

# THE EPOCH TIMES ARTS & CULTURE

SIMON CHADWICK



“  
**I thought to myself:  
I'd love to get one of those  
harps and play this music.**

*Sylvia Crawford, musician*

## TRADITIONAL MUSIC

# Coming Home to Ireland's Lost Harp Tradition

Musician Sylvia Crawford  
and the early Irish harp

LORRAINE FERRIER

One of the most enduring of sounds, synonymous with the Emerald Isle, is that of the dulcet Irish harp. But the Irish harp that many of us are familiar with is a relatively modern instrument. Prior to the late 19th century, Ireland had a rich tradition of making and playing a different kind of harp, which is now referred to as the early, or old Irish harp.

The new type of harp that came to Ireland was based on the Anglo-continental harp tradition, musician Sylvia Crawford said on a video call. Eventually, as the old Irish harp makers and harpers—the term used to describe the old harp players—passed away, the knowledge of the early harp tradition went with them.

*Continued on Page 4*

COURTESY OF SYLVIA CRAWFORD



**(Above)** Musician Sylvia Crawford is one of a number of experts and enthusiasts dedicated to learning and playing the early Irish harp—a rich Irish tradition that died out at the end of the 19th century.

**(Left)** During her studies of the early Irish harp, Sylvia Crawford discovered a kinship with harper Patrick Quin. An engraving of Quin in an edition of *The Monthly Pantheon* (1809).

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### TRADITIONAL CULTURE

# Letting Our Lives Speak: Some Ways to Fight the Culture Wars

JEFF MINICK

Traditionalists of whatever political stripe seem to have given up on winning the culture wars waged over the last five decades or so. The past year in particular has brought setbacks and defeats: the removal or desecration of statues of American heroes, schools erasing the names of some of these same heroes, classics removed from English literature reading lists, and professors and writers attacked for defending the heritage of history and literature.

Pessimists say the war is lost, that we should run up the white flag and acknowledge the reality that the deconstructionists and radicals, having taken control of much of our media, Hollywood, schools, corporations, high tech, and government, have won.

Not so fast. Cultural preservationists still have weapons in their arsenal. News outlets like The Epoch Times, online sites like Intellectual Takeout, and publishers like Encounter Books continue to emphasize the vital importance of family and tradition in a healthy culture.

Academic institutions like Hillsdale College and the University of Dallas still teach Chaucer, Shakespeare, Bach, Mozart, Michelangelo, Plato, and Aristotle without labeling those great men “dead white males.” A bestseller right now at Amazon and at Barnes and Noble is George Orwell’s classic novel about totalitarianism, “1984.”

No—we must not even think about giving up. Instead, let’s remember the words of Revolutionary War hero John Paul Jones, who when called upon by the British to surrender his ship replied: “I have not yet begun to fight!”

Here are some strategies to strengthen our hearts and carry on these battles.

## Patience and endurance must be our watchwords.

### Be Patient

In “The Twilight of American Culture,” Morris Berman examines our civilization and finds it in decline. He cites reams of evidence from literature, politics, and our culture in general to make the case that America’s power and influence in the world will shrink in the coming years, in no small part because of a degraded culture.

But here’s what we must remember: This radical transformation of our culture took 50 years or more to achieve fruition. We are deluding ourselves if we believe



A portrait of Matsuo Basho, master of the haiku, by Hokusai.

we can reverse that conquest overnight. Instead, we must take the long view. Restoring the standards of excellence in the arts and the practice of honor and decency in the public square may take decades. Along the way, we must expect delays, troubles, and even suffering as we slowly work to rebuild society.

Patience and endurance must be our watchwords.

### The New Monasticism

Although on his blog he is no fan of American corporations, of George Bush II, or of Donald Trump, Berman looks to tradition for answers. He devotes a good portion of “The Twilight of American Culture” to what he calls the NMIs, or new monastic individuals. He takes as his model the monasteries that came into existence after the collapse of Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries, those tiny outposts of learning where generations of monks worked to preserve the documents of the past.

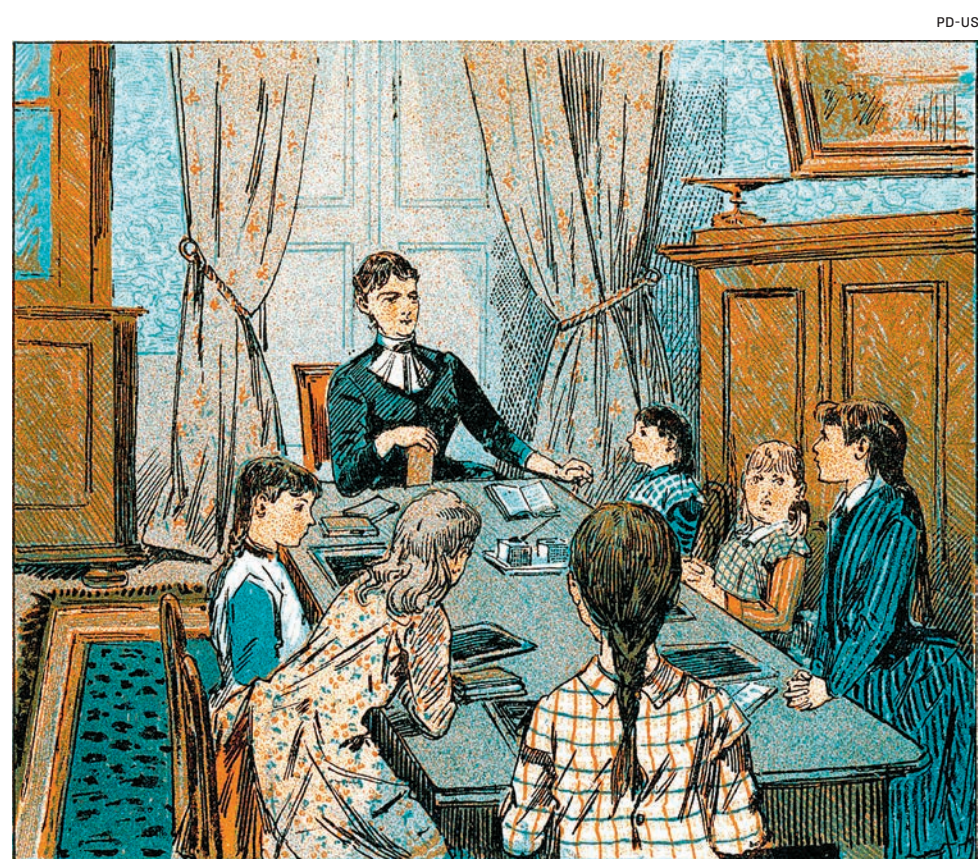
He then argues that we can live the same way, removing ourselves from a declining culture and pursuing truth and goodness. A few years ago, Rod Dreher’s “The Benedict Option” advocated a similar course of action for Christians in an increasingly hostile world.

Berman describes the typical NMI as a person who has little interest in money or power, lives frugally, and works as much for love as for cash. As an example of the credo of the NMI, Berman cites that master of haiku, Matsuo Basho:

“Journeying through the world  
To and fro, to and fro  
Cultivating a small field.”

### Building Communities

Berman offers several instances of peo-



Since we can no longer rely on public schools to teach Western classics to our children, we must do so ourselves. An illustration in an 1889 issue of the Danish magazine Punch.

ple practicing cultural preservation in groups. My favorite of these examples has to do with writer Nathan McCall, who once spent time in prison where he helped organize a “Western civ discussion group.” The inmates read such philosophers as Spinoza, Kant, and Hegel, and spent hours discussing their ideas.

Many people in the world of homeschooling already qualify as Berman’s NMIs. They worship together, meet at the playground, create co-ops to enhance their children’s education, share books and ideas, and forge tight friendships.

Whatever our situation, many of us can take steps to become cultural preservationists. We might consider forming a book club, for example, where we read and discuss the classics or works like those published by Encounter Books. We might gather with a small group of friends every month—or every week, for the ambitious—share a meal, and talk over some piece of art or music, or a movie we’ve watched together.

Just as we might join hands with family and friends, so too should we engage the communities in which we live. We should keep abreast of decisions made by our town council, shop locally when possible rather than buy from global behemoths, and take the time when going to a convenience store or a coffee shop to chat a few moments with an employee.

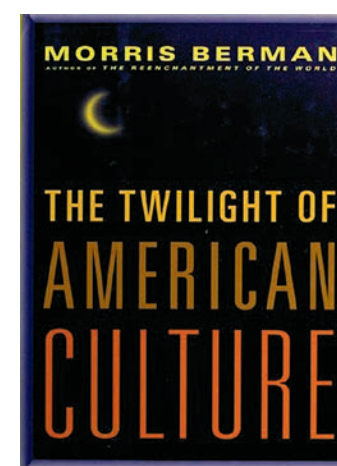
When we do these things, we are strengthening the bonds of our neighborhoods and local communities.

### The Best of the West

I first read “The Twilight of American Culture” years ago. When I returned to my copy this week, I was delighted to find so many dog-eared pages, underlined sentences, and notes I’d written to myself.

I was happy, too, to find Berman using the word “guerrilla” to describe this underground movement of NMIs.

Withdrawing from our decadent culture doesn’t mean leaving the battle-



Morris Berman’s book on the decline of Western culture.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



Let’s refashion the Revolutionary War cry by John Paul Jones, “I have not yet begun to fight!” A portrait of John Paul Jones, circa 1781, by Charles Wilson Peale.

field. Instead, in the stifling and ugly culture of today that seeks to silence dissent and ruin opponents, we should regard ourselves as guerrillas, irregular warriors whose weapons are the “best of the West” and who seek to inspire others by our example and by living in truth.

Nor should we turn a blind eye to current events. When Berman wrote his book, “cancel culture,” “de-platforming,” and suppression of free speech were in their infancy. If we fail to track the political developments of our time, if we fail to speak out against lawlessness and attacks on our liberty, we may someday find ourselves stripped of our rights and freedoms, repressed to the extent that resistance is impossible.

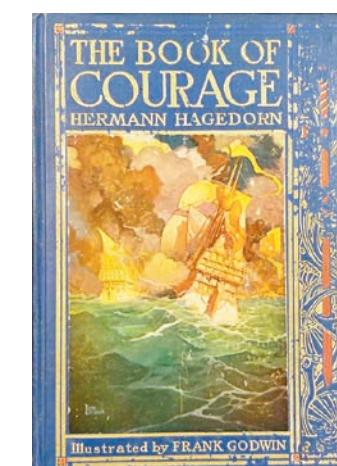
### Teach the Culture to Our Children

To readers familiar with my writing, I will now sound like a broken record.

It’s up to us to impart the culture of Western Civilization to our children. Whether this effort involves teaching them “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” the story of Little Red Riding Hood, the “Little House on the Prairie” books, the “Iliad,” or hundreds of other classics, the point is that we must hand down our heritage to our young people. The same holds true for all the arts. Certainly, many people can no longer depend on the public schools to do so.

Even more importantly, we must pass along to them the virtues and values esteemed by our ancestors. Temperance, prudence, courage, and justice were once staples of what children learned at home and at school.

Just this week at our local second-hand bookstore, I bought Hermann Hagedorn’s “The Book of Courage,” which was completely unfamiliar to me. Published over 90 years ago and aimed at young readers, this thick volume contains accounts of Hannibal, Joan of Arc, Daniel Boone, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and 27 other heroes. Hagedorn clearly meant to inspire youth with



“The Book of Courage” includes short biographies of over 30 inspiring heroes for children.

these mini-biographies, and we should aim to do the same today through what we teach our own children.

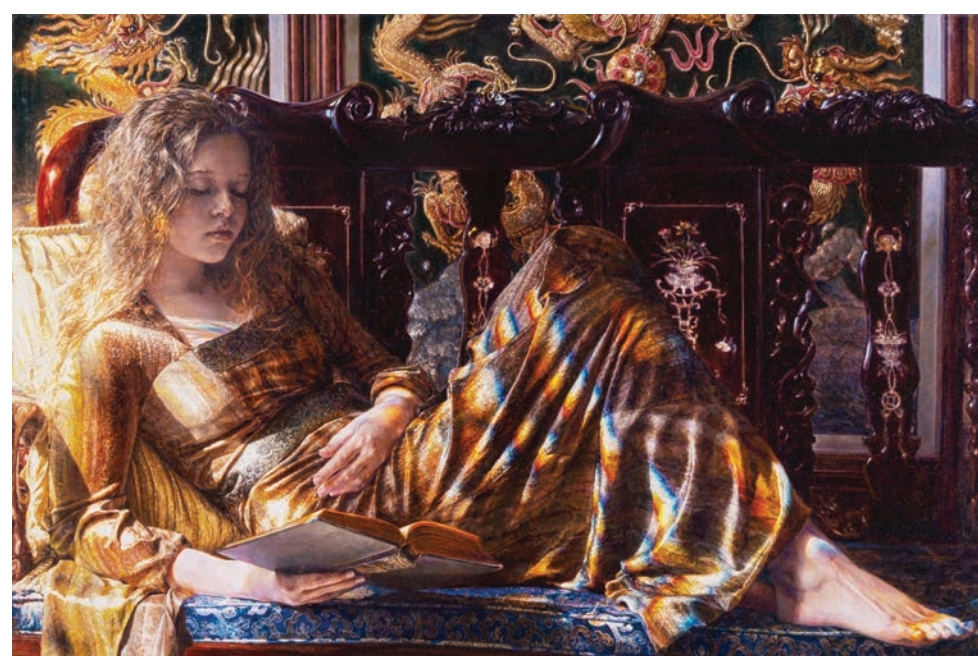
### Doing Good in a Fallen World

At the end of “The Twilight of American Culture,” Berman writes: “I leave it up to you to decide if the glass is half-full or half-empty, or whether that even matters. For the “monk” of the 21st century will not be pursuing his or her activity for grand, heroic outcomes, but for the sense of worth and meaning that the activity itself contains. The work may lead somewhere; it may not. Our job is only to give it our best shot.”

A few lines later, Berman concludes his book by citing an old Quaker, “Let your life speak,” and then adds: “In the end, that’s the only thing that matters.” Agreed.

Keep the faith, everyone. And hold fast to the good.

Jeff Minick has four children and a growing platoon of grandchildren. For 20 years, he taught history, literature, and Latin to seminars of homeschooling students in Asheville, N.C. He is the author of two novels—“Amanda Bell” and “Dust On Their Wings,” and two works of non-fiction, “Learning As I Go” and “Movies Make The Man.” Today, he lives and writes in Front Royal, Va. See [JeffMinick.com](http://JeffMinick.com) to follow his blog.



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## TRADITIONAL MUSIC

# Coming Home to Ireland's Lost Harp Tradition

Musician Sylvia Crawford and the early Irish harp



The Castle Otway harp in "The Irish and the Highland Harps," 1904, by Robert Bruce Armstrong.

**Musician Sylvia Crawford thought playing the early Irish harp wouldn't be that different from playing the piano. She was wrong.**

Continued from Page 1

Crawford is one of a number of early Irish music experts and enthusiasts who are reviving the old Irish harp tradition. In 2019, she completed her master's in ethnomusicology, specifically focusing on 18th-century Irish harper Patrick Quin.

"My aim is to look at what the evidence is about the old tradition. ... But also to bear in mind that it was traditional music, so to respect that, and bear in mind [that] this would've been an unwritten music and an oral tradition transmitted from master to pupil," Crawford said.

With the last of the old harpers having passed away and the traditional teaching from master to pupil therefore unavailable, Crawford had to look to many historic sources to understand and reconstruct the tradition. It's an ongoing process that she likens to painstakingly constructing a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle without a picture.

### Meeting the Harp

Crawford first remembers seeing harps in her neighborhood in Portadown, Northern Ireland, when she was 6 or 7 years old. It was in the 1970s. One day, while playing in the street, she saw her neighbors taking harps from their car into their house. "That was my first encounter with harps, and in fact one of the men in that family was a harp maker," she said.

Many years later, she came across the same family, not on her street but in a video from the RTE (Ireland's national public service media) archives, when she was studying for her master's degree. "Inside the house was a room full of young pupils who were learning to play the harp: There was a lot of brown and orange ... [It was] very 1970s," she said.

It was in the late 1990s that Crawford heard the old Irish harp for the first time, in Galway on the west coast of Ireland. Master harper Paul Dooley was playing the tune.

"He was a wonderful, wonderful player. ... And I heard this sound, and I saw him sitting just quietly playing on the street busking; that was very common in Galway in those days. There was something about the sound of that, I thought: This is different; this is a different sound than I've heard before," she said.

Dooley's harp playing piqued Crawford's interest in the instrument. As a classically trained pianist and a traditional Irish fiddler, Crawford was already well-versed in both the classical and traditional Irish music heritages.

"I was very much involved in the early music scene in Galway and I was playing these old Irish harp airs. And I was playing them on my fiddle, and I was playing them on my piano, and I thought to myself: 'I'd love to get one of those harps and play this music ... on the actual instrument it was composed for,'" she said.

### Learning to Play the Old Irish Harp

The early Irish harp is a diatonic instrument with no mechanisms (levels or pedals) for changing the pitch. And apart from the metal strings, it is basically made of three parts: the sound box, the neck, and the pillar. The harp is held together by the tension of the metal strings. There's no glue holding it together. In the old Irish harps, the sound box was carved out of one piece of wood, traditionally willow.

"There's a lot of strain on the construction, and you can see a lot of the old harps have big iron rods around them holding them together where they've likely burst open from the middle because of the tension of the strings," Crawford said.

In 2006, Crawford bought her first early Irish harp. She thought playing it wouldn't be that different from playing the piano. She was wrong. She soon realized that the unique nature of the instrument made it challenging to play. When one of the metal strings is plucked, it rings and doesn't stop, so when the next string is plucked, the two strings ring together. If a third string is plucked, then there's a clash, she explained. "This is much more challenging than it appears because I have to learn to control this resonance," she said.

Crawford discovered some harpers who tried to play by borrowing from historical harp technique and others who were adapting modern harp technique.

Although she learned to play the instrument from several people, she felt something was not quite right. "I was playing these old laments and old Irish airs on an old instrument ... but to me, it was outside of the world of traditional music," she said.

One technique Crawford used when starting to learn was to color code the strings to see what she was doing. But she soon realized that the old harpers wouldn't have played the instrument that way; in fact, many of them were blind. And the harp itself doesn't have any visual clues as to where the harper is in the instrument when play-



Musician Sylvia Crawford with her early Irish harp, which is based on the Castle Otway harp once owned by 18th-century Irish harpist Patrick Quin.

ing, she explained. One particular note has two strings, so harpers could only orientate themselves by sound.

As an experienced fiddler, she knew that one of the things that makes the fiddle sound Irish is the bowing technique. There are many different styles and regional differences, Crawford explained, but the bowing—where it slurs into the beat—is one of the real distinctive features of the Irish fiddle sound.

She began to wonder if there wasn't a similarity between bowing on the fiddle and fingering on the harp, each giving the instrument its Irish sound.

### Meeting Patrick Quin

Two people who helped Crawford learn more about the old Irish harp, including the distinct fingering techniques, are from the 18th century: harper Patrick Quin and musician Edward Bunting.

Crawford was already familiar with the work of Bunting. But she "met" Quin around six or seven years ago at the "Summer School of the Early Irish Harp" run by The Historical Harp Society of Ireland, in Kilkenny, south-east Ireland. It's an annual event devoted to the early Irish harp.

During one presentation, there was a slide that showed Bunting's handwritten piano arrangement of a tune he'd collected from Quin, which is now held at Queen's University Belfast.

The university has a collection of Bunting's notebooks from when he visited the old harpers and recorded their music at the end of the 18th century. Crawford says it's important to note that when Bunting was collecting this music, he was outside of the Irish music tradition: He didn't play the harp. He wasn't a Gaelic speaker. Bunting's purpose was not to preserve the harp tradition but to record the tunes before the last of the harpers died.

At the bottom of this particular slide, Crawford noticed a note that said something like Patrick Quin, County Armagh, near the Blue Stone. "I thought, 'I know exactly where he's talking about,'" she said. Crawford had grown up in that very area on a road called the Drumnacanny Road, which led to the Bluestone Road.

Suddenly, Crawford could imagine Bunting sitting down beside Quin, in one of the old cottages along that road—Bunting with his notebook and Quin playing his tune. "It suddenly came to life in my imagination. But I also thought, 'Nobody else knows where the Blue Stone is. I know because it was up my road. He's my harper. I need to focus on him,'" she said.

Although there was some research on Quin, there wasn't that much known about him, she said.

The more Crawford found out about Quin, the more she realized how her life, although centuries apart from his, mirrored aspects of his life. For example, Quin lived in Portadown in County Armagh, where Crawford grew up; both of them played the fiddle, and of course both had the harp in common. Crawford was living in Brittany, France,



Celtic motifs are carved into Sylvia Crawford's poplar harp. Traditionally, willow would have been used to make the early Irish harps, but large blocks of willow are now harder to find.



Edward Bunting in the "Annals of the Irish Harpers," 1911, by Charlotte Milligan Fox.



The harp is synonymous with Ireland in so many ways. Here a wall plaque with harp on a shield denotes an official government building in Ireland.



Edward Bunting's piano arrangement of "Limerick's Lamentation," which he collected from harpist Patrick Quin with the title "Lochaber," as published in "A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland," 1809, by Edward Bunting.



Edward Bunting's piano arrangement of "The Butterfly," which he collected from harpist Patrick Quin, as published in "A General Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland," 1809, by Edward Bunting.

at the time, but she decided to move back home to County Armagh, to focus on finding out as much as she could about Quin.

### Learning From a Past Master

Quin "was a real master of his art. One person described how 'he threw his fingers across the strings with all the ability of a master,'" Crawford said.

Delving deeper into her research, Crawford discovered that Quin was associated with the Fewes, an area in South Armagh with a strong literary and poetic tradition. "So no longer was Patrick Quin just a harper from Portadown. He was connected to this really important Gaelic literary and musical culture," she said.

Among the tunes Bunting collected from Quin were three of the first tunes traditionally taught to young harpers. Bunting collected versions of those particular tunes from various harpers, but Patrick Quin was the only harper source for all three tunes. From the point of view of trying to reconstruct a musical tradition, having that information was wonderful, Crawford said.

She also discovered an oil painting of Quin in a private collection; it was unknown before. In the painting, Quin is vividly depicted playing the Castle Otway harp that is now owned by Trinity College Dublin.

By closely looking at the painting, she could see how Quin was seated quite low, and that he rested the Castle Otway harp on his left shoulder. The modern harp rests on the right shoulder. She could also see that he held the harp between his legs and how he steadied it with his knees.

What fascinated her the most in the painting was Quin's fingers. "You can see his left hand's fingers up on the strings and his right hand low in that left-high, right-low position that old harpers played. But you could see more information than that; you could see exactly the shape of his fingers on the strings. And you could see his bass hand in this sort of spread-out shape with his fourth finger extended," she said.

At the time, Crawford had a simplified copy of the Castle Otway harp on loan from The Historical Harp Society of Ireland. She was aware that the painting was not a reliable source because of its static nature and because the artist could have used artistic license. However, she combined what she found from the painting with information from a chapter in one of Bunting's publications (1840). When writing about how the harpers played, Bunting included a table of tune fragments and showed exactly which fingers were used in each fragment.

As Crawford played the harp by relying on these discoveries, her fingers flowed into what Bunting's fragments described. Because traditional Irish music was oral, she decided to study other oral music traditions. She learned that certain characteristics differ a great deal in oral and written traditions. "For example, recurring motifs are used in lots of different contexts, the idea of being taught by rote and copying, the idea of associating an aural sound with a movement or a hand or finger movement, and the

idea of naming these very specific fingering techniques," she said.

As she read about oral traditions, she saw what Bunting had written about playing techniques, which he had collected from the harpers, in a different light. "I started to realize that he'd given us a lot of this information." But because he did not play the harp himself—he was an organist, pianist, and arranger—his published work had to be interpreted to be fully understood, and then reconstructed or pieced together.

### Continuing the Old Tradition

Crawford stresses that there's a lot more still to be discovered about the early Irish harp. And each discovery is the result of experts working together on one another's research. Ultimately, Crawford feels a sense of responsibility to share what she's found. "Any insights that I have, I really do want other people to build on those in the future," she said.

She's currently writing a book about the first tunes taught and the playing techniques of the early Irish harp, explaining how she came to her conclusions and the importance of interpreting what Bunting wrote. She especially wants to draw attention to his work because "without him we would have no possibility" of doing research and understanding the early Irish harp.

"On a very personal level, it's made me realize that I didn't have to go to Galway looking for traditional music. I didn't have to go to Brittany looking for traditional music. It was right on my road; it brought me back home," she said.

To find out more about Sylvia Crawford and the old Irish harp, visit [SylviaCrawford.net](http://SylviaCrawford.net)

## Remembering Edward Bunting

In celebration of St. Patrick's Day, March 17, the organizers of the Remembering Bunting Festival, held in February, have extended online access to the festival, which includes talks and performances from across the world. To access the festival and to learn more about Edward Bunting's legacy, visit [RememberingBuntingFestival.com](http://RememberingBuntingFestival.com)



In 2020, musician Sylvia Crawford led a workshop for The Historical Harp Society of Ireland's Early Irish Harp Discovery Day at the Remembering Bunting Festival, in Belfast.



In her diaries, letters, and works, Virginia Woolf demonstrated her reverence for the truth.



A 1902 portrait of Virginia Woolf by George Charles Beresford.

## TRUTH TELLERS

## Virginia Woolf: 'I always tell the truth'

RAYMOND BEEGLE

Virginia Woolf asks us—we hear her own voice, by way of a BBC recording—"How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?"

This was Woolf's life question, her life quest, the catalyst of her genius. She struggled with it, like Jacob struggled with the angel, and she would not let go until the true and the beautiful, in one way or another, blessed her. "When I write, I always, always tell the truth," she admonished a friend who suggested that she might do otherwise. In her letters, diaries, and fiction, the struggle never ends.

## Her Diaries

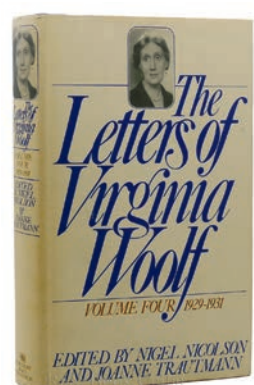
Her diaries, comprising 6,873 pages in a Harcourt Brace Jovanovich edition, tell us her most intimate thoughts and feelings. These pages were not meant for our eyes, and she asked her husband to burn them after her death. They perhaps contain the farthest reaches of her mind, and some of her most beautiful phrases, as well as her candid, private views of contemporaries.

She was scandalized, for example, at the success of James Joyce's "Ulysses," which she found to be a celebration of the ugly, a unilateral attack on the literary tradition she revered: "An illiterate, underbred book it seems to me. ... It is brackish. It is pretentious. ... A first-rate writer, I mean, respects writing too much to be tricky; startling; doing stunts."

A close friend told her, "Only your death will be the one thing you will be unable to describe!" True, of course, but she does describe, as no one else has done, the depression that often seems to attend genius. Tolstoy, Handel, and Beethoven knew it well but left no detailed account of it.

Virginia Woolf did: "Woke up perhaps at 3. Oh its beginning it coming—the horror—physically like a painful wave swelling about the heart—tossing me up. I'm unhappy unhappy! Down—God, I wish I were dead. ... This goes on; several times, with varieties of horror. Then at the crisis instead of the pain remaining intense, it becomes rather vague. I doze. I wake with a start."

Other entries tell us of her search for the thing that so many of us pray to: "I enjoy almost everything. Yet I have some restless searcher in me. ... I see the mountains in the



One volume with two years of Virginia Woolf's letters.



Two volumes of Virginia Woolf's diary.

Her letters contain the farthest reaches of her mind, and some of her most beautiful phrases.

sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is 'it.'? ... I do fairly frequently come upon this 'it'; and then feel quite at rest."

Later she writes, "I see before me: something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist." It strikes one as remarkable that this marvelous writer, this brilliant poet, could find no better word for this "something" than "it"! Yet, every one of us knows that this "something" is beyond words, so perhaps "it" is as good a name as any other.

## Her Letters

One is struck by the author's observation that an answer to a letter reflects something of the writer of the original letter that she received. One can see, for example, the warmth and gentleness in her correspondence with her sister, Vanessa, and a cooler persona in her letters to the glacial and proud Vita Sackville-West.

The letter to Sackville-West quoted below is a penetrating view into Woolf's creative process, something too personal to be said to the public but easily said to an understanding and trusted friend:

"Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't get the wrong words. ... Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than any words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing one has to recapture this, and then as it breaks and tumbles in the mind it makes words to fit it."

These words illumine us, tell us more about the depths of Woolf's heart and mind than we can find in any formal publication.

## Her Shorter Fiction

The shorter works—sometimes very short, but never about trivial things—address the issues that loom large in the life of every person, the wonder of life itself. How easy it is for us to forget the sheer unlikelihood of our existence, the infinite confluence of events that make up our circumstances as well as what we call our "selves."

"In the Orchard," a story of only five paragraphs, reveals Miranda sleeping beneath an apple tree. "Apples hung four feet above her head. The sound of the church organ is carried over the tree tops by the wind while Miranda sleeps thirty feet below." Two hundred feet above her, "bells thudded" calling the faithful to service. The wind swept on, "eyeless, brainless, meeting nothing that could stand against it" while "miles below, in a space as big as the eye of a needle, Miranda stood upright and cried aloud. 'Oh, I shall be late for tea!'"

## Her Novels

As memory is a reliable critic, it is employed here to recall some of the best passages of her novels, fragments that entered and never left my mind. The subjects are deep, and the impressions are powerful.

In "The Voyage Out," the young man learns the bitterness of loss; the woman he is to marry becomes fatally ill. "He could not get used to his pain, it was a revelation to him. He had never realized before that underneath every action, underneath the life of every day, pain lies, quiescent, but ready to devour; he seemed to be able to

suffering, as if it were a fire, curling up over the edges of all action, eating away the lives of men and women. He thought for the first time with understanding of words which had before seemed to him empty: the struggle of life; the hardness of life."

In "The Waves," love appears. "Time passes, yes. And we grow old. But to sit with you, alone with you, here in London, in this firelit room, you there, I here, is all. ... When you come, everything changes. The cups and saucers changed when you came in this morning. There can be no doubt, ... that our mean lives, unsightly as they are, put on splendour and have meaning only under the eyes of love."

The intimation of a higher, transcendent life is at the heart of "The Years." A woman returns to her friends after living abroad for 30 years. They gather at a party, and in its midst, she draws into herself: "There must be another life, she thought. ... Not in dreams, but here and now in this room, with living people. ... She was about to grasp something that just evaded her. There must be another life, here and now, she repeated. This is too short, too broken. We know nothing, even about ourselves. We're only just beginning, she thought, to understand here and there."

"To the Lighthouse" is a melancholy narrative of the Ramsey family, a family in the face of change. Time passes; things, people, mysteriously become other things. A child becomes a man, another dies, a way of life that seemed fixed is swept away. The great life question "to what end?" is constantly in our ears. An answer, not complete, not entirely satisfactory, but perhaps the only answer we have, is given. It seems to be that time, indeed, passes. We can hold on to nothing; yet, still, something remains: An entire life of thoughts, feelings, and experiences is synthesized, translated, transubstantiated, stored in our brain as our own ever-unfolding vision. It is our own personal view of the world, of the scheme of things, which no one in all time has witnessed before, and which no one in all time will witness in the future. It is our own.

Genius is occasionally able to immortalize and share its vision through songs, paintings, words, through beauty and truth. "How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth?" we again hear Virginia Woolf ask, on the BBC. It is a question, but to her it was a calling as well.

The closing lines of "To the Lighthouse" are not really about the amateur painter Lily Briscoe; they are about the writer Virginia Woolf: "She drew a line in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush, ... I have had my vision."

Raymond Beegle has performed as a collaborative pianist in the major concert halls of the United States, Europe, and South America; has written for *The Opera Quarterly*, *Classical Voice*, *Fanfare Magazine*, *Classic Record Collector* (UK), and the *New York Observer*. Beegle has served on the faculty of *The State University of New York-Stony Brook*, *The Music Academy of the West*, and *The American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria*. He has taught in the chamber music division of *The Manhattan School of Music* for the past 28 years.



(Left) Edee Mathis (Robin Wright) attempts hunting deer, in "Land." (Top right) Edee (Robin Wright) and Miguel (Demián Bichir) enjoy coffee and some FM-lite songs together. (Bottom right) Robin Wright plays as Edee Mathis learning to live off the land.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.

## Healing Grief Through Living Off the Land

MARK JACKSON

Anticipating an encroaching *Zombie Apocalypse* in my 20s, I started taking classes in primitive skills at Tom Brown Jr.'s Tracking, Nature, and Wilderness Survival School at the now defunct Tracker Farm in Asbury, New Jersey.

We built leaf huts, learned fire-making with bow and hand drills (in a rainstorm), how to stalk and track animals, and set figure-4 deadfall traps. Tom Brown, America's master tracker, further taught various primitive fishing methods, rabbit-stick and atlatl throwing, and edible plant, bark, and mushroom identification. He also taught introduction to Native-American spirituality in the form of sweat lodges and vision quests.

But when Y2K didn't happen, I relaxed my survival prepping and started focusing on the spiritual stuff instead. But that's a different story for a different movie.

## 'Land'

Robin Wright, best known as Jenny in "Forrest Gump," Buttercup in "The Princess Bride," and Sean Penn's ex-wife, makes her directorial debut with "Land," directing herself playing Edee Mathis, a woman getting away from it all by retreating to a log cabin in the remote wilderness.

To preface, this is a well-worn genre: the getting-away-from-it-all quest for solitude movie, the grandfather of which is perhaps Robert Redford in "Jeremiah Johnson" and more recently in "All Is Lost." There's also Reese Witherspoon in "Wild," and Emile Hirsch in "Into the



Robin Wright in her directorial debut, of "Land."



(Left) Miguel (Demián Bichir), a hunter, checks up on Edee when he notices that her chimney is no longer producing smoke. (Right) Robin Wright plays a woman who tries to outrun her grief.



Wild." Those constitute the chosen-solitude variation. There's also the forced-solitude-by-happstance variation, like Tom Hanks in "Castaway" and James Franco in "127 Hours."

Edee packs a few cans of beans, blithely drops her cellphone in the trash, and tells the craggy realtor to come back soon and please drive her car and U-Haul trailer the heck outta here, despite his vehement protestations that one should not be up high in the Wyoming Rockies (the film was shot in Alberta) without a vehicle.

She's got zero wilderness survival experience or primitive homesteading skills. She's clearly thinking, "How hard could it be?" I started cowering inwardly, like at the beginning of a horror movie.

## Out of the Frying Pan, Into the Fire

Sure enough, there's scary animal sounds in the night, food supplies quickly dwindling, the immensely labor-intensive procuring of wood to heat the drafty cabin, and getting cornered in the rickety outhouse in severe cold, sans pants, by a bad-mood bear. Said bear then sees her cabin door standing wide open and commits major food-foraging mayhem. Edee soon realizes that her plan is not working.

Why did she have this plan in the first place? To numb severe pain: Her Chicago life came to a screeching halt after losing her son and husband. She's grief-stricken and suicidal, so her sister (Kim Dickens) pleads that Edee not hurt herself. Edee heads for the hills anyway.

Granted, the nonstop foraging, fishing, hunting, trapping, building, prepping, planting, harvesting, repairing, and chop-wood-carry-water involved in living off the land will focus the mind—but if you don't know what you're doing, you're quickly out of the frying pan and into the fire in terms of tribulations.

Suffice it to say, it's beyond her. Although Robin Wright might have the strong features of an American frontierswoman of old, her character's a survivalist neophyte, and we endure quite a bit of suffering with her.

Starving and emotionally destroyed, Edee is found and rescued last minute by local outdoorsman and hunter Miguel (Demián Bichir) and Alawa, a nurse (Sarah Dawn Pledge).

Alawa suspects that Edee, who consistently refuses hospital treatment and is vehemently closed-mouthed about her affairs, might be a fugitive from the law. Miguel offers to teach Edee primitive skills if she's up to it, to which Edee reluctantly agrees, but with the condition that Miguel tell her absolutely no news from the outside world.

## Out of the Fire, Like a Phoenix

There's an immediate platonic chemistry,

and as much as Edee is stubbornly fixated on remaining cut off from everything and everyone, "Land" slowly segues into a two-character piece. She values the wilderness survival lessons, but also, eventually, the camaraderie with its smidgen of warm banter. Like the fact that Miguel hilariously has a completely random and incongruous playlist of FM-lite songs in his head, and knows all the words to Tears for Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."

When Edee is informed that a six-foot-high tree stump is the work of beavers, she asks if there are beavers around that stand that tall on their hind feet. Miguel answers that there's at least four feet of frozen snow on the ground when the beavers chew these big trees down.

When Edee queries, "Why did you help me?" Miguel responds, "You were in my path." Miguel has his reasons, and we eventually learn what they are, but all I'll say about that is—while Edee's escaping to solitude for comfort initially only brought her more pain, Miguel's helping her find new life helps him find peace.

## She's a survivalist neophyte, and we endure quite a bit of suffering with her.

"Land" is somewhat similar to the recent "Nomadland" in that both are about women who get away from it all, one on a mountaintop and the other in a van. But whereas "Nomadland" has a bleak, desolate tone, "Land"—by featuring stunning Rocky Mountain landscapes, turquoise rivers, pristine woodlands, and pink-orange sunrises and sunsets—harbors a strong center of hope. This is strengthened by plentiful and soothing birdsong, whistling elk calls, and a soundtrack very similar to the muted string, guitar, and banjo-laden folk band Horse Feathers.

It's initially a difficult, painful journey. But ultimately Edee reaches the state that Tom Brown Jr. spoke of, which is that you want to get all your hunting, tracking, and survival techniques to be second nature so you can waste little time getting to the good stuff: the spiritual stuff.

Edee gets to the spiritual stuff. Which is letting go her attachments to the internet, phone, computer, to the state of being hyperaware of the healing beauty and peace around her, and finally pinning photos of a painful past in a cabin-wall collage to be celebrated.

Looking forward to seeing more from this newly minted director.

## FILM

# ‘Little Nellie Kelly’: A Great Day for the Irish

TIFFANY BRANNAN

St. Patrick’s Day, and the whole month of March by extension, is dedicated to celebrating all things Irish. However, many complain that American celebrations of “St. Paddy’s” Day are primarily cheap commercialism, ignoring Ireland’s traditional, genuine culture. Even “Plastic Paddy” celebrations, though, are few in 2021. After claiming St. Patrick’s Day as its first canceled event, the ongoing pandemic is dampening the popular March holiday for the second year. New York City’s famous St. Patrick’s Day parade was canceled in 2020, and the 260th year will be virtual on this 17th.

Whether you normally celebrate at home or in public, St. Patrick’s Day is about much more than drinking green beer. It’s an opportunity to appreciate the influence that Irish immigrants have had on America’s history, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. You can celebrate by watching a movie from the era when Hibernians, the traditional Latin name for the Irish, reigned supreme in Hollywood: the 1930s–1950s. For this St. Patrick’s Day, we recommend MGM’s charming Irish-American musical from 1940, “Little Nellie Kelly.”

## ‘Little Nellie Kelly’

Stubborn Irishman Michael Noonan (Charles Winninger) dearly loves his young daughter, Nellie (Judy Garland), but hates working almost more. He is furious when she decides to marry local boy Jerry Kelly (George Murphy). When the couple emigrate to America soon after the wedding, he grudgingly accompanies them, still refusing to speak to his son-in-law.

In New York City, Jerry studies to become a policeman, but Mike refuses to seek employment. When the couple’s first baby is born, Nellie dies in labor. Jerry and Mike must raise little Nellie together, but the father-in-law remains hostile.

Years later, Nellie (again Judy Garland) is a grown-up girl, the image of her mother. She gains the admiration of young Dennis Fogarty (Douglas McPhail), the son of Mike’s friend Timothy (Arthur Shields). Although her father is delighted, her grandfather is just as disagreeable about her romance as he was about her mother’s. Little Nellie loves her father, her grandfather, and possibly Dennis, so she determines to bring them all together.

## For St. Patrick’s Day

This movie is appropriate for St. Patrick’s Day from start to finish. The opening credits roll to standard Irish tunes with shamrocks and Celtic harps as background art. The first scenes take place in Ireland, and even after the story moves to New York, all the main characters are Irish and played by Irish actors, often with noticeable brogues.

Irish folk songs play a key part in this musical’s score. Nellie Noonan often sings “St. Patrick Was a Gentle Man,” a traditional folk song about Ireland’s patron saint, both before and after leaving the Emerald Isle. She also sings Roger Edens’s arrangement of the traditional “A Pretty Girl Milking Her Cow.” Later, her daughter sings a swing rendition of the song.

“Little Nellie Kelly” was originally a 1922 Broadway musical written by George M. Cohan. In typical Hollywood fashion, the movie adaption featured a significantly altered story and retained little of the original music. Only two songs from the original score, “Nellie Is a Darling” and “Nellie Kelly



“Little Nellie Kelly” was not only a vehicle for Judy Garland but also for the Irish.

## ‘It’s a Great Day for the Irish’ showcases Judy Garland’s popular vocals as well as Douglas McPhail’s classical singing.



(Above) Joseph I. Breen in the 1950s, working at the Production Code Administration.

(Left) MGM’s supplied 1940 photos of Judy Garland for the Argentine magazine *Cinelandia*.



I Love You,” appear in this movie. “Singin’ in the Rain” was added as another solo for Garland.

The Irish celebration reaches its pinnacle with New York City’s famous St. Patrick’s Day parade. Capt. Jerry Kelly walks in the parade with other policemen, and Mike, Tim, and Dennis Fogarty also march. Little Nellie joins the festivities, much to her grandfather’s displeasure. While marching along, she sings the memorable “It’s a Great Day for the Irish,” which Roger Edens wrote for the film.

One of very few songs specifically about St. Patrick’s Day, “It’s a Great Day for the Irish” showcases Judy Garland’s popular vocals as well as Douglas McPhail’s classical singing. This tune is a lovely tribute to New York’s St. Patrick’s Day parade, complete with a comical, tongue-twisting listing of Irish surnames.

## The Values of Erin

Irish themes and characters were common in Golden Age films. This is hardly accidental. Filmmakers intended this frequent representation of Emerald Isle descendants as tribute to one of Hollywood’s most powerful people. If you’re trying to remember whether Louis B. Mayer or Samuel Goldwyn was Irish, don’t bother.

The person to whom I am referring was neither a mogul nor any other studio employee. He was the head of the Production Code Administration (PCA), the Hollywood branch of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), later called the Motion Picture Association of America. This organization, independent of any studio, religion, or political affiliation, self-regulated American film content for decades. While Will Hays, MPPDA president during 1922–1945, is generally associated with this organization, Joseph I. Breen deserves the credit for film decency.

The PCA was called the Breen Office for the two decades when Irishman Joe Breen ran it (1934–1954). He ensured that all films complied with the Motion Picture Production Code, guidelines for inoffensive movie content. Although commonly called the Hays Code, publisher Martin J. Quigley and Father Daniel A. Lord, not politician Will Hays, penned the famous document.

Like a lovable Irish constable in an old movie, Joe Breen was a public servant with a club and a smile. He quickly befriended Hollywood folks, who realized he had their best interest at heart. They hoped to appeal to Irish-American Breen’s love of country by making Hibernian-themed movies. This may have charmed him, but it never made him lower PCA standards!

The uniquely strong but flexible moral values that Messrs. Quigley and Breen instilled in American films are comparable

to the lyrics of Thomas Moore’s “We May Roam Through This World”:

“In England, the garden of beauty is kept By a dragon of prudery placed within call; But so oft this unamiable dragon has slept, That the garden’s but carelessly watch’d after all.

“Oh! they want the wild sweet-briery fence Which round the flowers of Erin dwells; Which warns the touch, while winning the sense, Nor charms us least when it most repels....

“In France, when the heart of a woman sets sail, On the ocean of wedlock its fortune to try, Love seldom goes far in a vessel so frail, But just pilots her off, and then bids her good-bye.

“While the daughters of Erin keep the boy, Ever smiling beside his faithful oar, Through billows of woe, and beams of joy, The same as he looked when he left the shore.”

England’s “dragon of prudery” is like a censor board, which artlessly butchered pre-Code films (1930–1934), ruining their stories without improving their moral content. France’s “vessel so frail” could be the modern Classification and Rating Administration, which merely categorizes finished films instead of guiding them throughout production. Only the Code, like Ireland’s “sweet-briery fence,” charmed while doing its job, since it made entertaining films that were appropriate for all ages.

## Vintage Irish Charm

If you love entertainment from Hollywood’s yesteryear, explore the vast world of old movies! They offer charm, music, heartwarming stories, wholesome romances, and genuine portrayals of family. “Little Nellie Kelly” is a beautiful example of all these attributes. It shows a young woman who is torn between her love for her father and her love for her husband. A generation later, her daughter faces the same dilemma with her grandfather, the same stubborn Irishman, in fact.

This movie teaches the value of American citizenship, work’s importance, and how love, no matter how sincere, can be misguided if it allows someone’s bad behavior to continue.

This St. Patrick’s Day, elevate your celebration by viewing this classic. Whether you’re Irish or not, this movie will leave you doing a jig while singing, “It’s a great, great day!”

*Tiffany Brannan is a 19-year-old opera singer, Hollywood history/vintage beauty copywriter, travel writer, film blogger, and ballet writer. In 2016, she and her sister founded the Pure Entertainment Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to reforming the arts by reinstating the Motion Picture Production Code.*



## MUSIC

## When Does ‘Classic Film Music’ Become ‘Classical Music,’ or Can It?

MICHAEL KUREK

In recent years, as symphony orchestras have struggled to remain in the black, they have adopted increasingly innovative programming to sell tickets. One way to do that has been to increase the number of better-attended pops concerts and decrease the number of classical concerts during their season. Even in the classical concerts, they have taken to playing suites of film music excerpts, which used to be performed only in the pops concerts. Often, these have taken the place of the concert’s “new music” slot, formerly reserved for often dissonant contemporary pieces.

While leading pre-concert discussions, I have frequently been asked by an audience member something like this: “Isn’t film music really the new classical music?” It seems a reasonable question, given that fewer people than ever in the populace as a whole even know that the so-called contemporary, “academic” genre of classical music even exists. It also seems reasonable because so much film music has long endured and is loved. It is often written for the same orchestral instrumentation as many classical pieces and in a late Romantic style, influenced by classical composers like Richard Wagner or Gustav Holst.

However, there are also some crucial differences between film and classical music, from which to argue that they are fundamentally different genres. That is not to imply that one might be better or worse than the other, only that it is more of an apples-versus-oranges comparison than some people may realize.

## Simply in terms of length, film music may be likened to a collection of poems, while a classical symphony is more like a novel.

### Differences of Length, Form, and Purpose

The most obvious difference between film music and classical music, with some exceptions, is that film music must be parsed into short “cues,” being frequently interrupted by dialog or a complete change of scene or mood on screen. Simply in terms of length, film music may be likened to a collection of poems, while a classical symphony is more like a novel. No one can say that the novel as a genre is “better” than poetry as a genre, just different.

However, the literary analogy to music also holds in terms of form and structure. A sonnet, for example, may have a form of 14 lines, usually in iambic pentameter, while a novel may require a vast outline weaving many elements into a climax near the end. A film cue may, typically, have one or two statements of a melody

in one key, while a symphonic movement in sonata form may have a vast outline, weaving themes and developments of themes through many keys to a musical climax.

Also, an obvious difference is that film music requires collaboration between the composer and the filmmaker, in the sense that film music must “obey” what is on screen, or be compatible with it, moment by moment. A classical work is autonomous and its own master, in terms of content.

### Hidden Differences Between Film Music and Classical Music

If I’m not mistaken, not everyone realizes that almost all film composers work with one or more orchestrators, so the music itself is actually a collaboration between them. While a classical composer is personally responsible for creating a finished, written conductor’s score with every note for every instrument on it, film composers usually create only a piano sketch, or a “short score” of a few staff lines, and hand it over to an orchestrator. The orchestrator is sometimes not credited on screen at all, or is listed in the “fine print,” somewhere among the hundreds of names that scroll by at the end of the film.

John Williams, for example, has long worked with an orchestrator named Conrad Pope, who created the full scores for such films as the “Star Wars” prequel trilogy, the “Indiana Jones” films, and the “Harry Potter” films. However, John Williams is known as a composer who includes in his sketches a great number of detailed prose notes about what instruments should play what parts, for the orchestrator just to flesh out on the large score. Williams, in a sense, both composes and arranges the music, only in a condensed version.

However, many other composers provide far less to the orchestrator, so the orchestrator really must also become the arranger of the music, composing things like countermeasures and accompaniment figures not supplied by the composer. This is a much more significant creative role, as may be evident in the accompanying illustration. On the left, from an actual film (which shall remain nameless), is what the composer provided to the orchestrator: just a tune with chords. And on the right are the same measures done by the orchestrator on the finished conductor’s score. It would seem fair, if such a score were ever to enter the canon of classical music, to credit the name of the orchestrator as a co-creator.

Another fundamental difference between film music and classical music is that film music almost always contains what is called “underscoring,” music of an ambient nature to be played while actors are speaking in the foreground, to set a mood. However, every moment of a classical composition is on center stage, must command the listener’s interest, and move the musical “plot” forward. When film music is brought to the concert hall, the underscoring is omitted and only the memorable parts

are assembled into a “suite” or medley of excerpts. Such suites are also common in the concert hall from ballets and operas, though.

When classical music is brought into a film, then the reverse is done: It gets chopped up into shorter cues, and original new underscoring is added where needed. At that point, it might be speculated that it ceases to be a classical composition in that form, but rather makes reference to the original classical piece from which it was taken.

Finally, and as an arguable generalization, much film music seems to be purposely derivative of a particular classical source. For example, one moment in the “Star Wars” score is almost identical to one in Holst’s “Mars” movement from “The Planets.” It can be argued that much classical music is also derivative of other classical pieces, though perhaps more often accidentally or less obviously.

### The Marriage of Film and Classical Music

Perhaps the lines between the two genres were most genuinely blurred by the very successful classical composer Austrian-born Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957), whose classical works were performed worldwide, including at New York’s Metropolitan Opera. Korngold was invited to Hollywood in 1934 to rework classical composer Felix Mendelssohn’s music for a film adaptation of Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” With the rise of Hitler at that time, the Jewish Korngold decided to stay in Hollywood, where he became a pioneer film composer, scoring a total of 16 films.

In those early films, Korngold went on writing his classical compositions for movies like “The Adventures of Robin Hood” (1938) with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, and without bothering to shorten it into cues. In those early days of film, music was often playing almost continually as a classical piece and, sometimes to its detriment, would just be turned down lower when dialog required it to be. Later, especially with the rise of film composer Bernard Herrmann (1911–1975), for example, with his 1958 score for “Vertigo,” the modern method of shorter cues was born.

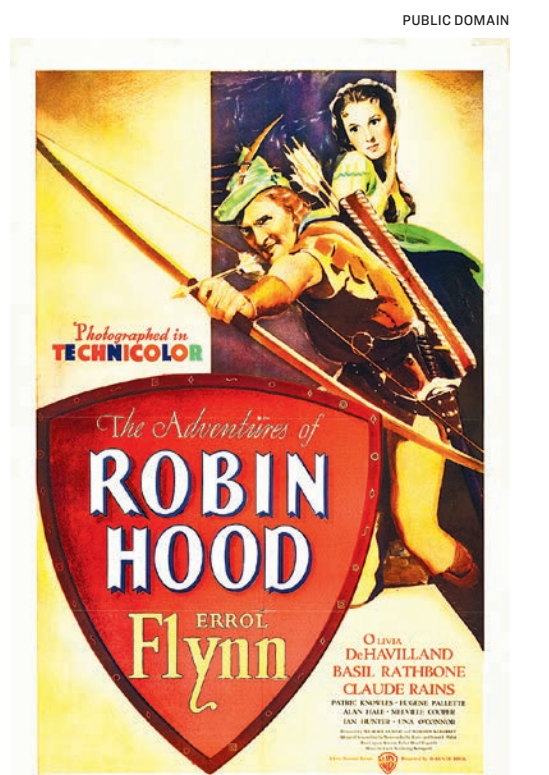
In recent years, some of Korngold’s film music has been recorded and performed in the concert hall as fully classical music—a marriage of two worlds, indeed.

*American composer Michael Kurek is the author of the recently released book “The Sound of Beauty: A Composer on Music in the Spiritual Life” and the composer of the recent Billboard No. 1 classical album “The Sea Knows.” The winner of numerous composition awards, including the prestigious Academy Award in Music from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, he has served on the Nominations Committee of the Recording Academy for the classical Grammy Awards. He is a professor emeritus of composition at Vanderbilt University. For more information and music, visit MichaelKurek.com*



(Above) A film score demonstrating the musical idea (L) created by the composer and the fleshed out arrangement composed by the orchestrator.

(Left) With the rise of composer Bernard Herrmann, film compositions changed. Here he is pictured conducting the orchestra in a scene from the trailer of director Alfred Hitchcock’s “The Man Who Knew Too Much” (1956).



Erich Korngold’s composition for “Adventures of Robin Hood” is ranked 11th by the American Film Institute as one of the greatest of film scores. But is it classical music or a different genre entirely?



Erich Wolfgang Korngold, 1934–35. The photo is a gift from the Musical America Archives.

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## POPCORN AND INSPIRATION

## A True Journey of Self-Discovery and Accomplishing Dreams

IAN KANE

As my review of “The Ron Clark Story” just last week revealed, inspirational films based on real people are much more effective. They are a lens into exceptional lives that we can all learn from, no matter what our own hindrances and backgrounds.

Director Thomas Carter’s (“Coach Carter,” 2005; “Save the Last Dance,” 2001) “Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story” is a biopic based on the incredible life of neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson.

The film certainly didn’t begin as I’d assumed it would. Ben overcame quite a few challenges in his younger life; it is during these times that the film is most interesting.

Ben’s father abandoned his family when Ben was just a young boy (played by Jaishon Fisher and later Gus Hoffman as a youth). His mother, Sonya (Kimberly Elise, “The Manchurian Candidate,” 2004), is raising Ben and his brother, Curtis (Tajh Bellow), as best she can.

**‘Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story’ is a well-acted and well-directed biopic that shows what people can achieve despite difficulties.**

Sonya, a housemaid, is not only illiterate but also struggles with mental illness. A good-hearted, God-fearing woman, she takes her boys to church often and instills in them the values of hard work and discipline.

But there’s a problem: Ben has his own struggles in the form of learning disabilities. He’s behind in his classes and frequently receives F grades on assignments. Because of this, as well as being one of the few black kids at the school, Ben is frequently bullied by his classmates. On one occasion, as he is relentlessly taunted,



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES TELEVISION

(Above) Cuba Gooding Jr. as Ben Carson in the inspiring biopic “Gifted Hands.”

(Left) Ben Carson (Cuba Gooding Jr.) is aided by his wife (Aunjanue Ellis) in his medical studies.

he comes out swinging and slugs one of his tormentors. It is here that we see Ben’s anger issues.

Sonya soon discovers that Ben has vision problems and buys him a pair of glasses, enabling him to boost his grades. But his real turning point occurs when he attends church one Sunday, and as the pastor gives a fiery sermon, Ben’s imagination takes off: He is inspired to become a doctor.

Although poor, Sonya is rich in her belief in her sons. With a hefty number of pep talks (as well as some good old-fashioned discipline), Sonya inspires her boys to read as many books as they can get their hands on. Soon, Ben and Curtis are answering “Jeopardy” show questions before any of the TV contestants.

Due to Ben’s voracious appetite for learning, a science teacher notices the youth’s intellect and shows him organisms under a microscope. From there, Ben moves from strength to strength, letting his mind absorb as it can.

A few years later, Sonya, having saved

money, moves the boys from their Detroit tenement into a house close to a prestigious high school. She figures that having her boys attend the school is their best shot at breaking the chains of poverty.

But things take a dark turn when Ben’s anger rears its ugly head again: One of his friends taunts him, and Ben stabs his buddy with a knife. Miraculously, the blade hits the boy’s metal belt buckle and snaps in half. Shocked by his own violence, Ben runs home, locks himself in his bedroom, hits his knees, and prays to God to remove his volatile temper.

Ben manages to earn a full scholarship to Yale University, where he also attends medical school. He meets his perfect counterpart and future wife, Candy (Aunjanue Ellis), who’s brilliant in her own right. Ben reveals to her that he is struggling to keep up with his classes. But Candy figures out a workaround for Ben’s obstacles in the form of cue cards, since he has such a tremendous reading memory. From there, Ben becomes a pediatric neurosurgeon and goes on to achieve many great things.

**Casting Does the Job**

Just as with “The Ron Clark Story,” this film benefited from shrewd casting. Gooding Jr. is convincing as the college-aged, and later, Dr. Ben Carson. As well, Elise is great as his ever-supportive mother who sees past their dire circumstances.

Ellis is very capable in the few scenes she’s in, but since most of the movie takes place during Ben’s childhood years in the 1960s, we don’t see much of her. I have to say that both Jaishon Fisher and Gus Hoffman are exceptional in portraying Ben as a young boy and teen, respectively.

Overall, “Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story” is a well-acted and well-directed biopic that shows what people can achieve despite difficulties. Through his faith in God, his ferocious intellect, and his mother’s indefatigable belief in him, Ben was able to overcome early handicaps and go on to a formidable future. At the same time, it also reminds us that if talents go unrecognized, some children may never live up to their potential.

**‘Gifted Hands: The Ben Carson Story’**

**Director**  
Thomas Carter

**Starring**  
Cuba Gooding Jr., Kimberly Elise, Aunjanue Ellis

**Running Time**  
1 hour, 26 minutes

**Not Rated**

**Release Date**  
Feb. 7, 2009 (TV movie)

★★★★★

*Ian Kane is a filmmaker and author based out of Los Angeles. To learn more, visit [DreamFlight-Ent.com](http://DreamFlight-Ent.com)*

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