



Kim Robertson

Celtic Harp 2008 Competition & Workshop

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Southside Festgrounds
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Judge Kim Robertson is a renowned performer and instructor who has stretched the boundaries of the harp for a new generation of performers and audiences. Born in Wisconsin, she is classically trained on piano and orchestral harp.

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Mythical Beasts to Floral Bouquets

Historical Harps in Scotland's Museums by Nancy Hurrell

On a recent trip to Scotland, I was able to see six historical harps in various museums. These interesting harps date from the 15th to the 20th centuries, and two are among the rarest harps in existence: the Queen Mary Harp and the Lamont Harp, in the National Museum, Edinburgh. I visited two other museum collections: St. Cecilia's Hall Museum of Instruments at Edinburgh University, and Dean Castle, Kilmarnock. At St. Cecilia's Hall there are two historical harps: a 19th century pedal harp by Erat, and a clarsach by J.W. Briggs, 1933. At Dean Castle, a small French dital harp from the early 1800's is on display, and also there is an Irish Royal Portable harp by John Egan, from the 1820's in the collection. It's quite interesting to compare the design and decoration of each of these harps, and to reflect on the continuity of a harp tradition spanning five hundred years. The revival harps of the 19th and 20th centuries combine elements from the ancient clarsachs, with new ideas for construction and mechanisms.

Two of the oldest and most fascinating harps, or Scottish clarsachs, in existence are the Queen Mary Harp and the Lamont Harp, dating from the 15th century. There is one other similar harp from this period, the Trinity College Harp in Dublin, Ireland. Like the Trinity College Harp, these harps are wire strung, and are hand held instruments. The Queen Mary Harp has 29 strings and the Lamont Harp has 32 strings. The height of the Queen Mary Harp is 30 1/2 in. and the larger Lamont Harp is 37 1/2 in., and both harps are constructed of hornbeam.¹ These ancient harps have chunky, substantial sound boxes, each carved from a single log of wood, with a flat panel attached for the back. Referred to as the "Lude Harps", they were formerly kept by the Robertson family at Lude, Perthshire. It is believed that the Queen Mary Harp was a gift from Mary, Queen of Scots, to Beatrix Gardyn of Banchory, an ancestor of the Robertsons. In 1880 the harps became part of the National Museum of Scotland, in Edinburgh.

The Queen Mary Harp and the Lamont Harp

are beautifully displayed in well lit glass cases in the spacious rooms of the museum. The Queen Mary Harp is actually in a free standing case, so one can walk around it and see the sides, front, and back. The first thing I noticed was the pillar, carved with fantastic reptile heads at the top and bottom. The center portion of the pillar is decorated with foliate patterns and celtic knots exquisitely carved in relief. There are six silver studs on the front of the pillar. Also on the pillar are four incised circles, two at the top and two at the bottom, filled with mythical and symbolic beasts: a lion, a reptile with fish in its mouth and a horse-like animal, a dragon, and a griffin [eagle/lion]. It is believed that these beasts were Christian symbols, whose religious meanings were widely understood. The front and sides of the soundbox are decorated with burnt lines

The revival harps of the 19th and 20th centuries combine elements from the ancient clarsachs, with new ideas for construction and mechanisms.



TOP PAGE GRAPHIC:
 Dital mechanism on
 French harp.
 ABOVE: Brass fittings
 on the Lamont Harp.

and geometric shapes with circles and crosses. There are four soundholes on the soundboard. Traces of paint suggest the harp was colored at one time. Robert Bruce Armstrong, in "The Irish and Highland Harps", describes these patterns in great detail, and also informs us:

According to tradition there were attached

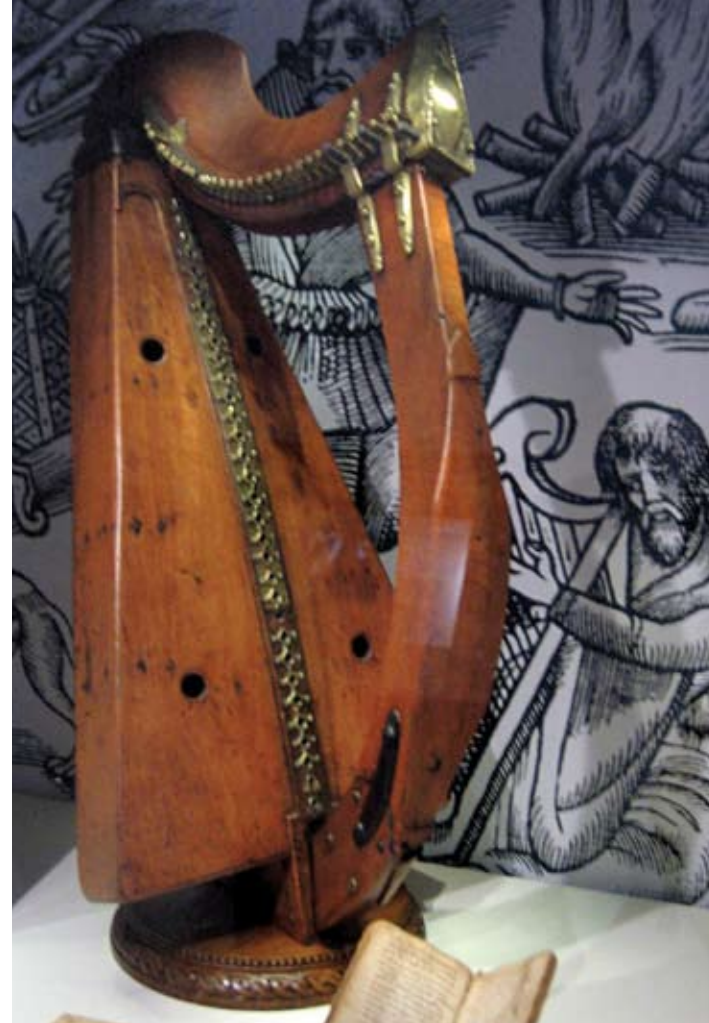
*Be afraid.
 Be very afraid...*



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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: The Queen Mary Harp at the National Museum, Carved pillar on the Queen Mary Harp, Lamont Harp at the National Museum, Briggs clarsach, 1933, at Edinburgh University, and Erat pedal harp, Edinburgh University.

Two of the oldest and most fascinating harps, or Scottish clarsachs, in existence are the Queen Mary Harp and the Lamont Harp, dating from the 15th century.

to this Harp representations of Queen Mary and the royal arms of Scotland, worked in gold, and it is believed that these were removed and stolen about the year 1745.²

The larger Lamont Harp is plain (without decoration) and is very striking in appearance with a smooth, polished natural wood surface. It is very solidly built, and like the Queen Mary Harp, it has four soundholes on the soundboard. There are decorated brass straps connecting the column to the neck, possibly a means of preventing the neck from leaning, due to the tension of the strings. The brass straps are finely made and are engraved with interlaced patterns. On the end of the neck, or harmonic curve, is a brass fitting meant to imitate a large jewel. The ends of the tuning pins are sculpted in a decorative shape. Also there are decorative brass fittings, the 'shoes', on the string band, to protect the string holes on the soundboard. These interesting metal fittings, some in a horse shoe shape ending with quatrefoils, prevent the wire strings from cutting into the wood. The pillar is simply carved with bold angular shapes, and there is also some rounded carving at the top of the soundboard. The harp is displayed in front of a blown up reprint of the famous bard and

harper illustration from John Derrick's Image of Ireland, 1581.

Within walking distance is another museum with two harps well worth visiting, the St. Cecilia's Hall Museum of Instruments at Edinburgh University. The Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments has about 3000 objects, housed in two locations: the Reid Concert Hall Museum and St. Cecilia's Hall Museum, and is known for its collections of keyboard instruments. On view at St. Cecilia's Hall is a clarsach by J. W. Briggs, 1933, and a pedal harp by Erat & Sons, c.1815. J. W. Briggs was a famous instrument maker in Glasgow in the 1930's. The Briggs clarsach is a revival harp, somewhat resembling the shape of the ancient Lamont Harp. It is 36 inches in height, with a bowed pillar and a high harmonic curve extending past the pillar. However, this modern harp of walnut is made from pieces of wood, with a stave back construction, rather than the old practice of hollowing out a log for the soundbox. And instead of wire strings, the Briggs harp is gut strung, with three bass wire strings. It has 30 strings, with blades for sharpening.

The pillar of the Briggs harp is simply carved in a shape suggesting a creature similar to the reptiles on the Queen Mary Harp. On the upper front of the pillar is a section of carved celtic interlaced patterns, again a revival of earlier harp designs. The inscription on the brass plate reveals that this was a prize harp, presented to the winner of a competition sponsored by a Glasgow newspaper, the Daily Record. It is engraved, "PRESENTED TO CHARLES MACCONVILLE ESQ, WINNER OF DAILY RECORD CLARSACH FOR GAELIC MELODY COMPETITION/ APRIL 1933." It's fascinating to see an early Scottish folk harp from the 1930's. Its design relates to the ancient harps, and one can also compare the Briggs harp design to folk harps in production today.

The other harp exhibited at St. Cecilia's is a single-action pedal harp by the London harp-makers, Erat and Sons, c.1815. It is in the style of the Erard harps from this period, with gilt ram's heads on the capital. The base of the harp is also gold, with a charming sculpted pair of sleeping lions. The lion has been a symbol of royalty and strength throughout history, and we saw it used on the Queen Mary Harp as an early

Christian symbol. The body of the Erat harp is painted black, with printed gold decorations on thin paper applied to the soundboard and soundbox. The effect is to look as if it were hand painted. Two large Grecian figures decorate the soundboard, one holds a trumpet, and the other holds a lyre. There are elaborate gold borders on the front and back of the soundbox, with intricate foliate designs and fantastic creatures. Dragons, griffins, mermaids, and other mythical beasts are part of the pattern. Tiny finely crafted vines, upon closer look, are serpents, with fierce expressions on their faces! The snakes seem to be battling large eagles. This could well be a symbolic battle of good vs. evil, as eagles were Christian symbols in early times. The eagle, an ancient symbol of Rome, came to represent military victory, and in the early 1800's when this harp was made, the eagle was the main symbol used by Napoleon.

Finally, I saw two historical harps at Dean Castle, which is set in a beautiful wooded country park, within the town of Kilmarnock. The Van Raalte Collection of musical instruments is housed in the oldest part of the castle, the Keep, built about 1360. It has a Great Hall with a high vaulted ceiling and a minstrels' gallery. The

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ABOVE:
French harp at Dean Castle.

On display is a splendid small French harp with ditals, dating from the early 1800's. The museum's other harp, an 1820's Irish Royal Portable Harp by John Egan is not currently on view, but the museum staff allowed me to examine and photograph it.

castle was originally owned by the Boyd family, and has strong historical connections with famous people in history, including Robert the Bruce, who gave Boyd the land. The 4th Earl of Kilmarnock was a patron of the poet Robert Burns. In the early 1900's, the 8th Lord Howard de Walden inherited the castle, and in the 1940's he moved his father-in-law's collection of musical instruments to the castle.

I had made arrangements with the Museum Officer ahead of time to see the two harps in the collection. On display is a splendid small French harp with ditals, dating from the early 1800's. The museum's other harp, an 1820's Irish Royal Portable Harp by John Egan is not currently on view, but the museum staff allowed me to examine and photograph it. Although both harps are similar in that they each have ditals, or finger operated levers, the mechanisms work quite differently on each. In the late 18th century, and early

19th century, harp makers were experimenting with ways to sharpen or fret the strings. On the neck of the French harp is a row of ditals on the brass plate, one for each string. Each dital can be moved into a slot. As the ivory dital is lowered into the slot, it activates a tiny metal crutch under the brass plate. The crutch pinches the string against a pin, thus fretting the string to raise its pitch.

John Egan's Royal Portable Harp has ditals placed on the inner side of the harp's column. Like the French harp, the ivory levers are moved and fixed into a slot. However, these ditals are actually connected to rods inside the column, which move the metal discs on the neck to fret the string. On each disc there are two forks which pinch the string in the engaged position. This fourchette mechanism is still used on pedal harps, operated by the feet instead of hands. The Egan harp, painted green with gold shamrocks, is an Irish revival harp. Egan tried to create a harp in a traditional size and shape, but one capable of playing in many keys. The Egan harp is 34 inches tall, but is ac-

tually quite heavy with its somewhat cumbersome mechanism. Eventually, blades and levers became the preferred choice for players. Egan ingeniously stored a stabilizing rod inside the soundbox, which extends to the ground to make it easier to steady the harp when held on the lap. John Egan was granted the royal warrant from King George IV (hence, 'Royal' Portable), and the inscription on the brass plate is, "Maker by Appointment to His Most Gracious Majesty George IV".

The French harp at Dean Castle is decorated on the neck and column with charming bouquets of roses and wildflowers in red, pink, yellow, and blue, on a black background. The unusual column splits into two 'legs' before attaching to the bottom of the soundboard. At the top, the neck extends past the column join. The rounded finial has gilt flowers inside circles on the sides, and gold jewel like patterns on the front. This is reminiscent of jewels on the protruding necks of the ancient harps. The back of the soundbox is painted black. On the natural soundboard are bouquets of flowers and instruments, including a lute, trumpet, drum and bagpipes. Near the bottom of the soundboard there are oil paintings of idealized village scenes, similar to those found on 18thc. pedal harps. The harp is only 25¾ in. tall. It may have been a travel harp, or a child's harp. These beautifully painted small harps are extremely rare.

The harps in Scottish museums are well worth seeing, and present variety in both size and shape. Some are attempts to revive and continue a harp tradition. The mechanisms employed to play in various keys eventually became important to harpmakers, who discovered creative solutions. The decoration on historical harps is different in each period, from burnt lines and carving to oil paintings and applied gold paper decorations. Some symbolic images such as lions, griffins and dragons, have continued to be used to adorn harps for hundreds of years. ■

¹ K. Sanger and A. Kinnaird, *Tree of Strings*, (1992), 212.

² R.B. Armstrong, *The Irish and Highland Harps*, (1904), 180.

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Dean Castle Website: www.deancastle.com



ABOVE: John Egan Irish revival harp at Dean Castle.

Nancy Hurrell performs on classical, celtic and historical harps. She plays renaissance harps in the early music group, RENAISSONICS, and is on their latest CD, *Carols for Dancing* produced by WGBH radio. Nancy also performs on the Spanish cross-strung harp in *Musicians of the Old Post Road*. She presents solo concerts on Irish and Scottish harp at festivals, and gives workshops to harp groups around the country.

Nancy is a harp consultant for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, presenting lecture-demonstrations on the harp collection. Nancy is the current chair of the Historical Harp Society's Survey Project, creating a database of historical harps. Her four books of harp arrangements are popular around the world. Solo CD's: *Where the Heather Grow* and *Balletto*. www.HurrellHarp.com



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