

ARRANGING CAROLAN FOR THE MANDOLIN

Gráinne McCool caught up with both Simon Mayor and Hilary James to discuss their new album.



Simon Mayor, described as one of the world's leading mandolin virtuosos, composer and wit, has compiled a collection of music from Ireland's famous Turlough O'Carolan. Together with Hilary James, he has created something very special.

Gráinne: "How did you two meet and come to play together?"

Simon: "We met as students at Reading University, although neither of us was studying music; Hilary did fine art, I did Russian. Hilary was already running the folk club; I arrived as a first year complete with tin whistle, something that was quickly overtaken by the mandolin and fiddle."

Gráinne: "Your music is so diverse: was that always the plan?"

Hilary: "It was never a plan, but we've only ever performed and recorded music that excites us in some way. Simon was primarily inspired by traditional music while I was starting to explore early music, American country blues and singing with the University Big Band. Throughout our career together we've worked with a succession of people from different musical backgrounds and they've all broadened our tastes. The first guitarist in our student band, for example, was a ragtime picker. Today, our current quartet, The Mandolinquents, has classical guitarist Gerald Garcia sitting alongside bluegrass multi-instrumentalist Richard Collins. Somehow, it all comes together and works well. We're also performing as 'Simon Mayor & Friends' with two young classical musicians Florence Petit (cello) and Elias Sibley (guitar, ukulele, mandolin)."

Gráinne: "What made you want to make an album celebrating Turlough O'Carolan?"

Hilary: "I had booked Planxty at the university folk club in 1973, and the Carolan pieces they played really left an impression. Over the years Simon arranged a number of Carolan pieces mostly for solo guitar or mandolin quartet. He uses a lot of the material at the residential weekends he hosts for mandolinists, and eventually it seemed almost inevitable we would put out a Carolan album. He wrote the string quartets especially for the project and the existing material underwent much evolution in the studio."

Gráinne: "How did you choose which pieces to include on the album?"

Simon: "You're spoilt for choice! There are over two hundred Carolan tunes surviving, and you'd be hard pressed to find a duffer. I'd say about half were longstanding favourites, particularly the really popular ones such as *Carolan's Concerto*, *Hewlett* and *Sí Beag Sí Mhór*. I also spent many a happy evening just playing through the Donal O'Sullivan book, usually on guitar rather than fiddle or mandolin because it's easier to busk a few chords to get a rough idea of how it might be harmonised. Less well-known ones such as *Dolly MacDonough*, *Mrs Sterling* and *Katherine O'More* were chosen like that.

"I think it's easy to bring Carolan's music to the mandolin. Like the harp it's a plucked instrument; they have a lot in common. Also, because we have Carolan's melodies but not his harmonies, it's evident that, if not the man himself, then certainly his archivists considered the bare tunes to be of overriding importance, and as the textures of any original harmonisations have been lost, this gives freedom to someone like me to arrange them with the textures of my own instruments in mind."

Gráinne: "Where might we hear you playing over the coming months?"

Simon: "Two highlights for us: August we'll be heading over to Goderich Celtic Festival (Ontario, Canada) for a couple of weeks teaching, performing and catching up with old friends. Then I've got

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two nights at Wembley Arena in September playing Japanese animée music as mandolin soloist with The BBC Concert Orchestra. In between times we'll be rehearsing and writing more Carolan arrangements for Simon Mayor and Friends, our latest live project with Florence Petit (cello), long-time fellow Mandolinquent Richard Collins (mandolin, guitar, banjo, bass) and Elias Sibley (mandolin, guitar, ukulele). In summer 2024 we'll be travelling far and wide with Ireland high on the list."

They both assure me also that Hilary is overdue a new album. This will match the new mandobass she's had specially made so she can cover the front with her paintings of dancers and musicians. They also hope to do more with the music they've written for children, and a spoken word comedy album is also on the cards.

But for now, it's all about Carolan. Check them out at www.mandolin.co.uk

