

2015 Q5 (B) (iv) Give an Account of the Harping Tradition in the Context of Irish Traditional Music. | A1 Sample Answer

The Irish harping tradition dates back hundreds of years, and can be seen as far back as the 16th Century. It has evolved as a result of political influence and discoveries of new methods and techniques and its turbulent history is what has shaped the harping tradition we see today.

The old Irish Harp contained a very sturdy sound box made from Sally or Willow Tree. It had brass strings and could not change pitch due to a one key system. The brass strings created a bell sound quality. This harp was played on the harper's lap, using a technique known as "damping" to stop resonations.

Traditionally, the role of the Irish Harper was very prestigious and stable. Patrons at the time were the old Irish and English Aristocrats, many of whom had their own harper. A well known patron at the time was the McDermott-Roe family, who provided Turlough O'Carolan with harping lessons. These harpers often composed jigs in 6/8 time called planxties in order to honour the guests such as "Planxty Maguire."

The role of the harper became an itinerant profession when English Rule affected social positions and economic structures of Ireland. At the Battle of Kinsale (1601) the Gaelic Order came to an end and the Old Chieftains lost their power, status and wealth. Harpers were forced to travel to look for work, as the stable harping occupation no longer existed. The harping repertoire also changed to include a new, diverse audience.

By the late 1,700s the harping tradition was in danger of becoming extinct. Dr. James Mc Donnell arranged for ten Irish harpers and one Welsh to play in Belfast from the 11th - 13th July, 1792, at the Belfast Harp festival in order to preserve a dying tradition. The purpose was "to revive interest in the music of the old Irish Harp and to promote harping as an occupation." The festival was attended by Denis Hempson, aged 97, who used the old style of playing, and Arthur O'Neill who was appointed as an instructor to the Belfast Harp Festival society after the festival. This society continued to work to preserve the harp for years after the Belfast Harp Festival.

The most significant impact made by the Belfast Harp Festival was the attendance of Edward Bunting, aged 19, who was employed to notate the tunes played by the harpers. After the festival he spent the rest of his life collecting Irish music and published three volumes known as "ancient music of Ireland." He sometimes changed the music before publication, but many of the old Irish tunes and techniques survive despite this, as a result of his contributions.

As time went by, people found that the old Irish harp could not keep up with the changing styles of music, mainly because it could not change key. Towards the end of the 18th century the neo harp was introduced. It was modelled on the concert harp but had no pedals, and it had levers which could be used to raise it a semitone. The strings are made of gut which changed the sound, and the player can change the key. This harp is female dominated and is played with two hands rather than one melody.

An important figure in 20th Century harping was Sean O’Riada. O’Riada did not support the new harp, as he did not like the sound, and nobody played in the old style any more. He added the harpsichord into his group Ceoltóirí Chualann, as he considered the sound nearer to the old harp.

It is these events and figures which have created and influenced the harping tradition over the years.