



Star Edwards, Celtic Harper

Field Project for World Music Class

© 1998 - Julio Edwards

November 1998

Many an ancient song ends up being recycled and incorporated into contemporary music. Some melodies are well known such as Bach's *Minuet* which can be found in the song *Gentle in the Rain* and some are more obscure such as Chopin's *Prelude In C Minor* which "inspired" Barry Manilow's *Could It Be Magic*. This paper is about a Celtic harper who seeks out obscure songs and breathes new life into them. She's remolds these ancient tunes for a generation whose fetishes range from purple hair and nose rings to BMW's and 3.5-person family units. She's a cross between an ethnomusicologist, a historian and a musician, and she's on a mission from God: she preserves Celtic harp songs. Using an example from her latest CD, *Emerald Crossing*, we will examine her latest snatch from the jaws of history, *Coolin*, a song that has been around (and around) for a long time.

Historical Background

"Various forms of the harp have been around on most of the continents of the world since before written history and nothing is known about its remote origins. Harp-like instruments found in Greece, China, Assyria, Persia and Egypt were too large to carry and, while they don't appear to have influenced early Irish harps, they may have influenced later changes through the appearance in Ireland of Christian travelers. But certain small portable harps seem to have originated among barbarian peoples of Asia. The Celtic harp resembles this instrument more than any other ancient harp.

"By the year 1000, early forms of the harp were widespread all over Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The reign of the harp in the music of the British Isles was noted by learned Europeans. These early writings span several hundred years and hint at that marvelous music which is lost."-- Astra Thor, Lark In The Morning Home Page, 11/30/98
<http://www.mhs.mendocino.k12.ca.us/MenComNet/Business/Retail/Larknet/ArtCelticHarpHistory>

The Celtic culture surrounding the harp historically includes Cornwall, Breton, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Isle of Mann, and the Hebridean Islands. Their Gaelic language and their Pagan beliefs were their common bond. The myth of harp was embellished to include its supposed magical qualities. Certain songs, when played on the harp, would do one of three things: put a person to sleep, make them laugh, or make them sad. In the Bible, Saul's headaches are soothed by David's harp playing. For Irish Americans, the old harp songs are especially important because it allowed the older generations to express their sorrow being forced to leave Ireland because of the Potatoe Famine in the 1850s.

Modern Celtic culture in Colorado tries to immolate the days of old through fellowship meetings in such halls as the church and the pub, as well as through organizations like the Irish Fellowship and the Saint Andrews Society. Events such as the Renaissance Festival in Larkspur, the Scottish Highland Games in Estes Park, Colorado Springs, Denver and Grand Junction, the Irish Festival at Stapleton, and the Mile High Hooley in Denver all help help to stabilize and hold together the Coloradan neo-Celtic culture. St. Patrick's Day and (Robert) Burn's Supper are the two single events that bring many Irish and Scottish families together above all others.

Historical Foreground

Star Edwards was born Laurie Anne Adams, in Ammittville, NY, on April 30, 1953. A self-taught musician with no formal musical training, she started on the guitar at age 15 and later learned to play the Appalachian dulcimer and the recorder. In 1983, after a vivid dream, she found her first harp, a tall, very used, Mexican harp, in a Value Village discount store. She fell in love with it and took it home although it had several busted strings and a badly damaged harmonic curve. Twenty years later, after two failed restoration attempts, she finally parted company her first harp, in the meantime amassing quite a collection of ranging from Medieval, Renaissance, Irish Wire-Strung, Neo-Celtic and Electric harps. And the truly amazing thing is that not only can she play them all, she can tune them by ear, too!

In the early 1990's she started teaching harp to students of all ages which lead to her writing two harp instructional books for her students. She has recorded two CDs, one just released this week. And she has performed at many of the major music functions in Colorado including the Cherry Creek Arts Festival, the Stanley Hotel Fine Art Concerts, A Taste of Colorado, YMCA of the Rockies, KVOD's *Down to Earth*, Swallow Hill's Folkathon, Capitol Hill People's Fair, Denver Museum of Natural History, Irish Festival – Denver, Scottish Highland Games since 1985, Jewish-Islamic Cultural Concert, and a few dozen other major events.

“The sound and shape, its aesthetic appeal, its historical significance and its cultural charisma,” were the harp attributes that attracted Star to the instrument. She focuses on two areas of harp performance. On the nylon harp she converges on the harmony. She is able to play lots of chords within a melody and the sound is usually consonant. On the wire harp, however, it is technique that demands her attention. “The wire harp is played with the fingernails on metal strings giving it a bell-like sound,” Star quips, continuing, “Because of the sustained ringing, a selective dampening of the strings is required after they are struck. The bass line is simplified and the melody line always rules the day. On the nylon harp usually the opposite occurs.”

Her appreciation for the instrument has constantly grown over the years, the New Age music arena has opened new avenues of employment for harpers. “A musical trend in healing has begun since the late 1980’s that has opened the doors to playing harp in hospices for its relaxing qualities. The harp helps the patient make the transition by helping them to align their heartbeat and breathing.” According to Star, harpers are the folk or Celtic harp players while harpists are the pedal harp players.

Seeking the Obscure

Star’s “thing” is finding very old fine tunes that few have ever heard, rewriting them, recording them, publishing them, doing everything possible to bring them to a new generation of appreciative ears. But why is she compelled to find these old songs and

revive them? It has become something of an obsession with her. When asked the questions, she replies, “Because they have beautiful melodies and they are buried in dusty old books in the basements of libraries. Restoring the lost music brings them out in the open and the songs get recorded, written and arranged in books, students learn them, and they become mainstream in the harp culture and that is how they become popular.”

Star is not unique in her field by any means. She estimates that as many as one in five harpers may be doing some type of restorative work. So how does this speciality compare to writing a new song? “You’re taking a song that somebody else wrote about and they have their own story attached to it, whether its historical or personal. By retelling the story it continues to live. When writing my own songs, I get to tell my own story and a lot of times I use more contemporary ornaments riffs in expressing the music.” She likes both equally, but working with ancient music still sends shivers up and down her spine.

Coolin

Of all the songs on Star’s latest CD I chose *Coolin* to explore. It seems to have the most mixed up history of any song I’ve ever heard about. First of all, the word *Coolin* is spelled as many different ways as there are versions of the song, which is three, depending on who you want to believe. Star’s *Coolin* consists of all three variations woven into a single tune. Each has its own character and could pass as a separate song to most of us. The lyrics, written some time after the melody, tell one aspect of the song’s story surrounding “Culin.” Thomas Moore’s penned these impressions of a lad mourning the loss of his home in Erin (Ireland):

“Tho’ the last glimpse of Erin with sorrow I see
Yet wherever thou art shall seem Erin to me
In exile thy bosom shall still be my home
And thine eyes make my climate wherever we roam

“To the gloom of some desert, or cold rocky shore
Where the eye of the stranger can haunt us no more
I will fly with my Coulin, and think the rough wind
Less rude than the foes we leave frowning behind

“And I’ll gaze on thy gold hair as graceful it wreathes
And hand o’er thy soft harp as wildly it breathes
Nor dread that the cold hearted Saxon will rear
One chord from that harp or one lock from that hair.”

-- *Ancient & Modern Songs of Ireland for Piano* by Gail Smith, 1993, Mel Bay

Star says, “The title *Coolin* is a corruption of the Gaelic original pronounced Cooleen, or Coolun, meaning ‘The Maiden of Fair, Flowing Locks’ or ‘Lady of the Desert.’

All the variations of this song were written by Lyons in 1702 and this song was collected in the 1850s by various Irish organizations and individuals.” It is believed to be ancient but, according to Star, “all the the variations seem to be influenced by the baroque period which was characterized by a more slightly elaborate twisting and heavily involved fabrication, if you don’t mind her construction terms used to describe music.” It was a type of harmonized accompaniment from which the middle of Star’s version of *Coolin* was taken. Specifically from variation 2 in Mel Bay’s *Ancient & Modern Songs of Ireland for Piano* by Gail Smith, 1993, which was, in turn, taken directly from Bunting’s Collection in 1840, published by Hodges and Smith.

“*Coolin* is an important historical song, Star continues, “because it is a classic and it used traditional riffs with contemporary expression in the baroque era. The riffs were trills, grace notes (passing notes), turns (notes that go up and then down), tremeloes (two notes back and forth several times in succession), shakes (one finger repeats the same note several times in succession). The dampened glissando (an arpeggio that is muted as you progress up the scale) is unique to Irish wire harp and is today used by South American harpists. Also, through time you can even see how the title was distorted and that is also part of the process of traditional music because it was, for the most part, an oral art.”

Why did she pick *Coolin* for her CD? “Because it is so much fun to play, I like the staccato feel. Because it is played on a wire harp, the notes are dampened. Wire harps are played with the fingernails. Also, this song was thought to be ancient, I wanted to see if it fit my perceptions of what ancient music might be. I wanted to see if it conjured up visions of the old mythic Ireland. Yes, the third variation is very majestic. I felt like I was playing an Irish harp at the courts of kings when they were being crowned. The first variation has a lot of trills, very characteristic of traditional Irish music. The dotted eighth and sixteenth notes are characteristic of a Scottish “snap” style from their Highland hardshoe dancing. The 3d variation uses a lot of double dotted notes to give it that snap feel like when the dancers would snap their heels together or on the floor.”

Does this song mean anything to the Colorado Celtic community? Probably not. Many of the obscure songs are not well known in the local community, but Star likes to dig up old tunes and discover their wonderful melodies and give them life again. “I’m like the standard bearer for this type of music,” she beams. She feels it is important to bring this old tradition back to life, but with a contemporary expression.

Star feels this song relates to the present-day cultures she admires because it shows the threads that make up the tapestry of the Celtic culture. “As the song continues through time more variations will be set to it and it will always be current in its musical style. Since I created my own bass accompaniment I am contributing to the modernization of an ancient melody.” No longer the historian, she participates in the making of history.

Afterthoughts

Star refers me to this reference in book *The Minstrelsy of Ireland, 206 Irish Songs*: "The composition of this beautiful air, known as "Molly St. George," has been attributed to Carolan by James Hardiman and to Connallon by Bunting. The probability is that it was in existence long before these bards tuned their harps. It was sung in Coffey's opera *The Beggar's Wedding*, 1729, to verses beginning, 'In they arms, my dear Tib, will I end all debate'; it is also to be found in Burk Thumoths's *Twelve English and Twelve Irish Airs*, c. 1745, and it is satisfactory to note that these two versions differ but slightly."

"Air: 'The Coolun.' The following is Professor Sanford's note to the above melody in his edition of Moore's *Melodies* restored: 'This beautiful air has been mercilessly altered and spoilt by Moore. I have restored Bunting's version.' I am glad to be able to prove that Professor Stanford's statement is incorrect. Moore printed his song with the air in the first number of the *Melodies*, 1807. 'The Coolun' appeared in the following works prior to that date, and a reference to any of them will show the reader that Tom Moore's version is not only correct and unaltered, but that in substituting Bunting's air, which, by the way, was not published until 1840, and in appending the note which I have quoted. Professor Stanford is unjust to the memory of the poet. Walker's *Irish Bards*, 1786, air x: Urbanis' *Scots Songs*, vol. ii, 1894: Aird's Collection, vol. v., 1797; Adam's *Musical Repository*, 1799; McGoun's Repository, c. 1803; Mulhollan's *Irish Tunes*, 1804; Owenson's *Hibernian Melodies*, 1805; Holden's Collection, vol. i., 1806, etc. An examination of these works will show that although slight variations of the grace-notes occur, the air itself practically remains the same. Shield also made use of 'The Coolun' in the opera, *The Mountains of Wicklour*, 1798. Dr. Petrie noted down a melody which he called 'The Old Coolun.' (see Hoffmann's Collection, p. 880, but it has nothing in common with Bunting's hybrid tune. Mr. C.F. Cronin of Limerick has kindly forwarded me the following interesting communication:--The origin, authorship, and original name of this world-famous melody are unknown. Neither the Act of 24 Edward I, A.D. 1295, quoted by Lynch ('The Dublin Penny Journal' for April 13, 1833), nor that of 28 Henry VIII, A.D. 1539, quoted by Walker ('Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards,' 1786, p. 134.) on the fanciful authority of Beauford, had any connection whatever with its origin. The 'Culan' mentioned in Lynch's memoir is certainly not its original name; nor is there the slightest foundation in fact for that writer's beautiful story of the bard, the virgin and her lover--a story manifestly borrowed from Walker and fabricated by his friend Beauford. Not less unwarranted and misleading is the latter's audacious interpolation of the word 'Coulins' after that of 'Glibbes.' It is not mentioned, nor even implied, in the Act of Henry VIII, which was directed against the wearing of the 'Glibbes' only--then, and for long afterwards, the popular hair-fashion among the natives. This tune (according to O'Curry) was only called 'The Coolin' about a hundred years ago *for the first time*, and then only in reference to Irish words (see Dr. Douglas Hyde's 'Love Songs of Connacht.' 1893, pp.70, 71) written to it by Father Oliver O'Hanley, a Gaelic poet of that period (*circa* 1700-1750) in praise of a beauty of the country of Limerick of the name of Nelly O'Grady. The title, 'The Coolin' is a corruption of the Gaelic original, i.e., 'An Acuifhionn' (pronounced 'Cooleen' or 'Coolun'), meaning 'the maiden of fair flowing locks.'--Page 274, *The Minstrelsy of Ireland, 206 Irish Songs*