

MY IRISH HARP

My harp (pictured below) has travelled with me all over the world from the Yukon and Labrador City to the far reaches of New Zealand and Africa and much in between. I have played it in all the major concert halls of the English-speaking world and it has never let me down. When I was leaving New York shortly after I was widowed in 1957, I got rid of my double-action Erard concert harp and, from then on, only ever used my Irish harps. These were specially made for me, around 1953, by Henry Briggs, an Englishman living in Scotland and making Irish harps.

The old Irish harps were all wire-strung. The harper plucked the strings with very long nails and for that reason a particularly unkind punishment for a harper was to have his nails cut. All harpers were men. They used their harps as accompanying instruments for their songs or for reciting poetry, which was a very popular activity in Gaelic culture. At various times in the history of Ireland much of the material used by harpists would not be considered politically acceptable and for that reason, harpists were not 'flavour of the month' among government supporters. At various periods harp playing was proscribed, harps officially burnt and harpists jailed for inciting rebellion. Nowadays, most harp strings are made of gut

or nylon and are plucked with the finger tips instead of with the nails. Also, unlike in the old days, harp playing is no longer the exclusive preserve of the men of Ireland, nor is it any longer considered a treasonable offence to play the harp. Instead, the harp has finally achieved the proper recognition it has long deserved.

Ironically, it was an English monarch who first established that respectable symbolic connection between Ireland and the harp. Henry VIII in the 16th century used the harp as a symbol of Ireland, and towards the end of that same century, his daughter, Elizabeth I, had the harp minted on the coins of Ireland. The custom of representing Ireland with the

harp design gradually gained acceptance thereafter and in the 17th and 18th centuries many of the Irish mercenary armies abroad used the harp as their distinguishing badge. At the turn of the 18th century, the poet Thomas Moore, popularised the harp, perpetuating it as a symbol of resurgent Irish nationalism.

Today, the harp is the most widely recognised symbol of modern Ireland. It appears on all official state documents, as well as on the presidential flag and on Irish Euro coins.



My Briggs Harp in retirement at Rivendell. In the background is my thatched cottage, home to me since 1980. It was built in 1667.

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