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In praise of ... harps

Leader**Wednesday June 6, 2007****The Guardian**

Even those who reflexively recoil from anything to which the Prince of Wales puts his name should make an exception for his patronage of the harp. Not because the harp is many people's favourite instrument - it isn't. But the harp has an unmatched rich pedigree.

Few instruments can be traced back to 4000BC or are rooted in the cultures of so many parts of the world. Not every instrument has a prominent place both in the Old Testament, plucked by Jubal and King David, and in classical antiquity, in the hands of Orpheus. Few can match the harp's place in northern European culture and none can compete with it in the different folk traditions of these islands.

If the Celtic claims on the harp are the most vigorously maintained (not least by Guinness and in the Irish state's insignia), they are certainly not unique, since the harp is also firmly rooted in the music of the Middle East, west Africa and South America (it was brought there by the Spaniards). The harp was so popular in Marie Antoinette's circle that Mozart was prevailed on to write a concerto for flute and harp during a stay in Paris. Later composers, from Berlioz and Wagner to Debussy and Ravel, put the harp to good use too, while Harpo Marx made a career out of playing it.

So too today does Claire Jones from Crymch in Pembrokeshire, who makes her debut in Cardiff Castle this evening as the Prince of Wales's official harpist. Perhaps Gordon Brown should follow the prince's lead and appoint a harpist of his own. It would be a very British thing to do.

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