

# Melody- Maker with a passion for tradition

When not touring the world with her harp, Dearbhail Finnegan is teaching young students the intricacies of the ancient instrument at the academy established by her parents in Nobber. JIMMY GEOGHAN talked to her about some of the highlights which litter her career, including a frantic dash to play at the White House.

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**T**he wind was howling and the rain was swirling around the streets of Navan when Dearbhail Finnegan met up with the Meath Chronicle to chat about her life and career.

It was Saturday evening and Dearbhail had just completed a hectic day of teaching. Not that just looked in any way disconcerted by the demands of the day- or the wild conditions.

She looked calm and composed. Was this calm demeanour, one wondered, due to the fact that she makes her living playing soothing tunes on the harp? From early that morning she had been teaching students the intricacies of the ancient instrument.

Dearbhail runs the Meath Harp Academy, from her home which has an address in Kilmainhamwood but is in the Nobber Parish - and Saturday is her busy day. But the teaching is only one aspect of a life that is varied and interesting.

Once some shelter from the wind and rain was secured in a local hostelry, Dearbhail was happy to sip a warming cappuccino and talk about a life that is most certainly out of the ordinary.

Much of her time is spent touring the world, something she does with her harp and her husband Robin Slater, an Englishmen and former ballet dancer, who plays the flute and bodhran. With no family the couple have the freedom to move from city to city.

Dearbhail, who is in her early 40's, recalled some of the most interesting times during her 22 years as a professional harpist.

There was, for example, the day back in 1999 when she was asked play in the White House for President Bill Clinton and a group of world leaders. She was Stateside performing in Branson, Missouri, when the call came from Washington.

She initially thought it was some sort of a wind-up orchestrated by one of her fellow musicians who was touring with her at the time. When she verified that the invitation was for real, she headed for nearby Springfield Airport on her way to Washington DC, only to discover that she had left her passport behind.

She knew she was moving at an elevated level when one of the people charged with the task of getting her to the White House told her not to worry and escorted her through the various passport controls, flashing ID. Dearbhail laughs at the thought of it now in these post 9/11 days - although even then, her harp had to be stripped down for security reasons.

"To this day, I'm not sure how it all worked out and I ended up in the White House, I was asked to play a 20-minute recital and it was in a big room in the White House where they hold receptions," she recalled.

"It was absolutely amazing because there were all these people I recognised from TV like President Clinton and the French President Jacques Chirac. They're all sitting there watching you play and you're going: 'This is amazing'.

"Anyway, it went well. President Clinton came up and asked me where did I travel from and I said Missouri, and he said I was near his home state of Arkansas. He spoke to me for a few minutes." she recalls.

In more recent times, Dearbhail has played in London's House of Commons and she also performed for US President Barrack Obama when he paid a quick visit to Ireland.

Dearbhail Finnegan grew up immersed in the traditional music scene, as did her three brothers, Ronan, John and Aidan, and her sister, Emma.

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She initially learned the fiddle, tin whistle and accordion, only turning to the harp at the relatively late age of 14 and discovering that it was the instrument for her.

"I discovered that with the harp, practice wasn't practice, it was fun. Physically you're wrapped around it, connected to it entirely; it resonates through your body when you play. It's got such a big sound that you feel every single pulse of music coming from it. You're complete."

"You can play the melody and you can also harmonise, you've got a whole grounded sound."

She graduated from the Royal Irish Academy of Music in 1995 and started out on a professional career in music; the only member of her family to do so.

Her mother Ann, is also steeped in the Irish music tradition and she and her late husband, Tony Finnegan, worked hard to establish the Meath Harp Academy in 1993. The husband and wife team ran the academy almost right up until Tony passed away in 2003.

Dearbhail took over the reins and keeping the academy open is something she feels passionate about. A carpenter by trade, Tony Finnegan loved traditional music and served as the head of Comhaltas Ceoltóiri Éireann for a time. He encouraged his children to follow the musical path.

One of the things Dearbhail did when she played at the White House was call her father from the fabled building, just as a way of thanking him for all the encouragement he gave her and a thank you for the countless hours he spent taking her to harp lessons as a youngster.

Dearbhail's grandfather, Patrick Finnegan, was also a noted fiddler, and his love of traditional music inspired Tony Finnegan to work towards setting up the O'Carolan Harp Festival in Nobber, now in its 27th year.

While the music helped to bring happiness to the Finnegan household, the family was touched with tragedy just over 20 years ago when John died during a car rally. He was only 25.

When not teaching, Dearbhail is invariably travelling. She spent a good chunk of this year on the road to a number of states throughout the American midwest, places like Branson, Missouri, where she plays regularly.

She also appeared at cultural events in Israel and Italy as well as Australia where she performed the 'Chronicles of Meath', composed by Vincent Kennedy.

"A big highlight for me this year was playing at the World Harp Congress in Sydney last July and at the Irish embassy in Canberra. I brought six other harp players from the Nobber area, the Meath Harp Ensemble, with me to Sydney and we performed the 'Chronicles of Meath', commissioned by Meath County Council. There are seven movements in a 40-minute suite. It's all about Newgrange, the Hill of Tara, the Boyne, all about historic sites in Meath." she says.

"That was a highlight for me, not only because I was involved, but my students, who learned from me, played in it. It was a dream come true."

Unlike many professional performers, Dearbhail says she does not suffer from nerves before going out on stage. Playing the harp to her, is second nature.