

Psalms on the Shannon

A Collection of Choral Pieces in the Irish Celtic Style

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Abstract

The Irish music tradition has a rich heritage ranging from ancient ballads to nineteenth-century dances. One area of Irish music, a subset of Celtic music in general, that has been somewhat underrepresented in modern times is Irish choral music. Scripturally-based choral singing has been part of the Irish tradition ever since medieval monks began Christianizing the Celts. Today, several choral groups in Ireland are working to revive the art of Celtic choral singing. This collection, presenting psalms set to choral music in the Irish style, is one modern composer's endeavor to join the Irish choral genre, incorporating traditional harmonic elements and following a long-established line of psalm singing in Ireland. Portions of text are sung in both English and Irish.

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Psalms on the Shannon

Overview: Ireland's Place within Celtic Music

The terms “Irish music” or “Celtic music” carry great significance with regard to the cultures of Celtic lands. In fact, from around the nineteenth century up until today, Irish or Celtic music has been considered to be a symbol for Celtic cultures as a whole; traditional Irish music has “presented itself as a definitive expression of Irish identity” (White 5). With such an amount of cultural weight behind them, phrases referring to Irish music often come with many associations and assumptions about what Irish music is and how it reflects the culture of Ireland and the surrounding lands such as Scotland and England.

In order to knowledgeably approach and appreciate this subject, one must first discover what are the defining characteristics that make Celtic music what it is – what makes it special and worthy of study. Unfortunately, the term “Celtic” has been overused and misused to such a degree today that it is unclear to many people what it actually means (Sawyers 4). There is not only one distinctive Celtic style or culture. Irish, Scots, Manx, Bretons, Welsh, and Cornish are all Celtic cultures, each with its own language (4). Each of the six Celtic cultures has developed its own unique style, producing multiple “Celtic musics” rather than one homogenous “Celtic music” (Porter 209). This project focuses on Irish music in particular and includes selections in the Irish language, the linguistic grandchild of the old Irish Gaelic. Most of the traditional Irish music heard today comes from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and is rural in origin. Most Celtic singing is usually done a capella and liberally ornamented, as is shown in this composition project (Sawyers 6).

Style

One outstanding characteristic of Irish music, as well as other forms of Celtic music, is its use of particular diatonic and pentatonic modes. Many Irish and Celtic tunes are composed in modal rather than tonal harmony. A diatonic mode is defined as “a diatonic pitch framework with the tonic assigned to a particular position in the scale” (Temperley and Tan 237). These modes do not necessarily fit into the categories of major or minor; they have their own distinct characteristics. The modes that most commonly appear in Irish music are the Ionian, which is the same as the major scale, Dorian, Aeolian, which is identical to the natural minor, and Mixolydian, as well as an occasional Lydian. Also, many Gaelic tunes make use of a gapped scale, with one or more scale degrees omitted (Gilchrist 151). The most typical gapped scale is the pentatonic scale, which contains only five scale degrees instead of the diatonic seven. The pentatonic scale is thought to have come from an eastern Asian tradition and is also quite prevalent in Scotland (153). There are several different variations of the pentatonic scale. The Ionian pentatonic omits the fourth and seventh scale degrees, the Mixolydian pentatonic omits degrees three and seven, the Aeolian leaves out the second and sixth, and the Dorian pentatonic omits scale degrees three and six (n.p.). The pieces in this collection are written in diverse modes which are all a part of the Irish Celtic tradition, including Ionian, Dorian, Aeolian, and Mixolydian pentatonic.

Historians are not certain which modes came into being first, but there is a theory that pentatonic modes could have been the forerunner to diatonic modes (Bronson 43). Some music historians also believe that, in folk music, plagal tunes, which place the tonic in the middle of the tessitura, came before authentic tunes, which place the tonic at the

bottom of the range (49). In this collection, two of the pieces – Psalm 19 and Psalm 143 – are primarily plagal, and the others are primarily, but not strictly, authentic.

With respect to form, Irish Celtic music has been extremely influential: “Taken in general, from a technical point of view, the ancient Irish can claim the credit of inventing musical ‘form’ – in fact the germ which developed into the Sonata form” (Flood 37). The form of many old Irish tunes resembles a binary or rounded binary form, which is reflected in the Psalm 20 piece of this collection. The traditional melodies that developed into sonata form

are all in triple or three-four time and consist of two parts, or strains, of eight bars each and the same number of phrases, divided into two sections. ... the second of the first part is, generally, a repetition – sometimes, however, slightly modified – of the section preceding; and the second section of the second part is usually a repetition of the second section of the first part...(Flood 36)

History

Ireland, including its music, has a rich history worth studying. While much of Celtic reference in popular culture refers to recent history in Scotland, Ireland, and Northern Ireland, Celtic peoples have actually existed for longer, and over a larger area of land, than one might think. They originated as a people group not in Ireland but in more eastern regions of Europe, many of them likely settling in modern-day Spain and France (Freeman 37). *Gaul*, *Galicia*, and *Gaelic* all come from the same root word, indicating that the Celts were quite widespread. Many of them moved from Belgic Gaul to the British Isles (65). In the first century A.D., the Roman Empire invaded Britain, but they were unsuccessful in conquering the Scots; according to several primary sources, the

Romans talked about attempting an invasion of Ireland but never fully carried out their plan to do so (76-77). Therefore, the Celts were able to retain a greater degree of their cultural identity than were their Anglo-Saxon neighbors, although Rome certainly left an enduring fingerprint on the British Isles.

Independently of the Romans and Saxons, and before the Romans ever set foot on those famed White Cliffs, singing has been a significant part of the way the Celts communicate ideas about their culture. Poetry and music were closely connected, and ancient Gaelic poetry was most often composed with the human voice in mind (Sheridan 176).”

A significant portion of musical topics in Ireland has to do with the church.

Ancient records

show us the missionary Church of Christ making an early and triumphant adaptation to a civilization and a social order not shaped by the Roman Empire; they demonstrate how, by a turn of the wheel of destiny, this alien land became one of the chief instruments in preserving Christianity and the culture of the Mediterranean as the main ingredients of western civilization. (Kenney 4)

With this in mind, it becomes clear that the church played an instrumental role in shaping the culture, including music, of Ireland. Many church traditions, as well as knowledge of the Bible, came to Ireland through missionaries in the early middle ages. One such missionary was St. Patrick, who was kidnapped and taken to Ireland in the fifth century before returning several years later as a bishop (Freeman 80). Early monasticism brought many continental traditions, including Latin psalmody, to the Emerald Isle, but they also accepted the indigenous musical forms they found there. Particularly in Scotland but also

throughout the Celtic regions, "...[Christianization] brought a great richness of new music, sung mysteries and chants and there is strong evidence that the early Celtic Church embraced both the older secular music of the inhabitants of the islands as well as the mother church of Rome" (Sheridan 175). As early as the twelfth century, traditional Celtic chants were being adopted as antiphons for use in church services (175). As long as Christianity has been present in Ireland, psalms have also been prevalent as a form of worship. For example, during the medieval era, a child being educated by the monks would be expected to learn all 150 psalms, as well as to read from the Latin Psalter, just as children learned in other western European countries (McNamara 21-22). The earliest evidence historians have of psalms in Ireland is the *Cathach* of St. Columba. This text, containing the psalms as seen in the Latin Vulgate, is thought to have been written down by St. Columba, who travelled to Iona, an island off the coast of Scotland, in 563 AD for the purpose of evangelizing the native Celts (28-29). The Irish have had psalms for many centuries; however, it was not until circa 1659 that a psalter in the Gaelic language was compiled (Crotchet 477). The translation of psalms in an iambic meter was not very well suited to Gaelic, which usually places the accent on the first syllable of a word (478), making translation somewhat difficult.

Summary

Based on the characteristics and history of Irish music given above, this collection presents four pieces for a choir with four voices, with occasional divisions in the parts. The pieces have been written with modal harmony in mind, in keeping with the Irish – and, in fact, pan-Celtic – tradition. However, most of the pieces have been notated with key signatures in order to make them easier to read for the modern chorister. The pieces

in this collection, although they do not adhere to an exact standard or the style of a particular time period within Irish music history, are inspired by harmonic and structural elements that set Irish music apart.

The text for the pieces comes from the biblical book of Psalms. For the most part, the pieces are presented in English; some smaller portions are presented in the Irish language and taken from an Irish translation of the Bible. The rationale behind this choice is to make the pieces intelligible to American and other English-speaking audiences while still paying homage to the language of the Irish people. Irish is classified as an endangered language; although many "...Irish people believe the Irish language is crucial for maintaining an Irish identity, ...most Irish people do not speak Irish and have not done so for centuries (Nettle and Romaine 187-188)." By presenting some elements in Irish, the composer hopes to pay a tribute, however small, to a time-honored linguistic tradition and heritage.

Description

The first piece in the collection is based on text from Psalm 8 and Psalm 19. It is written in the Dorian mode and, as such, possesses a distinctly Irish character. The Dorian mode can be thought of as a natural minor scale with the sixth scale degree raised. In the A Dorian scale, this means having an F# instead of an F natural and eliminating the leading tone, making the IV chord major instead of minor. The melody contains pentatonic elements while still including that raised sixth. The piece opens with a soprano or alto soloist intoning a rhythmically free melody, while the lower voices provide a harmonic base, before entering into the main tune in a steadier tempo. The character of this piece is rather melancholy, given that it is in a "minor" mode, as many would think

of it; however, the major IV chord adds an unexpected ray of light that shows a sense of wonder, an idea which will be reflected in the chosen text for this piece.

The second piece, A Psalm of Praise, is built on the Mixolydian scale. While it does include the third scale degree, for the sake of clarity, some passages outline the Mixolydian pentatonic scale by leaving it out (Gilchrist n.p.). The rhythm is in 6/8 time with occasional dotted rhythms. The bass, tenor, and alto sections together provide a “drone” of sorts, featuring several perfect fifths, before the soprano and alto sections, in unison, take the melody of the A section. The tenors sing a B section before the A section returns at the end as a richly textured round, beginning with the sopranos and progressively adding each voice, until it ends with the bass section. The text for this piece comes from Psalm 136, Psalm 126, and Psalm 150. A single line from Psalm 136 is sung in Irish, translated as “His love endures forever” (v. 1 NIV). Other portions of text are taken from both the Irish and the English translations.

The third piece in the collection contains two diatonic modes: Ionian and Aeolian. The piece harmonically shifts from the former to the latter, as the tonic moves from G to E. Both the G Ionian scale and the E Aeolian scale can be played using one sharp. A notable feature of the Aeolian mode is that it sounds like a minor scale, but without a leading tone. Music of the common practice era, commonly referred to as “classical music,” deals exclusively with the major and minor scales. Listeners of Common-practice music should note that most of the pieces in this collection will sound different from what they are used to hearing, as Irish music and its modal character do not come from the common practice music tradition. This piece also borrows a particular rhythmic feature from Ireland’s neighbors Scotland and England. This feature consists of a note followed

by one three times its length – often a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth. This rhythmic pattern is known as the “Scotch snap” and came into general use around the year 1675 (Temperley and Temperley 53).

The final movement is in the Ionian mode. As such, it will sound more familiar to modern listeners since it is equivalent to the major scale. This piece is a reflection of the ancient Irish airs and tunes mentioned earlier, having a triple meter and a form with several instances of repetition, reminiscent of rounded binary form. The triple meter and moderately slow tempo lend this piece a lilting, peaceful air, evoking the ideas of serenity and blessing. The text for the piece comes from Psalm 20 and the traditional Irish Blessing. The piece therefore serves as a kind of final benediction to the work as a whole, asking God’s blessing on the listeners.

Conclusion

Although the composition of the pieces in this work do not strictly adhere to the style techniques of any one particular time period or region of Ireland, per se, they achieve the goal of evoking the elements that make Irish music distinctive and special. The collection is a modern composer’s view of traditional Irish music, based on research and presented in a new light and in the rather underrepresented medium of Irish psalms. The endangered culture and music of Ireland are well worth preserving. Through this musical work, the composer’s hope is that this small contribution will help to accomplish that by exposing choral music enthusiasts to a lesser-known style and exposing the audience’s ears to modal harmony – a harmonic structure that is most likely less familiar. The music in this piece should be accessible to choirs ranging from high school groups to professional groups, and it can be an excellent way to introduce choristers and their

audiences to the not-quite-dead art form of Irish choral music. Also, the composer hopes that this work will expose audiences to the psalms in a new way, fostering greater reflection upon them and an opportunity to worship the Lord in a different style. Irish music, with its deep roots and its strong ties to Christianity, is an excellent medium for singing the psalms together in community.

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Appendix A: Translations

Psalm 19

A Thiarna, ár dTiarna, nach éachtach é d'ainm ar fud na cruinne (Leabhar na Salm 11).

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your Name in all the earth (Psalm 8:1a NIV).

A Psalm of Praise

Óir maireann a bhuanghrá go brách (Leabhar na Salm 288).

His love endures forever (Psalm 136:2b NIV).

Molaigí Dia ina ionad naofa... Molaigí é as ucht a éachtaí... Molaigí é le séideadh an
stoic... (Leabhar na Salm 314).

Praise God in his sanctuary... Praise him for his acts of power... Praise him with the
sounding of the trumpet... (Psalm 150:1-3 NIV).

Psalm 19

Music: Greta Hanks
Lyrics: Based on Ps. 8 and 19

$\text{♩} = 80$ **freely** *mp*

Soprano (solo) When I look at the heav ens, work of your hands, what is man-kind that you are

Alto *p* Ah - - - Ah - - -

Tenor *p* Ah - - - Ah - - -

Bass *p* Ah - - - Ah - - -

Piano

a tempo *mf*

4

S. mindful of him? That you care for him? (tutti) The heav - ens declare the

A. Ah - - - The heav - ens declare the

T. Ah - - - The heav - ens declare the

B. Ah - - - The heav - ens declare the

Pho.

9

S. glo - ry of God. The skies show the work of His hands. And day and night they

A. glo - ry of God. The skies show the work of His hands. And day and night they

T. glo - ry of God. The skies show the work of His hands. And day and night they

B. glo - ry of God. The skies show the work of His hands. And day and night they

Pno.

13

S. pour forth speech. They re - veal your know-ledge to dis - tant lands. *freely* (solo)A Thiar - na, ár

A. pour forth speech. They re - veal your know-ledge to dis - tant lands. Ah - *p*

T. pour forth speech. They re - veal your know-ledge to dis - tant lands. Ah - *p*

B. pour forth speech. They re - veal your know-ledge to dis - tant lands. Ah - *p*

Pno.

17 *tr* *mf* **a tempo**

S. dtiar - na, nach éach - tach é dáinm ar - fud na cruinne. (tutti) Your *mf*

A. Ah - - - - - Your *mf*

T. Ah - - - - - Your *mf*

B. Ah - - - - - Your

Pno.

23

S. laws are per - fect, re - fresh - ing the soul. They are far more pre - cious than gold. May the

A. laws are per - fect, re - fresh - ing the soul. They are far more pre - cious than gold. May the

T. laws are per - fect, re - fresh - ing the soul. They are far more pre - cious than gold. May the

B. laws are per - fect, re - fresh - ing the soul. They are far more pre - cious than gold. May the

Pno.

27

S.
words of my mouth be pleasing to You, my Rock, my Redeem - er and my God - .

A.
words of my mouth be pleasing to You, my Rock, my Redeem - er and my God - .

T.
words of my mouth be pleasing to You, my Rock, my Redeem - er and my God - .

B.
words of my mouth be pleasing to You, my Rock, my Redeem - er and my God - .

Pno.

A Psalm of Praise

Music: Greta Hanks
Lyrics: from Ps. 126, 136, and 150

$\text{♩} = 96$

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Piano

Oir mai-reann a bhuan-gra go brach. Oir mai-reann a bhuan-gra go brach.

5

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pho.

Praise the Name, the Name of the Lord, and give Him thanks for He is good. For

9

S. He has done great things for us and filled our hearts with joy and love.

A. He has done great things for us and filled our hearts with joy and love.

T. He has done great things for us and filled our hearts with joy and love. Oir mai reann a

B. He has done great things for us and filled our hearts with joy and love. Oir mai reann a

Pno.

14

S. [Rest]

A. Oir mai reann a bhuan-gra go brach.

T. bhuan-gra go brach. Oir mai reann a bhuan-gra go brach. *f* Mo-lai-gi Dia ina io - nad nao - fa!

B. bhuan-gra go brach. Oir mai reann a bhuan-gra go brach.

Pno.

19

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pno.

24

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pno.

28

S. *mf* name of the Lord. Oh, praise the name, the name of the Lord. Oh, *mp* praise the name, the

A. *mf* name of the Lord. Oh, praise the name, the name of the Lord. Oh, *mp* praise the name, the

T. *mf* Praise the name, the name of the Lord. Oh, *mp* praise the name, the

B. *mp* Praise the name, the

Pno.

32

S. name of the Lord.

A. *p* name of the Lord. Oh, praise the name, the name of the Lord.

T. *p* name of the Lord. Oh, praise the name, the name of the Lord. praise the name, the

B. *p* name of the Lord. Oh, praise the name, the name of the Lord. praise the name, the

Pno.

36

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pho.

40

S.

A.

T.

B.

Pho.

Psalm 143

Music: Greta Hanks
Lyrics: Based on Psalm 143, NIV

$\text{♩} = 66$
mf

Soprano
Let the mor-ning bring me word of Your un - fail - ing love. - for I have

Alto
Let the mor-ning bring me word of Your un - fail - ing love. for I have

Tenor
Let the mor-ning bring me word of your un - fail - ing love. for I

Bass
Let the mor-ning bring me word of your un - fail - ing love. for I

Piano

10

S.
put my trust in You. Show me the way that I should go. An - swer

A.
put my trust in You. Show me the way that I should go. An - swer

T.
put my trust in You. Show me where I should go. An - swer

B.
put my trust in You. Show me where I should go. An - swer

Pho.

18

S. me, come quick - ly O Lord, my spir - it with - in me - fairs. Oh do not

A. me, come quick - ly O Lord, my spir - it with - in me fairs. Oh do not

T. me, come quick - ly O Lord, my spir - it with - in me fairs. Oh do not

B. me, come quick - ly O Lord, my spir - it with - in me fairs. Oh do not

Pno.

26

S. hide Your face from me in my weak - ness and in my pain. Lord hear my

A. hide Your face from me in my weak - ness and in my pain. Lord hear my

T. hide Your face from me - in my weak - ness and in my pain. Lord hear my

B. hide Your face from me in my weak - ness and in my pain. Lord hear my

Pno.

34

S. prayer and my cry for mer - cy; come, Lord, to my aid. My en - e - my pur -

A. prayer and my cry for mer - cy; come, Lord, to my aid. My en - e - my pur -

T. prayer and my cry for mer - cy; come, Lord, to my aid. My en - e - my pur -

B. prayer and my cry for mer - cy; come, Lord, to my aid. My en - e - my pur -

Pno.

43

S. *p* sues me, and my heart with-in me is dis - mayed. Res - cue me, I

A. *p* sues me, and my heart with-in me is dis - mayed. Res - cue me. I

T. *p* sues me, and my heart with-in me is dis - mayed. Res - cue me. I

B. *p* sues me, and my heart with-in me is dis - mayed. Res - cue me. I

Pno. *p*

51

S. hide my-self in You. Oh, You are my God! May Your good Spir - it lead me on

A. hide my-self in You. Oh, You are my God! May Your good Spir - it lead me on

T. hide my-self in you. Oh, You are my God! May Your good Spi - rit lead me on

B. hide my-self in you. Oh, You are my God! May Your good Spi - rit lead me on

Pno.

59

S. lev - el ground, in Your un - fail - ing love.

A. lev - el ground, in Your un - fail - ing love.

T. lev - el gound, in Your un - fail - ing love.

B. lev - el gound, in Your un - fail - ing love.

Pno.

Psalm 20/Irish Blessing

Music: Greta Hanks
Lyrics: Ps. 20, traditional

mf
♩ = 80

Soprano
May the Lord answer you when you are in dis - tress. May the Name of the God of

Alto
mp
Oo - - - - Oo -

Tenor
mp
Oo - - - - Oo -

Bass
mp
Oo - - - - Oo -

Piano

7 *mf*

S. Ja - cob pro - tect you. May he send you help from the sanc - tu - ar - y and

A. *mf*
- - - - May he send you help from the sanc - tu - ar - y and -

T. *mf*
- - - - May he send you help from the sanc - tu - ar - y and

B. *mf*
- - - - May he send you help from the sanc - tu - ar - y and

Pno.

14

S. grant you sup - port from Zi - on. May He re - mem - ber all your sa - cri -

A. grant - you sup - port from Zi - on. May He re - mem - ber all your sa - cri -

T. grant you sup - port from Zi - on. May He re - mem - ber all your sa - cri -

B. grant you sup - port from Zi - on. May He re - mem - ber all your sa - cri -

Pno.

21

S. fi - ces and may He ac - cept all - your of - fer - ings. May He give you the de -

A. fi - ces and may He ac - cept all your of - fer - ings. May He give you the de -

T. fi - ces and may He ac - cept all your of - fer - ings. May He give you the de -

B. fi - ces and - may He ac - cept all your of - fer - ings. May He give you the de -

Pno.

27

S. sire of your heart deep in - side you and may He make all your plans suc -

A. sire of your heart deep in - side you and may He make all your plans suc -

T. sire of your heart deep in - side you and may He make all your plan suc -

B. sire of your heart deep in - side you and may He make all your plans suc -

Pno.

33

S. *p* ceed. (Hum) - - - (Hum) - - -

A. *p* ceed. (Hum) - - - (Hum) - - -

T. *p* ceed. (Hum) - - - (Hum) - - -

B. *p* ceed. (Hum) - - - (Hum) - - -

Pno.

41 *mf*

S. *mf*
- May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind al-ways be

A. *mf*
- May the road rise to meet you. May the wind al-ways be

T. *mf*
- May the road rise up to meet - you. May the wind al-ways be

B. *mf*
- May the road rise up to meet - you. May the wind al-ways be

Pno.

48

S.
at your - back. May the sun shine warm u - pon your face. May the

A.
at your back. May the sun shine warm u - pon your face. May the

T.
at your back. May the sun shine warm u - pon your face. May the

B.
at your back. May the sun shine warm u - pon your face. May the

Pno.

54

S. *subito p* rains fall soft u - pon your fields. *mf* Fare - well, my friends, and un -

A. *subito p* rains fall soft u - pon your fields. *mf* Fare - well, my friends, and un -

T. *subito p* rains fall soft u - pon your fields. *mf* Fare - well, my friends, and un -

B. *subito p* rains fall soft u - pon your fields. *mf* Fare - well, my friends, and un -

Pno.

60

S. til we met a - gain, may God hold you in the hol - low of His hand. *molto rit.*

A. til we met a - gain, may God hold you in the hol - low of His hand. *molto rit.*

T. til we met a - gain, may God hold you in the hol - low of His hand. *molto rit.*

B. til we met a - gain, may God hold you in the hol - low of His hand. *molto rit.*

Pno.