

About These Accompaniments

The accompaniments in this book are suitable for either pedal or lever harp but they were specifically written or adapted for the latter. Since making my first singing radio broadcast in Ireland at the age of sixteen, I accompanied myself on the Irish harp. Over the years my repertoire expanded to include songs from other parts of the world. This volume, **Travels With My Harp** offers a sprinkling of my favourite songs - songs I have performed many times in concert, on radio and on television, recorded on LP and CD.

It has been said that the Irish harp is the closest of all instruments to the human voice and I only ever used the harp as an accompanying instrument. The harp's role for the self-accompanist is to enhance the singing without drawing undue attention to itself. All along, my aim had been to keep my harp accompaniments simple without being dull, interesting without being fussy or drawing attention away from the actual song. I memorised my harp accompaniments and never wrote them down. Now at last I'm committing them to paper.

Over many years I performed my songs on stage and in my television shows. As any professional singer knows, one's interpretation of songs evolves over time and likewise the accompaniments. My recordings of the songs in this book were made at different times, sometimes part of live performances, and what is on the various recordings may not always in every detail accord exactly with what appears on paper here. I've avoided over-burdening the user with too many directions. Singing and the interpretation of songs is a personal matter, best left to the individual singer to work out on his or her own. My own interpretation can be heard on my recordings or seen on video on my web page www.maryohara.co.uk.

Of the hundreds of songs I have recorded, fewer than a third are with harp accompaniment only. Most are with harp, piano and flute – my regular concert line-up – and many with orchestra. For this book, I've selected a cross section of the songs I sang with the harp only.

To help you understand these songs more fully, some knowledge of the songs' backgrounds may be helpful. I have also provided translations of the non-English songs.

When I was growing up in Ireland in the 50s, *Moore's Melodies* was in the very blood of every man, woman and child and *Believe Me If All Those Endearing Young Charms* was part of our inherited culture. What is little known, however, is that Thomas Moore (1779 – 1852) wrote this song for his beautiful young wife who had contracted smallpox, leaving her disfigured and heading for an early grave.

The English poet Peter Levi (1932 – 2000), an old friend of mine, wrote the words of *The Snail* for me, at my request and I then set the words to music.

An Mairín Rua is a sort of hunting song, a dialogue between a very confident, cheeky little fox and an irate farmer. Mostly in Gaelic, the English parts give the essence of the song. It was written just over two hundred years ago when the population of Ireland was exchanging its Irish (Gaelic) language for English as Ireland's spoken language. Thomas Moore based his song 'Let Érin Remember' on the melody of *An Mairín Rua*.

Canada is a country where I frequently went to give concerts and sing on television. It was in that country that I first came across the poignant *A La Claire Fontaine* though the roots of the song are back in medieval France.

Trottin' to the Fair. From this jaunty little song, it's clear that the course of this very happy young man's love is running exceedingly smooth.

Across the sea from the Scottish mainland, however, *Na HaoRi Iù* from the Isle of Sky, has never parted from its Scots Gallic words. In my late teens, I was invited by the illustrious Maclean family to the Hebridean Islands to collect and sing some of their beautiful Scots-Gallic songs. This is one of the first songs taught to me by Rena Maclean sitting at her kitchen table in South Uist. While out minding the cattle on the Isle of Skye, a young girl hears the ghost of her mother singing to her. Although we learn that her family has been maltreated by her cruel stepmother, it is, nonetheless, a song of comfort.

England, where I have lived most of my adult life, is represented by the Elizabethan song *Greensleeves*. Some hold that it is the work of King Henry the Eighth, others that the author is unknown.

She Didn't Dance is a dandling song sung when one is bouncing the baby upon one's knee. It is a happy, care-free song.

One of the most tender love songs in my repertoire is *The Riddle Song*, sometimes referred to as *I Gave My Love A Cherry*, and it comes from North America.

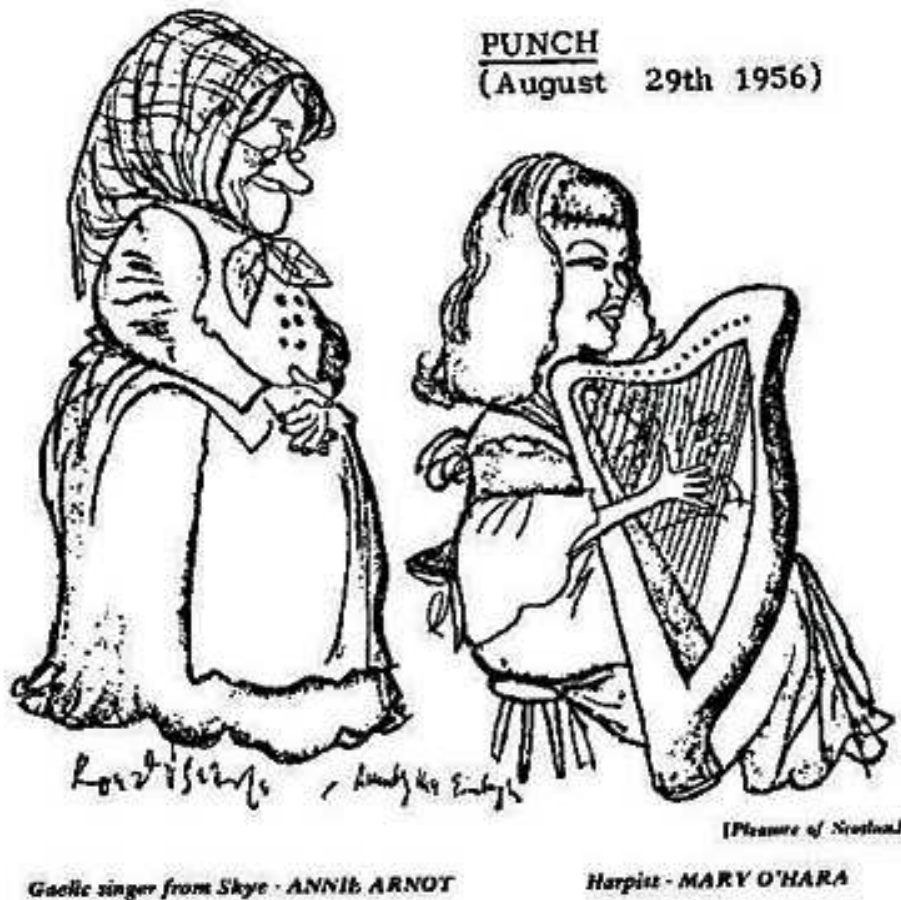
The melody of the *Lord of the Dance* is from an old Shaker hymn (used by Aaron Copland in his instrumental work for small orchestra entitled *Appalachian Spring*). The original hymn was called: *'Tis a Gift To Be Simple*. The late Sydney

Carter (1915 – 2004) added new words. This is the song that started me singing again after a 12-year long monastic silence.

Scotland's Robert Burns (1759 – 1796) used a traditional melody to clothe his heart-rending *Ae Fond Kiss*.

I have now been retired from singing for some years and I have hung up my harp for good but I hope these harp accompaniments of mine will give you some pleasure and that you'll find them useful in your work.

A word of explanation may be of help. All Irish harps are tuned to either E \flat or A \flat . I choose to tune mine to the key of A \flat major (4 flats). In the key of A \flat major all the levers (blades) are in the neutral position and thus the tone of the harp is at its best – when a lever is engaged, the tone of the string is slightly affected. (To get from the key of A \flat to E \flat simply engage the D lever.) However, I've made some of the songs in this book available in keys other than that of A \flat in which I sang them.



A drawing of Mary O'Hara by Ronald Searle (of St. Trinian's fame) during her Edinburgh International Festival appearances in 1956. It appeared in the English