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1 BACKGROUND

1.1 HISTORY
The clàrsach has a long history in Scotland, and indeed the earliest depictions of a triangular framed harp are on the carved Pictish stones in the North East, some dating from the 8th and 9th century. It is not known what these instruments were strung with, nor what kind of music was played on them. In the Gaelic speaking Highlands and Islands a wire strung clàrsach was used, similar to that played in Ireland at the time.

It is important to realise that the clàrsach was never really a ‘folk’ instrument, it was a ‘high art’ instrument played by a professional class of musicians who had undergone a long training and relied upon the patronage of clan chiefs, aristocracy and the royal court. When this was no longer available for various historical reasons such as the Union of the Crowns and the diminution of the power of the Highland chiefs after Culloden, the number of harp players greatly decreased. It is also likely that harpers found it necessary to play other instruments, including the new keyboard instruments, to be able to survive. Clàrsach playing in Scotland, it should be realised, is a broken tradition with a gap of almost two centuries before the revival took place.

1.2 REVIVAL
The instrument was revived in 1892 at the first National Mod, with a competition for self-accompanied Gaelic song on clàrsach, which attracted 2 competitors. The competitions continued for some years, with increasing popularity and clàrsachs being made by various makers including the violin maker Henry Briggs. After the 1931 Mod there was enough interest to warrant the formation of The Clàrsach Society. There has been a steady increase in players ever since, and indeed there has been an ever expanding pool of players in the last 20-30 years. The annual Edinburgh Harp Festival (run by the Clàrsach Society) now attracts over 300 players annually, and the Feis movement also plays a vital role in teaching young harpers.

1.3 STYLE
We must remember that the clàrsach is a broken tradition – and look seriously at what exactly was ‘revived’. There was a great deal of influence from the classical world in terms of instruments, technique and arrangements. This is still a style that continues today.

However, there are two other main ‘styles’ of clàrsach playing today:

- One that is very contemporary and jazz influenced, exploring the technical limitations and possibilities of the instrument
- A style of playing traditional tunes which is recognised by other traditional musicians as being a valid traditional style of playing and interpretation.

1.4 INSTRUMENTS –
1.4.1 GUT STRUNG CLÀRSACHS
While there are many clàrsach makers and their instruments are all somewhat different, there are 2 main types of modern gut strung levered clàrsachs:

- A heavily strung, ‘concert gauge’ instrument, which uses the same string tension as a pedal harp and requires a similar technique to produce a good tone. The heavy stringing is not best suited to traditional playing.
• A lighter strung instrument, usually about a 5th lighter than pedal harps in Scotland although in Ireland many players use even lighter tension. The lighter tension makes it more suitable for playing traditional tunes and for good clean ornamentation.

The levers enable a player to raise each string by a semitone, otherwise the clàrsach is a diatonic instrument. Levers (originally blades) are a modern invention and were not present on any historical harps. It is important to note that:

• A string can only be sharpened or flattened once, that is, a C string can be raised to C# but after that the only way to go is to lower it back to C natural, it cannot go down to B or up to D.
• In most instances only one lever can be changed at a time, rather than two or more at a time.
• The player needs to take his left hand off the strings in order to change levers, so the lever change has to be done at a suitable point in the music, and becomes a technical challenge for the inexperienced player.
• Traditional music does not often require lever changes within a tune, but it is often necessary and desirable to change key when moving onto the next tune in a set.
• When accompanying other instruments, especially fiddle, a player often has to work out a way of changing levers without it becoming too much of a disruption in the music.
• Not all players tune their instruments in the same key with all the levers off. Many tune in Eb, which means you can play in anything between Eb and E major, but would not be able to play in Ab for example without retuning strings. Other players who do not use the flat keys tune in C, and still others tune in F.
• The quality and accuracy of the levers are vitally important if they are going to be used.
• A harper thinks in terms of strings to be played rather than theoretically correct notes. For example an A# on the A string is not possible if you are tuned in Eb, the harper will play it as a Bb on the B string.

1.4.2 WIRE STRUNG CLÀRSACHS
In more recent years there has been another harp revival – that of the wire strung clàrsach. This was the original clàrsach played in the Highlands and Islands and in Ireland. Usually smaller than modern gut strung instruments, they do not have levers and have a very different sound, often described as bell-like. The wire strings (usually brass, with some better quality instruments using silver or gold for the bass strings) have a long resonance and require to be played with the fingernails rather than the pads. The player also has to return and damp the string when it is no longer part of the desired harmony of the piece. This means that wire strung harp technique is very different to that of the gut strung instrument, and that arrangements which work well on one instrument may not work well at all on the other.
2 TRADITIONAL STYLE ON THE CLÀRSACH

2.1 WHAT’S NOT SUITABLE!
As the harp is well known as a classical instrument, and as there is a school of thought which sees the clàrsach as a precursor to the pedal harp it is worth noting certain aspects of classical arranging that are not really suited to traditional music.

- Running chordal accompaniment patterns – a traditional player strives to avoid repetitive patterns
- Overly full chords – most traditional players will leave out the 3rd, especially in the bass range. (They may add it in as a 10th, giving a sparser sound)
- Cluttered arrangements – an arrangement should only support and subtly enhance the melody – it should never detract from it or overpower it.
- Too many right hand chords – while a traditional player will on occasion fill in the notes of the tune with the chordal notes in the right hand, they don’t do it all the time.
- Too many technical tricks – the danger with the clàrsach is that many things are possible, however just because techniques exist there is not a necessity or even virtue in using them.

2.2 ORNAMENTATION
Ornamentation is a vital part of traditional music on any instrument. Comments regarding clàrsach ornamentation will mostly copy those for any other instrument, that is that ornamentation should subtly enhance a tune, both rhythmically and harmonically, and should never ever detract from it, (by being too present, too repetitive or badly played).

On the clàrsach it should be noted that changing the grace notes on the repeat of a tune is problematic due to the fact that different grace notes will require a different fingering. While this is a desirable thing to do as it adds variety to the piece it is harder on a clàrsach than on other traditional instruments. Conversely sometimes adding in grace notes can actually make a phrase easier to play.

Clàrsach players should be encouraged to develop a natural style of ornamentation which is not too fixed or rigid, and be able to judge when a grace note or combination of notes is appropriate.

2.3 LEFT HAND ARRANGEMENTS
Generally speaking the right hand plays the melody and the left hand plays a chordal and rhythmic accompaniment, although there are some exceptions to this where the left may also share the tune particularly in faster dance tunes. The left hand arrangement should not be so heavy as to overpower the tune (see “What’s not suitable”, above). It must instead enhance and bring out elements of the tune. There are various arranging styles, and the aim of a good teacher should be to help the student to develop his own playing and arranging style. Certainly by Advanced Higher stage a student should be able to produce his own arrangements, although it is quite acceptable for him to also play other people’s.
2.4 FINGERING AND TECHNIQUE

There is no set or standard method of fingering on the clàrsach, and several players may all finger the same tune differently. However the choice of which finger to use is very important and good fingering provides fluidity and a solid rhythm to the music.

Some players and teachers follow a more classically influenced technique while others follow a more traditional or historical method. The former trains the student to be able to play any note with any finger with any emphasis (over a long period of time) while the latter often relies on the natural differences between fingers and thumbs and the fact that fingers one and three are ‘strong’ fingers while two and four are ‘weak’ fingers. The player would then finger a tune so that a strong finger takes a strong note. In traditional playing repeated notes are generally taken with a different finger each.

Other techniques vary too, for example a classical player will play harmonics differently with each hand but a traditional player on a lighter strung instrument may well choose the same method for both hands.

The aim of technique in traditional playing is to

- Produce a good tone
- Enable a piece to have the desired rhythm and flow
- Enable the player to play challenging pieces
- Not to harm the player

2.5 PLAYER'S INTERPRETATION

While the SQA criteria sheets use the term ‘composer’s intentions’ it is much more relevant to traditional music to talk about the player’s own interpretation of a tune. This should be encouraged from very early on in a student’s playing career. Very few published arrangements of traditional music contain any dynamic or phrase markings, these are expected to be put in as the player sees fit.

2.6 VARIATION

This is linked to the idea of the player’s own interpretation and indeed the development of a player’s own individual arranging and performance style. A good performance of a piece should include some variation, that is, it should not be entirely the same every time you repeat the same phrase or part of a tune. A player might choose to vary the left hand, or use a different (or no if there were some before) ornamentation, or even make slight variations in the melody itself.

2.7 THE LIMITATIONS OF STAFF NOTATION

The traditional style therefore, which is dependent upon a player’s own interpretation and their use of variation is not well suited to playing from staff notation. While it is desirable that a student should be able to read music, as it opens up a rich repertoire resource, it would not be acceptable performance practice in the traditional world to use notated music. A clàrsach player is expected to memorise their entire repertoire. If SQA examinations were to truly reflect traditional style then playing from memory would become a requirement, although the student should not simply be judged on note for note accuracy, but on the musicality of the performance as a whole.
2.8 USE OF PERFORMANCE PLAN IN EXAMINATIONS
In an ideal situation a clàrsach player would be examined without any staff notation being given to the examiner. The main criteria would be whether the performance works musically rather than whether the player has merely played all the written notes. The latter situation provides no scope to reward the creativity of the player rather than the composer or arranger.

However if there is a necessity for the examiner to see some printed music it would be best if the candidate could submit a performance plan – this could entail a basic copy of the tune without any grace notes marked in and a chord chart. The candidate would then indicate what he is likely to do with the piece. This would also provide an opportunity for the candidate to describe the origins of the piece or how they came to play it. Such associations are very important to traditional music, and a professional player would be expected to impart such information during their on stage introductions or in CD sleeve notes.

3 ACCOMPANYING

While most examination candidates will be judged on solo performance it must be recognised that accompanying other instruments or singers is a major part of the traditional clàrsach player’s role. Everything that has been mentioned about style holds true in this situation as well, and the accompanist must never, of course, detract from the main player or singer, or force them into a set rhythm or style. The accompanist must always follow the lead in terms of tempo etc.

Otherwise the comments made by Andy Thorburn in the piano section also hold true for clàrsach accompanists.

4 GRADING

It is very difficult to grade traditional tunes for the clàrsach because a tune can be performed at different levels. You would need to actually grade a particular arrangement of a tune, and it is quite possible that 8 different arrangements could be made of the same tune ranging through all the grades.

There is also the danger of using the current grades as set by the Associated Board and Trinity College. It must be remembered that although these grades are for the clàrsach they are not especially for traditional music on the clàrsach (which can of course play many other types of music). It would not be appropriate to simply look at the techniques required at each grade and ‘translate’ that into arrangements of traditional tunes as the very important question of taste arises. Traditional arrangements have different values to classical ones, fewer chords may be used for example, and in many cases it is not appropriate to use some of the higher grade techniques in traditional music. A classical glissando, for example, would rarely be appropriate in a solo clàrsach piece. It is not the case in the traditional world that the more technically demanding a piece is the better it is musically, indeed a good clàrsach piece can be ruined by too many technical fireworks.
A very simple and skeletal outline would be as follows:

INTERMEDIATE I
A basic tune, probably a slow air or simple waltz or jig, which may be played using both hands for the tune or with a simple left hand accompaniment.

INTERMEDIATE II
Simple march, air, jig or waltz played with some grace notes and a simple chordal accompaniment in the left hand.

HIGHER PIL
Airs, marches, slow strathspeys, and, if desired, dance tunes* played at an appropriate and steady tempo. Likely to involve repeated notes and some large intervals or 5 note runs. Suitable ornamentation and chords should be included. A good clean tone should be produced.

* ‘Dance tunes’ mainly refers to strathspeys, reels and jigs. It should be noted that dance tunes are not especially suited to the clàrsach and were not part of the instrument’s repertoire before the revival. While many players are keen to play dance music it should be remembered that the speed of the tune will need to be slower than a fiddler for example would take it, the left hand will be quite simple, fingering must be very secure and even then the tune must be chosen with great care as some will suit the instrument better than others. It is very unusual to hear a clàrsach actually playing for dancing.

HIGHER EXTENSION/ ADVANCED HIGHER PIL
Any type of tune, although still of a straightforward nature, presented in longer sets, with greater technical difficulty in both melody and left hand arrangement. The pieces should flow well.

ADVANCED HIGHER EXTENSION 1
Tunes should be of various types with some more demanding timing, varied ornamentation and left hand arrangements, they may also contain some lever changes either within the tune or in order to play the next tune in the set. At least some of the pieces should be the player’s own arrangements. Arrangements of pieces from the old harp repertoire should be encouraged by this level.

ADVANCED HIGHER EXTENSION 2
Anything that may be met in the traditional repertoire – all tune types, with a variety of time signatures and moods presented. There should be good use of ornamentation and variation. The player should show good technical command of their instrument and demonstrate their ability with a variety of chordal patterns and rhythms. The player’s own style and interpretation should be evident from the performance.

Teachers should also be aware that many keen young clàrsach players would want to play a mixture of styles in their performance exams. A student may well play some traditional pieces, such as those discussed in this pack, as well as modern compositions such as those by Savourna Stevenson, or even classical pieces. Although the clàrsach is a traditional instrument not all music played on it is traditional. The comments in this pack
refer to traditional music only, as other ‘rules’ or sensibilities will, of course, govern other genres.

5 TUNING AND TONE

Once a clàrsach has been tuned there is no possibility for the player to alter the pitch other than by retuning the instrument. Therefore the question of ‘intonation’ is not as relevant to clàrsach playing as it is to fiddle or whistle playing. However a player should never be allowed be to play out of tune and should be able to tune their own instrument as soon as possible, but definitely by Higher level. By Advanced Higher they should be able to tune from a fixed reference pitch by ear, without any electronic tuning aids.

However the production of a good tone is very much the responsibility of the player, as is a clean sound without any finger noise.

6 RESOURCES

The following is intended as a guide only and is not a comprehensive listing of suitable resources.

6.1 Published music

6.1.1 Clàrsach arrangements

Alison Kinnaird  
*The Small Harp Tutor Book*, Kinmor Music  
Contains a good overview of suitable ornamentation and tunes ranging from beginner to advanced  
*The Harp Key*, Kinmor Music  
More advanced arrangements in traditional style, contains many older pieces from the clàrsach repertoire.  
*The Lothian Collection*, Kinmor Music  
*The North East Collection*, Kinmor Music  
Both of these books contain arrangements of tunes from a particular area, often intended to be played in sets and with good background information. Intermediate to advanced level.

Wendy Stewart  
*About Time*, Taigh na Teud  
*About Time Too!*, Taigh Na Teud 1998  
*Standing Wave*, Cairn Water Music 2003  
*These three books contain both traditional and contemporary Scottish harp music, with many of the tunes appearing on recordings by Wendy Stewart and the band Ceolbeg. Some tunes are suitable for beginners.*

Corrina Hewat  
*Scottish Harp*, Taigh na Teud, 2002  
*A collection of traditional and modern pieces ranging from beginner to advanced, comes with a demonstration CD of the pieces.*
Catriona Mackay and Charlotte Petersen  *Tunes from Scotland for Harp, Books One and Two*, CMCP Publications  
(cmcp@catrionamackay.co.uk)  
*Elementary/intermediate level*  
*Traditional Tunes for Harp*, CMCP publications  
*Intermediate/advanced level*


Savourna Stevenson has published many of her own compositions, some of which such as *Tickled Pink* and *Blue Orchid* are not traditional pieces but would be of use to the student interested in exploring possible techniques or jazz idioms. (Available from Old School Productions, Freepost, EH24 451 Stobo, Peebles EH45 8BR  01721 760298).

6.1.2 Other music

Students and teachers should be encouraged to develop their own arrangements from traditional tunes. Good sources of repertoire include:

- Piping books
- Fiddle collections, such as the Athole Collection, the Gow publications
- Highland collections such as the Gesto Collection, the Skye Collection, Patrick McDonald’s Collection of Highland Vocal Airs, Angus Fraser collection.
- Both *Ceol nam Feis* books, published by Feisean nan Gaidheal. [www.feisean.org](http://www.feisean.org)
- Song airs

6.2 Recorded Music

Anything that has been recorded by players such as Alison Kinnaird, Wendy Stewart, Patsy Seddon, Karen Marshalsay, Ingrid Henderson, William Jackson, Corrina Hewat, Catriona Mackay, Charlotte Petersen, William Taylor would be suitable listening material. As individual style is very important to a traditional player listeners are strongly encouraged to listen to several different players.

There are two compilations, *Scottish Harps* by Greentrax recordings, CDTRAX 5007, a record of performances in the Edinburgh International Festival’s 1998 Scottish Harp series, [www.greentrax.co.uk](http://www.greentrax.co.uk) and the more recent *Harp House* produced by the Edinburgh Harp Festival in 2004, which features artists who performed at the festival that year. (Available from [www.footstompin.com](http://www.footstompin.com))
Recordings that feature clàrsach along with other instruments are worthwhile listening material, especially by bands such as Sileas, Ceolbeg, Ossian and Cliar.

Singer and clàrsach combinations such as Alison Kinnaird and Christine Primrose, and Anne Martin and Ingrid Henderson give a good example of traditional style accompaniment.

6.3 Festivals and other events

The Edinburgh Harp Festival runs each year at Easter. It has teaching classes and concerts as well as various workshops and a makers’ exhibition. www.harpfestival.co.uk

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – runs a couple of weeklong clàrsach courses each year in the summer. www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/smo/cg

Alison Kinnaird runs a weekend harp course in Temple at the end of October each year, Savourna Stevenson runs one in June and Bill Taylor runs various courses throughout the year at Ardival Harps. www.alisonkinnaird.com or www.templerecords.co.uk www.ardival.com

Most feisean have a clàrsach component of their teaching; contact Feisean nan Gaidheal for details.

6.4 Other resources

Very little is written about the history of the clàrsach with the exception of The Tree of Strings, Crann nan Teud, a history of the harp in Scotland, Keith Sanger and Alison Kinnaird, Kinmor Music 1992

There are many other websites with good information about harp resources and about traditional music in general. For example:

www.scotlandsmusic.com
www.musicinscotland.com
www.clarsach.net
www.clarsachsociety.co.uk

Many players also have their own websites.
7. ACCOMPANYING RECORDINGS

7.1 TRACK LISTINGS

All tracks were performed by Karen Marshalsay on a modern, light-tensioned, gut-strung clàrsach with 34 strings and a full set of semitone levers. The instrument is tuned in Eb with all levers off. The tracks were recorded at The Practice Pad, with DP Johnson engineering.

All arrangements are by Karen Marshalsay unless otherwise noted.

All tunes are traditional in style, although some have been recently composed. The composer’s name has been given if it is known, otherwise the tune is attributed as ‘trad’.

1. *The Eagle’s Whistle* (March). Tune only.
2. *The Eagle’s Whistle* Tune with grace notes.
3. *The Eagle’s Whistle* Simple arrangement

7. *Seice Ruaraidh*. Simple arrangement suitable for those with only a few months experience.
8. *Seice Ruaraidh* Slightly more advanced version.


13. *Cuttie’s Wedding / Glenlivet* Strathspey and reel played together as a set.


16. *Bert Mackenzie’s 70th Birthday Waltz* By Louise Mackenzie. Tune only.
17. *Bert Mackenzie’s 70th Birthday Waltz* With simpler left hand arrangement.

20. *Ellen’s Dreams / Pipe Major Donald MacLean of Lewis / Bert Mackenzie’s 70th Birthday Waltz* Professional level performance of these tunes as a set.

7.2 INFORMATION AND COMMENTS ON THE TRACKS

1-5  *The Eagle’s Whistle.*
An old Irish march, with similarities to the Manx tune *Arrane Ny Niei*. As the clàrsach was prominent in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic society, with players of both nationalities travelling around, it is appropriate to play tunes like this. The tune itself does not use any of the clàrsach’s coloured strings (Fs and Cs) and its range is not greater than an octave (starting on G above middle C). This makes it an excellent choice for an improving beginner who could also revisit the piece at a later date with a more advanced arrangement. Marches, which should be played steadily and not too fast, are generally a good choice for the clàrsach.
Track 3: fairly simple chords, mostly on the beat, upholding melody line.  
Track 4: more frequent chords, various patterns, more right hand decoration.  
Track 5: Left hand gradual build up, left hand harmonics, right hand triplet decorations, variations in both accompaniment and tune, damped chord for rhythmic effect.

6–9  *Seice Ruairaidh*
A fairly simple strathspey, to be found in *Ceol nam Feis* book one. Strathspeys have a very strong 4 to the bar feel and should be played with a clear, crisp rhythm.  
Track 6: both hands used to play the tune.  
Track 7: simple left hand chords, often with the melody note on top.  
Track 8: Increased tempo, greater range of instrument used, right hand 32 fingering decoration.

9–12  *The Red Haired Girl of Tulloch*
A more difficult strathspey, learned from the playing of a fiddler.  
Track 9: Tune played with right hand.  
Track 10: Simple supporting chords used.  
Track 11: Slightly increased tempo, more left hand notes emphasising the rhythm of the tune, same chord structure as before.  
Track 12: Variation in left hand- repeat of tune given different left hand arrangement.

13  *Cuttie’s Wedding / Glenlivet*
Example of change from strathspey into a reel. Both tunes require a clean and crisp rhythm. The left hand is used to play some of the tune notes in the reel.

14–15  *Pipe Major Donald MacLean of Lewis*
It is important to convey the feel of a pipe march here. The repeated notes in the third part are technically difficult on clàrsach.  
Track 15: Some left hand is added to support the melody and rhythm, but it is very important that it does not detract from or overpower the tune at any time.

16–18  *Bert Mackenzie’s 70th Birthday Waltz*  
Written by Louise Mackenzie. Louise is a fiddle player I’ve worked with on various projects such as the Gordon Gaithering and An Drochaid events. She wrote this tune as a birthday present for her dad.  
Track 18: slightly increased tempo and greater use of left hand in the arrangement, especially as a rhythmic highlight.
19  **Ellen's Dreams**  
Great control and poise is needed to play a slow and free piece well on the clàrsach. This track highlights the use of various sound qualities (by playing on different parts of the string), complicated decorations, chords broken downwards (in the style of the old harpers).

20  **Ellen's Dreams / Pipe Major Donald MacLean of Lewis / Bert Mackenzie’s 70th Birthday Waltz**  
When compared to track 19 this shows the subtle differences when a traditional player never plays things exactly the same way each time. The overall structure and feel of the piece is the same but the exact decoration and chordal patterns used varies in each performance. It is common to string several tunes together in a set, which may incorporate key changes and will often involve different time signatures and rhythms. Slow airs are often played on their own, but it can be very effective, in live performance especially, to lift the mood by going into some more upbeat tunes.

21  **The Horseman’s Port**  
This tune appears in the Balcarres MS (1692-4) and the word ‘port’ in the title indicates a link with the clàrsach. The structure of the piece is well suited to variations such as these created by Alison Kinnaird. The fourth variation however, was made up on the spot as I forgot what was meant to come next and improvised a fitting pattern – a very acceptable and traditional thing to do. I would congratulate rather than criticise a student who did something similar and indeed a good traditional player should always be able to find their way out of problems without alerting their audience!

8.  **NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY**

In recent years there has been some controversy and discussion about what the instrument should really be called. Historically the word clàrsach was used to denote a wire strung instrument with harp being used for gut strung ones. However it must be remembered that the tradition was broken and when it was revived it was by a Gaelic association and they used the Gaelic word *clàrsach*, as opposed to the English word *harp*, which by this time most people associated with an orchestral pedal harp. For the purposes of this pack it is a useful general distinction (similar to the way the terms fiddle and violin are used) to use clàrsach to mean the smaller instrument used in traditional music rather than the larger pedal harp used in classical music. The term ‘wire strung clàrsach’ is used when an instrument strung with wire is discussed. Teachers and students should be aware, however, that terms such as Scottish harp, small harp, folk harp, Celtic harp, and Gaelic harp will be encountered in various publications and are used by various players.

Traditional players favour the term *harper* rather than *harpist*, which is used by orchestral players, and I have followed that usage here. The Gaelic word *clàrsair* may be heard on occasions. For ease of reading I have used the pronoun *he* to denote any player, whether male or female.