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IRELAND



CRUIT
ÉIREANN

JUNE 2024

HARP PERSPECTIVES

CAROLAN: seál a s cantaireacht
REFLECTIONS ON CAROLAN AS A SINGER,
SONG-WRITER AND PERFORMER

CAITRÍONA ROWSOME

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Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal. One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our June edition, Caitríona Rowsome shares her perspective on harper Turlough Carolan as a singer, song-writer and performer in late seventeenth and eighteenth century rural Ireland. A historical background is included with references to Carolan singing, along with a discussion to explore what Carolan might have played as harp accompaniment to his music and song.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann

Editor

June 2024

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CAROLAN: SEAL A’S CANTAIREACHT

REFLECTIONS ON CAROLAN AS A SINGER, SONG-WRITER AND PERFORMER

Caitríona Rowsome

Introduction

Turlough Carolan (1670–1738) – an iconic Irish harper-composer and Irish song-writer – sang songs and played the harp to appreciative households and visitors in neighbourly domestic settings in late seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland. Carolan’s legacy includes many extant airs and Irish songs that give an insight into his character and the times in which he lived. This essay includes a brief biography of Carolan, a historical background, historical references to Carolan himself singing, and a discussion to explore what Carolan might have played as harp accompaniment to his music and song.

A Brief Biography

Born in 1670 near Nobber, Co. Meath, Carolan¹ attended a school run by the Cruise family in nearby Cruisetown. It was here that he first met Bridget Cruise (his first love) for whom he in later years composed both music and song. When he was about 14 years old, he and his parents moved west to the Leitrim-Roscommon area.

Soon afterwards Carolan gained the patronage of two cultured Irish families, the MacDermott Roes, and the O’Conors. Both of these families (like the Cruises) were supporters of traditional Irish culture and learning. When Carolan lost his sight at the age of 18 through smallpox, Mrs. MacDermott Roe encouraged Carolan to learn the harp as a profession. Aged 21, and by then a proficient exponent of the instrument, he set off on a journey which to this day has helped shape the course of Irish music history.

¹ ‘Known to himself and his friends as Cearbhallán, or, in English, Carolan’ – O’Sullivan, Donal (ed.), *CAROLAN The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper* vols 1–2 (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1958); one-volume edition with appendix by Bonnie Shaljean (Ossian Publications, Cork, 2001), p. 31



From a Painting in the Possession of Mr. Harbison, Author of the History of Galway. — J. Martyn, Sculp. Dublin.

CAROLAN,
The Celebrated Irish Bard.

To His Excellency the Marquis's Wexley, R.G.
LORD-LIEUTENANT of IRELAND &c. &c.

This Print (by Permission) is most respectfully Inscrital. by his most Obedient Servant—

Published as the Act directs Dec: 17: 1765 by Martyn, DL. Corner of St. Dun's Church, Dublin.

J. P. H. del.

Figure 1. 'Carolan, the Celebrated Irish Bard'
Engraver: John Martyn (fl. 1794–d.1828), After: Francis Bindon (c.1690–1765)
(Image Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland)

Carolan enjoyed a successful career and level of fame during his lifetime as a professional harper and composer. He married Mary McGuire from Fermanagh, and they reared a family of six daughters and one son. He died on 25th March, 1738 (Lady Day) at the home of his patrons and friends, the Mac Dermott Roe family, at Alderford, County Roscommon.

Historical Background

In Gaelic Ireland, before 1600, the harp was held in high esteem, with harpers often having kings or chieftans as their patrons.² The tradition of harping and the fortunes of harpers continued to flourish while the Gaelic aristocracy remained in power in Ireland.³ However, Carolan lived through a turbulent time in Irish history – born mere decades after the Cromwellian war in Ireland (1649–1653), and the destruction by Cromwell of the old Gaelic order.

Around the time Carolan (aged 21) set off on his musical journey with horse and guide, Catholic Ireland was defeated due to the Williamite War in Ireland (1689–1691). The Penal Laws were imposed in Ireland in 1695, and remained in place throughout Carolan's professional life as a travelling musician.

It is a testament to Carolan's character and creative genius, that – despite these gruelling times – he managed to maintain a successful career that transcended the power, land and religious struggles of the time. In the homes of his patrons, he honoured members of the family with his own compositions of music and song. His songs are for both Irish and English, native and settler, Catholic and Protestant. Carolan made no distinction when composing for characters of differing class or religion. Through the medium of his harp and voice, he entertained, and composed for his patrons airs and words in praise of them, often describing their features, where they were from, their accomplishments, members of their family, and toasting their good health. Most of his patrons were individuals of local importance who lived in the surrounding countryside, and were interconnected by means of family relations, or neighbours.

2 Moloney, Colette, *The Irish Music Manuscripts of Edward Bunting (1773–1843) An Introduction and Catalogue* (Irish Traditional Music Archive, Dublin, 2000), p. 7

3 Ibid., p. 7

Carolan's Irish songs⁴ reveal glimpses into the life and times in which he lived – such as the musical instruments played⁵ and the pastimes and hobbies of his patrons⁶. One of his song texts alludes to the mood of the Irish at the time – *Ἦέιρὸ Σαεὸδλιυῖβ̄ σο σύζαδ̄ σᾱ ζκούζεαδ̄ σο ἀρίσο*⁷ (*The Irish will be joyful in this province again*). His laments are heartfelt and respectful and his many songs for wedding celebrations are a reflection of his conviviality and popularity.

In Carolan's lifetime, a cultural change was happening in Ireland – music and dance from the continent were becoming fashionable. The chorus of his song 'John Jameson' (tune no. 61) refers to this – *Φαισιυη̄ η̄ᾱ ϕ̄ραν̄κε̄ το̄ ζηη̄ᾱτ̄η̄ ᾱ β̄η̄ε̄ιτ̄η̄ ρ̄αῑν̄κε̄*.⁸ Interestingly, the rhythm of the song lends itself well to the cantering of a horse (*μαρκαϊζηεαδ̄η̄τ̄* / horse riding, is referred to in the song as something the patron, for whom it was composed, loved).

It is clear that new customs of music and dance appealed to Carolan because he was also greatly influenced by the music of Italian composers of this time. Charles O'Connor of Belanagare, to whom Carolan taught the harp, maintains that Carolan was enraptured with Corelli and charmed with Vivaldi.⁹ Carolan's compositions reveal his ability to absorb the traditional music of his predecessors and his ability to adapt to the new trend of fashionable music from the continent – see for example, 'Mr Waller' (tune no. 165), and 'Carolan's Concerto' (tune no. 154). Airs such as 'Sir Aurthur Shaen' (tune no. 159) and 'Carolan's Quarrel with the landlady' (tune no. 190) show evidence of echoes and sequences, while other compositions are followed by a quick jig as a coda.

4 For Donal O'Sullivan's extensive study on Carolan, including sources of Carolan airs and associated words (where extant), refer to his extraordinary masterpiece, *CAROLAN The Life Times and Music of an Irish Harper*. Numerical references to tunes in this essay correspond to the airs as presented by O'Sullivan, pp. 103–223. For song settings of airs and words together, English interpretations, and airs from the appendix of the one-volume edition, see Rowsome, Caitríona, *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs Arranged for the Irish Harp* (Waltons, Dublin, 2011)

5 Musical instruments *ceol píobas*, *viol is cruic* (pipes, *viol* and harp) are referred to in the song lyrics for 'Hewlett' (tune no. 56), and *CLÁRSACH FIOELÉIR*, *ΣΑΙΡ ΔΙΣ ΠΙΟΒΑΙΡΙ* (harp, fiddlers and pipers) in the song lyrics for 'George Brabazon – First Air' (tune no. 6)

6 *Τάβλις* (tables / draughts / backgammon), was a pastime of 'John O'Connor' (tune no. 114). (Spelled *Τάβλιος* in Bunting MS 4.7.205) For a description of the board game and other Irish spellings – *τάβλεασ̄* and *κάιβ-φλεασ̄* – refer to Seán Donnelly, 'Playing the Irish Game and the Irish Harp: Two Pleasureable Accomplishments, 1590–1790', *Harp Perspectives*, May 2023

7 Ó Máille, Tomás (eag.), *Amhráin Chearbhalláin* Vol. XVII (Irish Texts Society, London, 1915, 1988), p. 175 and also footnote on p. 45

8 The word 'ραν̄κε̄' in the song text is thought to be a dialectal form of the Irish word *rince*, meaning 'dancing, dance'. See notes on the Irish placename *Sceichín & Rance* (*Sceichín an Rince* / Skeheenaranky) – little hawthorn, thorn-bush of the dancing – at <https://www.logainm.ie/en/48039> (accessed 13 May 2024)

9 Walker, Joseph C., *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (Payne, London; White, Dublin, 1786), pp. 97–98

His creative fusion of baroque and native styles generated highly attractive melodies which enhanced his stature and assured his reputation as a composer both in Anglo-Irish and in Gaelic circles.¹⁰

A further confirmation of the popularity of Carolan's music through the centuries (from the 1720s to the present day) is that many have been inspired to write English lyrics for Carolan's airs – or have written English lyrical interpretations of Carolan's Irish song texts.^{11 12 13}

Carolan's Singing

Carolan was held in high esteem by his friends and was known by his contemporaries to sing and to accompany himself on the harp while singing.

In terms of music and song, he was, most likely in chronological order, a person interested in song and music, then a singer, then an apprentice musician, then a performing professional singer and musician (although not an outstanding one), and finally a uniquely gifted composer of song melodies and of instrumental music.¹⁴

Walker, in *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, quotes Charles O'Connor as follows:

'I have often listened to Carolan singing his ode to Miss Cruise.¹⁵ On Easter-day I heard him play at Mass. He called the piece 'Gloria in excelsis Deo,' and he sung that hymn in Irish verses as he played. At the Lord's Prayer he stopped; and after the priest ended it, he sang again, and played a piece which he denominated "The Resurrection"'.¹⁶

10 Mac Gabhann, Séamus, 'The Significance and Legacy of Turlough O'Carolan', *An Cruitire*, December 2016, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 29–31

11 See notes for the melody 'Plea Rarkeh na Rourkough' in Neal, John and William, *A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes Proper for the Violin, German Flute or Hautboy* (Dublin, 1724). Facsimile edition, Irish Traditional Music Archive in association with the Folk Music Society of Ireland (Dublin, 2010), pp. 87–88. See also 'The O'Rourke's Feast' (tune no. 199) in Rowsome, C., *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs*, pp. 220–221

12 Refer to 'Carolan airs becoming part of English and Anglo-Irish song literature', in O'Sullivan, *CAROLAN The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, p. 95. See also, 'Historical English songs interpreting Carolan's verse' in Rowsome, C., *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs*, p. xii

13 Carolan himself composed a song in English for 'Miss Fetherston / Carolan's Devotion' (tune no. 48), as an act of gallantry on his part as Miss Fetherston did not understand or speak Irish.

14 Carolan, Nicholas, "Carolan's Music" in *Amhráin Chearbhalláin / The Poems of Carolan: Reassessments*, Liam P. Ó Murchú ed., (Irish Texts Society (Subsidiary Series 18), London, 2007), pp. 1–11

15 Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, p. 289

16 *Ibid.*, p. 317

The following are excerpts from Walker's, *Historical Memoirs*, on Carolan's composition, and singing of 'Stafford's Receipt':²⁰

"Carolan at an early period of his life, contracted a fondness for spirituous liquors ... His physicians assured him that unless he corrected this vicious habit, a scurvy, which was the consequence of his intemperance, would soon put an end to his mortal career. He obeyed with reluctance and seriously resolved upon never tasting that forbidden, though to him, delicious cup."

The story continues, that after six weeks' abstinence, he entered the grocer's shop in Boyle and asked the grocer's assistant to pour him out a glass of whiskey which he was to smell, but not to taste. However, he gave into the temptation, and drank, and drank once more and as a result of this temporary exhilaration he

"set about composing that much-admired song which goes by the name of *Carolan's*, and sometimes *Stafford's Receipt* ... He commenced the words and began to modulate the air in the evening at Boyle, and before the following morning he sung and played this noble offspring of his imagination in Mr Stafford's parlour at Elfin."

Dr Stafford turned out to be a life-long friend of Carolan, and was one of the coffin-bearers at Carolan's funeral.

Carolan, in one of his verses for 'Sir Ulick Burke' (tune no. 8), refers to himself as sometimes rhyming and sometimes singing / chanting:

Extract:²¹

ΜΑΡ Δ ΜΒΙΟΜ-ΣΑ ΣΕΔ Δ' ΡΑΝΤΑΡΑΧΤ
ΙΣ ΤΑΜΑΛΛ ΕΙΛΕ Δ' ΚΑΝΤΑΙΡΕΑΧΤ
ΡΕΑΒΔΟΗ ΤΕΔΟ 'Σ Δ' ΚΑΧΑΜΗ ΤΟΒΑΚ
'Σ ΔΞ ΟΛ ΝΑ ΞΕΠΩΝ ΛΕΘ

Interpretation:

As I'm sometimes rhyming
And other times singing
Playing the harp and smoking
And drinking from goblets with them

20 Walker, *Historical Memoirs*, p. 307

21 O'Sullivan, *CAROLAN The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, p. 229

An account is given of Carolan²² that on hearing of the death of Sir Ulick Burke – after shedding ‘tears of real sorrow for his loss he again took up his harp and sang the last verse in elegiac style, far surpassing the two first verses’.

Carolan is said to have sung a song for Denis O’Conor to the accompaniment of the harp at Belanagare on Christmas day in 1723.²³

Of Carolan and Jonathan Swift (1667–1745), Dean of St Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin – the Dean admired Carolan’s genius and used to hear him play and sing the *pléarácá*.²⁴ Carolan’s good friend and poet Aodh Mac Gabhráin (Hugh McGauran), composed the Irish words for ‘*Pléarácá na Rourkough*’. McGauran requested of Carolan to set his Irish poem to music. ‘*Plea Rarkeh na Rourkough*’ appeared in print in 1724 (during Carolan’s lifetime) in John and William Neal’s *A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes Proper for the Violin, German Flute or Hautboy*.²⁵

Laurence Whyte, a friend of John and William Neal, wrote of Carolan in his 1740 poem, ‘A Dissertation on Italian and Irish musick with some panegyrick on Carrallan our late Irish Orpheus’:²⁶

The greatest genius in his way
An Orpheus, who could sing and play

Oliver Goldsmith (1728 – 1774) a neighbour and poet, refers to Carolan in one of his essays as:²⁷

a poet, a musician, a composer and sung his own verses to his harp

and that Carolan was

possessed of the most astonishing memory, and a facetious turn of thinking,
which gave his entertainers infinite satisfaction.

22 Ibid., p. 229

23 Ibid., pp. 42, 268

24 Ibid., p. 56

25 Neal, *A Collection of the Most Celebrated Irish Tunes Proper for the Violin, German Flute or Hautboy*, pp. 60, 87; Walker, *Historical Memoirs*, p. 303; and O’Sullivan, *CAROLAN The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, p. 56

26 Mac Gabhann, Séamus, ‘Carolan’s Legacy : from Jonathan Swift to Brian Keenan’ in *Ríocht na Mídhe* (2002), p. 107 – Article based on a lecture in 2001

27 Goldsmith, Oliver, *The Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith, Volume 1* (Putnam, 1855), “Essay VI, Carolan The Irish Bard”

Harp Accompaniment

What did Carolan play as an accompaniment to his airs and songs?

In 1792, Edward Bunting (1773–1843) – a classically trained organist from Belfast – was engaged to transcribe music from harpers at the Belfast Harp Festival. Bunting was so taken with this music that he wrote three volumes of Irish music, which were collections of *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, in 1796, 1809 and 1840 respectively. His notes on the harpers, how they played, and the terminology they used is invaluable, and many of the tunes would have been lost if he had not collected them.

In each of Bunting’s volumes, the accompaniment published is mainly suited to and arranged for piano, however the Bunting MSS in Queen’s University, Belfast, contains some instances of harp basses that were played by harpers of the eighteenth century.



Glas	
Ladhar	
Ladhar Lair	
Glasluth	
Ceann an Chroibh	
Taobhcrobh	
Lanchrobh	
Malairt Phonch	

Figure 3. (Left) ‘Edward Bunting’ by William Brocas (1811). (Image Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland)

Figure 4. (Right) Some of the stylistic terms which Bunting includes in his 1840 volume for playing double notes, chords, and so on, on the early Irish harp²⁸

28 Bunting, Edward, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (Hodges and Smith, Dublin, 1840); See also *The Ancient Music of Ireland (An Edition Comprising the Three Collections by Edward Bunting Originally Published in 1796, 1809 and 1840)* (Waltons, Dublin, 1969, 2002)

A chapter ‘Of the method of playing and musical vocabulary of the old Irish harpers’ is included in Bunting’s 1840 volume. Harpers played the bass with the right hand at the time. Bass harp motifs included were *glas*, *ladhar*, *ladhar lair*, *glasluth*, *ceann an chroibh*, *taobhcrobh* and *lanchrobh* – each of these a term representing a particular passage of notes played on the harp with associated fingering. The method adopted in fingering, and of stopping the vibration of the strings would produce a different sound and expression.

Accompaniment approaches: Delving more deeply

The following section discusses a selection of the present author’s harp arrangements in an attempt to explore what Carolan might have played as accompaniment to his music and song.

The majority of my harp arrangements in *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs* were handwritten according as I played them on a neo-Irish harp. A manuscript page containing only the given melody was to the left of my harp, and I would play the melody once through to get a feel for it, and then start again but this time with both hands, playing a passage of notes, writing them down, and repeating this process – making revisions along the way – until finished.

The arrangements include examples that I wrote with the wire-strung harp in mind. In my arrangements for tune nos. *30, *132 and 201, for example, I begin to incorporate bass / ‘lower register’²⁹ motifs of the early harpers, and to explore what might have been played as harp accompaniment by an eighteenth-century harper.

While the arrangements are for neo-Irish harp, some arrangements are included that would work quite nicely on the wire-string harp. Most significant of these is ‘Richard Cusack’.³⁰

29 A term used by Dr Siobhán Armstrong in ‘How did Irish Harpers accompany their melodies?’, *Harp Perspectives*, June 2022

30 Cynthia Cathcart, “Ringing Strings: The Lyrics of Carolan”, *Folk Harp Journal*, Summer 2013, Issue no. 159, pp. 38–39, with footnote to Gráinne Yeats, ‘Some Thoughts on Irish Harp Music’, *Ceol*, vol IV (2), 1973, pp. 37–50



Figure 5. First four bars of my arrangement of the song ‘Richard Cusack’ (tune no. *30)³¹

(By kind permission Waltons Publishing, Dublin)

The existence of chromatics in some of the airs is sometimes a topic of discussion among harpers. It is possible that accidentals in some airs were introduced by editors of Carolan’s music who were unfamiliar with the constraints of an early Irish harp, or that a particular melody may have been collected on hearing it played on an instrument that could accommodate chromatic notes. My arrangement of the song ‘Richard Cusack’ (tune no. *30) includes the Irish words of the song which can be sung as the melody, with a sparse harp accompaniment that does not utilise the accidentals of the air. This mode of performance would suit the construction of an early Irish harp, as it eliminates the need for blade / lever changes.

An early harp accompaniment for the tune ‘Feaghan Geleash’ was noted by Bunting from the playing of Denis Hempson in 1792. The tune is titled ‘Faigh an Gléas / *Find the Key*’ and included with notes in *Bunting’s Ancient Music of Ireland*³² detailing the similarities / differences in different occurrences of the piece in the MSS. My arrangement of ‘Kean O’Hara – Third Air’ (tune no. *132)³³ is loosely based on the arrangement reproduced there, and includes a style of playing noted by Bunting to be ‘according to the practice of the ancient harpers’³⁴ whereby the arpeggios are rolled downwards.

Harping motifs of the early harpers (as noted by Bunting in his third volume), were used in my arrangement of ‘Separation of Soul and Body’ (tune no. 201).³⁵ Forms of *ceann an chrobh* (bars 1–3), *glasluth* (bar 4) and other harping motifs such as *taobhchrobh* and *lanchrobh* are included in the arrangement.

31 Rowsome, C., *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs*, pp. 34–35

32 Bunting, *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (1840), Intro., supplement p. 1: ‘Feagh an Geleash ____ or Try if it is in tune’; O’Sullivan with Ó Súilleabháin, *Bunting’s Ancient Music of Ireland*, pp. 212–214

33 Rowsome, C., *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs*, p. 148

34 For a practice of the ancient Irish harpers, refer to the footnote in Bunting’s third volume, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, p. 83

35 Rowsome, C., *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs*, p. 223

Conclusion

Carolan was a uniquely gifted and immensely popular virtuoso. As a singer, he sang songs in his native Irish language, in the homes of his patrons, and at mass.

As a song-writer, his song compositions were in great demand by his patrons, and are valued for qualities that are ‘human and endearing’. His Irish lyrics for patrons are mostly descriptive, he uses personifications and terms of endearment, and often compares the woman’s form to a swan. He toasts the health of his patrons, and praises patrons from the nobility. ‘He made many a noble song in praise of fair women and gallant men, now long dead, whose names still live in the grace and charm of these melodies.’³⁶

As a performer, because most of Carolan’s music passed on to us is in single line melody, it is not known what he played as accompaniment to his songs and airs. Perhaps he played motifs of the early harpers as noted by Bunting at the Belfast Harp Festival of 1792, or perhaps he played in a style that was unique to him. Though it was said that ‘he never excelled as a performer’³⁷ this did not detract from his popularity as a performing artist or lessen his urge to entertain. One of his greatest enjoyments was playing the harp in the company of friends and patrons, while generous hosts filled goblets with wine.

Carolan’s songs provide an insight into the tastes and traits of his patrons, and glimpses of cultural life and cultural changes in rural Ireland three hundred years ago. His life has fuelled the imaginations of many over the centuries. His artistic legacy will no doubt continue to be a focus of performance, anecdotal and academic interest, to charm and engage for generations to come.³⁸

36 O’Sullivan, *CAROLAN The Life, Times and Music of an Irish Harper*, p. 98

37 Ibid., p. 91

38 Music 1: O’Carolan in Song, CODA and Freda Hatton, Coda Music, Mayo, 2023, tracks 1 to 9 (CD)
Music 2: The 4 CD set that accompanies *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs* contains instrumental-only arrangements performed on harp for all numbered tunes in this essay. Two different versions of Carolan’s Concerto are recorded on the CDs – the first is the melody as presented by O’Sullivan, ‘Mrs Power / Carolan’s Concerto’ (tune 154), which is played unaccompanied on track 25 (CD 3), and the following track (tune 154a) is an arrangement of the version universally recognised to this day as ‘Carolan’s Concerto’.

Caitríona Rowsome



Caitríona Rowsome is an Irish harper, author, artist and academic. Born in Dublin into a family which spans five generations of uilleann pipers, she studied the harp from an early age in the DIT College of Music (now TUD). Caitríona was deputy harp teacher in DIT on gaining a diploma for teaching the Irish harp in 1990, and also taught and adjudicated the Irish harp for a number of years in Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. She graduated from Dublin City University in 1992 and spent many years working in the IT and education sectors. Caitríona is the author of *The Complete Carolan Songs and Airs* (with accompanying 4 CD set on which she plays 226 airs on a neo-Irish harp).