

SONG
OF THE
FAR
ISLES

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WWW.CHICKENHOUSEBOOKS.COM

Text © Nicholas Bowling 2021
Illustration © Olga Baumert 2021

First published in Great Britain in 2021
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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Cover and interior design by Steve Wells
Instrument illustrations by Nicholas Bowling
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-912626-67-0
eISBN 978-1-913696-02-3

For Mary, Will and Andy

Also by Nicholas Bowling

Witchborn
In the Shadow of Heroes



THE FAR ISLES

The Tuning Rock

Great Horn

Little Horn

Little Drum

Tusk

Great Drum

The Spit

THE GREAT GULCH

THE ENDLESS SEA

Fiddlehead

The Five Fingers

NORTH

Harp

WEST

EAST

SOUTH



THE GREYING SEA



THE NINE INSTRUMENTS OF THE CHORUS

CITHARA

The cithara is the first of the instruments, and the most versatile. It is unique in not having a specific partner instrument, and will happily duet with any of the nine. Cithara players are just the same – open-minded, open-hearted and friendly to all (even when they should be more circumspect). Cithara players are creative, imaginative, and often characterized as dreamers. They usually have an adventurous streak, and have difficulty seeing the seriousness and danger of certain situations.



FIDDLE

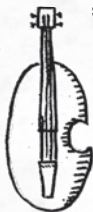
Fiddle players have long had to endure the age-old joke about being 'too highly strung'. While it is true that they have a tendency towards worry, and do not cope well with change and disorder, they are also fiercely loving and selfless souls. They are tireless workers – often on the behalf of others – and their quick fingers make them exceptional craftsmen and women.



BARROW FIDDLE

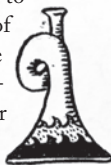
Traditionally the accompaniment to funeral song. Players of the barrow

fiddle are, like their instruments, a thoughtful and melancholy bunch. In general they are self-sufficient and happiest in their own company, but the friendships they do form are incredibly strong. To those who know them they are loyal, trustworthy and can always be relied upon for sound advice and a sympathetic ear.



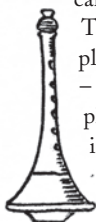
SEAHORN

Brash and brassy, players of the seahorn are perhaps the most confident of musicians. They are born leaders. They love to be in the company of others, and others love to be around them – not least to catch their jokes and stories. Typically, seahorn players have inexhaustible amounts of energy, and are known to be spontaneous to the point of recklessness. Underestimate their mood swings at your peril . . .



BOMBARD

Bombard players are renowned for being deeply affectionate and soulful sorts (the bombard is often known by its colloquial name, 'the lover's pipe'). They want nothing more than to please other people, and the courtship of a bombardist



can be a wearisome thing. They are, like fiddle players, very hard workers – although, unlike fiddle players, they are also impossibly disorganized. Always best to give a bombard player one task at a time.

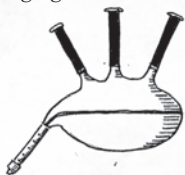
REED PIPE

Reed pipers are often hard to pin down – never happy to settle in one place, or at one task, for too long. They have a reputation for being flighty, changeable and unreliable, but at the same time there is no one with quicker wits. Many a time has an overconfident seahorn player found themselves on the sharp end of a reed piper's tongue. And their feet are quicker still – with the smallest and lightest of the instruments, they are the best dancers on the Four Seas.



BAGPIPES

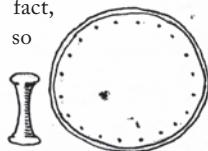
Bagpipers are some of the most gregarious musicians in the Far Isles – great talkers, great storytellers and (as the stereotype goes) great eaters and drinkers. Only cithara players can compete with their friendliness. They are known for their patience and compassion, and are nearly impossible to rouse to anger. On



the rare occasions when they give in to their emotions, however, best set sail for another island . . .

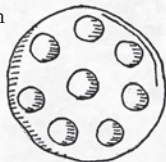
BODHRÁN

The role of the drum is to hold a song together, so it is unsurprising that bodhrán players are the most steadfast and reliable of islanders. They say what they mean, and they mean what they say. A drummer is often called upon to settle disputes between more 'passionate' instruments – in fact, they can be so diplomatic and even-handed that they seem to lack any feelings at all. Do not be fooled by this. Under a bodhrán player's thick skin is a warm heart and a wicked sense of humour.



HANDPAN

The handpan is perhaps the oddest instrument in the Far Isles – somewhere between percussion and a tonal instrument – and handpan players are, without exception, eccentric folk. Their minds seem to work in ways that other musicians cannot fathom, which means they often befriend each other (or just talk to themselves). But beyond their outward strangeness they are fiercely intelligent, perceptive and imaginative. They often see solutions to problems where everyone else has failed.





Oran hauled hard on the mainsheet and brought her little boat around to face home. It was almost dark. The wind was blowing in the wrong direction now, forcing her to tack left and right over the swells. She could hear her cithara case colliding with the hull every time she turned. The waves were larger too, and slopped over the edges of the boat. Sometimes the prow would strike one of them head-on and send a blast of foaming, freezing seawater into her face. It felt good.

She looked behind her to see the sun inches from

the horizon. Tusk was well behind her. Ahead of her the sky was a thunderous blue, the same colour as her cithara, and on Little Drum people were starting to light lamps in their windows. Oran hoped one of them was her mother's. If she was at home, that meant she hadn't gone out looking for her.

The wind changed direction again, and she ducked under the boom as it swung around. She let the rigging play out through her fingers, which were pink and raw from practice. She didn't mind. It was a sign of a day well spent.

The boat scudded and dipped and again she heard her instrument thump against the wooden sides.

'Sorry,' she shouted over the snapping of the sail, 'but it's better to have you down there than risk you going overboard.'

The cithara seemed to go quiet after that.

She could see the harbour now and the flames of the lighthouse. Way above, on the cliff top, a farmer was herding her flock home with a reed pipe before the weather turned. The quayside was crowded with brightly coloured fishing boats, sloops, and a very handsome three-mast frigate. Oran wondered whose it was. Visitors from the Headland, it looked like, but they hardly ever came out this far.

The sun disappeared and the waves turned black. The thunder began like the purring of some great

animal. Oran cursed and shivered. She'd been out in worse conditions than this, but her arms were getting tired from tacking back and forth, back and forth, and if she didn't get home quickly her mother's anger wouldn't be the worst of it. She'd be letting the whole island down.

The thunder cracked, urgently this time, and it started to rain. The wind still couldn't make up its mind where it wanted to go, but Oran wrestled the sail into position again and again and zigzagged her way to the harbour. The surface of the sea hissed, furred with raindrops, and the light of the lighthouse became a hazy orange globe. Everything else disappeared in the downpour. Before long there were three inches of water in the bottom of the boat, so she picked up her cithara and held it tightly in her lap.

'You'd better still be dry,' she muttered to the box. 'You owe it to me, remember? After your string snapped? Last week?'

As usual, the instrument didn't reply.

The boat limped into the harbour, carrying so much water it seemed moments from sinking. Oran leapt out and tied up the boat with a clumsy knot. The quayside was deserted apart from two or three ghaists whose forms shimmered in the pouring rain. That was one good thing about being dead, she thought. You never got wet.

‘Good evening!’ she said. She pushed a strand of wet hair out of her eyes. ‘Well, not really, is it?’

They looked at her in surprise. No one else spoke to the ancestors like she did. The older folk thought her disrespectful, but she didn’t care. She was happy to see them, and imagined they were glad to have a bit of conversation.

‘Is Alick with you?’

They shook their heads slowly.

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘He may be in the Barrow,’ said one, and his voice was like a gong, softly beaten.

‘Oh well,’ she said. ‘I suppose I’ll find him later. Whose is that swanky boat over there?’ She gestured to the frigate, though it could hardly be seen through the pouring rain.

‘Visitors,’ said another. ‘From the Headland.’

‘We know not what they bring.’

‘They came on an ill wind.’

Oran looked from one pale face to the next. ‘Right-o,’ she said. The ghosts were prone to these sorts of grave announcements. She never paid them much attention. ‘Well, I’m not getting any drier out here. I should go and get ready for the dance. Nice talking to you all.’

She gave them a quick bow, and they bowed back, bemused.

Oran took the coastal path away from the harbour. On the top of the cliffs, the lamps still glowed in the windows of her parents' cottage. She knew her father would be experimenting with a pot of stew, and her mother would be fussing over the torcs or tuning her fiddle. Granny would be knitting the same blanket she'd been working on since Oran was born – it should have been ready for Oran's cot, but her grandmother had got carried away and now, fourteen winters later, she was still clickety-clacking away in her armchair.

Oran smiled and set off up the steep, slick path towards home.

She'd taken the cliff path thousands of times but still had to watch where she put her feet, particularly when it was dark and the weather was as bad as it was. She looked down rather than ahead, and halfway up the cliff she collided with something huge and immovable and soft around the edges. She lost her balance and nearly toppled over backwards. Two strong hands shot out and held her upright.

Oran peered through the rain. 'Oh,' she said. 'Hullo, Da.'

Her father was wearing his thick sealskin coat, whose pockets contained a variety of spoons and ladles and spatulas. His bagpipes were slung on his back.

‘Oran!’ he cried over the noise of the storm.
‘Where on the Four Seas have you *been*?’

She shrugged. ‘Practising,’ she said, then added: ‘You’ve got some food in your beard.’ She tugged at his bristles.

‘Practising? Where?’

‘You know. Here and there.’

Her father narrowed his eyes. ‘Let’s see your hands,’ he said.

She showed him her palms.

‘Unless you’ve drastically changed your technique,’ her father said, ‘these are *not* the kinds of blisters you get from playing the cithara.’

‘I just took a boat out for while . . .’

‘You sailed to Tusk, didn’t you?’

Oran didn’t reply. She looked at her hands as though she’d never seen them before.

Her da sighed and ran his scarred fingers through his beard. ‘Love, you know how dangerous that is! Sea’s teeth, what is it about that old rock?’

‘It’s just quiet there,’ she said. That was at least *half* true.

‘You know how your maw feels about you sailing on your own, especially when the weather’s like this.’ The lightning lit them both for a moment, and was followed by a grumble of thunder. ‘Listen to that! If you’d been any later you’d be on the seabed by now,

and I'd have a ghaist for a daughter.'

'Sorry,' she said.

'Tell that to your maw,' he said.

'She doesn't need to know, does she?'

'She knows you're late, that's for sure. That's why she sent me down here.'

'We've got ages, haven't we? If she's still at home—'

'She's not at home. Granny's at home. Your mother went ahead to the Broken Bottle an hour ago.'

'An hour ago? Why?'

Her da looked grim. 'Because that was when the dance started. You're meant to be on stage right now, Oran.'