

My Enchantment with Celtic Music and the Dulcimer

by Joe Collins



I am not a Celtic musician although "Collins" is an Irish name and I am a devotee of "The Thistle and Shamrock," a Celtic music radio show. I have been known to burst out in a verse of "Danny Boy" for no apparent reason in public places, much to the embarrassment of my children. But I would not call myself a Celtic musician. The closest I can come to Celtic contains a mixture of Carolina backwoods, but I love trying.

What makes me love the music so is unclear. It certainly does not make me more popular with my family and friends. Although my mother used to occasionally tap her foot to a Scottish jig and enjoyed listening to Irish tenors, most of my loved ones just raise their eyebrows and seem to feel sorry for my apparent affliction with the Celtic muse. But the music is special to me, and I understand that it has found a home all over the world, mixing with native cultures and musical forms and enriching the people that will take time to listen. Perhaps the centuries of occupation by the English or the harsh environment of the Celtic lands has shaped their music around universal themes of hardships and hopes, two realities that all of us try to balance sometime in our lives.

Though I grew up in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, I was 22 years old before I ever saw my first Appalachian dulcimer. When I first saw a little plywood box with a neck and three strings, I treated it as little more than a curiosity. I did not take it any more seriously than I did my Jaw Harp or, at a later time, my "nose flute." The dulcimer turned out to be so easy to play that I was picking out tunes within a few minutes. Furthermore, the sound was so enchanting that I would play for hours. I didn't even know that "my" dulcimer was a cheaply made instrument. I had seen no others to which I could compare it. I used it in my prayer time to express praise to God. I would pull it out to amaze any friends that dared to cross my portal. I soon began incorporating it into performances where I also would share rare bits of information about the instrument that I came across from time to time. I became an evangelist, telling the good news that here, at last, was an instrument that could be played by all with results that were worth hearing.

The dulcimer also became my ticket into the world of Celtic music. I had always enjoyed what little Celtic music I had heard, but the open fifth chords of the droning dulcimer invited me to experiment myself with Celtic music. After three years with a borrowed dulcimer, I felt lost when the owner came to reclaim her instrument. I looked, but could not find another. I would go to music stores and ask about dulcimers and would end up drawing pictures of it to puzzled shop owners. It was then that I decided that I would develop what little knowledge of woodworking I had to become a maker of dulcimers. That was in 1985. By spring of 1986, I had made my first plywood dulcimer, which hung in my parents' house until they passed away. It now hangs in my basement.

I started making dulcimers with no reference points: no books, no knowledge of other dulcimer builders (though I assumed there must be some), and very few tools (mostly borrowed). All I had was rough sketches I drew while sitting in a systematic theology class. As a result, I made a lot of mistakes (as I'm sure I did in my theology ☺), but to date, I have built more than 200 instruments that are spread far and wide. Hopefully, at least some of them are playing Celtic music for future generations to love.

Joe is available to lead playing workshops and to perform on the mountain dulcimer. For booking information or inquiries concerning his dulcimer products, contact Joe Collins by mail at 109 Buck Landing; Shelby, NC 28150; by phone at (704) 472-9791; by e-mail at dulciman@bellsouth.net; or through his website at www.jcdulcimer.com.