

The Royal Portable Harp by John Egan

Nancy Hurrell

John Egan was an Irish harp maker working in Dublin from c.1804 to 1841. Regarded as Dublin's leading harp maker at the time, he made more than two thousand harps, from small Irish harps with blades to double-action pedal harps. John Egan is perhaps best known for his 'Royal Portable' harps: small Irish harps, about three feet in height, which were fitted with ivory knobs or ditals, on the column, to operate the mechanism. The Royal Portable harps had elaborate inscriptions on the brass plates: the royal warrant and coat of arms of King George IV, and Egan's business address, 30 Dawson Street. He manufactured harps at this address from 1815-1835. The Royal Portable harp was designed to revive the ancient Irish harp tradition, while incorporating ditals with the new building techniques used at the time to manufacture single-action pedal harps.

The early 19th century was a period in Ireland's history when efforts were being made to revive their ancient harp tradition. The Belfast Harp Festival of 1792 had been the last great gathering of the old harpers. In 1807 the Belfast Harp Society was formed. They started a boarding school for blind boys and engaged two harp teachers: Bridget O'Reilly and Arthur O'Neill. The program collapsed in 1813 due to lack of funds. A second Belfast Harp Society was revived in 1819, lasting to 1839. Harps for the society were made by John Egan. He tried to make a 'new' Irish harp- a revival harp. The first harps Egan made were wire strung, like the ancient harps. They had a similar high-headed design but the body of the harps was quite different. Ancient Irish harps were hollowed out of bog oak. Egan's harps were lightly constructed, and the soundboxes had rounded backs, like the pedal harps of Sebastien Erard.

The Royal Portable harps were even closer in construction to those of Erard. Gut strung, they had the same fourchette mechanism as pedal harps. Instead of pedals, however, the discs were activated by seven hand operated ditals on the inside of the column. The ditals were attached to rods inside the column, connected to the discs in the neck. Acting like a single-action pedal harp, when a dital was engaged in a slotted position, the corresponding discs for that pitch in each octave, would turn. Forks on the discs pinched the strings, raising the pitch a semi-tone. For instance, if an F sharp were needed, the left hand would move the F dital downward into its slot, thus creating F sharp pitches in all the octaves. The ditals were made of ivory with the appropriate pitch letter name painted on its surface.

In the early 19th century, ditals were used on harp-lutes and similar hybrid instruments made by Edward Light and A. Barry, in London. These instruments, combining the shapes of guitars and harps, were very popular with London ladies and their Parisian counterparts. And so, for his Royal Portable Harp, John Egan cleverly combined three concepts: the shape of the ancient Irish harp, the construction and mechanism of Erard harps, and the dital buttons used on harp-lutes.

The Royal Portable harps came in black, blue or green and were decorated with hand-painted clusters of gold shamrocks. Instruments were supplied with leather cases. There were brass knobs at the top and bottom to attach a leather strap. The harps were tuned to E-flat and used for the art music of the day, especially to accompany singing. The problem was that

dropping the hand to press a lever on the column, with the thumb, was not particularly easy. The Egan Portable harp was not meant for the old Irish music which used gapped scales and didn't require accidentals. It was more suited to the songs of Thomas Moore, who was actually given a Royal Portable Harp by John Egan.

Recently, I was able to closely examine a Royal Portable Harp [No. 2036], owned by Heidi Nitze of New York. Its height is 35 1/8"; depth from front of pillar to knee block is 22". The extreme width of the soundboard is 8 1/2 ". It has 33 stringholes with the length of the longest string, 33" and the shortest string, 4 1/4 ". The brass plate is inscribed:

"No. 2036 J. Egan 30 Dawson St. Dublin; Harp Maker by Authority of the Royal Warrant to His Most Gracious Majesty George IVth & the Royal Family". Next to the inscription is a royal coat of arms with a lion and unicorn.

King George IV reigned from 1820-1830 and was known for his patronage of the arts. Egan had obtained the royal warrant and thus named his small harp the 'Royal Portable Harp'. In 1822 Egan's firm advertised as 'Portable Harp maker to the King'. At the time, King George IV was very popular in Ireland. In 1821 George IV visited Ireland, the first royal visit since 1619.

In the course of my research I discovered there were two slightly different models of the Royal Portable Harp. The Egan owned by Nitze has a fairly straight column, quite thick at the join with the neck, exactly like a harp in a museum in Munich (pictures provided to me by Barbara Poeschl-Edrich). Another distinctive shape of Portable harp, with a very slender, much more bowed column can be seen pictured in auction catalogues and various other sources. I looked at two Egan dital harps of this type in the Boston area: one in the Edward R. Hewitt Collection at Harvard University, and another at the John J. Burns Library, Boston College. The harps are strikingly similar to each other in their 'high-headed' shape, decoration and slender bowed columns. Another striking similarity is the absence of a royal coat of arms. In fact, on both harps there is a rubbed out area on the brass plates where a coat of arms might have existed. I wondered if the royal insignia had actually been removed, since throughout history there has been a continuing anti-British sentiment in Ireland.

Beth Sweeney, Director of the Irish Music Center at the Burns Library, Boston College, had arranged for me to inspect the Egan harp in the Burns library, which is on loan from a private collector. Upon closer examination of the harp, I was delighted to discover the harp still had a stabilizing rod intact, inside the soundbox! When drawn out to the necessary length and fastened by a brass screw at the back, the rod would have stood on the floor supporting the harp as it was held in the lap.

Egan's Royal Portable harp, in the end, was a passing fashion. The decline of the Egan harp may have resulted from several conditions. The collapse of the Belfast Harp Society in 1839 was a factor as well as the social conditions in Ireland. Poverty and food shortages eventually led to a steady rise in immigration to America. The dital mechanism proved to be cumbersome for a passing accidental, and the tone was reportedly weak (Rimmer).

Although the Royal Portable Harp was short-lived, the greater contribution from John Egan is his role in supporting the revival of the Irish harp. And his lasting achievement is the harp shape he designed. It is the ancestor of many celtic harps made today. The Clark Irish Harp, produced by Melville Clark from 1913 to 1950's, is strikingly similar to Egan's design, as are many celtic harps offered by today's harpmakers.

Note: The Egan Portable harp formerly owned by Heidi Nitze (shown at the HHS Conference last summer) is now part of the collection in the Irish Music Center, Burns Library, Boston College. The harp has been cosmetically restored to its original color and damaged shamrocks were accurately re-painted. I replaced the strings, at low tension. For appropriate string gauges, I consulted Paul Knoke who suggested I read Jaap Keppel's article on stringing. An octave thinner than modern harps was suggested, similar to early 19th century Erard stringing. The harp is now on display at the Burns Library, adjacent to their other Egan harp currently on loan. The library houses early editions of Bunting and Armstrong's books as well as a collection of Thomas Moore's writings, and recordings of his songs.

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Nancy Hurrell is a performer, teacher and arranger in the Boston area. She serves on the boards of the Historical Harp Society of America and the Scottish Harp Society of America. Nancy gives gallery talks on the harps at the MFA, Boston and assists in restoration of instruments. She performs with *Renaissonics*. Nancy is a member of the collaborative harp department at The Boston Conservatory.



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