

The Celtic Circle

Ancient Celtic monks carved patterns into stone and painted onto illuminated manuscripts designs of complex knot work. To them, the intersecting lines represented the thread of life returning unendingly to its source. In harp therapy, we draw upon some of these ancient practices to weave the various strains of the gift of music into a seamless journey that completes a circle.

In his book entitled “Ancient Music of Ireland”, first published in 1890, Edward Bunting details the three Gaelic strains that a proficient harper needed to command on his instrument before he could become a “professional”.

They are:

Geantraighe (in English characters: Geanttraidheacht) – Love, or music of a graceful and expressive order.

Goltraighe (in English characters: Golltraidheacht) - Exciting sorrow, or melancholy music.

Suantraighe (in English characters: Suantraidheacht) – Soothing, or sleepy, composing strains.

The history of three strains can be traced back to ancient stories. Here is an excerpt from the website: <http://www.vincentpeters.nl/triskelle/history/thedagda.php?index=060.015.010.060.010> about the three strains of music.

The harp of The Dagda is known by two names: Daurdabla, translated as Oak Of Two Green, and Coir Cethair Chuir, Four Angled Music. Sometimes the name Uaithne is used for the harp, but Uaithne was in fact the harper. In the course of the history the harp would evolve to a national emblem of Ireland.

Three Noble Strains of Ireland

Boann gave Uaithne three sons. The birth of the oldest boy, Goltraiges, was extremely painful for the mother, while the second, Gentraiges, was born in joy. At the last delivery Boann was tired and after Suantraes was born she became heavy with fatigue. The three boys followed their father’s footsteps, but they all developed a harping style suitable to the circumstances of their birth. These styles, the goltraí (strain of weeping), the geantraí (strain of merriment) and at last the suantraí (strain of sleep), are known as the Three Noble Strains of Ireland.

The following story explains how important these Three Noble Strains are. Even in battle The Dagda and Daurdabla were inseparable. The rich decorated instrument was heavily scarred. Of course The Dagda took Daurdabla with him to the Second Battle of Mag Tuiredh. And one day The Dagda discovered that his harp was stolen. Furious, The Dagda and his son, Aengus Mac Oc, went to the campsite of the Fomorians to retrieve Daurdabla. Brutally they entered the dining hall where they saw the harp hanging on the wall. With a chant The Dagda called his instrument:

*Come Daurdabla, apple-sweet murmurer
Come, Coir-cethair-chuir, four-angled frame of harmony,
Come summer, come winter,
Out of the mouths of harps and bags and pipes!*

Daurdabla immediately flew across the dining hall, killing several Fomorians in his flight, and landed in the hand of The Dagda. In order to get away unscathed The Dagda played the Three Noble Strains of Ireland: the goltraí, or strain of weeping, the geantraí, or strain of merriment and at last the suantraí, the strain of sleep. After the last strain all Fomorians were fast asleep and The Dagda and Aengus MacOc quietly left the camp.

Massage and the Celtic Circle

As mentioned in the lesson, I work with aromatherapist, Rodney Schwan, who uses a beautiful ancient Celtic massage technique that involves working down one side of the patient's body and up the other. Using light traces of aromatic essential oils, he first massages the arms, and then works down the leg to the sole (soul) of the foot. He continues up the other side of the body, all the while using very specific circular motions. While he works, I play relaxing music in the Mixolydian mode and then modulate to a deeper Aeolian, Dorian or Phrygian mode. When he works up the other side of the patient, the music modulates into a lighter mode up to Ionian. As he finishes his work, he makes prolonged and deep eye contact with the patient.

My music reflects his work, and together with the patient we create what feels to us like a mystical moment – one that combines many vibrational energies to elevate the soul. Our simultaneous use of all these sensory elements - smell, touch, sight and sound - envelope and cradle the patient in a loving cocoon of caring.



Rodney performs Ancient Technique of Celtic Foot Massage while Christina creates Celtic Circle of Music

Many of our patients have had these deep moments, and I truly believe our work enables them to be at peace with themselves at the end of life. I regularly receive reports from patients and families that this experience reaches them at a profound spiritual level. Doctors and nurses at the San Diego Hospice who have witnessed these moments tell us they, too, are left with a feeling of awe. I feel truly blessed to be working at San Diego Hospice, and hope that someday I will experience my final transition as beautifully as the majority of our patients do.

Massage therapy and harp therapy are complementary healing techniques that go well together to facilitate the healing process. By making these musical transitions coincide closely with certain specific massage movements, we as harp practitioners are able to create soothing music that flows. Our harp music becomes its own kind of 'auditory massage'. It allows the patient an outlet for emotional release which can be often helpful in times of transition.

Following is a chord progression you might use when playing harp for someone whose resonant tone is G: (If you are unsure how to improvise on chords, then you need to study the previous lessons in this *Creative Harping Series – Learn to Improvise*).

The Circle of Music for a Person with a Resonance of G

Choices: G Major – uplifting, g minor – reflective, G Mixolydian (Key of C) – dreamy

Sharps and Flats in these keys are:

G Major – F#

g minor – Bb, Eb

G Mixolydian – Key of C – begin on G and switch to F chord

Or you can use Em (with F#) and accent the G in melodic improvisation.

The Circle for G

The Circle: (relaxing – Mixolydian, minor – reflective, major – outreaching) (fix F natural)

G G G G

F F G G play these two lines 2 times (fix F#’s)

Em Em Em Em

D D Em Em play these two lines 2 times

Em Em D D

C C D D play this once – they are the transition line (C becomes the turnaround note)

G G C C D D G G

G G C C D D G G play these two lines 2 times



On the following pages, you will find the Celtic Circle for various Resonant Tones/Keys. There are two rules of thumb I use that will help you in your thought process to find the Mixolydian Mode and the Locrian Mode.

For the Mixolydian Mode – take the person’s resonant tone – i.e. G, and think down a 5th which would be C. That then becomes the key you play in starting on the G. Then follow the pattern for Mixolydian mode – (root and 7th chords for beginners.) For F, think down a 5th to Bb – you would then set a Bb and Eb and proceed to play Mixolydian on the Bb. You will then have to adjust your levers when you are ready to go into the Ionian of the Resonance/Key. But before you play the Ionian, you will modulate into the Aeolian of that Major Key. I have left two Circles blank for you to fill in so that you can understand the process.

To create the Locrian Mode – that of hovering in space, take the resonant tone of the person – let’s say B. The resonance is the 7th of the key – in this case, that is the key of C. Then put the relative minor – the Aeolian in the left hand for the chord. That would be the A minor. One more example – let’s say a person’s resonant tone is E. E is the 7th of the Key of F. The relative minor – the Aeolian of the Key of F is D minor, therefore, fix the Bb so you are in the Key of F, play D minor with the left hand and hover on the E with your right hand.



Celtic Circle for G

Key of GM and Em have one sharp F#

G Mixolydian is 5th above C - Key of C has no sharps or flats



5. Geantraighe

Ionian

G G C D
G G C/D G



4. Transition Line

Em Em D D
C C D D



3. Goltraighe

Aeolian

Em Em Em Em
D D Em Em



1. Suantraighe

Mixolydian

G G G G
F F G G



2. Fix F#s - play 8 G chords



Celtic Circle for C

Key of CM and Am have no sharps or flats

C Mixolydian is 5th above F - Key of F has one flat - Bb

Geantraighe

Ionian

C C F G
C C F/G C



Transition Line

Am Am G G
F F G G



Goltraighe

Aeolian

Am Am Am Am
G G Am Am



Suantraighe

Mixolydian

C C C C
Bb Bb C C



Fix Bb's - play 8 C chords



Improvise on:

G G G G

F F G G

Then play the song

Christ Child's Lullaby

North Hebrides

Mo ghaol, mo ghradh, is m'eud - ail Thu! Gur

6

m'iunnt - tas ur is m'eibh - neas Thu! Mo mhac - an

11

al - aunn, ceut - ach Thu! cha'n fhiu mi fhein a bhith 'd

17

dhail. Mo ghaol an t,suil a sheall - as tla! Mo

22

ghaol an cridh' tha liont' le gradh! Ged is lean abh

28

thu gun chail Is lion - mhor buaidh tha ort a' fas.

Improvise on:

G G G G

F F G G

then:

play 8 G chords while improvising, avoiding the F's while you sharp all the F's

now improvise on:

Em Em Em Em

D D Em Em

now turn the page

Improvise on
Em Em Em Em
D D Em Em
then play this song twice

Adeu Dundee

Skene
Manuscript

Improvise on:
Em Em Em Em
D D Em Em

then transition line:
Em Em D D
C C D D

then improvise on:
G G C D
G G C/D G

then turn the
page

Improvise two times on:
 G G C C D D G G
 then play the song

Give Me Your Hand

Rory Dall O'Cathian
 Scotland

after the song, improvise again on:
 G G C C D D G G (2 times)

You have now completed the
 Celtic Circle of music with
 both improvisation and song
 for the resonance of G