

Egan's Irish Harps

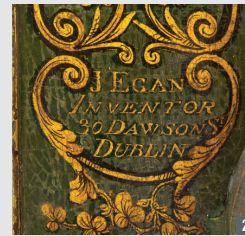
John Egan's Portable Irish harp became the archetypal Irish harp, writes **Nancy Hurrell**



1 SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE (1769-1830) **PORTRAIT OF ELIZABETH CONYNGHAM PLAYING AN EGAN HARP**, 1824, ©The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation/Scala/Art Resource, New York

2 Winged-maiden Egan harp (detail), Royal Academy of Music Museum, London Photo ©Ian Breary

3 Winged-Maiden Portable Irish Harp, John Egan and sons John and Charles Egan, 1820 ©Museo dell'Arpa Victor Salvi, Piasco, Cuneo, Italy



An Ireland without harps is inconceivable. The musical tradition has lasted a thousand years, from the chieftain's prized harper at the medieval court to the later traveling harpers welcomed in the big houses as resident performers,

celebrated for their Irish airs. By 1800 however, musical tastes had changed, with a preference for Italianate art music imported from the continent. The early Irish harp, or *cláirseach*, was strung with wire strings and its limited tonality was not idiomatic to the new music, thus invitations for harpers ceased and the Irish harp became obsolete. Music-making in the drawing room transitioned to the family members themselves providing the evening's entertainment with Italian art songs and opera themes sung and played on modern instruments, such as the pianoforte and the French pedal harp. For key changes, the harpist simply moved the harp's pedals, and mechanisms on the neck 'pinched' the gut strings for semitones. These modern instruments possessed the delicate sound qualities for the preferred musical style, and they also doubled as exquisitely ornate pieces of neo-classical furniture. At this pivotal juncture in history when Ireland's harp had essentially disappeared, a young Dublin harp maker, John Egan (fl.1797-1829), perceived the need for a new form of Irish harp – a modernised instrument.

John Egan began his working life apprenticed to a blacksmith. Author Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan), who knew him, wrote in *Patriotic Sketches of Ireland* (1807):

'Brought up from his earliest youth to the labours of the anvil, Mr Egan was still serving his time to a smith, when chance threw in his way a French harp... [A]ll the money he possessed in the world was shortly after laid out in the purchase of such materials as were requisite for the construction of a pedal harp, which he accomplished with so much success, as to find a high and immediate sale for it.'

This was a remarkable achievement and Egan marketed himself in adverts as 'Mr John Egan, a self-taught artist'. Early 1800s Dublin had no shortage of skilled artisans for

needed advice, as Egan had entered a burgeoning community of musical instrument makers, with furniture makers and gilders also maintaining busy workshops. Egan's training in the forge would inform him as to the metal-casting of the inner components of a pedal harp and it seems he also applied these techniques to harp decoration, as seen on an early example at Avondale House. Whereas the harp body displays a somewhat unrefined woodworking skill, the instrument's decorative motifs cast in bronze are all masterfully produced. Instead of the usual painted gold leaf ornaments on the column and base, this instrument has finely detailed bronze appliqué attached. The neoclassical themed vignettes feature bows and arrows, dancing Grecian figures, winged-griffins and charming angelic putti riding on the backs of Irish wolfhounds. Similarly, in place of lines painted in gold on a harp's fluted column and soundboard edges, here we see flat shiny strips of brass metal attached to the harp.

Egan's early experience of shaping objects out of molten metal possibly inspired his conceptual thinking, design sense and interest in form. He was not a typical harp maker, as evidenced by a dozen different harp models made in a range of shapes and sizes, some with quite unorthodox bodies. The jutting finials of his small portable harps are striking, and one extraordinary pedal harp has an unusual curved pillar cast in bronze, adorned with a spiraling garland of shamrocks and culminating in a lion's paw. And perhaps his most stunning example is the winged-maiden harp, wherein Egan transformed a nationalist symbol into a playable instrument. The sheer variety of harps by John Egan reflects the imagination of this inventor and, for a time, the artist





4 Portable Irish Harp
©Victoria and Albert
Museum, London

5 Egan harp Private
collection (detail)

6 Portrait of Thomas
Moore in his study
at Sloperton Cottage
©National Gallery of
Ireland

7 Egan harp base of
trumpeting angel
holding a sprig of
shamrocks (detail)

even adopted as his signature on harps, 'John Egan, Inventor'.

The mainstay of Egan's business was however the Grecian pedal harp model, the standard design also produced by his counterparts in London. These fashionable neoclassical harps featured capitals with robed Grecian figures in imitation of the marble figure statues brought back to the great houses from the Grand Tours to Greece and Italy. Regency ladies dressed in similar white flowing gowns, inferring a connection to the classical ideal of beauty. As described in the novels of Jane Austen, harp playing was a highly desirable female accomplishment for attracting a suitor and securing a good match. It was expected in families of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy to provide their daughters with an elegant harp and Egan obliged with finely made instruments from his well-appointed business address on Dawson Street in Dublin. The surviving pedal harps exhibit an impressive array of hand-painted decoration, from rich spiraling acanthus with rosettes to fantastic arabesques with acrobats, exotic birds, mythological figures and even devils. These pedal harps all uniformly display Egan's signature Irish touch on the base with trumpeting angels holding tiny sprigs of shamrocks.

The early nineteenth century was a period of heightened nationalism and cultural longing for an idealised Gaelic antiquity, and around 1804 Egan began to experiment with designs for Irish harp models. A movement to revive the early Irish harp led to the founding of harp societies in Dublin and Belfast, with special schools established to teach the early harp techniques and music. John Egan, appointed harp maker to the societies, supplied newly designed wire-strung Irish harps which enabled the continued transmission of the ancient Irish harp repertoire well into the nineteenth century. Patrick Byrne, a former student, achieved extraordinary fame touring and performing Irish airs on his Egan wire-strung harp. A favourite of Prince Albert, Byrne was appointed 'Irish Harper to His Royal Highness'. A review in *The Emerald of New York City* in 1870 described Byrne's expressive harp tones as a 'whisper like the sigh of the rising wind on a summer eve' then rising to a 'clang with a martial fierceness'.

John Egan's creative instinct was to look towards the future rather than reviving the past, and he continued to champion the idea of a chromatic Irish harp. This era was known as an 'improving age', and Egan, like other musical instrument makers, was driven by a desire to innovate. In his seminal invention – the 'Portable Irish Harp' – Egan effectively fused old with new. The harp design was intentionally Irish, for the model's bowed pillar shape and small size of three feet in height, paid homage to Ireland's oldest and most celebrated instrument, the Brian Boru harp in Trinity College. It was an ingenious marketing concept and to reinforce a symbolic Irishness, the portable harps were gilded with motifs of Irish wolfhounds and shamrocks, Egan's signature decoration. Visually, these beautifully crafted instruments blended shamrock vines effortlessly with lush gilt scrolling acanthus and oak leaves, all on a

lacquered ground of either blue, black or green. An up-to-date chromatic instrument, the Portable Irish Harp had gut strings fitted with newly invented mechanisms, either ring stops or ditals, for key changes. Thus this ingenious new instrument was instantly recognised as an *Irish* harp, and yet it had the desirable sound, appearance and capabilities for harpists to play popular art songs as well as traditional Irish tunes.

Egan Portable Irish Harps were played by the daughters in Ireland's prominent families, including Lady Alicia Parsons at Birr Castle and Frances Power Cobbe at Newbridge House. Literary celebrities Thomas Moore and Sydney Owenson (Lady Morgan) also played Egan portable harps and these symbolic instruments completed their public personas: Owenson posing as her fictional heroine 'Glorvina' and Moore as the 'Bard of Erin', celebrated for his harp-infused Irish melodies. Moore, Owenson and Egan each effectively combined elements of a romanticised Gaelic antiquity with the harp trope in their highly marketable products of songbooks, novels and modern instruments. Over time, Egan's small green shamrock-adorned harp came to be viewed as the archetype of an Irish harp and, one hundred years later, it was copied by subsequent makers J.G. Morley in England, Melville Clark in America and others for their own Irish harp models. The increased manufacture of small Irish harps revitalised the harping tradition, and in the 21st century, the modern Irish harp is still valued for the same qualities promoted by Egan: portability, chromatic capabilities, bright tone and affordability.

This was a significant achievement in the history of Ireland's harp. Yet even more remarkable is the story of this Irishman, a self-taught harp maker who eventually was awarded the highest accolade attainable for craftsman – the royal warrant for excellence. In 1821, John Egan presented a resplendent golden harp in the form of Hibernia, a winged-maiden, to George IV upon his historic visit to Dublin. Within days Egan was appointed 'harp maker to the king', the sole harp maker in his time to receive this prestigious appointment. In the following year, the maker's son Charles, a harpist, became harp professor to Princess Augusta, the king's sister who commissioned several Egan harps to be made for her.

Today, a small number of Egan harps have been restored to a playable condition and once again, the 'clear, bright tone' as described in Egan newspaper adverts can be heard. Egan harps survive as treasured art objects in major museums and collections in sixteen countries worldwide. A national icon, a device for playing Irish music and, an ambassador of culture, the Irish harp has a resonance on many levels, for which John Egan, inventor, king's harp maker and Irish patriot may claim no small part. ■

**A REVIEW
IN THE
EMERALD OF
NEW YORK
CITY IN 1870
DESCRIBED
BYRNE'S
EXPRESSIVE
HARP TONES
AS A 'WHISPER
LIKE THE
SIGH OF
THE RISING
WIND ON A
SUMMER EVE'**



Nancy Hurrell is a harpist and author of *The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, patrons and players* (2019).

