

Annals of the Harp

Playing with the Chieftains

by Sylvia Woods

The Chieftains, often known as “The Ambassadors of Irish Music” are the most recognizable Irish band of all time. Over the past forty years, they have played at such diverse places as the Great Wall of China and for television’s *Saturday Night Live*. They first became widely-known outside the Irish music circle with their performance on the soundtrack for the movie *Barry Lyndon*, in 1975. Their music can be heard on numerous other soundtracks, most recently the 2002 movie, *Gangs of New York*. The Chieftains have released over forty recordings, won six Grammys and been nominated for eighteen. Their tour schedule is extensive, taking them to many parts of the world, including of course, for several months each year, to the United States.

Since his debut, playing harp on the *Chieftains 4* recording in 1973, Derek Bell has been one of the most beloved members of the band. Often described as an “imp,” a “leprechaun,” and a “musical genius,” Derek always had a twinkle in his eye and a trick or two up his sleeve. He was affectionately known as “Ding Dong Bell” by the other members of the group. Although he dressed conservatively, wild and brightly colored socks were always a part of his on-stage attire.

Following Derek Bell’s untimely death on October 17, 2002, the Chieftains decided not to replace their beloved harp player in the band. However, the Chieftains did still want harp music in their concerts. So, as a tribute to Derek, they invited harp players from various parts of the U.S. to perform with them in their 2003 tour. Their booking agent from Canada



The Chieftains: Sean Keane (fiddle), Paddy Moloney (Uilleann pipes, whistle), Kevin Conneff (bodhran), Matt Molloy (flute).

Photo by Barry McCall

called me in December 2002, requesting my assistance in finding harp players in cities where they currently had no leads. I gave her quite a few names and numbers of people I knew would be delighted to perform with the Chieftains. When she asked for someone to do the five California concerts, I told her I would be honored to join them on that part of their tour.

The agent began discussing the pieces I would need to know, which included the traditional Irish tune *Give Me Your Hand*, and three tunes by Turlough O’Carolan: *Carolan’s Concerto*, *Fanny Poer* (also sometimes spelled *Fanny Power*), and, quoting her now, “a piece that translates into English something like *She’s Big and She’s More*.” The Gaelic name of the piece is



Photo by James O'Mara

Derek Bell. Used by permission of Macklam/Feldman Management, Inc.

Sigh beg sigh mór, or *Sheebeg and Sheemore* in English. The title means “The Little Fairy Hill and The Big Fairy Hill,” and has nothing to do with “she’s more!” Anyway, I understood right away what she meant, and told her there would be no problem.

I have been playing all of these tunes for about twenty-five years, so I was more fortunate than some of the other harp players who were going to have to learn them from scratch. However, I usually played some of them in different keys than those requested by the Chieftains, so I practiced them in the new keys. The Chieftains never use written music on stage, of course, so everything had to be from memory.

A few weeks later I spoke via telephone with Paddy Moloney, the leader of the Chieftains. He wanted to be sure I knew all the pieces, and told me that they always tune their instruments a bit sharp, to 446 or 447, so I should be sure to tune high. He also asked me if I knew *Carolan’s Farewell to Music*, since that was Derek’s favorite tune. I told him it was one of my favorite pieces as well, and that I loved playing it. He said to be prepared in case they decided to add that tune to the set. He was very sweet and said they were looking forward to meeting all the harp players they’d be performing with in the U.S.

The Chieftains’ 2003 winter U.S. concert tour covered thirty cities, beginning in Phoenix, Arizona, in January, and ending at Avery Fisher Hall, in New York City, on Saint Patrick’s Day. In all, sixteen harp players performed with the Chieftains on this tour. I performed the five California concerts: Santa Rosa, Berkeley, Thousand Oaks, Escondido and Cerritos.

The question I am most asked about the experience is, “How much time did you get to practice with the Chieftains before the gigs?” The entire amount of rehearsal time was playing the pieces once (sometimes not even all the way through) during the sound check. That was it!

Most nights after the sound check there was a buf-

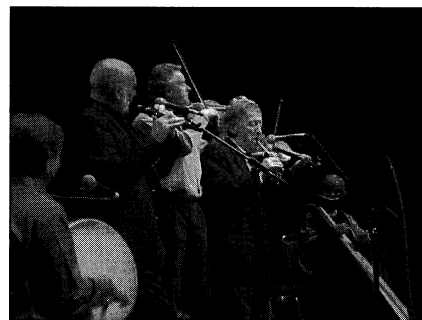
fet dinner backstage for the Chieftains, the other musicians, and the dancers. It was nice to be able to sit and chat with “the boys” and to get to know a bit about them. On the last night, I remarked to Paddy that I was happy that there was soup every night as part of the buffet. He said this was because Derek always ate soup before the performances, and so they still requested soup to be part of their pre-concert menu.

When I asked how I would know it was time for me to go on stage, Paddy told me that the O’Carolan set would be about forty-five minutes into the first half, and their tour manager, Dan Cleland, would tell me when I should be ready to go on. Luckily, I also found out that it would be right after the tune *Down the Old Plank Road*, so I listened for that song backstage. This was fortunate, because Dan was actually on stage playing keyboards during that piece, and wasn’t even aware that he was supposed to give me my cue!

Paddy gave me a very nice introduction, and I walked out on stage, moved my harp to its correct place, (with Derek’s microphone installed in the back), and we were ready to go. I played the hauntingly beautiful *Carolan’s Farewell to Music* as a solo, and the rest of the gang joined me on the other tunes in the O’Carolan set. It was a huge honor for me to be able to play Derek’s favorite tune in his memory.

While there are several Irish step dancers who tour with the Chieftains, the band also always gets young local dancers to join them every night, performing periodically throughout the show. Because of that, I always had to be sure to move my harp out of the way when I wasn’t playing, so it wouldn’t get knocked over by exuberant dancers.

With the phenomenal music and dancing, the Chieftains’ shows are spectacular with sold-out crowds of thousands. Their audiences are there to have a great time, and they certainly do. They clap along and stomp their feet and really get into the music. And the Chieftains love it!



Onstage with the Chieftains.

Photo by Patti Strout



Paddy Moloney and Sylvia Woods.

Photo by Don Snyder

I rejoined the Chieftains for the encore. Once again, Paddy introduced me, and I moved my harp up, ready to join in on *Give Me Your Hand*. I was sitting there waiting for them to begin when Paddy looked over at me and said, "Any time you're ready, my dear." So I started playing, and they joined in during the second time through. No one had mentioned that I was supposed to START it! At the end of that tune, they began a series of Irish reels, and the dancers came flying onto the stage. Since I was on the end, I had to scoot my harp back about five feet to keep from getting run over. But I just kept on playing chords to accompany the reels. There was so much noise by that time, I'm sure no one heard me in the background, but I still had fun playing along.

I had survived the first night!

While watching the show from backstage, I was particularly intrigued by their final number (before the encore). They brought out all the guest musicians who were touring with them, cellist Caroline Lavelle and Nashville bluegrass guitarist Chris Jones, and everyone had a solo during the piece. Some people played something silly, and others played something exquisite that brought tears to your eyes.

Before the concert on the second night, I volunteered to join in on this tune. We discussed it and decided to try it. So that night Paddy introduced me again right before the final number. When my turn came for my solo, I started playing one of the pieces from my suite, *The Harp of Brandiswhiere*. As planned, a little way into my solo, Kevin, the bodhran (hand drum) player, started making a lot of noise by dropping his stick, kicking over his drums, etc. I stopped, glared at him, picked up a rubber-tipped arrow, and shot it at him across the stage from the strings of my harp. I then continued playing as if nothing unusual had happened. Everyone liked it, so I got to shoot Kevin every night! (Whenever I give solo concerts, my encore is the song that I wrote called *Harpers Are Not Bizarre*. In the final verse I shoot an arrow into the audience from my harp strings. So I never travel without my arrows!)

All in all, playing with the Chieftains was a wonderful and unforgettable experience. The band members were very kind, and appreciative that harp players around the country were willing to join them to honor their friend and colleague, Derek Bell.

Thank you, Derek, for the years of inspiration and entertainment you gave us all. You are truly missed.

HARP PLAYERS:

The following is a list of the sixteen harp players who performed with the Chieftains during their U.S.

tour from January to March 2002: Laurie Riley, Mary Bouley, Therese Honey, Star Edwards, Sylvia Woods, Ann Heymann, Kristin Fallon, Susan Strasek, Marysue Redmann, Victoria Schultz, Harriet Peters, Gretchen Van Hoesen, Martha Gallagher, Carol Thompson, Sue Richards, and Kathleen Guilday.

OTHER CREDITS:

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About the author:

Owner of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center in Glendale, California, Sylvia Woods has been a leader of the renaissance of the lever harp for over twenty-five years. Her book *Teach Yourself to Play the Folk Harp* has sold over 50,000 copies worldwide, and she is the author of more than twenty-five additional books of harp music. Many of the tunes she played with the Chieftains can be found in her book *40 O'Carolan Tunes*. ☺☺



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