

Carolan

By Dónal Thompson



Think of a blind musical genius and you'll probably imagine Stevie Wonder or Ray Charles. But darkness was bringing out musical bliss a long, long time before soul and the blues rocked America.

Turlach O'Carolan's compositions were getting the Irish feet tapping as far back as the 17th Century. If you have ever listened to Irish music, you have very probably heard some of his work.

He was born in 1670 to a farming family and when an illness left him blind a local philanthropist paid for his musical education. After three years he began his career as an itinerant harper, a job which was highly respected in Ireland in those times. Harpers were considered bards - almost mystical artists.

He was given a very warm welcome in the big country houses where he entertained

the properous. He also visited poor towns and his playing was regarded as a major cultural event.

Part of Carolan's musical contribution to social life was to play at weddings and baptisms. He would also have been expected to play a *cumha* or lament at the funerals of Irish chieftains.

Carolan was the 17th Century equivalent of a pop star and was in demand from both ends of the Irish political spectrum. He only learned English late in life and so almost all his songs are in Irish. However, his English speaking patrons who had colonised parts of Ireland seemed to have enough *gaelic* to understand.

European music at the time was dominated by Vivaldi, Corelli, and Geminiani. Carolan, whose sense of humour was well known, could not resist calling himself Carolini on some published music sheets.

One story tells of a famous Italian composer visiting Carolan and deliberately making a mistake when playing a concerto of Vivaldi's. Very courteously, Carolan corrected him and then improvised a brilliant new tune based around Vivaldi's. The visiting artist never mocked an Irishman again. It is now an Irish classic fondly called "Carolan's Concerto". Every Irish musician of note has recorded it.

The majority of Carolan's compositions are known by the names of patrons like Lady Athenry or George Brabazon. However, as his health failed and he returned to house of his first patron, Carolan composed his last piece called simply "Carolan's farewell to Music". His death brought another farewell too. In the old church of Kilonan a stone proclaims "Within this churchyard lies interred Caolan, the last of the Irish bards".