

PATRICK BALL

Art Form: Storytelling

Style: Traditional

Culture: Irish

MEET THE ARTIST:

Patrick Ball was born and raised in California and says he gave little thought to where his ancestors came from. He was studying to be a lawyer when a required course introduced him to the history of Ireland. This led to graduate study in history and a journey to Ireland. There he fell in love with the eloquence of the Irish oral tradition and the Celtic harp. The unity of Irish words, music and history became his passion and his profession. Patrick Ball now tours extensively throughout the United States and Canada and is considered one of the premier Celtic harpers and storytellers in the world. His recordings have sold over one-half million copies and earned national awards. A review published in California Music Magazine reads, "Patrick's harp sounds so glorious that it's quite understandable why it's reputed to be the instrument of choice among the angels."

ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

The performance is an enchanting collage of storytelling and harp music. Each tale is accompanied and illustrated by a melody by Turlough O'Carolan, Ireland's foremost harper and composer. As the stories are traditional, so are the renditions of the tunes. Patrick's collection of tales is large and each audience receives an individually tailored performance. Patrick might tell *The Legend of Knockgraston* and accompany the tale with "Carolan's Quarrel with the Landlady" or "Sheebeg Sheemore." *Far Darrig in Donegal* might be accompanied by "Brian Boru's March" or "Carolan's Welcome." Each melody is carefully chosen to set the right mood for the story it accompanies. In the performance, Patrick will also describe the anatomy and techniques of the harp.



PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

The history and design of harps go back to early cultures. Any culture using a hunting bow had a harp-like instrument. Harps are found in Egyptian wall paintings and on Greek vases. The poet Homer is said to have used the Greek harp or lyre as accompaniment for his epics.

The harp in Ireland dates back to 460 A.D. when a Papal Music School was founded there. The Irish became known as expert harp players and storytellers, using the music to embellish their tales. These artists were known as harpers or bards. Harpers were required to provoke three emotions in their audience: laughter, tears or sleep.

For centuries, Ireland was organized into large estates ruled by local chieftains. Chieftains had resident bards who entertained and inspired the assembly. There were also bards who traveled the country, telling legends or the news in exchange for food and lodging. As the ruling powers of Ireland shifted into English hands, Irish culture, including harp playing, declined.

Turlough O'Carolan (1670-1738) was the last and greatest of the harpers. During his childhood, his father worked on the estate of MacDermott Roe. This chieftain's wife liked young O'Carolan and paid for his general education. In his late teens, O'Carolan contracted smallpox and became blind. Mrs. McDermott Roe then changed his studies to music and later gave him a harp, horses and a guide to begin his career as an itinerant harper. He enjoyed success as a composer, writing tunes wherever he visited. Many of his tunes are known by the names of the people for whom they were written.

Harp designs follow their history. Early harps were bow-shaped, with no triangular frame. Irish harps were triangularly-framed and strung with metal wire. Strings of different lengths in the frame produce the tones of the musical scale. Tones are adjusted by turning a tuning peg at the top of the string with a tuning key. Harps are built of many woods, often maple or walnut. Patrick Ball's harp is maple and strung in brass wire.

The 1960s saw a revival of Irish harp music. Artists like Patrick Ball have revived the Bardic tradition.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

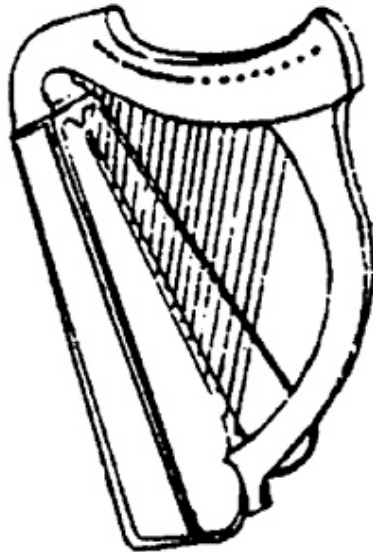
- Which story from the performance was your favorite? Why?
- Have you heard an Irish harp played before? How would you describe the sound?
- How did the harp music Patrick played relate to the stories that he told?
- What character from the stories do you remember most? Describe.
- Would you like to learn to play the harp or another stringed instrument?

FRAMEWORK FOCUS - LANGUAGE ARTS:

Each traditional culture has its own fairy and folktale tradition. The bards of Ireland kept alive tales of leprechauns and "wee folk". Britain has stories of gnomes and pixies. Scandinavia tells of trolls and Hawaii of menehunes.

Make a list of the cultures represented by students in your classroom. Investigate the folk tale traditions of the various cultures. What characters are the equivalent of the "wee people", fairies, trolls, etc.?

Have students choose a favorite character from these "fairy folk" and write their own original tale.



Legend:

- ⊗ Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▮ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- * Connections, Relations, Applications

ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

- ⊗ Get a piece of fishing line, string or wire. Tie one end to a heavy object. Stretch the string tight until you can pluck it and make a sound. Keep changing the length of the stretched span of string. A shorter length will produce higher tones, a longer length will produce a lower tone. Strings of different lengths are held in a triangular frame to produce a variety of tones and make a basic harp. Create a simple melody on the instrument.
- ▮ Find the island of Ireland on a map. The land mass is divided into thirty-two counties. Six counties form Northern Ireland which is governed by Great Britain. Identify them. The other counties form an independent country, the Republic of Ireland. Find Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, and Dublin, capital of the Republic. How many cities or towns can you find that were mentioned in the stories told?
- ❖ Select a fairy or folktale which you think could be enhanced by the addition of music. Choose 2 or 3 short pieces of music that express the mood or culture of the tale. Tell or read the story, inserting the music where you think it embellishes the telling.
- ⇒ Another type of harp frequently heard is the orchestra harp. This harp is larger than its Celtic relative and is strung in gut, rather than wire, as are many other stringed instruments. Not only is an orchestra harp tuned with a key, but it uses seven foot pedals to raise or lower tones while it is being played, producing all the notes of a full chromatic scale.

Play a recording of classical harp music. Two famous pieces often played on a harp are "Clair de Lune" by Debussy and "The Swan" from Carnival of the Animals by Saint-Saens. Compare and contrast the sounds of the Celtic and orchestra harps. Which sound do you like better? Why? What types of music seem more suited to which type of harp?

SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

Walton, Russell, comp., *A Harp of Fishbones*. White Row Press, Belfast, N. Ireland: 1992.

Yeats, W.B., ed., *Fairy & Folk Tales of Ireland*. Collier Books, New York, New York: 1986.