

# Ann Heymann:

## A lifetime of uncovering the Secrets of the Gaelic Harp

*By Lucy Cummin*

Both the Somerset Folk Harp Festival and the Historical Harp Society of Ireland are recognizing Ann Heymann with their Lifetime Achievement Awards this year.

Decisions each group reached independently.

Somerset's award honors Ann's pioneering work with wire-strung harps and her importance to the harp community. She will be presenting during the conference and will receive her award before her performance at the Thursday night concert on July 22<sup>nd</sup>.

The Historical Harp Society of Ireland honors Ann for her work with their organisation and with the greater early-Irish-harp world internationally. The Society will bestow the award at their festival on Monday, July 26<sup>th</sup>.







In the summer of 1981, Ann Heymann went to the bicentennial celebration of the Granard Harp Festival to listen, not play. She was not a fan of music competitions. While there, however, she changed her mind, struck with the conviction that in Ireland she had a duty to present the work she had been doing on the wire-strung harp. She signed up for a solo set. From her perspective the performance was not a success, but to her amazement she was awarded top honors! "Why me?" she asked the judges, Máire Ní Chathasaigh and Charles Guard, who said, "You have inspired us!"

If you ask Ann about the milestones in her career, she will talk first and foremost about that day in Granard. "Granard made me take what I was doing seriously." Aware that she was a pioneer and that her goal was to rediscover the techniques, traditions, and voice of the wire-strung harp. The award gave her the validation she needed. At the same time, she was convinced that the harp was her guide, and that Ireland had to be the focal point. This theme of responsibility to the wire-strung harp and the music is one of the strongest threads in Ann's distinguished career. "I am incredibly grateful to have the instrument in my life," she says, and "I love sharing and want people to hear what the harp can do!"

### Early Influences

Ann's harp adventure began quietly in 1971 in Minneapolis-St. Paul where she lived and worked as a horse trainer. A few years earlier Ann had discovered Irish music and was playing the tin whistle in a Ceili band, "as a wannabe," she says laughing ruefully. "This was the music I'd been looking for. It was the music I'd been trying to imagine—where melody itself expresses the harmony." Fatefully, friends gave her Edward Bunting's *Ancient Music of Ireland*, stemming from the 1792 Belfast Harp Festival. She found herself obsessively reading not only the melodies but *all* the background information about harp players and their harps.

In 1792, a 19-year-old Bunting had been hired to capture the melodies and whatever he could about how the harpers played, but his designated task was to save their melodies for that popular and "modern" new instrument, the piano. Only with the third volume, worked on much later in his life, did Bunting shift his focus to describing what he remembered of the harpers' techniques as he was, perhaps, realizing that this was a tradition that was soon to die out.

Ann and Charlie in 1988 with two of her Witcher harps.



## How Do You Play a Harp Nobody is Making?

With instincts that have characterized her methods, Ann says, "Oddly enough, I never tried to play the music on keyboard. Maybe I knew I would be disappointed and lose what I was imagining." "At that time," she adds with a laugh, "there were two instruments I wasn't too fond of: the piano accordion and the pedal harp. Just so schmalzy!" "But until the Bunting came into my life, I didn't know there was another kind of harp!" Utterly smitten by the music at first, she did not even try to find a wire-strung harp. Obsessed with the old Irish harp, Ann approached luthiers and woodworkers to show them engravings in Bunting's books. No takers.

Talk about synchronicity! Little did Ann know, but there *was* someone hard at work figuring out how to make wire-strung harps. This was, of course, former NASA engineer Jay Witcher, then living in Northern California, who since 1970 had been engaged in making musical instruments, first harpsichords and then, for his bread and butter, small harps to sell at Renaissance Faires. As Witcher's interest in harps deepened and he delved into the history of the instrument, he was soon making historically accurate wire-strung harps for the few tentatively emerging harpers in Ireland and Scotland.

When Ann broke an ankle in 1975 and couldn't work, she took a trip to Chicago where her future husband, Charlie, was working as a musician. He had exciting news. Friends with a music store in St. Louis had three Jay Witcher wire-strung harps for sale! In no time, they were in Charlie's car and drove straight to St. Louis. She drew her finger across the strings of the Castle Otway harp and that was it. Charlie bought Ann her first wire-strung harp.

Harp now in hand, Ann taught herself music out of Bunting's volumes, finding time after long days spent horse-training. Ann and Charlie married in 1976 and they made a foursome with Charlie's musical partners. She and Charlie made yearly trips to the Connemara Gaeltacht to soak up the trad music and *sean nos* singing, but the scales had begun to tip towards a life dedicated to the wire-strung Irish harp. They released their first LP in 1979, *Let Erin Remember*—to kick off their touring debut as the duo Claireseach.

## Research, Research and More Research

How did Ann's method work? First there was (and still is!) painstaking research, exploring not only how the harps were made and played, but also absorbing all she could find about the human context in which the harps existed in the centuries stretching from the late middle ages through the Renaissance and into the early Enlightenment. This included the mythology and lore, the social and physical settings—from castles to kitchens—the expectations and previous knowledge, how the audiences viewed and shaped their world and what changed, and what stayed the same. In essence, Ann became a time-traveler picking up the threads that

were lost as the old harp tradition died out with the last of the clan-trained harpers. Everything and anything from these times, from customs, to nature, to sexuality, to magical beliefs have come under Ann's regard as she *imagines* herself into a time when people, largely illiterate, *listened* and *observed* with an intensity we can barely comprehend today. Until widespread literacy and cheap printing, learning was largely aural—so memorizing vast quantities of information and lore—was primary. Artwork in the form of visual cues and the "*tableaux vivants*" of the murals and stained glass in the churches and cathedrals, all teem with symbols and designs the meaning of which was understood by almost everyone. While the language of symbols and signs (semiotics) of the past is one we no longer understand without study, just consider how we have plenty of our own modern equivalents from wordless pictures for hazards, to the colors green for go, and red for stop.

Ann talks about the work which back then, pre-internet, involved traveling to sources and long days spent in libraries, reading through original manuscripts and filling index cards and notebooks. As our collective memory of hands-on non-internet research fades, Ann reminisces, "Sometimes I feel sorry for people today [working on the internet] because... searching was such a treasure to find this little thing, this little thought." Ann used every source she could think of from poetry and mythology to dictionaries. Yes, she read page by page, a dictionary of the Irish language, taking notes on every word that might have some relevance to her understanding of how the harp was made, played, and regarded.

On the practical side Ann examined everything about harp-making, even working with historical metalsmith Daniel Tokar. Early Ireland had an ample supply of red copper very suitable for harp strings. Her research found mentions of harps strung not only in brass, but in gold, silver, and findruine. She explored their practicality, stringing the bass of her newly made one-piece soundbox Trinity by David Kortier, first in sterling silver, and then in high carat gold. In 1999 she premiered this newly strung instrument at the University of St. Francis Music in Medieval Ireland Symposium. Ann and Charlie's 2006 "*Cruit go nÓr • Harp of Gold*" recording reveals their magical sound.

Ideas percolated, both speculative and practical. As Ann questioned and experimented, things fell into place, and sounded right to her.

Why not play melody with both hands? "You find something so valid that has validity because it is real." Playing melody with both hands de-emphasizes accompaniment and gives both hands more space for damping. From the beginning Ann was drawn to Irish music because it placed harmony front and center within the melodies! Even Bunting in his third book implies that Carolan didn't play accompaniment, only melody. Ann took that up and kept exploring: How? Why?



## Crossing Over to Scotland and Wales

After Granard, Ann and Charlie crossed over to Scotland to visit a friend in St. Andrews. They visited a gallery where Ann spotted some beautiful glass work. "I'm drawn to shiny things!" To Ann's surprise they were labelled as the work of Alison Kinnaird! She asked the gallery owner, "Is this Alison Kinnaird, the harper?" It was. Asking for Alison's phone number, she called, got directions and off they went to meet Alison for the first time.

Alison had a Pilgrim wire-strung harp on loan, but she had decided that the instrument was too different for her and a pick-up was scheduled that very day. Then Ann dropped in. Not knowing what to make of this long-haired young woman from America, whimsically dressed in "long flowing robes" (as Alison's husband, Robin Morton, described her). They asked if she could play the wire-strung harp for them. Ann chose to play her own harp, which Charlie brought from their car, and from the very first note all were enthralled. Not long after, Robin suggested that Alison and Ann collaborate on an album, which became *The Harper's Land*, and a lifelong artistic friendship began.

Ann also researched Scottish and Welsh traditions although she has been careful to keep the threads separate unless they truly overlap. For example, the historic Welsh Robert ap Huw manuscripts offered a great deal of information about how to play the harp, but Ann was careful to sift and decide what was "universal" before adopting any of those techniques. One universal example, abundantly clear to Ann, would be that all three harp traditions, Irish, Scottish, and Welsh evolved from placing the harp on the left shoulder.

Another career highlight was being invited to Wales in 2008 by scholar David Howlett to compose music for nine Cambro-Latin prayers by the eighth century Welsh cleric, Moucan. In this case as Ann hummed, the words of the plain chant intertwined with the sound of the harp strings and ideas arrived. "The words told me the melody," Ann says, remembering that wonderful experience. But Ann knew the music should be played on a *telyn rawn*—the medieval horsehair-strung harp of Wales. Having no proper re-creation, Ann interpreted one based on a harp in the *Winchcombe Psalter*, c. 1020. A Welsh patron supplied her with timber from her property and donated horsehair from the area. The music premiered in 2008 at Brecon Cathedral where Charlie sang the prayers while playing various lyres, as well as singing three Welsh plain chants.

## A Major Influencer in the Historic Harp Sphere

Ann published her book *Secrets of the Gaelic Harp* on wire-strung harp technique in 1989. She recalls showing a pre-publication copy to Gráinne Yeats, who she stayed with frequently when she visited Ireland. Gráinne urged Ann to include beginning exercises, which she did. With Gráinne's critique in mind Ann also created an easier



Ann and Siobhán playing at Scoil na gCláirseach in Kilkenny, Ireland in 2004.

way to play the first pieces with simple Return Damping before progressing to Selective Damping. Gráinne herself found the wire-strung techniques daunting because it was so foreign to how she had been playing for years.

Now three decades later, Ann's influence has permeated the historic harp universe. She has taught, influenced, and encouraged so many emerging historic harp players and historians. Siobhán Armstrong is among them. In the early 1990's Siobhán made a pilgrimage from Ireland to Minnesota to learn directly from Ann, the beginning of a friendship that continues today. Ann encourages serious students like Siobhán to be bold in inventing new techniques. With Ann's encouragement Siobhán stepped forward not only to found the Historical Harp Society of Ireland but also to direct its Festival of Early Irish Harp, *Scoil na gCláirsach* each summer, where Ann has taught for 18 years. Siobhán writes, "Without Ann's work, and her great collegiality, the HHSI would probably not exist."

One of the happiest times in Ann's career were the months she spent in Galway in 2012 with a Moor Institute Fellowship at NUI Galway to explore the role of the Irish harp in the performance of bardic poetry. Living in the medieval center of Galway for six months was a dream come true. She and Charlie performed at NUI's Aula Maxima with *sean-nos* singer and scholar Lillis Ó Laoire and Simon O'Dwyer, a specialist in prehistoric instruments and horns.

## Teaching to Pass on the Tradition

These days, Ann confesses she finds teaching and sharing more rewarding than performing, of which she says, laughing, it's, "like the dentist, only worse." Turning serious, she adds, "What matters most is that everything is in service to the harp." The benefit of the internet, Skype, and Zoom, says Ann, who lives in Minnesota, is being able to reach out and have students from all over the world. Videos can be shared both



ways, allowing Ann to assess the students' progress and paving the way for the live, oral lessons. "I've learned to understand and articulate what it is I'm doing by being forced to analyze, communicate, and assess."

What is she is working on now? Ann gives a smile, saying that she loves semi-retirement, because "I can misbehave a bit, I can play, and think what I want." Given her innate curiosity, she has more time for exploring ideas and further developing technique and style. "You don't know when another breakthrough is going to happen; they are a gift." She is working on an updated edition of *Secrets of the Gaelic Harp* with a new subtitle: *In the Second Manner*.

Hers is a considerable lineage, says Siobhán Armstrong, noting, "It's hard to think of a person who plays a harp with wire strings nowadays who cannot somehow be traced back to Ann and her seminal work."

Owing to Ann's nonchalance in reflecting back over her long career, we have to rely on Siobhán and others to contextualize her contributions to the field. Cynthia Cathcart, who writes the monthly "Ringing Strings" column here in the *Folk Harp Journal*, says, "Ann Heymann was the first wire-strung harper I ever saw perform live. I will always remember how generous Ann was with her time following her inspiring performance, welcoming me to the clarsach. She mused aloud how promising it was for a musician with my training to come to our instrument, a comment which I have always cherished. Ann encouraged and strengthened my resolve to learn, discover, and share the music of this rare and beautiful harp."

Cynthia's sentiment is indicative of the moment that led Ann, however reluctantly, to get up on the stage at Granard in 1981 and take the bold step of publicly sharing her then entirely unique work to a discerning audience. She loves doing that.

Harp historian Karen Loomis says, "Ann has a way of getting straight to the heart of the matter and seeing it from an entirely novel viewpoint. I always come away with food for thought, marveling at the latest gem of insight she's shared, and recharged by her enthusiasm, and generosity of spirit."

"We, in Ireland, owe her a great debt," says Siobhán Armstrong. "It is her generosity of spirit that allowed the rest of us to benefit from her hard-earned skills and expertise."

The award at Granard shifted Ann's life. Up to that point Ann had been working alone. When asked who taught her, Ann says firmly, "The harp was my teacher." She understood that no one *could* teach her as there was no one alive who could pass on the tradition as it once had been. Internalizing all the facts and tidbits, Ann was always, "Listening to the voice of the harp," trying out her ideas, with meticulous care. The path she chose was combining immersive study and intense honest listening and she derived her confidence from her trust that the harp would be her guide.

At Granard in 1981 Ann's ideas were in development, some she had fully implemented into her playing, some were emerging, and others were yet to be discovered. For her the question was, did anyone out there understand what she was doing? Did anyone even care? Anyone who has aspired to live a creative life knows how important having your work recognized and validated is; all the more so if you are exploring *terra incognita*. The recognition and affirmation the judges and the audience at Granard gave her was the support she needed to begin devoting herself entirely to the study and playing of the wire-strung harp.

As for me, I hope from here on out, I will take Ann's wisdom to heart, so that when I sit down to play my (not wire-strung, but hey!) harp, I will take a moment to remind myself to let the harp speak to me, and through me, to others.

### Further Resources on Ann Heymann:

Find Ann at [AnnHeymann.com](http://AnnHeymann.com).

Listen to Maureen Buscareno's interview with Ann for her HarpSong podcast at [MoonOvertheTrees.com](http://MoonOvertheTrees.com).



Ann and her MacLisag Gold-strung  
Cruit made by David Kortier.



### Lucy Andrews Cummin

Lucy lives in Vermont and has been playing traditional Irish music on harp for about twenty years. She has been on staff at the Somerset Folk Harp Festival since 2010.