

THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM HARPS

By Nancy Hurrell

In London, there are collections of historical harps in the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Royal College of Music Museum of Instruments, and the Horniman Museum. The Victoria & Albert Musical Instruments collection has at least fifteen harps, including several eighteenth-century French harps, two Welsh triples, and harps by Erard, Egan, and others. The Royal College of Music Museum has six harps, also including eighteenth-century French and Welsh instruments. The Horniman Museum collection has eleven European harps, as well as several small ethnic harps from Africa, Afghanistan, Uruguay and Mexico. In the Horniman's Music Gallery, three European harps are currently on view: an eighteenth-century Cousineau single-action pedal harp, a nineteenth-century Stumpff double-action pedal harp, and a John Egan dital harp (ca. 1820).

On a recent trip to London, I visited the harps at the V&A and the Horniman Museum. (The RCM was closed in August.) I had arranged with Margaret Birley, Keeper of Musical Instruments at the Horniman, to photograph and examine six harps in the collection. In addition to the harps in the Music Gallery, I was granted access to research the harps at the Horniman Museum's off-site Study Collections Centre, where the instruments not on display are stored. The Horniman Museum owns 7,000 musical instruments. Dr.

Bradley Strauchen, Deputy Keeper of Musical Instruments, was my guide to the harp collection at the SCC. It seems I was the first person in at least twenty years (since Margaret has been curator) to examine the harps in the Horniman Museum.

The Horniman Museum has three main collections: World Cultures, Natural History, and Musical Instruments. The museum collection was started by Frederick John Horniman, a Victorian tea trader, who began collecting artifacts from around the world in the 1860s. In Forest Hill, it began as a family house museum, and eventually moved to a purpose-built museum, which opened in 1901. Three harps in the collection were acquired prior to 1898, when the collections were housed in Horniman's home: an Egan Irish dital harp, a Butler Irish harp, and a Cousineau single-action pedal harp. Other harps in the collection were acquired at various times in the twentieth century. In the period from 1981 to 1983, the museum acquired the Dolmetsch Collection, which included three harps: a nineteenth-century Welsh Triple and two harps made by Dolmetsch (a Celtic harp, Haslemere, ca. 1936, and "Caledonian" harp, Haslemere, ca. 1932).

Here is an overview of the six harps I surveyed in the Horniman Museum collection.

HARPS IN THE HORNIMAN MUSIC GALLERY:

Cousineau Single-Action Pedal Harp, late 18th century,

Horniman Museum number 3979.

Typical of the eighteenth-century French harp style, this is a stave-back harp with a scroll top decoration on the column. The carvings beneath the scroll top include acanthus leaves, laurel garlands, and foliate rope designs. The overall height is 63 ½ inches. The harp has the *bequilles* (crutches) mechanism, which was developed by George Cousineau and his son, Jacques-George. Each pair of *bequilles*, like small metal fingers, rotate and pinch the string, raising the pitch without pulling it out of line. There are shutter panels on the back of the soundbox.

The harp body is natural varnished wood with painted floral designs on the soundboard, in clusters of white flowers and blue flowers. There are attractive ivory (?) inlay strips along the edge of the soundboard and also parallel lines of mother-of-pearl inlay on the center strip, on either side of the strings. At the top of the soundboard is a painted



*French Cousineau
single-action pedal
harp, late 18th
century*

ribbon/banner with the inscription: *COUSINEAU PERE ET FILS LUTHIERS*. The same inscription appears again, in a striking feature on the back (right side) of the neck, in cut-out brass letters. A Cousineau harp (ca. 1790) with the same inscriptions can be seen in the catalogue of the Salvi Collection, *Three Centuries of Harpmaking*, p.88.

John Egan Irish Dital Harp
Horniman Museum number 3867.

Made in Dublin, Ireland, in the 1820s, this is an example of Egan's Royal Portable Harp. It is painted green with gold shamrocks decorating the column, neck and soundbox. It has the *fourchette* mechanism and ivory ditals or levers on the inside of the column, thus combining the pedal harp technology of the day with an Irish revival harp design.

HORNIMAN MUSEUM STUDY COLLECTION

CENTRE:

German Hook Harp, 19th century
Horniman Museum number 22.12.58/1.

The harp was acquired in 1958. The decoration on the front of the pillar is an attached piece, rather than the typically carved columns of eighteenth-century German harps. The finial also is an attached wooden knob. The maker is unknown. The harp is 57 inches tall. There are thirty-six string holes and eighteen hooks. The depth from the front of the pillar to the back of the knee block is 24 inches. The harp has the standard six soundholes of German harps. However, instead of clusters of perforations, these holes are large, perfectly round open sound holes. Ink inlay lines decorate the edges of the soundboard and also circle the soundholes. This purfling is similar in style to decoration on the German harp (ca. 1700) in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts collection.

The column and neck are darkly varnished, and the soundboard and body are natural. The strings are held in place with ebony string pegs with mother-of-pearl insets; one peg inset is in an interesting x-shape. Obviously the string pegs are not all original, but are from different periods, as they differ in size and shape. There are staples on the upper edge of the string holes, typical of German harp design. The harp has two iron feet attached to the bottom of the soundbox.



*German Hook Harp,
19th century*

This Egan harp is of the slender, very bowed column type. The harp is hung in a high position in the museum's glass case, which afforded me the opportunity to view inside the soundbox, from the bottom of the harp. The metal retractable stabilizing rod is still intact. The player would extend the rod to the ground, tightened with a screw, to assist in holding the somewhat heavy and cumbersome harp on the lap.



*Greek figure with aulos on
shutter panel on back of
Erard harp no. 808*

**Sebastian Erard Single-action Pedal Harp, no. 808,
London**

Horniman Museum number 1972.24.

The harp was acquired by the museum in 1972. An example of Erard's new innovative pedal harp design, the harp has the ram's head decoration on the capital, the rounded body construction, and Erard's fourchette discs for sharpening the strings. On the brass plate (on the back) is the inscription: Sebastian Erard's Patent Harp No. 808, No. 18 Great Marlborough St., London. The harp is ebony with gold paper transfer designs with a Greek motif. Two large female figures in flowing Grecian gowns decorate the soundboard on either side of the center string strip: one plays a triangle and the other plays a hand drum. An intricate decorative gold border frames the soundboard, with fanciful heads of men and women, and figures playing instruments. There are shutter panels on the back, with a gold figure of a Greek man playing the aulos.

The harp is not in good condition. There are no tuning pins or strings. The neck has detached from the body at the knee block, and there is damage to the base. However, it is an interesting example of one style of decoration from the London Erard factory in the early 1800s.

*Ram's head capital on
Erard harp no. 638*



Erard Freres Single-action Pedal Harp, no. 638, Paris

Horniman Museum number 15.10.48/39.

This Erard harp was acquired by the museum as part of the Percy Bull Collection in 1948.

Although this harp is also of the ram's head design, there are differences as well as similarities with the London Erard harp. On both Erards, the top sections of the gilded capitals above the ram's heads, have griffins and lyres. However, in the section under the ram's heads, the ladies on the French Erard are quite different from the English harp. Whereas the English ladies are quite stylized, attached to "pillar" bodies, the more natural French angel figures are more elegantly formed, dressed in flowing dresses, and playing trumpets.

The harp is natural, with a plain soundboard. There are five pointed oval sound holes on the back of the soundbox. The inscription on the brass plate reads: *PAR BREVET D'INVENTION NO.638, ERARD FRERES, Facteurs de Forte Piano de Harpes du Roi de Ses Menus Plaisirs & de la Cour Imperiale de Russie, Rue du Meul Nos. 13 et 21 a Paris.* A French Erard, no. 584 in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston collection, with the same inscription, is dated 1803. The Horniman harp is in good condition and there is evidence of it having been played quite a lot, with a bowed soundboard.

George Butler Irish Harp, 19th century Horniman Museum number 3869.

Records show that this harp was acquired by F.J. Horniman for £16 16s, and it became part of the collection before 1898. The harp, in storage for some time, was wrapped up, inside a large box. It was with great anticipation that Dr. Strauchen and I carefully lifted out the harp and unwrapped it. We were amazed to find a bright green Irish revival harp in very good condition, with especially beautiful paintings on the soundboard. The Butler harp is of the same shape and rounded back construction as John Egan harps; the overall

height is 39 inches. It is believed that some of the workers in the Egan workshop continued to make harps after the Egan business was closed. The harp has ring stops for the sharpening mechanism, in groups of one and two, and it has thirty-six string holes. Inside the soundbox, there is a screw for a stabilizing rod, but the rod is missing.

The neck, column and back are painted bright green with gold trim. On the back of the column, where it joins the neck, is a painted inscription inside the outline of a gold shamrock shape: *G. BUTLER-MANUFACTURER-MONUMENT-HOUSE, DUBLIN- AND- HAYMARKET, LONDON, S.W.* According to Grove's, George Butler was a firm of instrument makers, producing mostly brass and woodwind instruments, active in London and Dublin. The firm was based at Haymarket from 1865–1913.

On an ivory background, nationalistic symbols of Ireland are skillfully painted on the soundboard. The paintings are in mirror image on both sides of a gold center strip. In the middle of the soundboard are two identical round towers. According to Eileen Reilly, round towers were symbols of "the antiquity of Ireland's civilization which preceded English conquest...an image which signified durability as well as accomplishment."

Below the towers, similarly in mirror image, is the iconic figure of Erin or Hibernia, sitting on a stool and holding a harp, symbolic of Ireland. Hibernia has been described as a symbol of "prosperity, peace, and national unity," and was often depicted in political cartoons of the late nineteenth century [L. Perry Curtis, Jr.]. Another symbol, an Irish wolfhound, sits beside her; a beehive is on the other side of the figure. A putti figure is about to crown Hibernia with a laurel wreath. Bouquets of symbolic shamrocks tied with ribbons are above and below the figure.



*George Butler
Irish revival harp,
19th century*

Studying each instrument in the Horniman collection gives insights into the history and cultures of the countries where they were made. Designs and decorations reflect traditions, national symbols, and individual artistry. The range of mechanisms, to cope with the different types of music played on these six harps is an interesting array of inventions: hooks, ring stops, ditals, and pedals with *bequilles* and *fouchette* discs. I look forward to returning to the Horniman Museum at some time in the future to view the other harps in the collection. 🍀

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Thanks to Beth Sweeney, Director Irish Music Center, John

J. Burns Library, Boston College.

Nancy Hurrell is the current chair of the Historical Harp Society's Survey Project. She is a harp consultant for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, assisting with harp restoration and presenting gallery talks. She has recorded sound files for the MFA, and she records and performs on a copy of a seventeenth-century German harp in the MFA collection, made by Catherine Campbell. She can be contacted at www.Hurrellharp.com.

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Further information including a full schedule with class and presentation descriptions will be forthcoming shortly in the next *HHS Bulletin*.

The Madison Early Music Festival Website has general information on the location, fees, and concert schedule: www.dcs.wisc.edu/lsa/memf.