

A History of Music in the British Isles

Volume 1

Other books from The Letterworth Press
by Laurence Bristow-Smith

The second volume of
*A History of Music in the British Isles:
Empire and Afterwards*

and

Harold Nicolson: Half-an-Eye on History

A History of Music in the British Isles

Volume 1

From Monks to Merchants

Laurence Bristow-Smith

The Letterworth Press

Published in Switzerland by the Letterworth Press
<http://www.TheLetterworthPress.org>

Printed by Ingram Spark

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To
Peter Winnington
editor and friend for forty years

ISBN 978-2-9700654-6-3

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to pay tribute to Peter Winnington for his tireless editing of the text and his tolerance of my erratic and often idiosyncratic typing. My wife Jennifer suffered repeated exposure to the works of obscure composers in the name of research and then had to listen to me working out my ideas. A number of those ideas had their origins in musical conversations with my friend Adrian Abbott, sometimes in the pubs of Victoria and Marylebone, sometimes in hotel bars as far away as Athens and Ankara. Nigel Gibson gave invaluable help about the technical aspects of Church of England doctrine and terminology. Elizabeth Bates kindly allowed me to borrow her fascinating collection of papers relating to her father, Cuthbert Bates, and the Tudor Singers. Stan Calder read great chunks of manuscript and claimed to have enjoyed it. Brian Smith at the Shetland Museum was very helpful tracking down information about John Glass. Stephen Pern and Damian Leeson also read and commented on some of the early chapters. And there have, of course, been many other people who have given assistance along the way, helping me find references or recordings or just pointing me in the right direction.

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Dr Tim Rishton kindly allowed me to quote from his article 'William Smethergell, Organist' published in the *Musical Times*.

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David Whitwell kindly gave me permission to quote from his essays.

I am grateful to Isobel Preece and CORO for permission to quote from the CD-liner notes to *The Sixteen, Robert Carver*, CORO COR16051.

Hyperion Records generously gave permission to quote from Davitt Moroney's CD-liner notes to *William Byrd, the Complete Keyboard Music*, Hyperion, CDA66551/7; and from Andrew Carwood's notes to *William Byrd, Assumpta est Maria, The Cardinall's Musick*, Hyperion, CDA 67675.

Simon O'Dwyer and Maria Cullen O'Dwyer kindly gave permission for me to quote from the Ancient Music Ireland website.

The Guardian gave permission to quote from Vanessa Thorpe's 2011 article on *The Tempest*.

Cambridge University Press gave permission to use a short quotation from Ernest Newman's *Life of Richard Wagner*.

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Preface to Volume 1 of *A History of Music in the British Isles*

These two volumes – *From Monks to Merchants* and *Empire and Afterwards* – tell the story of music in the British Isles and how we got to where we are today.

I have spent much of my life living outside Britain, in places as distant and diverse as Norway, Italy, Morocco, Taiwan and China; so that when, in 2011, I finally stopped travelling and returned to Britain with the firm intention of staying here for good, I felt the need to reconnect with my own culture. For me, the obvious way to do this was through music, for while words have been my discipline, music has been my passion – ever since, as a twelve-year-old, I played trombone in the Kent Youth Orchestra. I became addicted to Radio 3. From our home in Kirkcudbright in South-West Scotland, my wife Jennifer and I drove across to concerts at the Sage in Gateshead and down to Hereford and Gloucester for the Three Choirs Festival. When in London, I went to the Proms, the Barbican and the Wigmore Hall. I read books on Tallis, Purcell and Handel, on Stanford, Elgar and Bax, on Finzi, Britten and Tippett. Then I decided that what I really needed was a narrative history of British musical life that would fit all the pieces together. I could not find one. The nearest thing was Percy Young's *History of British Music*, published in 1967; but even that was not quite what I was looking for.

I wanted a broad narrative that told the story of music in Britain – the composers and their lives, their music and the way it evolved over the centuries – and also set that story against the background of social, political, technical and technological change. I wanted a book that could be useful to the musically-minded and musically-informed, and would also appeal to lay readers, those who love music but do not play it and cannot face a succession of musical examples on the page.

So I have written the book I wanted to read. Researching and writing has taken five years. There has been a vast amount of material to be absorbed – books, internet sources, CD-liner notes, lectures, radio programmes. I have listened to a vast amount of music. The demands of space have required a rigorous selection process, and even then the narrative has stretched to two

volumes. There is much that, under other circumstances, I would have liked to examine in more depth and at greater length. I have mentioned as many as I could of those works that seem to me to have had a significant impact on the development of music in Britain, or that the reader may hear on the radio or find on a concert programme. Where I offer any kind of detailed description or assessment of a work, it means (with, I think, only one exception) that I have listened to the piece – often more than once. Where that has not been possible, I have drawn on contemporary criticism or on whatever critical consensus has built up over the years.

All the selections, omissions, judgements, and any errors of fact or interpretation are mine.

Writing anything about the British Isles is complicated from the beginning by questions of terminology. I am well aware – as Norman Davies points out in his study, *The Isles* – that ‘Great Britain’ refers to the island that includes modern-day England, Scotland and Wales; that Ireland is Ireland; and that together they form the British Isles. Technically, therefore, the adjective ‘British’ refers only to Great Britain. Simply for stylistic reasons – to avoid repeatedly saying ‘of the British Isles’ and ‘in the British Isles’ – I have used ‘Britain’ and ‘British’ to refer to the whole of the British Isles. Where there is a distinction to be drawn between Great Britain and Ireland, I hope it will be clear in the text.

These niceties are further complicated by the inexcusable habit of many writers, commentators and politicians of saying ‘English’ when they mean ‘British’ or even ‘of the United Kingdom’. I hope any problems that arise are clarified by the context or by my comments.

Different types and styles of music have to be described and classified in one way or another. Broadly speaking, there is the ‘classical’ tradition and the ‘popular’ tradition – with ‘light’ music coming somewhere in between. The classical tradition includes, and was for a long time dominated by, church music. Over the years, the terms ‘serious’ and ‘art’ music have also come to be used, usually in relation to secular classical music. The ‘popular’ tradition was for many centuries synonymous with the ‘folk’ tradition, but, with the passing of time, it began to subdivide to include glees and the whole range of songs and dances that are evidently not part of the classical tradition – from the music of the pleasure gardens and the music halls to songs from stage musicals and films, to jazz and dance-band music, right

down to the pop and rock of the late-twentieth century. Such categories are helpful to the critic or the historian who is trying to generalise or draw meaning from a broad spectrum of musical and cultural activity, but they should not be seen as in any sense rigid. Some incidental music for the theatre, for example, clearly derives from and belongs to the classical tradition, whereas some of it is closer to light or even popular music; and different commentators will draw the dividing line in different places. Music is too flexible an art, too open to interpretation, for classification to be inflexible. Once more, I hope that context will clarify any issues that arise.

I have concentrated on the classical tradition, but not to the exclusion of folk and popular music, which remain essential parts of the story. In part, this is simply because, up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the classical tradition was far better documented. More important, however, is the fact that only in the latter part of the eighteenth century did social change stimulate the democratisation of music. Once that process was under way, popular music became more varied and diverse and began to exercise an ever-greater cultural influence in all areas of the British Isles. Popular music, therefore, features more strongly in Volume Two.

In the arts, each new generation builds on or reacts against the work and achievements of its predecessors. A book such as this, which spans the centuries, must pay attention to the nature of that progression and set the music of each age in its longer-term context. I have used terms such as ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’, ‘forward looking’ and ‘backward looking’ in order to position individual works and the styles of individual composers in relation to what had gone before or what was going on elsewhere in the musical world at the time. These terms should be taken as descriptive rather than judgemental.

I chose the title, ‘A History of Music in the British Isles’, both to avoid being drawn into the debate about what constitutes British music or a British composer, and because it seems to me that non-British factors have been fundamental from the beginning. The majority of the composers whose lives and works are considered in this study were born, lived and worked in Britain. Some – Handel, Carl Friedrich Abel, Johann Christian Bach – were born in Germany but spent most of their working lives in Britain. Percy Grainger was born in Australia and, although he lived to be seventy-nine, spent only thirteen years living in Britain. Others – William Vincent

Wallace, Cecil Sharp, A.L. Lloyd – spent considerable parts of their lives working in Australia. The story could not be told without including them. Nor could it be told without considering the role of composers such as Mendelssohn, Grieg, Dvořák and Sibelius, who only visited but nonetheless exercised considerable influence on British tastes and British music. And the same must be said of the many American singers, entertainers and composers who became popular in Britain during the twentieth century: Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby, Doris Day, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Bill Haley, Bob Dylan.

To some, the idea of writing a history of music of a particular country or region may seem odd or even offensive. I have actually been told that this book will stimulate chauvinism; that it runs counter to the spirit of music, which should transcend national boundaries and national consciousness. Obviously, I do not agree. The British Isles and the nations that grew up within them have their own cultures. Their music is their own; and their response to music is their own. I am not offering any social or political message, nor yet indulging in any special pleading. I am simply telling a story.

Laurence Bristow-Smith
Glenholme, Kirkcudbright
2017

1

Very Early Music

In 2003, archaeologists working on the site of a new housing estate at Greystones in County Wicklow uncovered six pipes carved from yew wood. They were all different lengths and had no holes or perforations, but they clearly formed a set and had clearly been attached to something, though that something had not survived. Experiments showed that, when blown, the three least-damaged pipes produced the notes of E flat, A flat and F natural; and experts now think that the Wicklow Pipes, as they have become known, may have formed a set of panpipes or part of a very early pipe-organ. The remains have been dated to c.2000 BC, making them the oldest wooden instrument ever discovered. So we know that even then the inhabitants of the British Isles were capable of making and playing relatively sophisticated musical instruments.¹

This should not come as a surprise. Music is a human universal. No culture has yet been discovered which did not have some form of music, produced by the human voice or by those specialised tools which we now call instruments. Chinese mythology holds that music, and much else, originated with Huang Di, the Yellow Emperor, who is supposed to have ruled for a hundred years from 2697 to 2597 BC. Huang Di sent Ling Lun, a scholar and court official, into the western mountains with orders to cut bamboo pipes that would imitate the call of the Fenghuang, a strange, immortal bird, believed to be the bringer of classical harmony. The Emperor then cast five bells to ring in tune with the flutes in the hope that their music would spread harmony throughout his domain. In Mesopotamia, between 2500 and 2000 BC, the Sumerians were not only playing music but developing the first form of musical notation. Ancient Greece was full of music: it featured at weddings and funerals, during religious ceremonies and on important political occasions; it was an essential accompaniment to the reciting of poetry and to theatrical productions. Percussion, wind and stringed instruments were common to all these cultures, and in each case music seems to have fulfilled a broadly similar function within society. It was heard at official and formal social occasions

and it accompanied artistic performances of various kinds. In both China and Ancient Greece, we have evidence of folk songs as well as more formal music – in China, they were considered sufficiently important to be performed at the Emperor’s court – and of love songs, which were sung or recited to music. But, as far as one can judge from the available evidence, the use of music as a vehicle for the expression of individual emotions or a personal point of view seems to have been very much a secondary function. Music’s principal purpose was to serve society.

The Wicklow Pipes belonged to the people of the Early Bronze Age, which is usually dated between c.2300 and 1500 BC. They herded livestock and could work gold, but we can only guess how music fitted into their society. With the people of the Middle and Late Bronze Age we are on slightly firmer ground. We know at least that they were capable of casting and welding bronze instruments of great beauty and sophistication. Ireland offers much archaeological evidence – presumably because the population there was neither reorganised under Roman occupation, nor displaced by Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement. Simon O’Dwyer, who has spent many years researching ancient Irish instruments, has shown how certain kinds of Bronze Age horn, originating about 1500 BC, remained in use until about 700 BC. Over such a long period, their design and method of manufacture would presumably have evolved, but, taken as a whole, O’Dwyer sees them as representing ‘the largest surviving family of pre-Renaissance musical instruments in Europe.’²

One hundred and four such horns have survived, and there are reports of another ten that were discovered and have since gone missing.³ They come in widely differing shapes and sizes. Many of the smaller examples, like the one found at the bottom of a well in Battle in East Sussex at the beginning of the nineteenth century, have a simple, curved shape, not unlike the traditional idea of a hunting horn. Some were end-blown in what we would regard as the normal manner; others were sounded through an aperture at the side. There is no direct evidence, but it is a fair assumption that such instruments would have been used in war, for tribal celebrations, and for ritual ceremonies.

The first inhabitants of the British Isles whose musical life we can reconstruct – albeit to a limited extent – are the Iron Age Celtic peoples who swept in waves across Europe and across what is today called the English Channel, between the ninth and first centuries BC. They were warlike, tribal peoples, given to coalescing into loose federations or kingdoms.

They had their tribal leaders, warlords and kings, but their religious and cultural life was controlled by their priests, the Druids. Some European Druids were literate in Greek, Latin and even Etruscan, but the Druids of the British Isles, whether literate or not, apparently banned writing in order to keep the mysteries of their race and religion to themselves.⁴ As a result, the few written records that are available come from non-Celtic sources, and are condescending, disdainful or simply hostile. In 54 BC, when Cicero suggested that one could not expect to find anyone in Britain educated in music or the arts,⁵ his opinion simply reflected the prevailing attitude towards a people that the Romans regarded as barbarians. He had never been to Britain and was basing his views on letters from other, equally prejudiced, Roman correspondents, including Julius Caesar.

The Celts were undoubtedly a musical people, but the precise nature of their music is a matter for speculation. Polybius, the Greek historian who lived from c.200 to 118 BC, suggests that at the Battle of Telamon in 225 BC, the Romans were ‘terrified by the excellent order of the Celtic host and the dreadful noise, for there were innumerable horn-blowers and trumpeters, and ... the entire army was shouting its war-cries at the same time.’⁶ That was in Italy, but horns and trumpets were evidently important to the Celts of the British Isles, too.

The Celts who reached Britain and Ireland about 500 BC quickly established the dominance of their civilisation. The existing proto-Celtic, Bronze Age population was either swept aside or assimilated, but there was some cultural continuity, and it appears to have included musical instruments. Again, Ireland provides most of the evidence, including a number of instruments which are impressive in both size and technical complexity. In 1837, four pipes made of yew wood and held together by copper rivets were found in a bog near Killyfaddy in County Tyrone. They date from c.300 BC and probably fitted together to form a wooden horn, or *trompa*, approaching three metres in length, bound with bronze and perhaps fitted with a bronze bell.⁷ Four *trompa* were discovered in 1794 at the famous site of Navan Fort (Old Irish *Emain Macha*) in County Armagh, which spans both the Bronze Age and Celtic periods. Three have since disappeared, but the one that survives – the Loughnashade *trompa* – is spectacular. Dating from the first century BC, it consists of two curved bronze tubes which fit together to form a two-metre-long horn with a flat, decorated, bronze disk round the bell. The bronze has been so delicately worked – to a thickness of half a millimetre – that the instrument weighs only one kilo. The two

sections were probably fitted together to form an S-shaped instrument which could be held upright above the head of the player or marching warrior. Reproductions of the Loughnashade *trompa* have been found to produce an E flat harmonic series and ‘a powerful (shockwave) tone ... which is further amplified and projected by the circular plate creating a blast of powerful sound ... very out of proportion to the size of the tube ... very valuable to *trompa* players leading an advancing army into battle.’⁸

One particular variety of *trompa* that has attracted much attention is the carynx (also *carnyx*). This consists of a number of bronze sections which, when assembled, reach up to three metres in length and are topped by an elaborately fashioned boar’s head. That it was held upright and played vertically is known from an illustration on the famous Gundestrup Cauldron, which was found in north-eastern Jutland at the end of the nineteenth century and has been dated to between 300 and 200 bc. One panel of the cauldron shows Celtic warriors undergoing some kind of initiation ceremony while a group of carynx players provides musical accompaniment. One of the first carynxes to be discovered was unearthed at Deskford in Banffshire, in north-eastern Scotland, in 1816. It has been dated to between 80 and 300 AD and the site evidently had some kind of ritual significance, again suggesting that the instrument was used in religious or votive ceremonies, perhaps before battle. Only nine other carynxes have survived; no fewer than five of them (four with boars’ heads and one in the form of a serpent), were found together in the Limousin in 2004, appearing to confirm the implication of the Gundestrup Cauldron that carynxes were often played together. The noise, to judge from modern reconstructions, would have been booming, raucous, and very loud.

Besides horns (which probably attract a disproportionate amount of attention because, being made of metal, a good number have survived) the Celts had a range of other instruments. They had flutes – meaning, in this context, tube-shaped, end-blown instruments, more like recorders or whistles than the modern transverse-blown flute – made of wood or bone and perhaps of terracotta. They also had a range of drums and other percussion. The bodhrán is much favoured these days by Irish folk musicians. Its simplicity – a skin stretched over a circular wooden frame with two crossed struts strengthening the structure and acting as a grip for the player – suggests a long history, although the name does not appear before the seventeenth century. A similar instrument, the crowdy-crawn found in Cornwall, may indicate a shared Celtic origin, but drums of similar

construction have a wide currency throughout the Mediterranean Basin and the Middle East. There was also a percussion instrument called a crotal – a hollow, pear-shaped, bronze casting with a ring at the top. Crotals, or something like them, were found in many early civilisations. Most of the examples from the British Isles were discovered in a single, late-Bronze-Age hoard in County Offaly in central Ireland. With a piece of metal or a pebble trapped inside, crotals may have been shaken like maracas as rhythmic accompaniment, or they may have been attached to a belt or harness so that they sounded during dancing in the manner of Morris bells.

Away from a martial or formal ceremonial context, however, the most important instrument in Celtic culture – at least until the arrival of the harp some centuries later – was undoubtedly the lyre. Lyres or something like them are known to have existed in Mesopotamia as far back as 2500 BC, and they were, of course, widely used in Ancient Greece, but they clearly have a long history in the British Isles as well. In 2012, archaeologists excavating a Celtic site at High Pasture Cave, near Torrin in the southern part of Skye, discovered what appears to be part of the bridge of a lyre, dating back to c.300 BC – which makes it the oldest stringed instrument ever discovered in Western Europe.⁹ The Celtic lyre came in different shapes and quite probably evolved over the centuries; it had different names – the crotta or chrotta or cruit; and they were all plucked or strummed, not played with a bow (although a bowed variety, the crwth, did evolve in Wales in the tenth or eleventh century).¹⁰ A striking statue of a seated Celtic figure with a seven-stringed lyre, discovered in central Brittany and dating from the second century BC – the so-called Lyre de Paule – gives a good idea what one looked like. So, too, do images on coins from the mid-first century BC unearthed in Sussex, although these appear to have fewer strings.

The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus wrote his *Bibliotheca historia* about the time the Sussex coins were minted. Having given a description of Britain, he goes on to describe the Celts of Gaul. They

have sharp wits and are not without cleverness at learning. Among them are also to be found lyric poets whom they call Bards. These men sing to the accompaniment of instruments which are like lyres, and their songs may be either of praise or of obloquy. Philosophers, as we may call them, and men learned in religious affairs are unusually honoured among them and are called by them Druids. The Gauls likewise make use of diviners,

accounting them worthy of high approbation, and these men foretell the future by means of the flight or cries of birds and of the slaughter of sacred animals.¹¹

Four centuries later, the Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, again describing the Celts in Gaul, wrote that

Throughout these regions, men gradually grew civilised and the study of the liberal arts flourished, initiated by the Bards, the Euhages and the Druids. Now, the Bards sang to the sweet strains of the lyre the valorous deeds of famous men composed in heroic verse, but the Euhages, investigating the sublime, attempted to explain the secret laws of nature. The Druids, being loftier than the rest in intellect, and bound together in fraternal organisations, as the authority of Pythagoras determined, were elevated by their investigation of obscure and profound subjects, and scorning all things human, pronounced the soul immortal.¹²

Both writers indicate that the bards sang their poetry to the music of the lyre; and both indicate a close association, which was later to become a conflation of roles, between Druids, *euhages* (defined in French as a Celtic prophet and student of astronomy and divination) and bards.

It is impossible to draw any definite conclusions from this, but we can speculate that what we see here is a very early glimpse of that shadowy, undefined relationship between music, poetry, nature, mysticism and religion which has risen to the surface at various stages in the history of British music. It is there in the music of the great Tudor masters, in Purcell, in the music of the Celtic Revival, in early-twentieth-century English pastoral, in some predominantly Celtic folk and folk-rock music, even in some of the symphonic rock of the 1970s. It manifests itself as a sense of transcendental longing, of yearning, which, while not unique to British music, is certainly a recurrent characteristic, and may perhaps have its distant origins in the role of music in early Celtic society.

2 Romans, Druids, and Bards

During the four hundred years between Diodorus and Ammianus, a large part of Britain was invaded and occupied by the Romans. Ireland was

uninvaded, unoccupied and – despite trading and diplomatic contacts based on fort settlements, such as Drumanagh on the east coast – largely unaffected by Rome. North of the line of Hadrian's Wall, in what later became Scotland and Northumberland, Pictish tribes skirmished with the Romans or traded with them, but remained largely uninfluenced by Roman culture.¹ South of Hadrian's Wall, the years of conquest were violent and divisive. Initially, the number of Romans living in the occupied portion of Britain was comparatively small, but the occupation lasted three hundred years and gradually, as the country was pacified, their numbers grew. Roman families established themselves as landowners and farmers. There was intermarriage with the local population, and many Celts working in the towns or on Roman estates became assimilated, living an essentially Roman way of life. By the fourth century AD, Roman Britain was stable and prosperous. A rich and landed elite had built themselves large country villas with elaborate furnishings, underfloor heating, mosaic floors, and painted walls. They enjoyed a standard of living and a quality of life which was probably not seen again until the time of Tudor squires or Georgian country gentry. It is hard to imagine that music did not play a significant part in their lives.

No doubt when Julius Caesar's forces raided the south-east shores of what is now England in 55 and 54 BC, and when the Emperor Claudius' invasion fleet landed in 43 AD, there was much braying of trumpets and horns – the Roman cavalry trumpet was often made of wood, covered with leather. No doubt Roman families living comfortably on their estates in Luguvalium or Vectis sang love songs to the accompaniment of the lyre – during the British rebellion of 61 AD, Boudicca, referring to the Emperor Nero's favourite pastime, stigmatised Roman troops as 'slaves to an inferior lyre-player.'² No doubt music provided the background to much of Roman social life: to performances at the amphitheatre in Castra Deva, to the taking of waters at Aquae Sulis, to dancing on summer evenings in country villas. No doubt there were marching songs as the soldiers tramped the length of Hadrian's Wall during the day, and drinking songs when they huddled round log fires in the milecastles at night. At Bridgeness on the Firth of Forth, at the eastern end of the Antonine Wall, a carved stone was discovered depicting, among other things, a group of Roman figures taking part in a ceremony of sacrifice, while one of them plays a set of mouth-blown double pipes, the *tibia*, which are known to have been associated with such rituals. In 1961, archaeologists at Silchester in Hampshire uncov-

ered a small statue of a girl holding what appears to be a reed-blown flute or pipe with projecting stops.³ The evidence for music is there, but the fact remains that in practical terms the Roman presence left no musical legacy at all.

In one respect, this may seem surprising, for it was the Romans who brought Christianity to Britain; and Christianity has been the greatest single influence on the western musical tradition. According to Origen, the early Christian theologian, Christianity had already reached Britain by the end of the second century AD. At first, it was a minority cult and still suffered occasional bouts of persecution – it was *c.*209 AD when St Alban, a former legionary, was martyred for sheltering a fugitive priest. In 313 AD, the Emperor Constantine promised toleration for Christians and then, in 391 AD, Theodosius declared Christianity to be the sole, official religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity grew in influence and popularity across Roman Britain, although never to the complete exclusion of pagan cults. We know that bishops were appointed and that theologians argued, and we must assume, despite a lack of written or archaeological evidence, that hymns of some kind were sung and that liturgical music of some kind was heard during services. When the Emperor Honorius withdrew imperial support from Britain in 410 AD, it marked a political but not necessarily a social watershed; so, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, we can assume that Roman Christianity with its attendant rites and music continued to be practised – including by the shadowy figure of King Arthur – until it was disrupted and pushed aside by the waves of pagan, Germanic tribes that swept across the North Sea.

Although the Romans left no direct musical legacy, two aspects of the Roman period did have a long-term impact on the musical future of the British Isles. Before it was effectively buried under a landslide of pagan Germanic invaders, the Christian Church of Roman Britain had begun to spread its influence beyond the area actually controlled by Rome. St Ninian began the process at the beginning of the fifth century, establishing the first Christian community beyond the northern border of Roman Britain at what is now Whithorn in Wigtownshire. Ninian's community did not survive, but St Patrick was more successful. Born to a Roman Christian family, probably somewhere near to Carlisle and the western end of Hadrian's Wall, and probably towards the end of the fourth century AD, Patrick is credited with converting the Irish. In fact, there were already Christians in Ireland in the fourth century, apparently coexisting with

druidic cults, but St Patrick's arrival, probably in the 530s, seems to have speeded up the process of conversion, and by the seventh century Ireland was, officially at least, a wholly Christian island. It was St Columba, arriving from Ireland and settling on Iona in 593, who brought Christianity back to mainland Britain and began converting the Celts of the north, including the enigmatic Picts. Emissaries from Iona gradually spread their faith through the fragmented, tribal kingdoms of what is now Scotland. And it was from Iona, at the request of King Oswald, that St Aidan travelled to Lindisfarne to lead the conversion of Northumbria in the seventh century. The northern tribes and the Scandinavian-held islands to the north and west held out longer, but by the tenth century the whole of the north of Britain could be said to be Christian.

This strand of Christianity, which for convenience we may call the Celtic Church,⁴ thus spread its influence over more than half the land area of the British Isles. Shaped in lands that had not known Roman occupation – lands where Rome was culturally as well as geographically distant – and cut off from the rest of Christian Europe by Germanic invaders, it developed independently over more than two hundred years. It evolved its own traditions, its own organisational structures, its own variations in the liturgy and, of course, its own music and its own way of using music during worship. Evidence is thin, and within the Celtic lands themselves there would undoubtedly have been variations, but nevertheless there clearly was a so-called Celtic rite, accompanied by a Celtic chant. It had largely disappeared by the twelfth century – overtaken by the standard Gregorian chant of the Roman rite – although one example survives in a fourteenth-century manuscript known as the *Inchcolm Antiphoner*.⁵ From this and other sources, certain features of the Celtic chant, such as the use of alliteration and the repetition of melody to fit couplets, have been tentatively identified. Yet the real musical importance of the Celtic Church may well have been broader in that it created a sense, even an expectation, of musical distinctness which echoes down the long tradition of Celtic-influenced church and classical music.

A second and potentially more important legacy of the Roman period stems from the suppression of the Druids in 60 AD. The Romans, as polytheists themselves and out of political expediency, were traditionally tolerant where matters of religion were concerned. That tolerance did not extend to the Druids, partly because their rites and observances included ritual murder and human sacrifice, but also because it was the Druids who

had inspired resistance and rebellion on the part of the native Celts. Eventually, they were driven back to their stronghold and the centre of their faith on the Isle of Anglesey. Suetonius Paulinus led his army across the Menai Straits in a fleet of specially constructed transports. The Druids were slaughtered; their sacred groves cut down and burned; and their power, at least in Roman Britain, destroyed. Druids continued to exist and function north of Hadrian's Wall and across the sea in Ireland, but their power was fatally weakened and, as far as one can tell, they and their belief systems were simply overtaken by the spread of Christianity.

With the end of druidical power and the emergence of Christianity, the figure of the bard appears to gain new importance in Celtic secular society. Much of the evidence for this period derives from myth and tradition, and what documentary evidence there is comes from manuscripts that date from several centuries after the events they describe. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconstruct a situation in which, detached from their previous religious function with the Druids, the bards attached themselves to political leaders. The image of the Irish bard sitting beneath the throne of the High King and singing songs of the wisdom and valour in battle of his lord may not be too far from the truth. We know that Taliesin, the great bard of the early sixth century, was in the service of Urien, King of Rheged (which corresponds roughly to modern Cumbria). In what is one of the oldest surviving pieces of vernacular literature in Europe, Taliesin not only extols the virtues of his lord, but also shows the extent to which the bard was dependent on his patron.

Urien of Echwyd, most liberal of Christian men
 Much do you give to men in this world...
 Happy the Christian bards, so long as you live,
 Sovereign supreme, ruler all highest
 The stranger's refuge, strong champion in battle ...
 I shall have no delight
 If my lips praise not Urien.

So the bard was employed not only for his skill as a poet and musician; he was also a public relations man, a booster of the royal reputation and the royal ego – a role musicians have continued to play across the centuries.

Yet, at the same time, the role of bard was more than just political. It was the bard now who acted as the guardian of race, or tribal, memory. The inhabitants of the British Isles – both the Celts and, when they arrived, the Anglo-Saxons – maintained a tradition of preserving long and detailed

genealogies of their royal and noble families which is not in evidence to the same degree elsewhere in Europe. It was a tradition that was certainly more developed among the Celts than among later arrivals, and may well have had Celtic origins: certainly the largest and most detailed corpus of ancient genealogy is to be found in Ireland. Until they began to be written down in the tenth and eleventh centuries, these genealogies, like the wealth of Irish mythological tales that have come down to us, survived by being sung. The story of *The Battle of Magh Tuireadh*, for example, exists in a sixteenth-century manuscript, but the text is believed to be a twelfth-century compilation of material first written down in the ninth century. The story tells of the mythological origins of the Irish people: a contest for possession of Ireland between the Tuatha Dé Danann and the Fir-Bolgs. At one point in the story, the Dagda, High King of the Tuatha Dé Danann, pursues his stolen harp into the enemy's camp. He regains possession of his instrument and plays the three strains of music which all harpers must have at their command – the Strain of Lament, the Strain of Laughter, and the Lullaby. His enemies naturally cry, laugh, and then fall asleep, allowing him to escape. Such tales must surely have been sung or chanted to the accompaniment of a harp or lyre.

In many of these early Irish stories, music is portrayed as having magical powers. This is, of course, a useful narrative device, but it also contributes to the idea of the musician as a figure of power and control. Later, this connection was developed to associate the figure of the bard with wisdom – often hidden, riddling or gnomic wisdom – and with the gift of prophecy. *The Book of Taliesin* survives in an early fourteenth-century manuscript, containing fifty-six poems – some probably by Taliesin himself; others dating from the tenth century. They cover a range of subjects. There are songs in praise of Urien and other great men, songs in praise of mead and ale, elegies for dead heroes, and Christian hymns, but also a solid core of works of prophecy, philosophy and mystical wisdom. The central figure is often the bard himself – his power, his truth-telling, his ability to assume different identities, and the mystical sources of his wisdom. The poems frequently take the form of lists of roles or guises that the poet has assumed, and of things he has experienced: lists which the audience or, later, the reader was clearly expected to understand or interpret in the light of esoteric knowledge to which modern readers no longer have access.⁶

I am a bard to be praised. The unskilful
 May he be possessed by the ravens and eagles and birds of wrath.

Avagddu came to him with his equal
 When the bands of four men feed between two plains.
 Abiding in heaven was he, my desire,
 Against the eagle, against the fear of the unskilful.
 I am a bard, and I am a harper,
 I am a piper, and I am a crowder.
 Of seven score musicians the very great enchanter.⁷

The music of the bards was never written down and is impossible to reconstruct (though attempts have been made), but we can still see its distant legacy in the concept of the *eisteddfod*. In 517 AD, in what is now South Wales, Taliesin himself is thought to have directed an *Eisteddfod*; it was perhaps a sort of extended master-class run by senior bards in order to pass knowledge and practice on to the next generation. Another took place at Conway in North Wales in 540 AD. No more are recorded until the twelfth century when there were at least four (in c.1100, 1107, 1135 and 1176), although that does not mean that others did not take place. The tradition surfaced again in the fifteenth century and, with occasional breaks and revivals, has persisted until the present day, when the annual National *Eisteddfod* of Wales attracts 5,000 participants and over 150,000 visitors. The true legacy of the Celtic bards, however, may well lie elsewhere.

Norman Davies, in his study *The Isles*, has detailed the way in which, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the revival of interest in Celtic culture led to Celtic mysticism breaking its traditional bounds and becoming an influence and a force in English culture.⁸ Thomas Gray's 'The Bard', the whole Ossian saga, and Blake's 'The Voice of the Ancient Bard' all showed that, however romanticised, the idea of the bard with its overtones of poetry, music and mysticism was not dead. W. B. Yeats was no musician, but many of his poems are cast as songs and there is in his work a mysticism which, in his own mind as well as the minds of many critics, connects him with the bardic tradition. It surfaces also in the work of Rutland Boughton and Joseph Holbrooke at the beginning of the twentieth century. And the idea of the bard as someone who has an ability to see and communicate beyond the ability of ordinary mortals is one that remains powerful to this day. It is not too much to suggest that the prevalence in the English-speaking world of an attitude which regards certain singer-songwriters as sages or prophets, which seeks to extract from their work some message or philosophy, and which regards them as being gifted with a different or higher level of perception, stems ultimately from the concept of the Celtic

bard. Bob Dylan is the most obvious example. Others might include Nick Cave, David Bowie, or even Tom Waits.

3 Anglo-Saxons, Celts, and Harps

Meanwhile, in the south and east of what had been Roman Britain, three Germanic tribes – Angles, Saxons and Jutes – which had begun to arrive in waves at the beginning of the fifth century, were now sweeping inland. By 600 AD, they controlled all of what is now England with the exception of Cumbria, Lancashire and Cornwall. These Anglo-Saxons, to use the most convenient term, naturally brought with them their own musical traditions, although precisely what these were is difficult to establish. The storybook image is of a poet-musician, known as a *scop*, standing before his lord in the mead hall and plucking a harp while declaiming *Beowulf* or the story of some glorious victory achieved against all the odds – and it may not be too inaccurate. Percy Young, in his *History of British Music*, suggests that 'the Bardic tradition as established and maintained by the Celts and Britons was readily taken over by the Saxons and the Angles, and *scops* and *gleemen* (the former ranking first in seniority) were in consistent employment as long as they obliged their masters.'¹ It is certainly true, as Norman Davies has argued, that while the Anglo-Saxons ruled the land and wielded military and political power, they did not exterminate the Celtic peoples of Roman Britain, nor were they numerous enough to repopulate the country and replace them. The Celts, conquered, and perhaps periodically oppressed, continued to live their lives, speak their own language and follow their own cultural traditions.² There must have been plenty of opportunities for crossover between the two ethnic and linguistic groups.

Our understanding of the *scop* and his role comes principally from Anglo-Saxon poetry. *Widsith* is the oldest Anglo-Saxon poem. It is found in a tenth-century manuscript, the Exeter Book, but probably dates from seventh-century Mercia and may make use of material that is considerably older. The narrator is an itinerant *scop* whose family are far away and who has no lasting bond to any king or leader.

	I followed many
So I may sing	and stories tell
I can in hall rehearse	before the gathering
How men of kingly birth	were kinglike towards me ...

When we struck up the lay before our lord in war
 Scilling and I with sheer-rising voices
 Many men there of unmelting hearts
 Who well knew wording their thought
 Said this was the best song sung in their hearing.³

Deor, which probably dates from the eighth century, is another lament, this time on the part of a scop who has lost his place in his master's hall and consequently feels himself an outcast among men. In *Beowulf*, which was probably written down in the early eighth century but composed earlier, Grendel prowls in the darkness outside Hrothgar's great feasting hall, Heorot, hating what he hears.

The harp was struck
 and the clear song of a skilful scop
 told bravely of the beginnings of man
 how the Almighty had made the earth
 a shining plain set about with waters.

After *Beowulf* has slain Grendel, scopos perform 'words and music for their warrior prince / tunes on the harp and tales of adventure'; and later, at the end of the poem, after *Beowulf* has been killed by the dragon, a Geat woman with braided hair sings a dirge, lamenting his death.

It is worth emphasising that these poems were not composed until two or even three hundred years after the first Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, and not written down until many years after their composition, so they may well reflect Anglo-Saxon practice as influenced by Celtic models. It is also worth remarking that both *Deor* and *Beowulf* show signs of later Christian interpolations – tales of the Creation are not really appropriate for Heorot – which may also distort the picture. What is clear, however, is that Anglo-Saxon scopos were not bards. They served a king or lord; they were poet-musicians composing and performing battle narratives, laments and elegies, but the scop's focus was the heroic, or the loss of heroic possibility, rather than the mystic. He may have been the keeper of tribal genealogies, but the attempted connection was with a historical rather than a mythical past. He may have offered a moral vision, based on loyalty and heroism, but it was not a prophetic one.

If Celtic traditions influenced the practice of the Anglo-Saxon scopos, the Anglo-Saxons influenced Celtic music in a much more fundamental way. Harps have a historical pedigree as long as that of the lyre: they are known to have existed in ancient Sumeria and Persia, and they seem to have been

popular in northern Europe by the fifth century. Logic suggests that the Anglo-Saxons brought the harp with them – the name itself has a Germanic origin, meaning 'to pluck' – although, given the lack of records, the evidence can only be circumstantial. The harp, however, was not their main or dominant instrument at the time. At the beginning of the seventh century, the Bishop of Poitiers noted that the preferred instrument among the Saxons was the unbowed crwth (effectively a kind of lyre).⁴ And, of course, it was a lyre that was found at the late sixth- or early seventh-century ship burial at Sutton Hoo in Suffolk.

Whatever the precise sequence of events, the harp grew in popularity and rapidly spread right across the British Isles, so that carvings of harpers appear on an eighth-century Pictish stone found at Monifieth in Angus in Scotland, on the ninth-century Dupplin Cross in Strathearn, Perthshire, and on a tenth-century cross at Durrow Abbey in County Offaly in Ireland.⁵ The harp may have been an Anglo-Saxon import and it may feature in our traditional image of an Anglo-Saxon scop, but over the years it has become almost completely identified with Celtic culture. Thomas Moore's lines, 'The harp that once through Tara's halls / The soul of music shed', are for many people a definition of Irish musical culture; and the harp is the accepted heraldic symbol for Ireland, as well as providing the logos for Ireland's national drink and national airline. The Welsh musical tradition is almost wholly defined, at least for outsiders, by the harp and the eisteddfod. In Scotland, however, while the Celtic harp, or clarsach, remains popular from the Borders to the Western Isles, and features in national graded music exams, it is less iconic as a representation of the nation's musical culture.

Somewhere around 600 AD, a small army of warriors from the lands of the Gododdin, which comprised Northumberland and parts of south-east Scotland, crossed Hadrian's Wall and marched south to confront the growing power of the Anglo-Saxons. Their overwhelming defeat at the Battle of Catraeth⁶ occasioned one of the great bardic poems, *Y Gododdin* – a series of elegies for the dead heroes composed by the Aneirin, who, along with Taliesin, is one of the few names to have come down to us from the period. Yet if the old order was still fighting for survival in the north – though defeated on this occasion – a wholly new order, that was to alter the direction of religion, politics and music in Britain, had arrived in the south, in the Kingdom of Kent, just three years earlier.