

Travels With My Harp

by Mary O'Hara

Reviewed by Moira Stern

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I first began following Mary O'Hara's music when I was a very small child. Suffice to say that as a result of being steeped in this music, I chose to make my life playing the harp and singing. What can I say that could possibly express how I feel about Mary O'Hara's music?

I first listened to her album "Songs of Ireland" which is part Gaelic and part English; songs with delicate, spare harp accompaniments with more sophisticated harmonies; evoking a ruthlessly traditional feel which far transcends the usual banal 3 chord conception of Irish music. Her singing is breathtakingly pure; to compare her to anyone would not do her justice. She could be thought of as somewhere between Judy Garland, Enya and Joan Baez.

The type of Irish music Mary O'Hara is known for is described by Irish scholars as "ceól mór" which translates roughly as "big (or great) music." It is not low, coarse or countrified, nor is it trivial and syrupy as the worst of Irish music can be. To the contrary, this style of music can be heartbreakingly beautiful, and as challenging to sing as any art song or even as some operatic arias. The selections found in this book are neither too hard nor too easy. A classical harp teacher might think of them as grade two to grade four. Singers can find much to tackle in the way of finesse and emotional range, but there are no really high notes; nothing above the top of the staff, and nothing much below middle C.

I have worn out her last harp accompaniment book, "Songs from Ireland" (Lyra, 1985) over the years, playing and performing all of them at one time and another, and giving them to my students, and to other musicians, who would ask for the music after hearing me. I had gone so far as to transcribe a number of her songs, because she didn't have any other books out, so after a great deal of work, I finally tracked her down through the Internet and asked her to publish another book of harp music.

To my great joy, she did, and her new book, "**Travels With My Harp**" is currently sitting on my music stand, (flat, because it is spiral bound, and thus sits nicely on the stand.) waiting to be worn out like its predecessor.

"**Travels With My Harp**" contains a cross-section of Mary O' Hara's song arrangements in several different languages. I can't wait to toss out my old arrangements of "Lord of the Dance" and "Ae Fond Kiss" and get her new ones up to speed, as they are both vastly superior to mine.

Likewise, I am anticipating her highly original and



unusual arrangement of "Greensleeves" with much delight. The song "The Bonny Boy" is the less-familiar tune, and I have heard it performed this way by Jean Redpath, the remarkable Scottish singer. I was surprised, because I always used the Joan Baez tune. This will be a nice change. I heard her gorgeous rendition of "A La Claire Fontaine" recently, and it made me think that perhaps French-Canadian music is not performed as often as it deserves to be.

I never thought that the song "I Gave My Love a Cherry" was my sort of thing, but many people like it, and you might too. I'm going to give it a second look; after all, most of the performances I have heard of that song have been at the hands of camp counsellors with guitars and hordes of children with interesting interpretations of pitch and rhythm.

Of course, I have a list of things I would have liked to see in this book that is as long as my arm; her Gaelic songs "Seóladh na nGamhan," "Na Leabhair i mBeithil" and "Mhuire Mhór," just to name a few. However, she may well write more of these books, and I fervently hope she does. To that end, I am telling you all; buy this book; you'll love it!

While you're about it, if you like Irish music, you might as well buy any recording of hers that you can

possibly find (there is a discography at the end of the book) and also, her three books.

The Scent of the Roses is her autobiographical story of her blissful, brief marriage to the cancer-stricken American poet Richard Selig. An LP of same title.

A Song for Ireland (as well as being a remarkable album and book of Irish song accompaniments) is a gorgeous collection of photographs of Ireland with a great many song lyrics both in English and in Gaelic. I cannot tell you how much I have referred to this book during the course of my own work. An LP of same title.

Celebration of Love is a collection of her favorite writings on various topics related to love. I found myself laughing out loud opening the book at random; it is both funny and unexpectedly profound. An LP of same title.

When Mary O'Hara creates a harp arrangement, the voice is paramount. The harp serves the voice, and Mary prunes away anything which is extraneous or fussy. However, the harp parts are not simple; merely economical, with much contained in a small space. She uses judicious effects, word-painting, and minimal chromaticism to emphasize the melodies and the stories. The compass of notes will work for many folk harps; I believe she plays a 36 string harp, if the cover painting is accurate. The lowest note I found is the D below the bass clef; the highest note is the F an octave above the top of the staff.

As a real boon to singers, she gives some of the song in

two keys, to accommodate harpers with different tuning preferences. In Ireland, most harpers tune to A flat (four flats) which gives the harper easy access to up to four flats and up to three sharps without retuning.

On a personal note, many years ago, my mother, author Marion Zimmer Bradley ('Mists of Avalon', et al.) wrote to Mary O'Hara on my behalf to request the music of the traditional song "Seóladh na nGamhan." They had corresponded before, because of their appreciation of each other's work. Mary mailed my mother a very strange-looking piece of music. It was in Gaelic (which was fine), it was in Gaelic script, (which took a little longer), but the music notes were in solfège, and a sort of rhythmic tablature which gave me a real education as I deciphered it. This was a gift with value far beyond its appearance, because it was through this small piece of paper that I began transcribing, then finally writing music.

Mary no longer performs in public. These days, she is giving presentations about her music illustrated with DVD excerpts. If her recent review by an Australian journalist about the presentation she gave at the *World Harp Congress* in Dublin in 2005 is any indication, I'm sure she will be making a great many more.

If you'd like to purchase a copy of **Travels With My Harp**, you can contact *Afghan Press* online at www.afghanpress.com. Many of Mary O'Hara's recordings can be found on www.amazon.com.

- Moira Stern, April 2006

Moira Stern is an Irish singer and harpist. She performs and teaches harp and singing throughout Southern California. She lives in Murrieta with her husband and three children. She has recently founded an opera company. For more information, see her website www.moirastern.com. Her new album, "Avalon's Daughter" is now available.