

# The Sound of Ireland

Written by Yvette

In painting after painting created in the Renaissance period, you see them being held by cherubim and seraphim. You see gods and muses using them. Great musicians and composers such as Guillaume de Machaut, Guillaume Dufay and Guiraut de Calanson considered this the best of all the soft instruments. According to the twelfth century Laws of Wales, the three items a gentleman could not do without were his cloak, his chessboard and this. Kings, troubadours and town folk were among the people who played upon this instrument of God: the harp.

The ancestor of the harp came from the middle east where a sound box was set at an angle to a peg arm and was strung with gut. The time frame of the development of the first true harp is unknown. It is a wide excepted notion that the innovation of adding the fore pillar to complete the triangle came from Ireland. "This most ancient instrument (harp) was brought to us from Ireland, where it is excellently made and in great quantities," wrote the poet Dante.

The name 'harp' comes from Indo-European origin. In Irish it was called cruit. The Scots word was clarsach and the Welsh telyn. During the medieval era, the harp was often confused with the lyre.

During the renaissance period the harp lost some of its popularity to the lute and keyboard instruments. It was during this era that two diverse types of harps came forth: the Gothic harp and the Irish harp. Both harps had 24 or 25 strings and the familiar triangular shape but that is where the similarities end. The Gothic harp was strung with gut and strummed with the tips of the fingers. It had 'bray pins' like the original harps which caused a buzzing effect on the notes. The Irish harp was strung with brass and, in the higher registers, steel strings. It was played by plucking the strings with long fingernails. Plucking the metal strings produced a brighter sound than the subdued sounds of the strummed, gut strings of the Gothic harp.

Construction of and style of playing were not the only differences between the types of harps. The Gothic harp was mainly played for a soft background sound in compositions that were solemn and deliberate. The Irish harp was played with quick and lively music and in accompaniment with the bass viol. The plucked metal strings were brighter sounding and the sound lent well to quicker, less solemn music.

In the end, it was the Gothic harp that evolved into today's modern harp. The Irish harp was used by folk singers until the end of the 18th century when guitars came into their own as a folk instrument.