

"They are incomparably more skillful than any other nation I have ever seen. For their manner of playing on these instruments (The cruit, the cláirseach, and the tiompán) unlike that of the Britons, to which I am accustomed, is lively and rapid, while the melody is both sweet and pleasing. It is astonishing that in such a complex and rapid movement of the fingers the musical proportions can be preserved, and that throughout the difficult modulations on their various instruments, the harmony, notwithstanding shakes and slurs and variously intertwined counterpoint, is completely observed."

So, patronised by the native chiefs and encouraged by the Church, which always formed a nexus between Free Ireland and the continent of Europe, our native music flourished until the beginning of the seventeenth century. With the defeat of Kinsale in 1601 the old Irish social order received a blow from which it never recovered. The ancient aristocratic organisation of society was broken up and the schools of music and poetry, deprived of their generous patrons, were scattered and broken. The wandering harpers and the wandering poets were left as the sole custodians of literary and musical tradition. Remember the date 1601 for I must now digress for a moment to speak of those scales which as I said are characteristic of Irish Music.

The Irish harp, once it was tuned, ~~was~~ fixed and unalterable in pitch. (The pitch-changing pedal as we know it today was unknown until 1720 when Hochbrucker, of Bavaria, first introduced it.) The Irish scales were therefore based on the only possible system within the compass of the instrument, and that was the modal system. Now,



what is a mode? To explain in terms of the modern pianoforte, I shall as you to think of the keyboard without the black keys. If you play Doh Ray Me Fah Soh Lah Te Doh on the white notes, you have a progression which we call the Doh Mode. Starting from Ray and play eight white notes you have played the Ray mode. Similarly, Me to its octave gives the Me mode, Fah to its octave the Fah mode, Soh and Lah to their octaves, the Soh and Lah modes. These six modes were the scales of the Irish harp.

The scales of Irish Music are the very same scales that served the whole of European Music, even art music, until the beginning of the seventeenth century. From the 13th century the great development of European Music was in the direction of Polyphony, in which the music was in parts, was also in modes, had no instrumental accompaniment and was written in pure counterpoint. It was brought to its highest point of perfection by Palestrina and Vittoris and at the beginning of the seventeenth century - remember our date 1601, the defeat of Kinsale - men were already, as Sir Richard Terry has put it "casting about for new modes of expression." Ireland and the Irish musicians had no part in this new era, and for very good historical reasons.

Irish harpers, pipers and musicians of all kinds had joined in the last great fight ~~off~~ a United Ireland, and, after defeat, had acted as messengers between the scattered chieftains, and as spies among the English. In 1603 a proclamation was issued by the Lord President of Munster for the ~~extermination~~ extermination by martial law of "all manner of bards, harpers etc.," and within ten days of it, Queen Elizabeth herself ordered Lord Barrymore "to hang the harpers wherever found." Proscribed and banned, hunted and persecuted, as they were, they stilled practised

composition in the only style they knew, and the standard of their melodies bears wonderful witness to the high state of perfection reached in the schools before the Black Day of Kinsale. During the first part of the seventeenth century Ceann Dubh Dílis and Uileachán Dubh Ó were composed. Somewhere between 1615 and 1630 An Cnotadh Bán or The White Cockade first saw the light - and it may be interesting to point out here that this tune and Lá Fhéile Pádraig were the two tunes played by the war-pipers of the Irish Brigade at Fontenoy on May 11th, 1745. (That day, by the way, that the Píob Mhór was ever heard playing before an Irish Army.) 1648 marks the composition of a great favourite An Droimín *Curse of Cromwell* Donn Dílis, which itself speaks eloquently of the disturbed state of Ireland at that time. Knowing it we cannot be surprised at what I should call the 1654 version of National Identity - the Cromwellian Identity Card; all harpers, pipers and wandering musicians had to obtain letters from the magistrate of the district they hailed from, before being allowed to travel through the country, and this passport contained full particulars as to age, stature, beard, colour of hair and condition of life of the recipient. All musical instruments savouring of popery were ruthlessly destroyed so that Archdeacon Lynch, a contemporary writer, was of the opinion that within a short time scarce a single harp would be left in Ireland. Yet, to the time before the Restoration, we owe one of our most beautiful melodies Táimse 'mo chodladh, in which are found the two fearsome lines indicative of the Irish temper at the time:

Go bhfeiceam an lá a mbéidh ár ar Shasanaigh

Óim ar a ndroma 'siad ag treabhadh a's ag branar dúinn.

But that day they were not to see. The condition of the harpers became



worse and worse, the tide of Anglicisation swept on from Dublin, and after the defeat of Limerick our Irish Musicians were but interesting relics of a defeated greatness, depending for their livelihood on the charity of their trodden-down fellows, or, what was worse, on the condescension and patronage of their conquerers.

The Pale spread and, with it the cultivated and artificial music of the Continent, and Ireland's music declined before the music of its rulers. Carolan, who is often erroneously referred to as the last of the bards, was really the first Irish harper to adopt imported and unIrish forms of expression. Though he composed numerous airs in the true traditional style, he was influenced very much by the music of Geminiani, Vivaldi and Corelli and composed a concerto in the Italian style. He was praised by many musicians of the new school in England and on the Continent, but, as I shall show, that praise was the first sound of the death knell of Irish Instrumental Music. However, throughout the century other Irish musicians maintained the traditions and relaxed laws allowed their "assembly" at various places. We find a John Murphy, harper, playing for the "fashionable and polite" at Mallow between 1746 and 1753. In 1745 our most remarkable harper, Denis O Hampsey, was in Edinburgh at the court of the young Pretender and he familiarised the Scots with many Irish tunes, notably Eibhlín A Rúin which they now call Robin Adair. In the period 1750 -1790 our most famous harpers besides O Hampsey who lived to play for Bunting in 1792, were Jerome Duigenan, Dominic Mongan and Arthur O'Neill. Mongan is credited with An raibh tú ag an gCarraig? a tune whose metrical basis is so unEnglish that Moore had to evolve a new metre to represent it. "At the midhour of night when stars are weeping I fly." Duigenan won a competition against a Welsh Harper on the floor of the Irish

House of Commons in Dublin and Arthur O'Neill was the harper who gave Bunting his interesting list of musical terms and many of the tunes for his first collection.

Our pipers at this period deserve mention. As I have said the War Pipe appeared for the last time at Fontenoy but the uilleann pipe continued in popularity and many beautiful tunes were composed for it, for instance, Pléaracha an Ghleanna and The Dear Irish Boy, which so intrigued Handel when on a visit to Dublin, 1741, that he copied it into his MSS. music book. Twenty years later piper Jackson flourished and composed the famous airs, all named after himself - Jackson's Morning Brush, Jackson's Maggot, Jackson's Cup, and so on. 1770 saw the composition of Brennan On The Moor in praise of the famous raparee and in 1779 the people of Connacht were dancing to the air of the Geese in the Bog and 1799 The Hare in the Corn. Now these dance tunes of all kind we know to be no more than fast strict - tempo adaptations of slow tunes, and consequently of the same modal structure. Most of our Céilí band leaders who speak so glibly of "minor airs" should study this matter a little - and educate their piano-accordionists. For the Irish pipers who composed most of our Céilí music were all working in the Irish Modes and, like O Hampsey and O'Neill on the harp, were conscious upholders of the national traditions. That is, they were composing airs and music of the same modal character as that which had been the glory of Ireland before Kinsale. The school of music of the pre-Kinsale era was the one source which fed the broad-stream of seventeenth and eighteenth century composition.

But Europe, meanwhile, had moved far away from the modes. Polyphony, as I have said, gave way in the seventeenth century to new forms of expression. To quote Richard Terry again "The fondness for cadences with a leading note had



had become universal and from this small beginning came the whole system of our modern tonality. The fascination of this new progression gradually undermined the practice of the modes and drove composers - empirically and blindly, no doubt, but none the less surely - in the direction of keys. By the eighteenth century modal music was no longer practised [in Europe]. The major and minor keys had been discovered and established and the flood tide of modern music had begun." Thus far Terry. Now, the system of music based on keys and tonality had just come to its greatest point of development in Mozart and Beethoven, when Edward Bunting, their contemporary, who had been trained in that system, was asked by the organisers of the Belfast Harp Festival in 1792 to take down the airs played by the last of the Irish harpers.

The new system was confronted with the old and the modes sounded like something from an ancient age to a man trained to think in keys. The inevitable happened. In his transcriptions Bunting forced modal airs into major and minor keys, and crushed the rhythms of some of our most beautiful airs into the straight-jacket of regular bars.

The harps used by these people had, as a rule, thirty strings, which is exactly the number indicated by the string holes of the fifteenth century harp in Trinity College, Dublin. The compass of their instrument was from C below the bass clef to D above the treble clef. The method of tuning was by octaves and fifths, generally in the scale of G, but by alteration of one string a semitone (effected by means of a tuning hammer) the scale might be changed to C. For special tunes C in the treble clef was sometimes sharpened and tuned to F sharp (a fifth, but there is no evidence of their ever having taken the next step towards an overall