

# Harper takes a buzz to Saltire Festival

A baroque harp with its own built-in amplification device will feature in a concert as part of the Saltire Society's festival programme in Fountain Close on Saturday 20 August.

The bray harp was designed to cut through the hubbub of dances and gatherings in castles and the houses of the landed gentry during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It's one of three harps that leading Scottish harp player Karen Marshalsay will be bringing to the concert, along with the modern gut-strung clarsach and the wire-strung harp from the Gaelic tradition.

"Harp players were the ceilidh band leaders of the day back in renaissance times," says Karen. "And the bray harp was the instrument they played. Each string has a "bray" – a small piece of wood – that makes a buzzing effect, not unlike the sitar. If you put that together with a crumhorn and a tabor, or hand drum, that would have been the band that people danced to."

Karen, who has worked with some of traditional music's foremost musicians, including singer-flautist Cathal McConnell of Boys of the Lough and renowned piper and Gaelic singer Allan MacDonald, will be playing traditional tunes and original compositions from her album, *The Road to Kennacraig*, which she released just before the Covid pandemic.

“I still see the concerts I’m playing at the moment as the promotional tour because the pandemic meant the tour I had booked had to be rearranged and then rearranged again, which has been the case for many music musicians,” she said.

The album was produced by Robin Morton, who oversaw classic albums including Dick Gaughan’s definitive recording, *Handful of Earth*. Unfortunately, Morton has since died, meaning that *The Road to Kennacraig* was his final production, and his contribution, says Karen, has become all the more special.

“Robin was great to work with because he was such a stickler for melody and clarity. He really made me work and I think the album sounds better due to his input.”

Karen’s CV also includes collaborations with Indian, African and Paraguayan musicians but *The Road to Kennacraig* focuses on the Scottish aspect of her playing. All the music on the album is either traditional or written in the traditional style, with around half of the tunes being Karen’s own.

“I can’t say for sure but it’s possible that Fountain Close or the surrounding area will have experienced the bray harp back in the instrument’s heyday,” says Karen. “I’ll be playing music from the album and I’ll also be talking a bit about the tunes and the harps because people seem fascinated by the instrument. It has associations with angels, of course, although the bray isn’t quite so angelic. It often comes as quite a surprise because it looks as you might expect a harp to look but sounds quite a bit different from the other two.”

