

# A Woman for our Time

*Marie Madeleine ... a harpist*



**Perhaps there is no language more powerful than that of music.**

Music crosses all cultural and linguistic barriers. It speaks at depth to the heart and lifts the human spirit. Music is celebratory and the use of music in sacred ceremonies has occurred since ancient times. Music is truly the language of the angels.



For all these reasons and more, music has been a feature of FCJ life and an important part of FCJ education. Music and musicians have always been encouraged: music is in our soul, and we remember with delight that Marie Madeleine d'Houët, the Foundress of the FCJ Society was a harpist.

Though we know nothing of her musical ability we note that along with prayer books, pictures and other memorabilia, Marie Madeleine's *pedal harp* is a treasured possession in the museum of the FCJ house in Paris. Though there is scant record of

Marie Madeleine playing the harp once she founded the FCJ Society, tradition tells us that occasionally she accompanied the sisters at evening recreations as they sang the evening hymn to Mary, '*Bon soir, Bonne Mère ...*' which had been composed by Marie de Bussy fcj.

The FCJ foundress learnt the harp as a girl at a time when 'harping' was a social accomplishment. The following brief history gives insight on the context in which Victoire, (as Marie Madeleine was known) learnt her instrument. It is based on a text shared with us by **Mairead Doherty** (née Loughnane) who was at Laurel Hill FCJ and is now a professional harpist in Boston.

## *The harp and its development*

Hebrew Scripture tells us that *King David praised God with harp and song* and evidence tells us the harp of that time (c.1000BCE) was a simple ten-stringed instrument. Something like this so-called *lap-harp* was taken by the Celtic peoples in their westward migrations across what is now Europe, and the Celts adopted the harp as their own.

For over fifteen hundred years, particularly in Ireland, Celtic harpists developed the instrument and eventually with many more strings and a system of manual levers it was possible to change the pitch of individual strings. The harp was further developed in C18 mainland Europe and with a greater flexibility the instrument was included in orchestras. Then a Bavarian instrument maker, Hochbrucker, devised a mechanism that enabled a new range of keys and now known as the *pedal harp*, it was introduced to France in 1749. It was a success both musically and socially. Initially there was no music for this '*new*' harp and the gap was filled by harpsichord music and ingenuity! It was Hochbrucker's son who wrote some of the earliest known music for the pedal harp. Georges Cousineau, a French harp maker improved the pedal system and his improvements were built on by Sebastian Erard, a French piano maker who in 1794, when a refugee in London, patented the mechanism for the pedal harp.

The pedal harp flourished in France through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was popular in the private drawing room, *Salon* and especially in the developing orchestras of Europe. Young students, both boys and girls, usually came to study the harp by way of the piano and typically began the harp when they were ten to twelve years old.

... As Ireland is credited with the development of the Irish harp, France is credited with the development of the pedal harp.

*How lovely to think of Marie Madeleine Victoire, playing the rather 'trendy' pedal harp, ... entertaining her parents, younger sister, brothers and family friends.*

**Music and musical accompaniment is an FCJ tradition that lives on...**

## The Joys of Harping

**Martha Ní Ghlinn, and Aisling Egan** are third year students at Laurel Hill, Limerick, where harping is a proud tradition. They write:

We are two of the lucky people in Laurel Hill Coláiste FCJ who experience the joy of playing the harp. The joys of harping seem to be endless, from the activities both in school and outside school. This year we were given the amazing opportunity of participating in a Harp Ensemble with our school under the leadership of Ms. Geraghty, a musician well known to all of us. We came together a number of times during the year. We learned some great new tunes, participated in school masses and even joined with the school orchestra to perform a beautiful tune. As well as all that, we really had a great time and learned a lot from each other about our individual musical styles and techniques.

Outside of school, many of us are members of the National Harp Orchestra and the Irish Harp Orchestra under the directorship of Dr. Janet Harbison, renowned Irish Harper. This year alone we have travelled to Austria and Germany performing in such prestigious venues as the Philharmonic Hall in Munich.

Harping also tends to fill our summers with fun. From the residential summer school with *Cairde na Cruite* in Termonfeckin, Co. Louth to the *Willie Clancy Festival* in Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, the festivals provide us with opportunities to participate in workshops with different harp teachers and also to play in sessions with other musicians.'

## Praising God ...

**We leave the last word to an FCJ pianist.**

Madeleine Cuddy fcJ, known to many as an accomplished pianist, choir mistress and liturgist, speaks of the joy of choral accompaniment:

'There is such joy in accompanying a choir that is truly singing the meaning of the words.

Their singing, gives meaning to the music.

The faith behind the song becomes alive.

...Even when a voice sounds like a cinder under a door, if a singer puts everything into her music it is the most glorious worship of God.'

*David and the whole house of Israel were celebrating with all their might before the LORD, with songs and with harps, lyres, tambourines, sistrums and cymbals.*

(2 Samuel 6:5)

## Guitaring and Music ministry

The guitar, another stringed instrument, is popular in South America, and **Ely Peralta fcJ** writes from Argentina:

I am involved in music ministry in Holy Trinity Parish in *Solidarity Barrio* where I live. I play the guitar and lead the singing for Saturday and Sunday Masses. There are times when I offer this same gift to a catechist group.

I feel very happy to be able to contribute to the life of the liturgy. I know that people, particularly young people, are very grateful for my gift of music and I love to see their happy, smiling faces as they join in the singing. I have had many requests from students for guitar lessons. Unfortunately, because of my commitment to my ministry at *Fe y Alegría\** I could only take on one student. I love to see the enthusiasm that music and singing brings into the lives of people and into my own life too.

When I lived in La Banda, my home, I sang in a choir in my parish when I was a teenager. Here I learned that singing comes from deep within me and I experienced the feeling of "living the song"! Later when I was in Cordoba as an FCJ candidate I had an opportunity to learn to play the guitar. I met a young couple who gave me guitar lessons. Since I was very interested and loved this kind of music, I learned very quickly. On top of all this my brother gave me a guitar for my birthday. I give praise to God for the gift of music and song and I want to use this gift to bring life and joy to others. I think music is a wonderful way of gathering people together.

*\*Fe y Alegria ('Faith and Joy') schools are a network of joint Catholic and State sponsored schools founded by the Jesuits for the urban and rural marginalized populations. The State pays the teachers' salaries, and the schools do fund-raising to cover other operating expenses.*



... and they filled the air with joyful sound.

(1Chronicles 15:16)

Why not visit our web-site at [www.fcjsisters.org](http://www.fcjsisters.org)

*It could make your heart sing!*