

MARY O'HARA – CONCERT/RECITAL REVIEWS FROM PAST YEARS

NEWSPAPER CUTTINGS OF FEATURE ARTICLES ARE SEPARATE

(Only authenticated material is included, .unedited – word for word. Four “...” means sentence(s) irrelevant to M. O'Hara omitted. A ? means attribution is faded and awaiting further verification. Reviews are in chronological order.)

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN 1954

Irish National Concert

Sure, you could hear the angels sing at the Free Trade Hall last night. And Irish eyes were first smiling, then tearful, as Michael O'Duffy, Martin Dempsey and the Gaelic League Choir poured out their songs from over the water.

But singing sweetest of all was Mary O'Hara, the girl with the eloquent harp, a voice like a nightingale, and enough native charm to melt the Blarney Stone.

With that harp, that voice and that grace, sooner or later she has to be christened the Irish Angel.

- L.F.

THE SCOTSMAN 1/9/1955

A Scotsman's Log

... We ourselves, after 10 days of strict neutrality and absenteeism, are able to announce the best Festival performance of 1955 as decided by persons of absolute impartiality who have communicated with us. The outstanding performance, this year, was that of Miss O'Hara, a young Irish lady who played the harp and sang with the T.C.D. Players, and who has now left Edinburgh for Dublin. Everyone who saw and heard her assures us that she undoubtedly stole the whole, giddy Festival show....

The Irish Times August 30th? 1955

EDINBURGH FESTIVAL

2: Wilder and Yeats

- by Ulick O'Connor

Irish Music

That rural Ireland possesses, besides a wealth of Irish speech, a treasure house of folk music was indicated at the interval. In between the performances of the four plays a young lady, Miss Mary O'Hara, came out with her harp to play Irish airs. The combination of a pleasant accent with the blackbird notes of the harp, and a voice as delicate and exquisite as a filigree pattern, soon had massive bearded Scots in the audience blubbing softly and declaring their helplessness in the hands of this smiling child. Irish ballads have often quite beautiful lines in them, and Miss O'Hara's singing, a perfect marrying of word

and song, brought out the delightful imagery of songs like "Carraig Donn" and the "Spanish Lady." Even the ranks of Bloomsbury could scarcely suppress a tear, and Indians and heathen Chinese combined to spread the news about this performance, which was quite the talk of the Festival.

THE SUNDAY TIMES, (London)

February 19 1956

By Maurice Wiggan

Viewers of B.B.C. television who shared my hope that we were in for the luxury of a week without music were disappointed.

We did not even go short of that absurd anachronism, "background music", a hangover from the days of the silent film which has infuriated countless viewers, most of whom seem to have written to me...

"More Contrary" was cut from an hour to thirty minutes. If it had been cut to ten minutes it would still have been five minutes too long for me. The five minutes which I should have been sorry to miss were occupied by a beautiful Irish girl, Miss Mary O'Hara, who sang sweetly to the accompaniment of her own harp. Her two brief appearances have been the only redeeming features of a show which is as stubbornly, unfathomably fatuous as anything on the air.

EVENING EXPRESS, UK

Tue July 10 1956

MARY HAS FOUND A POT OF GOLD

The talented young Irish harpist, Mary O'Hara, who appears at the Capitol this week in the Terry-Thomas show, will do some trousseau shopping while she is in Aberdeen.

Mary, who incidentally is as genuine and intriguing as the folk songs she sings so well, will be married in Oxford in two week's time to Mr. Richard Selig, an American poet and Rhodes scholar, who is meantime studying there.

Before they leave in September for America, where they will make their home near Seattle, they will spend their honeymoon in Ireland, where they met and in the Hebrides. Mary will also sing at the Edinburgh Festival this year – probably her last performance for some time in Britain.

"But well be coming back every year if possible" Mary told me. "I shall want to return to Ireland often to get more traditional Irish songs."

Mary O'Hara's success story has a fairy-tale quality. Yet in its authenticity it's a publicity agent's dream.

Hearing it told in the soft Irish brogue, one of the chief attractions of this willowy girl with the long brown hair, freckled chiselled face, and laughing blue eyes was one of the highlights of the Aberdeen holiday for me.

It started with a pageant on the works of Thomas Moore, when Mary had to learn to play the Irish Harp for the leading role she played in it.

After she left school she decided to take more lessons from the woman who taught her for the pageant.

That lead to an exciting four-day visit to London, including parties and a TV appearance, to do advance publicity for the Irish Festival of Welcome, An Tóstal.

Her teacher also introduced her to Mr Seán Óg ÓTuama, the science teacher who has a collection of old Irish folk songs in his head and passes them on to her by word of mouth.

"He's a wonderful person. He teaches Irish and Gaelic folk songs for the love of it – and he's just a leprechaun."

And he has certainly, through his music, led Mary to the right pot of gold – one in which happiness and satisfaction of reviving traditional airs through TV performances and concert tours are more important than fame and fortune.

And the moral of Mary's story, I feel, is that she has never betrayed his trust – she takes a stand as strong as an Irish martyr against tempting contracts, and refuses to sing or play anything but traditional airs.

EVENING DISPATCH (Edinburgh)

August 3, 1956

Festival Show

Guest artist in the Scottish entertainment, "The Pleasure of Scotland," which the Edinburgh Festival Society are presenting in the Assembly Hall during the Festival's first week, is an Irish girl who has recently become a popular TV personality.



She is 21-year-old Mary O'Hara, who has made quite a reputation for her presentation, by voice and harp, of many of the lesser-known traditional songs of both Ireland and Scotland.

PUNCH

August 29th 1956
- Ronald Searle

....This year's main native entry, "Pleasures of Scotland," could have been described more accurately as an "Anguish of Scotland," so heavy was its burden of lament. Almost it succeeded in giving an impression that nothing nice had ever happened in Scotland.... Pretty melancholy....

Happy exceptions were a Pleasure of Ireland, Mary O'Hara, who accompanied her attractive voice on a kind of condensed harp, and two spirited old ladies whose tremendous set-to was a welcome reminder of the more robust qualities of our hosts: and at the end "The Bonny Earl of Moray" was sung rousing, as one had hoped other famous songs of equal quality might be sung....

SCOTTIS DAILY MAIL
Tuesday, August 21, 1956

A colleen makes this Scot's evening a pleasure

So International is the Edinburgh Festival that even the Scots may be allowed some say in its entertainment. And in "Pleasure of Scotland," produced last night at the Assembly Hall, they have a whole plaided evening of kilts, shawls and tam-o'-shanters to themselves.

Or at any rate almost to themselves. For with typical Scots generosity the biggest individual share of the programme and the warmest reception are reserved for Mary O'Hara, the sweet and gentle Irish singing harpist of TV fame, whose inclusion in the company is an adornment rather than an encroachment....

EVENING CHRONICLE

Newcastle Upon Tyne (UK)
September 9 1956

RECORD ROUNDUP

One of the most intriguing discs I've heard in a long time is that by Mary O'Hara singing songs to her own harp accompaniment.

She sings effortlessly, four ballads ("Spinning Wheel," "Ceol an Phibrough," "The Spanish Lady," and "Eileen Aroon") and gives each a fresh, charming and sincere quality which is refreshing in these days of singers with over-produced voices. Beltona IEP41

EVENING HERALD (Dublin)

December 13 1956

It seems but a few months ago since I last wrote about records for Christmas. However, another year has rolled by....

For once, I am not putting a classical record at the top of the list, using the word "classical" in its usually understood sense.

Little "classic"

Yet this record is, in its own way a little "classic." It deserves to be one of the best selling LPs in Ireland this Christmas, and I for one, will be very disappointed if it isn't.

This Irish record by an Irish artiste, Mary O'Hara, will make an ideal gift for highbrow, lowbrow, or middlebrow tastes.

It is one of the few LPs which may be said to have an almost universal appeal.

This issue of a 12" LP is a great tribute to Miss O'Hara's popularity not only here, but across the Irish Sea.

Here are 18 songs - six in Irish - which make up the LP:-
"The Weaving Song," "The Quiet Land of Erin," (translated by Mary's sister Joan) "I Wish I had the

Shepherd's Lamb," "The Bonnie Boy," "Aililiu na Gamna," "She Moved Through the Fair," "The Spanish Lady," "Eileen Aroon," "The Spinning Wheel," "Dileen O Deamhas," "Londonderry Air," "I Have a Bonnet Trimmed With Blue," "Castle of Dromone," "Next Market Day," "My Lagan Love," "Ceol an Phiobaire," "Fill, Fill a Run O," "Ballynure Ballad."

I should like to mention also that the sleeve is adorned with a very fine colour photograph of Miss O'Hara and her harp. (Beltona LBE 13-33/5)

RADIO REVIEW (Ireland)

February 1, 1957
Record Review By Austin Walsh

MARY HAS LAST WORD
Day by day, the Beltona division of Decca company gets, like the Geraldines of old, more Irish that the Irish themselves. In all sizes and at all speeds the Irish records are being issued, some featuring good music well-performed, some a little Oirish, but not so much so as to be offensive.

Cream of the current bunch is a LP from that superb artiste, Mary O'Hara (above), who sings no less than eighteen traditional songs to her own harp accompaniment.

It would be very pleasant to devote a whole page to describing and praising each number but space allows only a dip into the bag.

The highlight is her unaccompanied singing of "She Moved Thro' The Fair" an intensely moving performance.

FOR MY MONEY SHE HAS SAID THE LAST WORD ON HOW THIS SHOULD BE SUNG AND I CAN NEVER HOPE TO HEAR ANY SINGER BETTER THIS.

Other jewels in this casket include "My Lagan Love"; "The Spinning Wheel"; "The Spanish Lady"; "Eileen Aroon" (sung in the rarely-heard plentifully grace-noted style) and the "Londonderry(sic) Air." The number is LBE13.

THE BULLETIN (Glasgow)

February 1, 1957

MARY IS A JOY TO HEAR

- Writes Maurice Lindsay

The career of Mary O'Hara, the Irish folk-singer, has been of particular interest to me, because so far as Scotland is concerned, I may claim to have "discovered" her.

During the 1955 festival I heard her singing at a fringe show with a group of Irish actors.

Next day I recorded an interview with her and a couple of her songs for a radio programme.

Before you could say "Eileen Aroon" Mary was signed for all sorts of programmes, finishing up with her own immensely popular TV series.

Married now and in America, she produced her first LP disc, Beltona LBE 13, and a joy of a thing it is.

Models of taste

She sings 18 songs for us, one or two in Gaelic but the rest including "My Lagan Love," the "Londonderry Air" and "The Spinning Wheel," in English - or Anglo-Irish if you prefer!

Her own harp accompaniments are models of taste, and delightfully played.

Another folk-singer well known to us in Scotland is Burl Ives. In a disc of sailing, whaling, and fishing songs called "Down to the Sea in Ships" he gives us a selection of sea-songs - touching, funny, sad, and rousing.

It's by far his best disc yet.

Mary O'Hara and Burl Ives are both at the top of the folk-singing tree.

WASHINGTON POST -TIMES HERALD

D.C. USA
11/2/1957
by Paul Hume

Later in the afternoon, **Mary O'Hara** raised to a new high level the art of folk singing, especially in Irish and Scottish songs. Playing her Irish harp with marvellous simplicity at the Phillips Gallery, the winning young girl just over from Ireland, sang with a slender voice but one of infinite appeal.

Explaining the songs, and giving some of their background as she went, the singer brought to life some of the world's most alluring songs, in music that has heart and meaning every moment.

EVENING STAR, Washington DC

11.2.1957
By Frank C. Campbell

Mary O'Hara: Soprano. Phillips Gallery: A recital of traditional Irish & Scottish Songs. With self accompaniment on the Irish harp.

If you've never heard folk music in fancy orchestral garb, or even in the art-song arrangements found frequently on recital programs, and had the uncomfortable feeling that they were over-dressed, you should have heard Mary O'Hara sing Irish

and Scottish traditional songs in the Phillips Gallery yesterday. Mary O'Hara has an appealing freshness to the eye, but her courting of the ear has an exquisite purity and delicacy that almost defies description, and leaves these songs in their marvellously affecting original state.

Only a poet could avoid gaucherie in describing, song by song, Mary O'Hara's recital. Her repertoire, drawn largely from Bunting's famous collection, though largely unknown by the music-minded public, is as broad and many-faceted as the art-songs of any Western nation. And the singing of these songs, when it is done as Mary O'Hara does it, is as demanding of technique and subtle sensitivity as the performances of a *Tourel* or a *Schwartzkopf*.

Miss O'Hara's training (and I refuse to believe a voice of such beauty has been entirely unguided) has been a model of restraint, for at no time does she sacrifice simplicity in order to ape the sound of a diva. Naiveté and worldly wisdom are magically welded into a style that can express all that is human and moving, and totally unaffected by time.

Miss O'Hara made her American debut in the Phillips Gallery yesterday. I have little doubt that she will soon be heard in many halls throughout the land; and I have every confidence that if we are lucky enough to hear her decades from now she will sound as wonderfully fresh as she did on first hearing.

EVENING PRESS (Dublin) December 1957

A wonderful selection - They made the hit record of 1957

There is an embarrassing richness about the Christmas selection of discs this year....

Mary O'Hara I will rank with the greatest in recorded music. For her Songs of Erin is a classic in any language. I was in New York when she made her appearance on a coast-to-coast network. American comperes are not noted for sincerity when it comes to a build-up, but this particular gentleman couldn't help changing the spiel.

If one must concern themselves with ratings or polls, this would be my record of the year. It is impossible to explain why - you must hear her sing "The Weaving Song," "The Quiet Land of Erin," "I wish I had a Shepherd's lamb," "The Bonnie Boy," "Aililiu na Gamhna," "She Moved Through the Fair" (this without any accompaniment at all and most effectively). ...

SATURDAY REVIEW MAGAZINE (usa) Decembr 27, 1958

"Songs of Ireland," by Mary O'Hara accompanying herself on the Irish Harp (Tradition TLP 1024 \$4.98), can be counted among the year's finest offerings. It belongs in no special category; the filaments of classification cannot trap the likes of her. Mary O'Hara, like Jean Richie, is endowed with a light, sweet voice, and her talent is for songs from her own country. These are provided in abundance, and rendered with compassion and lilting joy. On the lyric side, "Carraig Donn" is about as lorn a love song as could be encountered in all the literature; "Sliabh na mBan" ("The Mountain of the Women"), sung unaccompanied, rivals it for lyric intensity, yet tells of a skirmish that took place during the 1798 Rebellion.

O hearing these well-phrased delights, one wonders what might have happened to Beethoven if the Scotch publisher Thomson, instead of plying the composer with stilted transcriptions of Irish folk song, could have plied him with Miss O'Hara. At the very least, Beethoven's "Irish Songs," as eventually published (1814-1816) by Thomson, might have lasted as something more than an obligatory listing among more impressive works for voices prepared by that composer. They might even have been good enough to be sung by Mary O'Hara.

- FREDERIC RAMSEY, JR.

NEW YORK TIMES Sunday January 4, 1959

GAELIC SONGS CAPTURED ON DISKS

By Robert Shelton

Some traditional songs crop up in the body of folk music that cry for a skill in performance equal to the most taxing in the classical repertoire. Such are the Gaelic songs of Ireland, fading all too rapidly from that country's oral culture. Fortunately, some of the best have been captured on records.

Two basic styles shape the performance of Gaelic songs: with harp accompaniment or with the purity of the solo voice. When counterpoised against the florid background of a harp, the singer's voice becomes almost an extension of that instrument's delicate configurations. When unaccompanied, the voice is freed to follow the complex and circuitous line that melody and poetry have formed in Gaelic-speaking Ireland. Each of these approaches is illustrated on two recent LP's.

Ann Moray Presents Gaelic Songs and Legends (Spoken Arts) takes the path alone.

With a dark-hued, powerful voice that is always under complete control, Miss Moray plunges headlong into the world of love, witches, fairies, heroes and the sea that once concerned the Gaelic bards. In six groups of songs, each introduced in English, this trained singer brings intelligence, technique and affection to bear on an



uncompromisingly difficult program – difficult for the performer as well as the listener. But the rewards of this unfamiliar excursion are many as she evokes moods of mystery and discovery. Her voice cuts through the darkness of the ages illuminating the craggy Gaelic shores.

In many ways a more accessible approach is **Songs of Ireland** (Tradition), on which a highly talented young soprano, Mary O'Hara, offers songs in Gaelic and English. Miss O'Hara is a gifted harpist as well, and rarely does one hear such splendid rapport between voice and instrument. The texture of her voice is compounded of the same gentle and elusive sweetness as the sound of her harp. Yet it is her vocal Artistry that makes the record so persuasively beautiful, witness the unaccompanied "Sliabh na mBan" ("The Mountain of the Women"). David Hancock's engineering has caught the whole performance in a breathlessly clear recording.

Harper-Singer

Another harper-singer is Deirdre Ni Fhlionn, who is heard to good

effect on Irish **Traditional Songs** (Folkways) in twenty-one Gaelic songs. This singer also has matched traditional influences with training and performs with style and understanding. Hear by herself, Miss Ni Fhlionn would be impressive, but when placed on the turntable right after Miss O'Hara, she comes out a poor second. For control, beauty of tone and thoughtful programming Miss O'Hara is perhaps the best soprano singing Irish and Gaelic traditional works available on disks today.

THE TELEGRAPH.

Sydney, Australia
7/7/1959
Assembly Hall. Folk singer

Irish eyes were smiling

Mary O'Hara, an attractive and very talented young Irish folk singer and harpist, began her short Sydney season at the Assembly Hall last night.

Singing a mixture of popular and more serious traditional Irish and Scottish songs, Miss O'Hara proved herself an artist of great charm.

With ease and unpretentious style she brought a simple beauty to her laments and coquettish happiness to her lighter, cheerful pieces.

Although her voice showed occasional signs of thinness there were moments of real and tender beauty, as in the love song Eileen Aron, where voice and harp were in gentle, loving combination.

And there was a lightness and brightness in her presentation of songs like The Little Red Fox that was most appealing.

There was fun in her voice, her harp and her eyes as she told of the lovers overheard in a ditch.

And she even brought something new and exciting to such well-known songs as *I Have a Bonnet Trimmed with Blue*.

Haunting

However, she sounded at her best in the Gaelic songs which appeared too infrequently in the programme.

Her playing of the Irish harp was at all times impeccable, bringing a haunting minstrel effect to much of her work.

- M.B.

FORBES ADVOCATE,

Australia
Tue July 21 1959

THEY PEEPED INTO HEAVEN

Irish harpist and singer Mary O'Hara gave a Forbes audience a little peep into "Heaven" at a concert here on Friday night.

The people who went to see and hear her were enthralled – and still are.

From the moment she stepped on to the stage she kindled a warmth between herself and her audience.

One could almost feel the audience waiting hushed expectantly – waiting for this beautiful and unique experience to happen to it.

Each person later showed their appreciation by demands for encore numbers which Miss O'Hara rather shyly granted.

GAIETY TO SADNESS

Her voice was of a light smooth quality, sometimes plaintive, with perfect intonation and diction, coloured by ever changing emotions as the singer went from song to song. There was gaiety, there was audacity, sauciness and joy. There was sadness too – such sadness.

Not a movement, not an expression came from this wonderful artist that was not pure music.

Even her fingers left the harp strings to change key during an accompaniment, it was done so deftly that it all became just part of the music. It did not distract.

Friday night was one of those rare experiences when one is lifted to such a high plane that one is conscious only of the beauty that exists – all else falls away.

?, 27/8/1959
Auckland, New Zealand

Mary O'Hara

Mary O'Hara's name had become well known throughout Ireland by the time the young singer was 18. Her frequent broadcasts over Radio Éireann and many concerts had drawn a wide and enthusiastic audience to her. When only 20 years of age Miss O'Hara was invited to take part in the Edinburgh Festival, and the following year, 1956, she returned as a guest artist. B.B.C. television soon claimed her and here her unusual style and little known songs made her an instant success.

Overseas tours on the Continent followed, including a recent visit to the United States.

To most people in this country, Mary O'Hara's reputation is more familiar than her voice. At her first concert of her New Zealand tour given in the Auckland Town Hall on Wednesday evening she made direct appeal to the large audience.

Her voice is a true soprano, pure and lilting, and she interprets the traditional Irish and Scottish folk songs with an artistry that highlights the beauty of these ancient songs. The harp accompaniment is ideal and Miss O'Hara plays with a delicate touch. She accompanied herself on the harp for all but two songs and in these two she proved

the fine control and purity of voice she possesses even unaccompanied.

The programme has been carefully thought out and Miss O'Hara weaves it together with her personal commentary which supplies a background to the various songs. Her fresh and captivating personality, as much as her singing, kept the audience delighted.

The Irish and the Scots should need no prodding to bring them to one of Mary O'Hara's concerts, but anyone who misses the opportunity will lose the chance of a rare musical experience.

• D. S.

NEW ZEALAND HERALD
Thursday August 27 1959
(Mary's first concert in Nz)

**Captivated By Charm
Of Mary O'Hara**

Mary O'Hara is a gifted singer in a field of more than usual interest. With a programme of Irish and Scottish traditional songs in the Town Hall last night, she completely captured an audience which was surprisingly large for a solo artist. Her charm and artistry will win her many admirers here.

Hers is a fine, gentle art. The most impressive aspect of her singing is her beautiful control and faultless melodic line, giving her voice an almost magical effect at times. Because she is to some extent content to let the songs speak for themselves, her singing is wonderfully effortless.

Integrated Style

Some might consider her lacking in emotional range, but her style suited most of the songs she sang last night. Her own accompaniments on the Irish harp could not be bettered for expressive mood.

These songs have a great appeal. They are truly traditional and far removed from the Irish and Scottish songs so popular with the crooners. With a few exceptions, the songs from Ireland were quiet and sad, the Scottish one rather less so, and she was completely at home with both.

Soft Melancholy

In the gently melancholy of some of the Irish songs, Miss O'Hara's voice was clear and serene as though heard across a still lake on a soft summer's evening. It was quite beautiful to hear her singing "Quiet Land of Érin" and "Eileen a Rún." Such songs as the "weaving Song" and "Ballynure Ballad," with their short cantering words, were fascinating to hear from Miss O'Hara.

There was much to delight in her recital and when she sang without her harp she was no less entrancing.

Even such a well-known song as "Annie Laurie" – this time the original version – had as much charm as the rest of the programme. She will be welcomed back to Auckland for her second concert.

THE PRESS

Christchurch Nz
Thu. Sept 10 1959

**Fine Interpretation of
Irish Folk Songs**

It is hard to find words to express the joy and artistic satisfaction which Mary O'Hara's singing can give. The Irish have a saying "she can charm the birds out of the trees." Mary O'Hara should be followed by flocks of them every foot of her journeyings.

At an Edinburgh Festival she sang in a show given by some Irish dancers. It is easy to understand how some of the world's greatest musicians gathered around her to learn some of the finest points of one of the most difficult vocal arts – that of interpreting ancient folk songs. Such an art calls for a most finely poised musicianship. The songs themselves do not give the opportunity for any grand climaxes; there are no fireworks which permit great technical powers to dazzle the hearers; everything depends on the singer's complete appreciation of style, her knowledge and understanding of the life and feelings of the people who in past ages, created the music out of their experiences, and of her ability to use every subtle device of the art of miniature to create something that is authentic and perfect in every detail.

All this Mary O'Hara did for us in her concert in the St James' Theatre last evening, and she brought within its walls the culture of an ancient nation and portrayed its history in a way that books cannot do. The life of a people lived again in her singing.

To those – and there were many in the large audience – who were united by ties of blood with these songs, she gave a deeply-moving experience. She gently healed the scars left by atrocious, false and completely erroneous imitations of Irish music.

To sing one folk song really well is a very difficult task. To sing a whole programme of them, and to make each a gem, is a formidable task indeed. And yet, it all came – as it must – with a natural effortlessness. But behind that was a steely technique that compelled an unbounded admiration. Perfect

rhythmic control, purity of enunciation, a wealth of colour and expression, kept, of necessity, within a narrow range and complete command over the whole extent of a glorious voice made every song a technical masterpiece. The technique aroused admiration but the interpretations gave delight.

Her playing of the harp had the same skill and musical insight as her singing. This wonderful little instrument gave out the most pure and delightful sounds. Miss O'Hara's playing had a rhythm which came from the heart of the music and was entrancing to hear. Every note in each phrase had exact tonal colouring and weight, and it was astonishing what a range the instrument has in these respects. The accompaniments themselves were highly interesting harmonically.

Mr. Maurice Till played piano-forte solos by Chopin, Glinka and Liszt. He brought to each of them that security and brilliance of technique, and artistic sensitivity, which always mark his playing, but which come as a new and heart-lifting pleasure in every performance which he gives.

There will be another recital in the St. James' Theatre on Saturday evening. – C.C.B.

CHRISTCHURCH STAR, Nz
Thu. Sept. 10 1959

**IRISH SOPRANO
CREATES
CHARMING ATMOSPHERE**

Listening to Mary O'Hara singing her Irish and Scottish traditional songs in the St. James Theatre last night was like entering another world, a world where sophistication, bustle, pressure, and the roar of mechanisation are completely forgotten in the serene calm and leisured poise of this Irish personality.

Playing her own accompaniments on a miniature harp, Miss O'Hara captivates you by the charming simplicity and sincerity of her singing.

Her attractive soprano voice seems ideally suited to folk singing. The dulcet tones of the harp match the voice in a complete unity of expression.

Miss O'Hara has no mannerisms whatsoever. Sometimes, singing in Gaelic, she will talk to you about her songs with that easy intimacy of being at home.

Her poetic understanding is deep-rooted for she sings her songs as if they were born and bred in her.

Unusual Songs

Her enquiring mind has unearthed a treasury of song never heard on the Christchurch concert platform before (not as far as I am aware of) and the voice becomes the medium by which she can express the temperature of a nation through its folk-lore.

Such a song as "Annie Laurie" is known the world over. To hear Miss O'Hara sing it in its original version brings the freshness of an early spring morning.

When Miss O'Hara sings of love it has the engaging innocence of sweet 17.

And so, throughout the evening, one comes under the spell of Miss O'Hara's artistic integrity. It was a unique experience and a musical joy. ...

Miss O'Hara will sing again on Saturday night. - C.H.D.

OTAGO DAILY TIMES

Dunedin, New Zealand
Wed. Sept. 16 1959

Audience Has Enchanted Evening

There must have been many young ladies with lovely voices who, after hearing Miss Mary O'Hara in the Town Hall last night, said to themselves: "Where can I acquire a harp like hers, and who will teach me to play it?"

There were three factors which contributed to what was literally an enchanting evening for a moderate but most receptive audience.

Firstly there was a voice of unusually attractive middle register, with some hauntingly beautiful top notes, under perfect control.

Secondly there were the superbly played accompaniments on the harp, an instrument perfectly suited to the Irish and Scottish folk songs presented.

But most important of all was the personality of the performer.

An attractive, unpretentious, unsophisticated and therefore charming young lady, Miss O'Hara has the rare ability to really transport her audience.

She demonstrated once again that it is not "what one sings" so much as "how one sings it."

It did not matter whether she sang about loneliness or potatoes that did not grow, or the Queen's cook's lost lover, or cuckoos, or cattle on the new grass, or the minstrel boy or just plain Annie Laurie, Miss O'Hara's art is of the kind that can take one easily into another world and another century.

At any rate, it is very doubtful whether the members of the audience were, during the height of their enjoyment, thinking much

about the actual subject matter of the songs. Rather they were sensitive to an atmosphere which probably produced as many mental and emotional states as there were people.

The ability to produce such an atmosphere belongs only to the truly great artist, and such is Mary O'Hara.

During the course of the evening one could not help thinking of another superb artist who played his own accompaniments - William Clouston.

In so many ways these two great folk singers are alike. In so many ways they are different. Suffice it to say that if they were both on the same programme one would have no desire to compare them, and this feeling is really a tribute to both.

In the light of the aforesaid, Mr Maurice Till, as assisting artist, had a big responsibility which he shouldered with great credit.

His choice of well-known solos from Chopin, Glinka-Bolakirev, and Liszt was wise in the circumstances. His authoritative and confident renderings merited the extremely enthusiastic reception given to him.

- E.P.D.

THE EVENING STAR

Dunedin, Nz Wed. Sept 16, 1959

Irish Girl Delights Audience With Her Folksongs

When pretty Mary O'Hara plucks her harp and sings, audiences are hearing true folksong interpreted in as pure a form as is possible in this age of commercialised background for a voice of surpassing sweetness and a fresh, charming personality.

For those who have suffered while traditional music is distorted in elaborate arrangements for colossal choirs and thundering orchestras (not to mention its fate at the hands of Tin Pan Alley maestros), last night's concert of Irish and Scottish folk-song was an example of the gently art of friendly persuasion and it was not surprising to find the Town Hall very well filled.

Mary O'Hara's instrument is the Irish harp, a smaller instrument than the orchestral harp, and one of great antiquity, dating back to bardic times.

The tone of this harp is not large nor is the tone of the singer, and this was one occasion when no one could object to the discreet amplification of both. By means of the microphone, Miss O'Hara was able to maintain an easy informal atmosphere which enhanced her performance, and introductory comments to the songs, delivered in her soft Irish voice, were of

assistance, particularly as many of the songs were not sung in English.

Beauty of tone is the outstanding characteristic of this singer: her voice has a pure bell-like timbre with a faultless pianissimo delivery and a lovely top register and it is completely free from any suggestion of edge or shrillness. To hear her in the legato phrases of "The Quiet Land of Érin", the rhapsodic unaccompanied strains of "*Sliabh na mBan*," or the rhythmic Hebridean "*Waulking Song*," is to recognise a real artist.

There are some quaint surprises in Miss O'Hara's repertoire, such as the mythical "*Song of the Waterhorse*," and an un-familiar version of "*Annie Laurie*," but possibly the gem of the evening was the encore, "*The Spinning Wheel*," a song for which this artist seems to have a particular affinity. - A.L.

The Southland Times.

Nz Fri Sept. 18, 1959

MARY O'HARA ENCHANTING IN SIMPLE SONGS

It would be good for a noisy, distracted and confused world to pause more often and listen to such songs as Mary O'Hara sings. There is magic and balm for the spirit in her serene art and in the old and simple things, some of them once sad but now distilled into poetry, of which she sings.

Lovely at 24 in an Irish way that catches the heart, dressed with the most tasteful simplicity, Mary O'Hara, seated beside her little Irish harp, is no mere embodiment of charm. She is a true artist, so natural and easy in her singing that it seems instinctive. The tone of her sweet clear soprano floats into the air without sign of effort.

The range of the music she sang last night was limited, but within that range there was no song which seemed to fall short of perfection in its kind.

Strangely, the Civic Theatre was not packed to the doors. It was a good-sized audience. Possibly music of this kind does not attract some of those whose taste is of the "popular" order on the one hand and some of the selective concert goers on the other. That is a pity. Anyone who can be touched by music would be the better for hearing Mary O'Hara.

Many of the songs she sang came from the Irish traditional collection made by Edward Bunting at the end of the 18th century. Most were sung in the Irish Gaelic which so perfectly fits their haunting rhapsodic tunes.

Some were infinitely touching in their far-away sadness, some tender with a tale of young love, some merry and some gentle as a cradle

song. Each was sung with the strange compound of simple direction and inward poetry which characterises Mary O'Hara's artistry.

Her playing of the harp, silvery and gentle in tone, is as graceful and easy as her singing and is less an accompaniment than a part of the song.

She sang "The Minstrel Boy" which sprang from the rebellion of 1798, "The Quiet Land of Érin," a poignant song of exile, "Sliabh na mBan," a song of the famine of 1845, a weaving song from Kerry, "Óró Mo Bháidín," "Hebridean Waulking Song," "Carraig Donn." And then, to make a dramatic contrast, there was the pathos of "Bonny Boy" followed by the captivating gaiety of "Have a Bonnet."

Songs from the Highlands, the Hebrides and the Lowlands, from Celtic fairy-lore and from traditional ballad sources were interspersed with those from Ireland in the second part of the programme. On her return to the stage, Mary O'Hara wore a long dress instead of the short one in which she first appeared and she greatly improved the sense of contact with her audience by having removed a microphone which earlier had cluttered the stage and transmitted distracting noises into the amplifier. "Ballinderry," "Maidrín Rua," "Eibhlin a Rún," "Spanish Lady," "Annie Laurie" (in its original form), "Song of the Waterhorse," "Ballynora Ballad," "Castle of Dromore" – these were the songs, explained with a few words and sung with a freshness that made them new, which Mary O'Hara sang after the interval and it was then that each one seemed to deepen her spell on the audience.

It would have liked more encores, but the little lullaby and "The Spinning Wheel" left a touch of magic in the air when the enchantress made her exit.

THE WANGANUI CHRONICLE
Nz Wed Sept. 23 1959

**Mary O'Hara's Concert
Was Unforgettable**

Last night's Opera House concert by Mary O'Hara was one which will not be forgotten, for Miss O'Hara possesses a voice of such sweetness that it was impossible not to take pleasure in the singing of this youthful, unsophisticated girl who accompanied herself on a Tara harp.

Mary O'Hara is more than a singer of old songs – she sang with the spontaneity of a lark, and with a wealth of learning and absorbed tradition. Her rhythm was delightful, and her intonation sure, even in the unaccompanied songs.

Just as the harp accompaniment added greatly to the authenticity of her performance, so did the beautifully-spoken explanations that preceded many of the songs add to the enjoyment, particularly where the songs were not in the English language.

Those who went to hear a programme of "Galway Bays" and "Mountains of Mourne" learnt that there was a great difference between the songs about Ireland and the songs of Ireland.

Perhaps Mary O'Hara's greatest ability in presenting her songs on the recital platform with the air of a country lass carolling to herself at her daily tasks. It is this freshness that has earned her the applause of the most sophisticated and critical audiences, including those attending the Edinburgh Festival. It is no wonder, then, that the Wanganui audience was charmed last night.

Instead of his usual role of accompanist, Maurice Till appeared as associate pianist, and played some seldom-heard pieces, including the Liszt "Rigoletto" paraphrase which he presented with much aplomb. – H.J.G.

THE WANGANUI HERALD
Nz Wed. Sept. 23 1959

**Irish Singer
Held Audience Spellbound**

Armed only with her soft soprano voice and a Tara harp, Irish folk-singer Mary O'Hara held her Opera House audience captive last night for two hours with her concert of Irish traditional airs.

Although her voice occasionally showed the strain of her 11 weeks' tour, her personality sparkled throughout, giving an extra fillip to the poetry of the music.

Her intimate, spontaneous style of presentation was enhanced by her simple introductions to each number and, in Gaelic numbers, prose translations which preserved the magic of the song.

Raised from his status of accompanist to that of solo pianist, Maurice Till dashed his way through a testing selection with aplomb and accuracy. His choice of many Chopin compositions was perhaps unfortunate in that it did not sufficiently demonstrate his versatility.

This lack of versatility was not a charge which could be levelled at Miss O'Hara's choice of programme. Her songs ranged from love songs to songs of exile, flirtatious little numbers to laments of the disastrous 1798 rebellion. The legend and history of Ireland were caught up in this programme – the

stumbling latecomers which seem to be a part of every performance here, a door slamming at intervals backstage, and the vastness of the poorly lighted stage which dwarfed the figure of the singer, presenting a type of cosy song which essentially belongs to a fireside or cottage doorstep. – (H.J.L.)

THE DOMINION (Wellington, Nz)
Monday September 21, 1959

**EVENING OF DELIGHT
WITH MARY O'HARA**

Mary O'Hara's concert in the Wellington Town Hall on Saturday was an evening of sheer delight for anyone with an interest in Celtic song, for anyone, indeed, who could take pleasure in a glamorous girl singing in a pure, sweet voice and accompanying herself on an Irish harp.

And who could not take pleasure in this? Certainly no one who came under her spell on Saturday night, except maybe, the nonplussed few who went expecting an evening of "Galway Bays" and "Mountains of Mourne" and found that the songs of Ireland are quite different from the songs about Ireland. It is a far cry to Saturday's concert from that last historic meeting of harpers at Belfast some 160 years ago, when Edward Bunting was inspired to devote his main efforts to the collection and publication of Irish song.

It is a far cry, too, from the ten harpers at that meeting, particularly the centenarian Hempson playing with long and crooked nails, to the charming O'Hara. The link is there, however, she impressively demonstrated her authoritative exposition of Irish and Hebridean traditional song.

We saw her first in a short frock whose high fashion somehow matched her air of youthful unsophistication, and after the interval in a long white frock the only defect of the latter being that two shapely legs were now lost to view.

But dressing could not distract attention from her art, for Mary O'Hara is something more than a singer of old songs. Not only does she sing with seeming spontaneity, like the lark in clear air, but she sings with a wealth of learning and absorbed tradition. Her rhythm is a delight, her intonation sure even in the unaccompanied songs and never, never, does she break a phrase however long.

Just as her harp accompaniments added greatly to the authenticity of her performance, so the beautifully spoken explanations that preceded many of the songs were an added

aid to enjoyment, particularly for the songs that did not have English words.

Appearing as solo pianist instead of in his more usual role of accompanist, was Maurice Till. There will be another concert on Thursday night. – R.W.B.

THE DOMINION (Wellington, Nz)
Friday September 25, 1959

**Mary O'Hara
Weaves Her
Spell Again**

That willowy young Irish enchantress, Mary O'Hara, attracted a good audience to the town hall last night for her return Wellington concert. With Tara harp and clear sweet voice she weaved a spell of Irish, Hebridean and Scottish traditional songs.

THE EVENING POST
Nz, Wellington, Fri Sept 25 1959

**SECOND CONCERT
BY MARY O'HARA**

Mary O'Hara has the blarney all right when it comes to singing. Last night she gave her second concert at the Town Hall. It was, so I am told, the same programme of Irish and Scottish traditional songs as she sang last week, but those who may have been hearing it twice seemed to enjoy it as much as we first-nighters. And no wonder, for, easy on the eye, easy on the ear, Mary O'Hara presents her programme with superb artistry.

She sings so well, that one hardly notices how well she has to sing, to sing so well; which is Irish for saying that hers is the art that conceals art. Excellent voice control, modulated to the subtleties of the music, with a most skilful accompaniment on the Irish harp, ensured the simple folksongs never lost their simplicity.

But this fragile art was a little incongruous in what seemed the vast amphitheatre of the Town Hall, and Mary O'Hara had to use – or did use, anyway – a microphone, which took something away from the intimacy of the music. Nevertheless it was an enchanting evening.

Maurice Till had the unenviable task of "filling in" with a group of piano solos of Chopin, Glinka-Balakirev and Verdi-Liszt but managed to make out of them a recital within a recital.

–Owen Jensen

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH (Nz)
Fri. Oct. 2 1959

The story of Ireland and the story of its people, its way of life and its romances were told in music to a fair-sized audience in the Napier municipal Theatre last night.

The teller of the story in this delightfully refreshing concert was Irish soprano and harpist Mary O'Hara.

From her opening number, the well-known "The Minstrel Boy", to the final encore, the equally popular "The Spinning Wheel", Mary O'Hara held her audience entranced with her sweet voice, her skill with the harp and her friendly personality. It is difficult to choose which number the audience liked most for they all received prolonged – and fully merited – applause.

The traditional songs of Ireland were interspersed with songs of the Hebridean Isles and of Scotland. Many of them were in the Gaelic tongue but Miss O'Hara gave the English translation before each song. There was little need for her to do so, however, for the story could be gathered from her expression, both in her voice and on her face.

The programme included such songs as "Quiet Land of Érin", "The Weaving Song", "Hebridean Waulking Song", "I have a Bonnet", "Eileen a Rún", and the original version of "Annie Laurie."

Miss O'Hara did not sing all her songs accompanied by the harp. For some she sang unaccompanied. But the sweet and rippling notes of her Tara standing harp added an authenticity to the traditional songs.

Miss O'Hara's voice is not particularly strong and she used a microphone during her performance. But this did not detract from her singing at all. Her voice was ideally suited to the wistful, haunting and gay music of Irish tradition. The fact that she sang while seated adds to the credit of her performance.

THE AGE (Melbourne, Australia)
Tuesday, December 8 1959

**Folk Singer
Chorus with
Performance**

Last night at the Assembly Hall, with a very little voice and a comparatively little harp, the Irish folk-singer, Mary O'Hara, enchanted a very large audience.

This was folk music as it should be presented, without fuss and elaboration, with very clear enunciation of words, and with a wonderfully expressive use of small changes of vocal colour.

The Irish harp, less than half the size of its concert brother, makes exquisite sounds, and the singer's

accompaniments were perfectly appropriate to the music.

Listening to them, one's blood boiled again to think of the bulbous and bloated travesties of traditional music that are blasted at us during this season of the year from loud speakers in every nook and cranny of the city.

Miss O'Hara sang mainly Irish songs, many of them, like "Fill Fill a Run O," profoundly beautiful. She also gave us a welcome glimpse of the incomparable Hebridean folk music in the "Hebridean Milking Song".

The singer introduced each song with consummate dignity and charm.

– DORIAN LE GALLIENNE

THE IRISH TIMES (Dublin)
Tuesday, October 4, 1960

TRADITIONAL MUSIC

Last night's musical headline is that Mary O'Hara came back and sang to us at the Shelbourne Hotel, Dublin in "an evening of traditional music" presented by the National Concert Hall Fund.

In spite of the title of the concert, Miss O'Hara, is not, of course, a traditional singer. But, as all who love her for her records know, she has evolved a translation of traditional song into a personal entertainment. The records stress the salon entertainment, but the live performance was so much more.

In contrast to almost every other song-to-the-harp performer that we have to endure, she sees that her harp starts in tune; she sings to her audience and not to the wall or herself; her whole manner and delivery are professional, musicianly, finished. In her person and her music she transforms mere entertainment into high art, entirely of its own kind.

"An Evening of Traditional Music." This was an excellent idea: it emphasises that our much needed concert hall is a national concern for all sorts of music. Nevertheless, it must be reported that hardly any of the proceedings were traditional: though the organisers and most of the large audience will regard that comment as mere hair splitting. An almost exact analogy would be a "classical" concert consisting of Pucini arias arranged for unison choir, a Mozart symphony transcribed for guitar, a Bach air played by skiffle group.

Before our traditional music in its true form is completely overlaid, why cannot we have just a few authentic performances? Within this context one must accept Grainne ni Chormaic's admirable dancing (and thank her for reviving an almost lost tradition by smiling) and also

welcome Leo Rowsome's expertise on the uilleann pipes – a welcome almost cancelled by the deplorable trio of pipe violin and flute which he led....

C. A.

IRISH INDEPENDENT (Dublin)
Tue October 4, 1960

**ARTISTRY OF
HARPIST
SINGER**

By Mary McGoris

"Irish Independent" Music Critic

The star artist at an Evening of Traditional Music, presented in the Shelbourne Hotel as the latest of the National Concert Hall Fund's recitals, was Mary O'Hara making a welcome re-appearance in Dublin.

Her gentle style is as winning as ever, and her performance has a finish and assurance which make themselves felt without being thrust upon the audience. It is a pleasure to hear her harp accompaniments, not alone in tune but played with a musical artistry which lends distinction even to so puerile a ditty as *Maidrin Ruadh*.

In the lilting charm of *Dia Luain*, *Dia Mairt*, she was at her most attractive and *Ard Ti Cuain*, always one of her best numbers was extremely moving though she seems to have incorporated an ill-judged nasal hum in the "trom" of the refrain.

My Lagan Love is a man's song and should not be sung by a woman, nor is its banked passion suited to a voice whose outstanding quality is one of innocent sweetness, but *Cucuin*, a *Chuaichin*, with the exquisite delicacy of its echo effect, was a tour de force.

IRISH PRESS.
Dublin, Ireland
4/10/1960

**CONCERT HALL
REITAL SUCCESS**

The occasion was memorable for the re-appearance, after her years abroad of harpist-singer Mary O'Hara. She sang with real artistry and calm confidence – backed by a quiet charm which won the audience completely. The small sweet voice we remembered has matured and is cleverly supported by cunning and tasteful harp accompaniments.

This is her secret – plus an innate ability to combine the two in seemingly effortless fashion. (Her deft manipulation of individual strings for passing modulations was a revelation – a technique in the manner of the old harpers).

She is still at her best in the old Gaelic songs and that is a very good best indeed. *Árd Tí Cuain*, *An Maidrín Rua* and *An Cúcuín* were delightfully sung.

THE IRISH TIMES (Dublin)
Wed. March 14, 1962

CONCERT BY RADIO EIREANN
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

For several years Radio Eireann has had a public concert in a theatre on the Sunday nearest St. Patrick's Day, at which the Light Orchestra, the Singers and other groups and soloists have produced a light entertainment to please all who have no purist objections to butchering Irish folk-song to make an Irish holiday....

In quite a different world of high artistry was Mary O'Hara's singing of "My Lagan Love" and "Roisin Dubh." The rest of the evening was entertainment: this was beauty.

- C.A.

SOUTHERN EVENING ECHO
Southampton, UK
24/7/1975

Irish singer Mary O'Hara, who recently emerged from her monastic retirement to return to the concert platform, recalled with effortless brilliance, her spectacular powers as a singer without peer, and delighted the audience who came to hear her at Salisbury Arts Festival's presentation at Wardour Castle.

From the first sung note, any fears that her voice might have become 'rusty' after the long silence were assuaged. In a recital which spanned the great 'High Songs' of Irish classic folk music to the contemporary Judas and Mary, she displayed all the qualities of the great singer.

The impeccable breath control which allowed the most difficult phrasing to appear effortless, the astonishingly light cascading scales and grace notes, the elegant tone and the delicate pianissimo with which she softened her voice were all a delight to hear.

There was no pandering to low taste in this recital. Miss O'Hara's art is a high and dignified form of expression, to which she added her own warmth and humour, punctuated at odd moments with a puckish grin, or with the most moving tonal variation.

To accompany her songs, Mary O'Hara used her small Celtic harp, a diatonic instrument capable of subtle shifts in key. Once again her playing was superlative, but never more so than when she sang and played the

sort of light song which brings a great smile to her face and an infectious chuckle to her voice.

JOHN PADDY BROWNE

EVENING CHRONICLE

Newcastle, UK
Thu Oct 2 1975

Nice One Mary

SMILING throughout as she charmed her audience in a soft Irish brogue, Mary O'Hara glided professionally through 16 Celtic songs with harp accompaniments at yesterday's lunchtime recital at the Laing Gallery.

And in a beautifully clear voice with the dulcet tones of the harp in support, she evoked the mood of the Irish countryside with such traditional Gaelic airs as "Sligo Fair" and "The Quiet Land of Érin".

In a programme whose theme was love in all its aspects, she displayed a voice of great range yet capable of subtle inflection in songs demanding considerable light and shade.

The unaccompanied "Úna Bhán", one of the greatest of tragic love songs, gave full expression to her faultless diction which seemed to make every note hang in the air.

And from "Trottin' to the Fair" to "Shetland Lullaby" her harp accompaniment had her fingers dexterously moving in skilful command of a difficult instrument.

This was a restful and melodious lunchtime break for a large and appreciative audience. Recitals continue at the Laing from next Monday.

- S.F.

THE IRISH TIMES

Dublin, Ireland
Mon Oct 27 1975

**Mary O'Hara's
magic undimmed**

APART FROM her participation in the Late Late Show a year ago and her recent records, Saturday night at the Wexford Arts Centre was the first time for a dozen years that I had heard Mary O'Hara. I went with eager expectations but a little apprehension. Twelve years is a sizeable period in a singer's life, not to mention seclusion from the world in a monastery.

Her programme centred on Irish and Scottish traditional music, but ranged through the 13th-century Adam de la Halle "Tant Con Je Vivrai," Dowland's "Fine Knacks For Ladies," Campion's "Oaken Ashes," Stanford's "Trottin' to the Fair" (slightly out of place), plainsong, and her own work.

It took her about three items to settle in properly, but then she showed that she had all the old magic. It first appeared in Burns's "Ae Fond Kiss," the Scots air (with, I think, Harold Boulton's affecting harmonies), consolidated itself with "Óró mo Bháidin" and blazed forth in the (unaccompanied) plainsong "Rorate Coeli," stilling our breath and hearts with this deeply moving dialogue of God and His people. This was no liturgical formula but, through her, an act of worship.

In her own setting of Rabindranath Tagore's "Face to Face" and of "Prayer of the Badger" (whose words were written by George and Michael Scott-Moncrieff at her request), the unselfconscious Celtic quality of these unobtrusive vehicles for her words most interesting – in contrast to her setting of "Eros," a striking poem by her husband, Richard Selig, matched by passionate and anguished dissonances on the harp. If Seóirse Bodley or John McCabe had heard Saturday's recital, they might write important work for her.

It is, as always was, a joy to hear the impeccable intonation of voice and harp, the total accomplishment of both, but from a sequence of four successive items of tremendous intensity, "The Prayer of the Badger," "A Úna Bhan," "Eros," and "Eibhlin a Rúin," the second was for me the climax of the evening, with all the greatness of that song's beauty and all the artistry and desolation of its performance. I did wish that more foreign visitors to the Festival had heard her: to have done so could have introduced them to a unique artist and brought them a new picture of our country and its artistry.

When we heard her before, she was a true artist and still a girl. Now she has the added stature of a woman at the peak of her achievements. And as beautiful as her singing was her speaking voice in her charming and dignified introduction to each item.

- CHARLES ACTON

THE JOURNAL (Salisbury, UK)
December 1, 1975

INFECTIOUS CHARM OF MARY O'HARA

MARY O'HARA, the folk singer and harpist, gave a recital on Sunday evening, in aid of the Society of African Missions at St Edmund's Arts Centre, where the acoustics are admirably suited for events of this kind.

Mary O'Hara first made her name in the late 1950's and has only recently returned to public life after

13 years in a monastic order, which she entered after the early death of her husband.

She is likely to re-establish her original following very quickly, and to add to it many more admirers.

It would be misleading to describe her as a folk-singer pure and simple, for some of her material is newly written, and some is from the Elizabethan lutenists and similar composers.

And a purist in folk music might possibly take exception to some of her harp accompaniments to traditional tunes.

They seem to belong to the realm of art-song rather than folk-song which is not to detract in the slightest from Miss O'Hara's considerable artistry. I also found myself wondering whether the lute writing of Dowland and Campion transferred to the harp entirely successfully.

TONAL PURITY

However, no-one can have failed to be impressed by Miss O'Hara's vocal control and tonal purity, or by her skill in playing the Celtic harp.

The voice seemed strained only once or twice, in the plainchant, "Rorate Coeli", but in all other respects it was virtually flawless. Burn's "Ae Fond Kiss" demonstrated a very effective control of dynamics, while "Trottin' To The Fair", with Stanford's accompaniment, was sung with infectious charm.

Two items in the recital seemed to me outstanding. The first was Adam de La Halle's rondeau, "Tant con je Vivrai", with a simple accompaniment which had the ring of authenticity.

Authentic and tragic, too, was the unaccompanied Gaelic lament "Una Bhan" by the Poet Tomas Laidir, which made the deepest impression of any song in this well-balanced recital.

- R. M.

IRISH TIMES, Dublin
12/12/1975

ENCHANTING

It was a true pleasure to be at the U.S. Embassy at Ballsbridge last night to hear Mary O'Hara give a short recital of her own especial art of song and harp. This was, I think, her first recital in Dublin since she left her monastery just over a year ago, although we had the privilege of hearing her in the Wexford Arts Centre nearly six weeks ago during the festival there.

The rotunda of the Embassy has not the happiest acoustics and, unfortunately, there was a persistent hum (on C sharp in the treble clef). Such a drone or pedal itself could have been endured, but Miss O'Hara's art includes a lot of exquisitely soft singing so that, again and again, her dynamic fell

below the level of this hum, so that we lost our effortless concentration upon her.

While her late husband Richard Selig was an American poet, and his words of two of her items ("Among Silence" and "Eros") were American, and the music was her own, I was disappointed that in this context she did not include any specifically American music – one spiritual "Its-a-Me, O Lord," being less than enough.

In the terms of these islands her Irish and Scottish items were a joy to hear, and done with all her extraordinary, individual artistry. Perhaps "Over Here" was a little slow (and, whatever its factual connection with the Famine, it is probably Canadian in location), but to hear her "Sliabh na mBan" or "The Gartan Mother's Lullaby" is to be wholly enchanted.

She has such a unique artistry that one must hope that very many people in Ireland should soon have the chance to hear her again in recital, but she must be willing to provide the audience with a printed programme.

- CHARLES ACTON

THE IRISH POST (London, UK)
Saturday, April 17, 1976



TARA TRIUMPH

The Sligo-born singer and harpist Mary O'Hara enchanted a large audience at the latest Irish Heritage presentation at the London Tara Hotel. It was her first performance before an audience comprising of Irish people in Britain since she resumed her international career after 13 years in an English Benedictine convent.

The presentation, titled "The West's Awake," was presented by Irish Heritage in conjunction with Connacht county associations. The programme included Charles Kennedy (tenor), John Leeson and Kevin Moore (readers), George

Crozier (flute), Dermot cCehan (violin and traditional fiddle), and John Chillingworth (piano), while there was also a contribution from the John Brooke school of Irish Dancing. The programme was devised and introduced by Ethna Kennedy.

In many ways it was the most successful Irish Heritage evening since the group began with a performance to mark the Goldsmith bicentenary two years ago.

Mary O'Hara had just returned from a tour of the United States, which included a performance at New York's Madison Square Garden. While all of the artists at the LondonTara contributed to the richness of the occasion, it was Mary O'Hara, however, who added the magic and made it a very special evening for the audience of approximately 400.

In her area of entertainment she is without peer and it can only be hoped that she can be brought to increasing audiences in this country. She alone at this time can convey what is most exquisite and delicate in Irish culture.

THE IRISH TIMES (Dublin, Ireland)
Mon. June 15, 1976

**Poetry and Music
at Slane Castle**

By Maeve Kennedy

FRIDAY NIGHT in Slane Castle was the odd man out in this year's Festival in Great Irish Houses....

Music was provided by Mary O'Hara, whose voice retains the astonishing purity and clarity that it had twelve years ago when she renounced her career. Her diction is flawless. Even when she sings in a voice as tiny as a whisper, every word is distinct and her sharp stylish harp accompaniment is worlds away from the saccharine rippling of the Bunatty school, particularly in her harpsichord-like backing of the Campion song.

THE NEWS (Portsmouth. UK)
May 23 1977

**A WELCOME RETURN
FOR PIONEER...**

A beautiful woman, a talented harpist, and a fine singer - to find these three in one person is rare, and Mary O'Hara provides that pleasing experience.

As a pioneer of folk music it is now widely enjoyed. She has returned to the concert platform after a silence which was long and lamentable to the world of music.

Her audience at a Portsmouth Festival recital in Oaklands Convent School, Waterlooville, were among her world-wide admirers.

In reviving the traditional songs of her own Ireland, and other countries she does not affect the rural rumbustiousness with which many artists have distorted folk music.

From the moment she walks on stage and perfects the tuning of her



Celtic harp she evokes grace and simplicity. But hers is not a simplicity which precludes wit, feats of musicianship, or observation of a complex life.

Her songs are extremely varied in pace, tone and subject. They alight on the seemingly remote incidents of Celtic country life. But is there, for instance, anywhere in the world where girls do not hanker after a husband so that they no longer have to work for a living?

Mary's simplicity is also musically deceptive. It is easy to forget that behind the tales she tells there is a skilful, flexible voice and an often complex harp accompaniment. One of the greatest achievements of musicianship is that there is none of the showiness which would be inappropriate to her style of songs.

Her voice soars strongly or quietly through a wide range. Few singers today seem to realize that a passage sung quietly can be more effective than a burst of volume.

The harp which complements so well her pure voice sometimes emerges as soloist. It is only then that we are aware of the really fine music which it produces in its own right.

She is equally at home in French, Celtic, Latin and English. Among her loveliest songs is her own setting of a poem by her late American husband Richard Selig.

Most individual are her rapid Irish romps, sung at a speed which is breathtaking even to listen to. Yet even in these tongue-twisting jokes never a word is lost.

- C.S.

THE DAILY TELEGRAPH
London, UK
Mon Nov 1 1977

**MARY O'HARA TRIUMPHS
IN
LONDON CONCERT**

The facts about Mary O'Hara's emergence as a singer are fairly well known. Originally she was a very young performer of Irish traditional songs to her own harp accompaniment.

Then she entered a convent on the death of her husband, the American poet Richard Selig, coming back into the every-day world 12½ years later when her health broke down for the second time.

But nothing heard or seen about her could have prepared us for the impact of her first London concert on Saturday night.

From the first crystalline notes of her opening item, a Gaelic round, to the final encore, she sang with purity of tone, a sustained precision of pitch and a total absorption such as I have rarely heard in folk or popular music.

She sang nothing, if fact, that she did not adorn, to which she did not add grace.

She invested some familiar contemporary songs with a radiance that is part of her personality: others she enabled us to hear analytically for the first time and to realise how good they are.

Not for a second did her almost incredibly clear and exact attack falter.

Best of all were her Gaelic songs, her interpretations of Peter Levi's "The Clown" and "The Snail," Sydney Carter's "Lord of the Dance," and her setting of a prose poem by Richard Selig.

But the Royal Festival Hall really must not allow people to clump on their seats during a song recital any more than during a chamber concert, though this did give us the malicious pleasure of hearing her introduce a song with a quiet "I'll sing it for you now - if you are all set...."

- M.R.

THE GUARDIAN, UK
Fri Nov 4 1977
Harp Times

"LEGENDARY" is a dreadful term used far too easily in popular music, but Mary O'Hara, who appears at the Festival Hall tomorrow, does almost justify her billing as "the legendary singer-harpist." Sixteen years ago, when she appeared on the Ed Sullivan Show and influenced Joan Baez, she was hailed as one of the great exponents of Celtic folk

music. Her approach was formal, even classical, and with her clear pure voice and delicate harp playing she showed how traditional songs could also be appreciated as "art music."

That, to most people is the last that is known of her. She was married for 15 months to the American poet Ricarrd Selig, and after his tragic death she retired – as Sister Miriam – to a Benedictine monastery in Worchester.

She was there for 12½ years and in that time never touched her harp. "I didn't want to," she says. "It had been my life before, not my recreation." She left after her health badly broken down twice in two years.

She returned to performing three years ago, and has since toured America and Europe and played in Britain at Arts Festivals and on radio. Only now – rather suddenly and dramatically – have the media realised that a story like hers is almost too good to be true. An appearance on the Russell Harty Show led to two book offers and there are already negotiations under way for a feature film of her life (in which she herself won't appear). Her new manager is the controversial American Jo Lustig, who's success provokes both admiration and disquiet on the folk scene (past clients include Pentangle and The Chieftains). Under his guidance her new record company Chrysalis will be recording her two-hour show for an album release next year. She will be accompanied, for the first time by an acoustic hand, and for the first time her set will include contemporary work by Saul Simon, Carole King and Leo Sayer.

All this (combined with news that she is booked for Val Doonican's Christmas Show) may lead to speculation that the lady who planned to spend her life in obscurity, work and prayer, may have sold out to the commercial devils. But on meeting her, any such terrible thought vanishes. At 41 she seems youthful and charmingly Irish. She describes herself as "very blessed," and it comes as no surprise when she explains how a parking ticket was cancelled when she wrote in apologising and promising to obey the law in future.

She says she decided to include contemporary songs in her repertoire after hearing Sydney Carter's Lord Of The Dance, but she doesn't consider herself a pop singer. Along with the new songs she will still play Irish, Scottish and Elizabethan material.

As for catching up on the music she missed while in the monastery, she had no set plan but "let the ear listen to what was there." She still

hadn't heard the Rolling Stones but likes Gordon Lightfoot and John Denver. Her heroine is still Baez.

*Contributed by:
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SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

Dublin, Sun. Nov 6 1977
(front page lead story)
from Jim Gleeson in London

**Mary O'Hara
acclaimed in London**

MARY O'HARA returned last night after 13 years as a nun in a Benedictine convent to an overwhelming reception from an enraptured audience at the London Festival Hall.

Three thousand seats were all sold out 10 days ago. Last night ticket touts outside the hall also sold out at £20 for a £2.75p ticket.

Mary, the civil engineer's daughter from Sligo, was on the stage for two and a half hours and sung for the first time in London with a five-piece orchestra with her own harp.

Each of the 25 items was received with deafening applause by the sympathetic and impeccably behaved audience.

Mary, at 41, was looking half her age – fresh, young and vivacious.

There was no interval because of the risk of a blackout due to the electricians' strike.

Mary included several Gaelic songs in the Concert as well as several well-known tunes which received tumultuous applause: "Morning Has Broken," "Ruban Rouge," "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," and especially for her closing number, "The Modern Hymn – The Lord of the Dance."

LIFE STORY

"Mary's success has been like an avalanche," her promoter Jo Lustig told me. "Five publishers are bidding for her life story and we are negotiating for a picture on her life. In spite of what has been published, we have not yet decided upon a leading man.

"It is possible that we shall tour Ireland next January. At the moment Mary is working hard rehearsing for Val Doonican's Christmas party and for the TV show 'Stars on Sunday,' which will be going out in December and January.

Mary, who had to leave the convent through ill-health seemed a better artist than ever last night – more confident and mature. She serenely captivated her audience and there seemed little doubt that

her beautiful soprano voice and her skill on the harp will soon be resounding throughout the world.

DAILY TELEGRAPH
London, UK
Fri Jan 20 1978

**MARY ON THE
MORNING OF ANOTHER SONG...**

ONE of my favourite records, made in Bali, is called "Music from the Morning of the World." I was reminded of this music the other day when I met Mary O'Hara, an Irish singer who is making her first concert tour after 12 years in the seclusion of the Benedictine Order at Stanbrook, Worcestershire.

The record came to mind, not because of any similarity between Balinese music and the songs Mary sings, but because Mary's music also seems to come from the morning of the world – she makes this music even when she is not playing the harp or singing, but simply talking softly.

This quality of hers is rare and comes from a natural charm lit from within by tragic loss, courage, the practice of contemplation, self-discipline and a great gift – a voice of classical purity.

Mary was born in Sligo and educated in Dublin, where she first began to play the Celtic harp. There too she later met Richard Selig, an American poet and Rhodes scholar, whom she married in 1956. Within 15 months, Richard, then in his late twenties, had died.

For some time Mary continued to fulfil her concert engagements, tours and recording commitments until, in 1962, she entered the contemplative order at Stanbrook. A couple of years ago she returned to public life and resumed her career, and her next London concert is at the Albert Hall on Feb 8.

So much for the facts. Heaven-sent, you might almost say, for the promotion of a singer. But before her marriage Mary had already established herself as a sensitive and captivating interpreter of the songs of Ireland and Scotland, and there was a wide and discriminating audience ready to welcome her back.

This is how she sees the breaking-off and resumption of her life as a singer: "People tend to think only in terms of changes... But these changes – all changes – are simply phases in the continuity of life. The circle is unbroken, though it may be difficult to see this at the time, or even for many years after... In the Same way it is misleading to think of the contemplative life as the

antithesis of what we call real life. One of the most important lessons I learned at Stanbrook was to try to achieve not passivity, but receptivity."

I asked her how she saw herself as a singer: "I am not, I think, a folk-singer as the purists understand it. What I try to do is to interpret traditional songs with the skill and respect given to art songs simply by singing them with all the understanding I possess.

"I still think that folk and traditional songs are among the most beautiful, but I also love *Elizabethan lyrics* and some *modern poets' verses* and *prose poems*, which sing to me, so I set them to music."

Mary's is not the skill of the art singer who perhaps unwittingly, patronises the "simple" songs she sings. Nor is she the middle-of-the-road singer the impressive sales of her new record might suggest. Her singing is crystal clear and beautifully phrased – qualities for which she thanks Sister Angela, a Dominican teacher now in her nineties. And, above all, Mary has a delicious sense of humour.

- MAURICE ROSENBAUM

EVENING PRESS,
Dublin
Mon Feb 6 1978

**MARY'S STYLE IS
STILL A WINNER**

Mary O'Hara: Gaiety Theatre

MARY O'HARA'S returned to Dublin disproved the old saying that a profit is without honour in his own country, for in her own special way, she enraptured the audience in a packed Gaiety Theatre last night.

The very presentation of this concert was in itself a new venture for Mary O'Hara. Although she has now moved into the sophisticated world of amplification and theatre lighting effects, this in no way altered the simple and sincere style which has always been the hallmark of her performances. Her ability to communicate the atmosphere and content of her songs, apparently quite effortlessly, is the essence of her success.

Her programme took us through a varied range of songs, differing widely in mood. Singing in both Irish and English, we heard many well-loved folk songs in which she accompanied herself on the Irish harp with her customary skill and taste. Several lesser known songs were also included, and one of these was her own composition 'Among Silence', a setting of words by

Richard Selig, which was most moving. For part of the evening, she was joined by a group of four instrumentalists, under the direction of arranger/pianist Dave Gold, whose contribution added considerably to the variety of the programme and allowed Mary to leave her harp and perform purely as a vocalist.

The success of such lollipops as "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "Morning Has Broken" needs no comment. However, the poignancy of Phil Coulter's "Scorn Not His Simplicity" was a classic example of Mary O'Hara's extraordinary ability.

- ENID CHALLONER

THE TORONTO STAR
Monday June 17 1985

**Gentle soprano sings
with pure emotion**

By Kate Daller
Special to The Star

It wasn't until near the end of her concert at Roy Thomson Hall Saturday night that Mary O'Hara referred to her new single; and even then the mention came as an almost semi-apologetic after-thought. Something as, well commercial as a record was the one slightly jarring note in an evening of perfect gentility.

O'Hara herself set the tone, walking onstage, regally serene in a floor length pink floral gown. Her two musicians, playing flute and piano, wove a lilting introduction to Gordon Lightfoot's "Minstrel of the Dawn," before the singer effortlessly overshadowed the man-made instruments with her sweet, soaring soprano.

Arms as motionless as an Irish stepdancer, O'Hara resembled for all the world an elegant figurine as she lent the modern-day classic a bell-like clarity which fairly startled Lightfoot's lyrics into new life. But she quickly dispelled the porcelain-perfect image by revealing herself as quite human after she'd played harp accompaniment to her coy interpretation of a playful old folk song.

Fell off bicycle

"Last year I fell off a bicycle at top speed," she told the audience of 1200, "and this tour is the first time that I've played harp since the accident." It would take two more months, she explained, before she would recover the full use of her left hand.

O'Hara managed nicely, however in the absence of her own virtuoso harp-playing (when she plucked a melody from her small Celtic harp she chose arrangements that favoured her right hand), moving in

seamless fashion from an unamplified a capella plea to God, to a Broadway show tune, to a 400-year-old Shakespearean ditty. Through it all, her audience remained completely hushed; so much so that even a discreet cough or a snuffle during O'Hara's version of "The Rose," took on all the belligerent cacophony of a firecracker.

Though the soprano's vocals and concert lacked a certain rawness of passion, the patrician beauty compensated by delivering pure and simple emotion through her violin-like vibrato. And whether she was hitting high "C" in a chilling 17th-century tale of the poisoning of an Earl, or crooning a French lullaby, she kept theatrical movements to a minimum.; only occasionally would her arms move, and then with the refined, slow-motion grace of a ballerina.

Charming excerpt

Twice, O'Hara abandoned song for the spoken word, when she read a charming excerpt from "the Velveteen Rabbit," and later a prettily written account of a garden which becomes an orchestra. But what lingers most in the mind are O'Hara's Gaelic songs.

It was then that Roy Thomson Hall's futuristic ceiling seemed to take on the ambience of a rain-soaked Irish forest, and the concrete walls faded into so much mist.

THE SUN
Melbourne,
Monday July 21 1986

**Marvellous Mary triumphs
over her sound of silence**

- By BOB CRIMEEN

FOR one or two agonising seconds at the Melbourne Concert Hall on Saturday night, Mary O'Hara probably prayed the stage would open and swallow her up.

Momentarily, she forgot the words of Gordon Lightfoot's ballad, *Song for a Winter's Night* – the singer's ultimate dread.

Lyrics she probably has sing a thousand times before just disappeared from her head and no sound came from the lips.

Her fingers ceased plucking the strings of her Celtic harp and Miss O'Hara could do nothing but stop and hope to regain the "lost" lyrics.

Being the great artist she is, a moment or two's silence – and the sympathy of everyone in the hall – was all Mary O'Hara needed to recompose herself and resume *Song for a Winter's Night*.

In a country which has such strong links with her native Ireland,

a consummate artist/entertainer like Mary O'Hara could hardly fail.

The devotees were at the Concert Hall en masse on a bitterly cold Melbourne winter's night and they came away having seen another superb performance by her.

She plucked the harp to provide her own sparing accompaniment to her vocals, performed in five languages – if lowlands Scottish qualifies as a language foreign to us Australians – and read two extracts from her new book, *Celebration of Love*.

The night's highlights – as judged by the volume of audience reaction – was an 18th century Gaelic song about Bonny Prince Charlie.

Miss O'Hara sang this downstage, away from her harp, without accompaniment or amplification.

Bravo, Mary O'Hara.

**Contents
of
this section
periodically
augmented
/added to**