

About These Accompaniments – Vol. 5

In this fifth and final volume of **Travels With My Harp**, as with the other four volumes, the accompaniments are suitable for piano and for 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 offers a sprinkling of my favourite songs - songs I have performed many times in concert, on radio and on television, recorded on LP, CD and DVD-video.



'CAROLAN' - the model for the statue of the 18th century blind harper was the final work of Irish sculptor Oisín Kelly. The completed statue stands in Mohill, Co. Leitrim.

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 will tell you, 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 on the CDs and DVDs that accompany these volumes. I'm including a sprinkling of contemporary songs in each volume but most are traditional, now also available on a new (double CD) compilation entitled **Mary O'Hara – 40 Traditional Songs**. More information: 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, knowledge of the songs' backgrounds or my own connection with them may be helpful.

The Quiet Land of Érin. The first song I sang on national public radio – 'Children at the Mike' on Radio Éireann – aged 15. I sang the Gaelic version, *Árd Tí Chuain*, an exile song subsequently translated by my sister Joan as *The Quiet Land of Érin*. I have recorded it in both Gaelic and English and it has been a great favourite in concerts.

A Hebridean Milking Song or Bó Luathreach Thú. This was my first Scots Gaelic song and I accompanied myself on the little Brian Boru knee harp. The oft repeated chorus translates as, "Oh, you are a lovely cow."

Pussy Willows, Cat Tails. After this song for the album *In Harmony* in 1978, I decided to adapt the accompaniment for the Irish harp and include it in my regular concert repertoire.

Among Silence. This was the start of what turned out to be the last poem of my first husband, American poet, Richard Selig (1929-1957). I set it to music around 1972 while still a member of the Benedictine community at Stanbrook Abbey. It was the first thing I ever set to music.

'S Ar Éirinn Ní n-Eosfhainn Cé h-Í. A young man returns from exile to claim the one he loved, only to find she was now married to someone else. With great sorrow he describes her beauty. He longs to talk to her of his adventures, but sadly he can't do so or even mention her name in public.

As I Walked Forth. One of several beautiful Elizabethan songs I started to include in my repertoire in the early 70s.

The Wee Cooper of Fife. In this braid Scots song the 'wee cooper' describes drastic measures he planned to cure his wife of her notions of grandeur. The threats quickly convinced her to return to her housework. Not a very PC statement nowadays.

Déirin Dé. A mother assures her precious baby of her love and lulls him to sleep with descriptions of little animals and of their doings.

Sweet Child of Glory. One of my earliest recordings was *Na Leannaí I mBeithil*, a Gaelic hymn. When I asked my good friend, the Scottish writer George Scots Moncrief to do me an English translation, he came up with this beautiful song.

The Minstrel Boy. Irish nationalist literature of the early nineteenth century used the imagery of the Irish harp to fashion republican sentiment and urge people to heroic sacrifice. The harp "is new-

strung and it shall be heard". This song is part of that tradition.

Annie Laurie. This is the original version of this universally loved braid Scots song.

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 about accidentals and enharmonics: 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) and all my instructions regarding the accompaniments stem from that. In the key of A \flat major (a key I was comfortable with, having a high voice), 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. I have indicated how to get accidentals in a way that I see to be easiest for the player of the Irish and similar lever harps. Incidentally, the next much favoured key for me was E \flat . To get from the key of A \flat to E \flat , simply engage the D lever.



Malaga, Spain: September 2008 – taking a break from Spanish lessons.

Now that the five volumes of harp accompaniments are finished, Mary's next venture is a spell teaching in South America (Paraguay) and here she is with her husband Pat and friend and Spanish teacher, Gladys Gnisci.

My thanks to the many people who have encouraged and helped me with the preparation of these 5 song books: Professor David Watkins, Sheila Larchet, Déirdre Kelleher, Dermod McCarthy, Moira Stern - to name but a few. I want to thank particularly Alan Tongue, my former BBC TV producer who meticulously examined all my arrangements. I also want to thank Rena and Cailean Maclean for help with my Scots Gallic.