

Early Irish Music: an overview of the linguistic and documentary evidence

(Fergus Kelly, School of Celtic Studies Statutory Public Lecture, TCD, 15 November 2013)

I. Introductory

1. Simon O'Dwyer, *Prehistoric music of Ireland* (Tempus Publishing, Gloucestershire, 2004).



Drumbest Horns © Ulster Museum

2. Ann Buckley, 'Music in Ireland to c. 1500', in: *A New History of Ireland*, I (ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Royal Irish Academy; Oxford 2005) 744-813.
3. — 'Music and musicians in medieval Irish society', *Early Music* 28/2 (May 2000) 165-190.
4. — 'Musical instruments in Ireland from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries', *Irish Musical Studies* 1: Musicology in Ireland (Dublin 1990) 13-57.
5. — 'Musical monuments from Medieval Meath', *Riocht na Midhe* 19 (2008) 23-42.
6. Sorcha Nic Lochlainn, 'The foster-mother as praise-poet in Gaelic tradition', *Celtica* 27 (2013) 119-47.
7. Fintan Vallely (ed.) *Companion to Irish traditional music* (2nd ed. Cork, 2011).
8. *Esnada Tige Buchet* 'the melodies of the house of Buchet' (ed. David Greene, *Fingal Ronáin and other stories* (Dublin 1955) 27-44).
9. *Trí mile cheól n-écsamail cecha oenclaisse fil oc classchetol imme. Binnithir ilcheólu in domain cach óencheól fo leith dib-side fessin* 'three thousand different songs from each choir singing around Him. Each single one of them is as sweet as all the songs of the world' (R. I. Best and Osborn Bergin (ed.) *Lebor na hUidre* (LU) (Dublin 1929) 69.2033-35).
10. *Binne ceol coirae, .i. is binde ná cach ceol córae sídha iter na féichemna* 'reconciliation is sweeter than music, i.e. the peaceful reconciliation between disputing parties is sweeter than any music' (D. A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (CIH) (Dublin 1983) iii 826.16).
11. *Domfarcai fidbaidæ fál: fomchain loíd luin, lúad nad cél / huas mo lebrán ind línech fom-chain trírech inna n-én* 'A hedge of trees surrounds me: a blackbird's song sings to me – praise which I will not hide / above my lined book, the trilling of the birds sings to me' (Whitley Stokes and John Strachan (ed.), *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus* ii (Cambridge 1903) 290.6-7).
12. *is he longaire ban Érind* 'it is the blackbird-call of the women of Ireland' (Rudolf Thurneysen (ed.), *Zwei Versionen der mittelirischen Legende von Snedgus und Mac Riagla* (Halle 1904) 11 § 42).
13. *Cáini ailmi ardom-peitet* 'beautiful are the pines which make music for me' (Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish lyrics, eighth to twelfth century* (Oxford 1956) 18 § 30).

II. Instruments

(a) stringed

14. *Caíd cach ceól co cruit* 'every music is sweet until the lyre (?)' (Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Tecosca Cormaic: the instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt* (Dublin 1909) 46 § 31.21).
15. *krut- (Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* i (Bern 1959) 624).

16. *cithara* .i. *crot* (Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus palaeohibernicus* (*Thes.*) i 577.19 (Cambridge 1901) Wb. 12c42).
17. *Din croit tresa rocachain duid na psalmu* ‘of the lyre to which David sang the psalms’ (Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Hibernica minora* (Oxford 1894) 1.11).
18. *IS CROT CEN CHEIS* .i. ... *ainm don delgain bic fostas in téit humaide na crote* ‘i.e. the name of the small pin which attaches the bronze string of the lyre’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), ‘The Bodleian Amra Choluimb chille’ (*Revue celtique* 20 (1899) 164 § 20)).
19. **cruitt-ith* > *cruitt* ‘lyre-player’, later *cruit(t)ire* (D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* 18 (1958) 47 fn. 3).
20. *Trí ségainn Hérenn: fáthrann, adbinn a cruit, berrad aigthe* ‘Three excellences of Ireland: a wise verse, a tune from a lyre, shaving the face’ (Meyer, *Triads*, 10 § 89).
21. *goltraige, gentraige, suantraige* ‘music to make one weep, laugh, sleep’ (Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Triads of Ireland* (Dublin 1906) 16 § 122 = *CIH* vi 2219.34-5).
22. *Goltraiges, Gentaiges, Suantraiges*: three lyre-players, sons of Úaithne (W. Meid (ed.), *Táin Bó Fraích* (Dublin 1967) 4.101-2).
23. *na golóca* ‘the sad strings’ (Yellow Book of Lecan, p. 75b25); cf. Gerard Murphy, *Duanaire Finn Part III* (Dublin 1953) Glossary 274 s.v. *geantarghléss*.
24. *mar guth timpán, 7 mar toirnigh* ‘like the sound of a timpanum, and like thunder’ (Winifred Wulff (ed.), *Rosa anglica* (London 1929) 26.20).
25. *ic seinm a thimpán téidbind* ‘playing his sweet-stringed harp’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Saltair na Rann* (Oxford 1883) 6060).
26. *tolg do thétaib timpán* ‘a chestful of harp-strings’ (*CIH* i 42.38-9).
27. *arsentis crutire 7 timpánaig* ‘lyre-players and harpists played’ (*LU* 307.10134)
28. *Craiphnine*, mythological lyre-player (M. A. O’Brien (ed.) *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1962) 18; David Greene, *Fingal Rónáin* p. 86).
29. *Loch na gCrataireadh* ‘the lake of the lyre-players’ (Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin 1910) 503).
30. *Ferdomnach dall, fer leiginn Cille Dara* .i. *sui cruitirechta* ‘[the death of] Blind Ferdomnach i.e. an expert lyre-player’ (Bartholomew Mac Carthy (ed.), *Annála Uladh: annals of Ulster*, vol. ii (Dublin 1893) p. 84 s.a. 1110).
31. *Rí na senma* .i. *Maelruanaid Mac Cerbaill* .i. *in Gilla Cáech ... do marbad ... 7 ni fes cotanicc na co ticcea choidchi a commaith do timpanach* ‘The king of music i.e. Maelruanaid Mac Cerbaill i.e. the one-eyed lad ... was killed ... and no-one knows if there ever was or ever will be as good a harpist’ (A. Martin Freeman (ed.), *Annála Connacht: the Annals of Connacht* (Dublin 1944) 264 s.a. 1328 § 12)
32. *Bran h. Brain sai timpanaig quieuit* ‘Bran ua Brain, expert harpist, died’ (Freeman, *Annála Connacht* 324 s.a. 1364 § 10).
33. *Gilla na Naem Ó Connmaidh, ollam Tuadmuman* .i. *re timpánacht, d'ég* ‘Giolla na Naomh Ó Connmhaidh, chief harpist of Thomond, died’ (Mac Carthy, *Annála Uladh* ii 510.10 s.a. 1360).
34. *Mac an Tiompánaigh* ‘son of the harpist’, anglicized MacAtimney, MacAtamney, Tamney, Timony, etc. (Patrick Woulfe, *Sloinnte Gaedheal is Gall* (Baile Átha Cliath 1923) 317).
35. *ingu eiti don timpanach* ‘a nail of [a bird’s] feather for the harpist’ (*CIH* i 303.35).
36. *CRUIT* .i. *Cruit ar timpan sin, nó cruit uirri bodein* ‘Lyre-player, i.e. that is *cruit* for *timpán*, or *cruit* for itself’ (*CIH* v 1616.31).
37. Geraldus Cambrensis, *Topographia Hibernica* III. xi; trans. J.J. O’Meara (Dundalgan Press 1951) 87.



National Library of Ireland MS 700 f. 36r. © National Library of Ireland.

38. Irish *cláirseach* '(large) harp'; Scottish Gaelic *clàrsach*; Manx *claasagh*.

39. *pípai, fidli, fir cengail / cnámfhír 7 cuslennaig* 'pipes, fiddles, gleemen / bones-players and bag-pipers' (Edward Gwynn (ed.), *The Metrical Dindshenchas* iii (Dublin 1913) 20.257-8).

(b) wind.

- 40.** *Tri chorn buelhin y brenhin, punt yw gwerth pob yn ohonunt: corn yved, a chorn kyweithas, a chorn hely y penkynyd* 'Three buffalo horns of the king, each one is worth a pound: his drinking horn, the horn of his retinue, and the chief huntsman's hunting horn' (Sara Elin Roberts (ed.), *The legal triads of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff 2007) 68 (X52)).
- 41.** *Cuslennaig, cornairi, clesamnaig i n-airthiur foitsi* 'Pipers, horn-players, jugglers in the left foreground' (D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach* (Dublin 1941) 23.590).
- 42.** *Stuic, cruitti, cuirn chróes-tholla / cúisig, timpaig cen triamna* 'Trumpets, fiddles, hollow-throated horns / pipers, timpanists, unwearied' (Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* iii 18.234).
- 43.** *a comseinm itir orgán 7 gitart 7 galltrumpa 7 tabur 7 sheden 7 cruiti 7 cláirsig* '(trans. p. 132.) 'playing the organ, guitar, trumpet, tabor, pipes, fiddle, harp' (F. N. Robinson (ed.), 'The Irish life of Guy of Warwick', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 6 (1908) 52.8).
- 44.** *tob di humu fo chosmailius n-adarcae side* 'that is a trumpet of bronze of the shape of a horn' (*Thes.* i 8.30-31 (Ml. 2b16)).
- 45.** *gingu raib acht pipán no grus ingnighe* 'though it be only a pipe or nail-parings' (CIH vi 2104.11).
- 46.** *liaigh, cruit, cuislennach, cerd, gobha* 'physician, lyre-player, piper, wright, blacksmith' (CIH iii 1117.41).
- 47.** *bindfogur na cuslend n-órdae fochanat ceól isind rígthig* 'the sweet sound of the golden pipes which make music in the king's house' (LU 225.7367 (*Togail Bruidne Da Derga*)).
- 48.** *tibia .i. buinne* 'pipe' (*Thes.* i 577.19 (Wb. 12c41)).
- 49.** *fedán doboí aicci 7 fir an domain dochoteldais ris gemad mor a ngalur* 'he had a pipe and the men of Ireland would go to sleep with it however great their sickness' (Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Acallam na Senórach* (Leipzig 1900) 168.6100).
- 50.** D ii 2 (Royal Irish Academy MS no. 1222), f. 34r. © Royal Irish Academy.



51. *Fíach cadail* ⁊ *cruitte* ‘Fiach (a sorcerer) of leather-skin (= bagpipe?) and harp’ (Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* iv 72.48 (Benn Bóguine)).
52. *beola crot* ⁊ *bolg* ⁊ *buinne* ‘mouths of harps and bags and pipes’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), ‘The second Battle of Moytura’, *Revue celtique* 12 (1891) 108 § 163).
53. *Píb uilleann* (*uillinne*) ‘elbow-pipe’.
54. *it hæ indorga[i]n inna hí asber innadiad* .i. timpanum ⁊ chithara ‘these are the instruments of which he speaks afterwards, i.e. the timpanum and harp’ (*Thes.* i 298.31-2 (Ml. 89a8)).
55. *œrea corneaque* .i. *orgain humaidi fo chosmailius n-adarcae* ‘and bronze horns i.e. instruments of bronze like horns’ (*Thes.* i 395.33 (Ml. 116c8)).
56. *Stuicc* ⁊ *orgáin* ⁊ *cuirnd chathaige* ‘trumpets and pipes and bugles of battle’ (Kuno Meyer (ed.), ‘Die Geschichte von Philipp und Alexander’ (Leipzig 1887) 27.172).
57. *fogur na sdocc* ⁊ *na sdurgan* ‘the sound of the trumpets and the pipes’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), ‘The Gaelic abridgment of the book of Ser Marco Polo’ (*ZCP* 1 (1897) 364 § 57)).
58. Wm H. Grattan Flood, *A history of Irish music* (Dublin 1905) 31.
59. Ann Buckley, ‘The musical instruments depicted at Clare Island’, in: *New Survey of Clare Island 4: The Abbey*, (ed. Conleth Manning, Paul Gosling and John Waddell, Royal Irish Academy; Dublin 2005) 123-32.



60. *Milsem cech céol céol ind orcin* ‘the sweetest of all music is the music of slaughter’ (Roland Smith (ed.), ‘The *Senbriathra Fíthail* and related texts’, *Revue celtique* 45 (1928) 51 § 23). Read *orcáin* ‘of the harp’?

(c) percussion.

61. *Bodraíd* ‘deafens’ + -án > *bodrán* ‘deafener, drum’.
62. *mar timpan no mar tabur* (*bodhran* v.l.) (Wulff, *Rosa anglica* 268.14-15).
63. *Cloc* ‘bell’ (Latin *clocca*): *cluicíne, ceolán* ‘hand-bell’.
64. *Bardán Ciaráin* ‘the little bard of Ciarán’, *Bernán Brigte* ‘the gapped [bell] of Brigit’, *Bóbán Caeimgein* ‘the little calf of Kevin’, *Éloidech* ‘the wanderer’ (Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae* i (Oxford 1910), pp. clxxvi-clxxvii)).
65. *In Findshaídech* ‘the fair-calling [bell]’ (e.g. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (ed.), *Annals of Ulster* (Dublin 1983) 444 s.a. 1012 (= 1013) § 1).
66. *A chluicc ... ge doné tú do ding-dang* ‘o bell ... though you make your ding-dong’ (John O’Donovan (ed.), *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann. Annals of the Four Masters* ii (Dublin 1856) 786 s.a. 1015).

III. Singing.

67. **kan-* ‘sings, chants, declaims’ (Pokorny, *Wörterbuch* 525-6).
68. *Bindithir téta mendchrot i llamaibh suadh ica siorsenm guth 7 amar in dara fir* ‘as sweet as the strings of lyres in the hands of experts continually playing them was the voice and song of the second man’ (Cecile O’Rahilly (ed.), *The Stowe version of Táin Bó Cuailnge* (Dublin 1961) 141.4463-4).
69. *deróil cach céol i farrad aidbse* ‘every music is wretched in comparison with *aidbse*’ (*Amra Choluimb Chille* = LU 12.328 footnote d).
70. *Dictionary of the Irish Language (DIL)* (Dublin 1913-76) s.vv. *dord, dordaid*.
71. *Andord* lit. ‘great humming’ (Vernam Hull (ed.), *Longes mac nUislienn: the exile of the sons of Uisliu* (New York 1949) 45.100-4 § 8).
72. *dord fiansa* (*fiannachta*) ‘the hum of the warband’ (Stokes, *Acallam* 398 (Index) ‘something, perhaps, like “the long drone half hum, half roar, with which Zulus beguile the warpath”’).
73. *ceól crott, ceol timpán ... dord Fir Tunni meic Throgain* ‘music of harps, music of lutes ..., deep tones of Fer Tuinne mac Trogain’ (Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas* iv 368.7-8).
74. *do gabál chepóce* ‘singing a choral song’ (Rudolf Thurneysen (ed.), *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó* (Dublin 1935) 19.11 § 20).
75. Edward Dwelly, *Faclair Gaidhlíg agus Beurla* (Glasgow 1901-11) s.v. *ceapag* ‘catch, verse or verses composed impromptu’.
76. *cep(p)- + -óc* ‘(extempore) composition’.
77. Breandán Ó Madagáin, *Caointe agus Seancheolta eile: Keening and other Old Irish Musics* (Indreabhán, 2005).
78. *Poenitentia bardigi capalbiae post laicum uel laicam .l. dies in pane et aqua* ‘the penance for the wailing ... after a layman or laywoman, fifty days on bread and water’ (Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin 1963) (*Canones Hibernenses*) 162 § 26).

IV. Dancing.

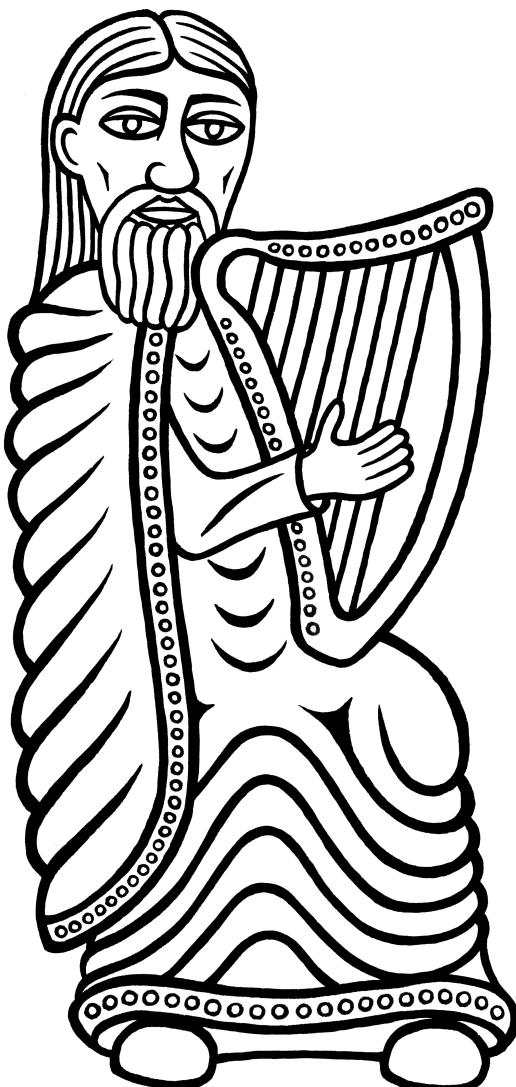
79. *DIL* s.v. *damsa* ‘dance’.
80. *In ingen aile imorro .i. Saluisa, fri clesaigecht 7 lemenda 7 fri hopairecht* ‘The other girl .i. Saluisa (= Salomé) engaged in acrobatics and leapings and activity’ (Robert Atkinson (ed.), *The Passions and Homilies from the Leabhar Breac* (Dublin 1887) 66.891-2).
81. *Riasinn airc noib ... lingged ar fháilti ndermáir ... amal drúth ic furséoracht* ‘Before the holy Ark ... he (King David) was leaping with great joy ... like a clown engaged in buffoonery’ (Whitley Stokes (ed.), *Saltair na Rann* (Oxford 1883) 98.6681-4).
82. *Atnaig dna Dauid oc lige 7 oc ergi 7 oc abartaib imdaib* ‘David then set to lying down and to rising up and to many movements’ (Prose version, *Leabhar Breac* 130b6).
83. *monaig ... 7 cleasamnaig 7 fuirseoire 7 bruigedoire 7 fodana olceana .i. drochdana uili cena* ‘jugglers ... and acrobats and buffoons and farters and all other lowly arts, i.e. all other wicked arts’ (CIH v 1617.12-18).

V. Music in society

84. *Aprit-si fri Cornán: na cluasa-sa nicon tairbertar fri ceolu talman co tairbertar fri ceolai nime* ‘Tell Cornán: these ears are not lent to earthly music that they may be lent to the music of Heaven’ (E. J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton (ed.), ‘The monastery of Tallaght’, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 C (1911) 131 § 10.31-33).
85. *canar immon Muiri* ‘the hymn to Mary is sung’ (138 § 30.16); *canar imonn Michil* ‘the hymn to Michael is sung’ (138 § 30.17);
86. Douglas Hyde (ed.) *Abhráin grádh Chúige Connacht: Love Songs of Connacht* (Dublin 1893).
87. *per quaedam scoticae lingae laudum ipsius carmina* ‘through certain songs of his praises in the Irish tongue’ (A.O. and M.O. Anderson (ed.), *Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (Edinburgh 1961) 202-03 f. 9b).
88. *mesrugud senma* ‘music in moderation’ (Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic* 10 § 4.12).
89. *todiuri ceoil* ‘[women] tearful during music’ (Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic* 30 § 16.48).

VI. Music and the supernatural

90. *Imluid Bran ... co cóalae a céol iarna chúl* ‘Bran went out ... and heard music behind him’ (A. G. Van Hamel (ed.), *Immrama* (Dublin 1941) 9.7-17 § 2).
91. *síanargán síde* ‘long-lasting song of the elf-mound’ (Vranke de Vries (ed.), *Two texts on Loch nEchach* (Irish Texts Society LXV, 2012) 23 fn. 79).



Based on the 11th-century Breac Maodhóg (National Museum of Ireland). ©Edward Myles Kelly.