

"Expressing Irish History through Music"

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Level 1

I had low expectations as I walked into the museum, class field trips never interested me. This time however, I was taken aback. The inside of the museum was filled with color and vibrancy. There was music sounding from one of the back displays and there were old black and white pictures of festivals and what the signs referred to as *seisuns* and *céills*. There was a section of the museum set apart from the rest, a section filled with pictures of suffering, starving children, a family watching their house being burnt down, and the horrible remains of a massacre. Lying in the middle of all the displays was a beautiful and intricate harp. All of us stood in awe. *Maybe this won't be such a bad field trip after all*, I thought.

"Hello class!"

My thoughts are disrupted by a voice that rings through the museum. I whirl around to find a woman standing behind us, who must be our tour guide. She smiled at us warmly.

"Welcome to the Museum of Irish Music and History!" she beamed. "This museum focuses on the Irish and how they express historical events through music. They have used music for many years to express their feelings and important events. Today, you will be learning all about the most influential eras in Irish music. I'm Ciara, and I'll be your tour guide for today. Follow me to the first exhibit!"

Ciara bounced off, and the class eagerly followed.

"Before we get started, you should know the different forms of gathering the Irish participate in to celebrate their already existing music and to compose new music. There are two main gatherings. The first is a *seisun*. A *seisun* is an informal gathering

of musicians. They usually begin with just one guitar, and then other instruments gradually add in one by one. If you listen to Irish music you will notice that many of their songs follow the same pattern. The other type of musical gathering is a céilí. However, in a céilí the focus is more on dancing to the music than playing the music itself."

We followed her onward.

"And now, here is our next exhibit, the British influence on Ireland. This subject ties to the rest of the exhibits we will see. Britain colonized Ireland, much to the discontent of the Irish. After Ireland's colonization, the British attempted to crush Ireland's rich culture and spirit, for they seemed too independent. They introduced new laws that forbade any participation in cultural and traditional activities. However, when Irish people are struggling, they group together. As you can imagine, many Irish songs were made during this time, some rebellious, some grieving, and some expressing their helplessness."

I looked closer, and saw images of Irish families watching their houses burn, children begging on the streets, and families who were forced to leave their country, crying as they watched their homeland vanish on the horizon. I could just imagine the types of songs and music that was composed during this time.

Ciara's expression saddened and her voice took on a mournful tone as she lead us to the next exhibit.

"This is a display for the Great Potato Famine of Ireland. Britain controlled all of Ireland's farmlands, exporting all goods back to Britain. The Irish began to rely completely on potatoes, a cheap source of food. The Irish were already extremely poor,

but a period of famine and starvation began, for the potatoes they depended on contracted a fungus that made them completely inedible. Due to the famine, many Irish emigrated to other countries. They began to develop music that was still souly Irish, yet had influence from other countries. Many Irish wrote songs about missing the 'motherland' and mourning for their lost family and friends."

The pain in the display was easy to see. I listened closely, and could hear music in the background, a mourning, beautiful song that sang of the home she missed and the family she lost. I was holding back tears as we walked on to the next exhibit.

"The last display we will be visiting is the Easter Rising," Ciara continued. I inspected the pictures and realized that these were the pictures of a horrible massacre.

"The Easter Rising was an act of rebellion. It took place on Easter day, 1916. The Irish had organized an uprising that they hoped would finally overthrow British control. Sadly, the Irish did not succeed in their attempt at rising against the British. At the time, they were under the impression that England wasn't paying much attention to them, yet they were. The uprising turned into a horrible massacre with the casualties of participants in the uprising, and common street folk caught in the crossfire. The music during this time period is some of the most sorrowful you will hear, and the Irish took it upon themselves to remember all the lost through music."

Ciara clicked a button and music rang through the speakers. This time, I couldn't hold back my tears. The song came to an end, and Ciara turned to face the class.

"I want to thank you all for coming. It was my pleasure being your tour guide and I hope to see you again. If not, I want you to remember one thing, if nothing else from

this trip; the Irish express their history through songs of all different types, rebellious, pain, unfairness, sorrow, grieving, longing, anger, but also happiness. The Irish will always express their feelings throughout history in music. This is what has held them together through years of suffering and pain. This is what makes them such a great nation."

She smiled at us one last time and walked away, and we all filed out the door. As we were leaving, I was sure of one thing, I would always remember this trip, and I was coming back as soon as possible to explore more of the moving Irish music and history.

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