

SONGS: MARY O'HARA, HARPIST

By JON PARELES

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Sweetness and light reigned at the Carnegie Hall concert Thursday by the Irish singer and harpist Mary O'Hara, who has been popular in Britain for many years.

Accompanied at times by a pianist and a flutist, Miss O'Hara performed songs from the last five centuries in English, Gaelic and Scots Gaelic.

Miss O'Hara's clear voice is gentler than that of an operatic soprano, and has a constant, burbling vibrato that distinguishes it from current pop and folk approaches.

Within her delicate style, Miss O'Hara found plenty of variety. She sang warm love songs; wry folk narratives; comic songs, including one in which she cackled like a Gaelic hen; her own settings of poems by Thomas More and Rabindrath Tagore, and such chestnuts as "In an English Country Garden," which had an overly cute arrangement.

Amid many reassuring messages, Miss O'Hara deliberately slipped in Ian Campbell's "The Sun Is Burning," a protest against nuclear war. For this listener, the highlights were the stark ancient Celtic songs, set to Miss O'Hara's softly pealing harp, or - best of all - sung unaccompanied and unamplified. Jon Pareles