved out of a single log of bog oak or sallow. Three sides would be carved and a separate piece was added to the back. The neck and column were attached with decorative metal brackets. On Hempson's harp, reference is made to the harp's origin in a wonderful inscription, on the side of the soundbox:

*In the time of Noah I was green
 Since his flood I had not been seen
 Until seventeen hundred and two I was found
 By Cormac O Kelly underground
 He raised me up to that degree
 The Queen of Musicke you may call me*

From the portrait of Hempson, we see he leans the harp on the left shoulder, as was the custom. He plays the treble with the left hand and the bass with the right.

These wonderful harps with non-chromatic tuning, big resonant sound, and sweet upper registers, fit perfectly with the old Irish music. When considering instruments and styles of music, one wonders if the instruments were made to fit the music of the time, or if the music was composed to show off the existing instruments. Perhaps both apply here, but when eighteenth century music began to change, harp makers looked for ways to cope with the increasing chromaticism.

Much has been written about Bunting's tendency to "improve" upon the tunes he recorded in his collections. Still, the Bunting collection is an enormous contribution to the preservation of Irish music. Many of the tunes live on, somewhat altered, as modern Irish Songs, with words by Thomas Moore, and others. However, we are fortunate to live in a time where there is interest in searching for "the original" notes and sounds of early music. The

old Irish music is played once again, on reproduction instruments, using information from surviving sources. Bunting aptly summarizes the lure of the old tunes:

For the aim of all is to realize former times, so as to bring us acquainted with our ancestors...to become acquainted with the men themselves, and with their general turn of mind and sentiment in the very notes and cadences by which they gave expression to their ruling passions.

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