

NANCY HURRELL, *THE EGAN IRISH HARPS: TRADITION, PATRONS AND PLAYERS* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2019). ISBN: 978-1-84682-759-4, 302 pp, €45.

*The Egan Irish Harps: Tradition, Patrons and Players* makes an important contribution to the developing field of Irish harp scholarship. One of the iconic instruments in the history of Irish music, the Egan Irish Harp is recognizable by its distinctive design, often painted green with golden shamrock decorations. These instruments are generally not played today but form a significant part of harping activity in the nineteenth century. Their shape and use of semi-tone mechanisms proved to be very important developments in harp organology and their association with Thomas Moore afforded a cultural link with his *Irish Melodies*. The harps were significantly smaller than pedal harps and more portable, yet capable of use for a wide variety of repertoire including song accompaniment. His Royal Portable Harps were about three feet tall, gut-strung and fitted with semi-tone mechanisms that facilitated key changes previously not possible on the older wire-strung harps. Egan harps were popularly associated with domestic music making settings in middle- and upper-class contexts and both he and his successors catered for a relatively large market, their presence ensuring a consistent availability of pre-manufactured harps for sale in Dublin. The existence of these harps assisted in ensuring the survival of the small 'Irish' harp as distinct from the pedal harp. At a time when the older wire-strung harp tradition was operating at a very minimal level, John Egan's harp production gave a new direction and outlet for harping as these harps met new ideological and musical needs

Having John Egan's harp as the central focus of this book brings to life in rich detail not only the impact of his harps on Irish musical society in the nineteenth century but also adds to our broader understanding of the historical trajectory of the Irish harp during this turbulent period. Hurrell's volume categorically proves that the harping tradition was a vibrant and essential part of music-making in Ireland and England although it operated in a vastly different socio-musical context to preceding centuries. She illuminates the demand for harps and contextualizes Egan's patrons within the fabric of musical activity of Irish society. Hurrell guides the reader through the various developments in Egan harps and documents his successors and imitators in harp making. She cleverly marries this organological information into a broader narrative that nods to political and social factors in Irish society and traces the history of the nineteenth century in Ireland with reference to important musicians, patrons, and societies.

Nancy Hurrell is well placed to write this book. Her longstanding research project has focused on the Egan Irish harps and indeed harping in the nineteenth century, as evidenced in her previous publications. She is a consultant to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and as an Irish harp performer she is one of the few musicians to have performed on the Egan Irish harp at Birr Castle.

The introduction makes a convincing case for Egan's place in the history of organological developments of harps in Ireland and Western Europe. A short overview of the political climate and prevailing musical sensibilities of the largely urban elite creates a valid hypothesis as to why socially and culturally Egan's harps were timely in their introduction. In the prologue Hurrell draws the reader in with a narrative that weaves together the curious, tragic, and unfortunate aspects of the fate of the early Irish harp. She accurately condenses the literature dealing with the harp as symbol from 1534 to the late 1700s, providing a concise and stimulating overview of much detailed historical research that has been published in recent years, a section that would be particularly helpful to those not familiar with the history of the harp in Ireland.

Chapter one introduces John Egan in an engaging narrative writing style and speculates about his possible motivations for commencing a career in harp manufacturing. She provides an effective description of Dublin in the years leading up to the Act of Union and immediately afterwards, which sets the scene for Egan's arrival into a thriving urban music scene. In chapter two Hurrell uses Sydney Owenson's (*Lady Morgan*) biography to move the narrative into the realm of the musical use of the Egan harp. While Hurrell veers at times towards a romanticized narrative style when describing Owenson's life, she effectively conveys the critical importance this writer and harpist had in the popularization of the Egan harp amongst the elite of society.

In chapter three Hurrell provides an interesting methodological description of Egan's interactions with the Irish Harp Society of Dublin in the period 1809–12, with the Irish Harp Society in Belfast, and his organological influence on the Drogheda Harp Society. In chapter four Hurrell notes a similarity with Thomas Moore in terms of the importance of both 'Egan's Portable Irish Harp and Moore's *Irish Melodies*, two significant cultural products in a nationalistic post-union age' (p. 100). Chapter 4 is one of the most valuable sections in the book as it provides new and painstakingly detailed research on the instrument itself, giving a detailed technical account of its development.

The focus of chapter five is the visit of King George IV to Dublin in 1821. Hurrell describes Egan's negotiation of the process of securing a royal appointment during this visit while also explaining the role of Egan's son (Charles Egan) as a performer for

this visit, including a performance at the Viceregal Lodge in the Phoenix Park. Hurrell's research into the music and musicians who played for the King's visit further illuminates a period in harp history that is relatively underrepresented in the literature. Egan's children are the subject of chapter six. John Egan's son, Charles was tutor to Lady Augusta, an appointment that assisted in securing his ascent to society. He was also the author of the first tutor for the Portable Irish harp, *A New Series of Instructions Arranged Expressly for the Royal Portable Irish Harp* (1822). Other collections followed in 1822, 1827, and 1829. Following John Egan's death in 1829, his son John Jnr took over the family business, complete with growing financial difficulties. Despite being besieged by debt troubles he continued to make harps in the style of the existing Egan harps and his work helped enormously in continuing the availability of Irish-made small harps in Ireland during the 1830s. Mrs Jackson (*née* Miss Egan, forename not known), a daughter of John Egan, began her career teaching the harp, something which was not unusual for women at the time. More interestingly, however, she later moved into harp manufacture, setting up a rival firm to her brother's. The Egan siblings publicly exhibited their rivalry through published claims in advertisements and in seeking esteemed appointments. By 1836 Jackson's son had joined his parent's company and later succeeded them in running the family business, moving the business back in 1845 to the original Dawson Street premises where his grandfather's factory had been.

In chapter seven Hurrell discusses some key players of the Egan harps, the most interesting of whom is arguably Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904) of Newbridge House, Dublin. Her grandmother was a patron of Turlough Carolan for whom the well-known planxty, 'Mrs Power' or 'Fanny Power' was named. Cobbe studied the harp as part of her general education. According to Hurrell, while she rallied against the norms and customs associated with her class and gender, she had a particular affection for music and enjoyed playing the harp. She was a writer and early voice for feminism in Ireland. Other notable players and teachers include William Vincent Wallace (1812–65) and the Duchess of Richmond, Lady Charlotte Gordon (1768–1842).

In chapter eight Hurrell identifies the Portable Irish harp as being of singular importance in John Egan's career 'as evidenced in its longevity as the universally adopted form of the Irish harp in the last two centuries' (p. 224). In this chapter she discusses the harp manufacturers who closely followed the Egan model such as those made by Robinson & Bussell, one of which is currently displayed in Áras an Uachtaráin. Other makers include George Butler, Melville Clarke, John Quinn, and the noted English harp maker George Morley.

The final chapter details harps in private collections and museums. It concludes with a brief discussion around sonority and tone on restored or maintained Egan

harps. Hurrell here goes into some detail in attempting to convey the exceptional timbre produced by both Egan Portable harps (p. 260). Three appendices are included, covering chronology, terminology, and a catalogue of Egan harps, respectively.

Hurrell includes vignettes at the end of each chapter to provide close organological descriptions on the particulars of harp types from each era. These sections are very informative to the reader as they collectively create a second narrative thread running through the book in which the developments and inventiveness of Egan and his successors is traced. For the reader focused exclusively on organology, these sections could almost be read in isolation from the remaining body of each chapter. However, when read in conjunction with the rest of the chapter they provide immensely rich detail on harp construction and development in tandem with the unfolding sociocultural trajectory of nineteenth-century music-making in Ireland. This structural template is rare in writing about Irish music and illuminates for the reader how one instrument maker can engender significant change in a musical tradition and respond to rapidly changing cultural fashions to remain relevant as a source for new instruments.

This is a most welcome addition to the literature on music in Ireland in general and harp scholarship in particular. Hurrell's well-researched book brings to life the impact and critical importance of the Egan harps in the context of his patrons and those who performed on these harps. The Egan harps were popularized by the Irish and English gentry and acted as a musico-cultural symbol of Irishness both sonically and visually. They fulfilled an important role in society by providing suitable and fashionable instruments for public and domestic music settings. This book will prove beneficial to those with an interest not only in harping but in Irish culture, history, and music.

Helen Lawlor

Dundalk Institute of Technology