

# *The Derrynane Horn*

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**The Derrynane Horn, symbol of the Kerry Archaeological and Historical Society, is back in full voice after a silence of nearly 3,000 years.**



*New breath of life: Composer Simon O'Dwyer brings the past back to life by playing one of the Chute Hall horns found near Tralee. (Picture courtesy of Pre-historic Music Ireland)*

WHEN the Derrynane Horn was first discovered in the 19th century, antiquarian W.R. Wilde (father of the famous Oscar) described it as "one of the finest specimens" yet found. Since then, the collection of Bronze Age instruments has grown four-fold but the Derrynane Horn still holds pride of place as a superior example of ancient craftsmanship.

It is an imposing instrument – over 84 centimetres long – but its striking feature is not so much its appearance as its newly discovered voice. It has a deep, throaty, haunting sound that has been reawakened after thousands of years, thanks to Galway-based composer Simon O'Dwyer.

He has played and recorded the Derrynane horn and a picture of the instrument graces the cover of his CD of prehistoric music. "This is really special," he says. "It was one of the last made and one of the lightest. It has a beautiful mellow tone and it is tuned to a pitch."

Mr O'Dwyer has also played the Chute Hall horns which were first thought to be part of a distilling apparatus when they were found in 1886 at Chute Hall near Tralee. He has made 12 reproductions in cast bronze of these remarkable Bronze Age instruments and more than 20 of other horns. In fact, his first reproduction of a Bronze Age horn was played publicly during a summer parade in Dingle in 1986.

The rediscovery of the musical properties of the Derrynane Horn, and other instruments like it, opens up a new vista on our past. Until recently, researchers thought the horns were used in battle or as loud speakers to amplify military commands. For example, in 1860 Robert MacAdam suggested they might have been "ear trumpets" or "speaking tubes" used to convey signals over great distances.

It was also tempting to turn to the vivid classical descriptions of Celts wielding terrifying horns and trumpets in battle and to imagine a similar role for Bronze Age horns, but these instruments predate the Celts by several centuries.

Part of the initial difficulty in recognising them as musical instruments was the continued failure to play them. The 19th century antiquarian, Dr Robert Ball, managed to produce "a deep bass note, resembling the bellowing of a bull" but, unfortunately he died shortly after his attempt.

It was not until recently that their musical properties were explored in detail. In the 1960s Professor John M. Coles suggested that horns blown through an aperture on the side – like the Derrynane example –

were one-note instruments while those blown from the end were capable of producing four or five notes. In the 1970s Professor Peter Holmes compared them to modern ethnic instruments and enlisted the help of Australian musician and didgeridou player Rolf Harris to help him unlock the secrets of the Bronze Age.

That was when Simon O'Dwyer became interested and began making reproductions and learning how to play them. He applied a range of playing techniques and found that the horns produced a variety of notes, sounds and tones which, when combined in the hands of an expert, could make powerful and rich music.

"These instruments are scientifically accurate and were made by people who were very sophisticated. We imagine people in the past running around in skins, but these people were skilled and had a fine musical tradition," Mr O'Dwyer said.

It is quite clear that the Derrynane Horn required a significant level of expertise. It was modelled from a two-piece clay mould and, later, very deftly repaired around the mouthpiece. However, the high level of craftsmanship comes as little surprise as the later Bronze Age in Ireland was a time of great technical achievement. From about 900 to 500 BC, there seems to have been a flowering of high-quality metal-working. The number and variety of metal objects in circulation increased significantly reflecting, perhaps, a society preoccupied with wealth, status and power.

The range of weaponry and magnificent bronze and gold ornaments dating to this time offers a glimpse into a world that seemed to be increasingly concerned with ostentation and display. Professor Waddell in his book *The Prehistoric Archaeology of Ireland* suggests that Ireland was populated by numerous small chiefdoms and that these artefacts may have been the insignia of chieftains.

At this time there is also evidence for trade and influence from abroad but the cast-bronze horns are unique to Ireland, apart from two isolated examples found in Britain. Professor Coles has identified two distinct groupings: the smaller Class 1 horns are generally found in the North-east while the plainer and lighter Class 2 horns are usually found in the South-west.

It seems the northern examples are earlier, dating to 1100 BC, while those found in Kerry, Cork and Tipperary date to around 800 BC. They seldom survive in association with other artefacts but are often with other horns suggesting that they were played together. It is now thought likely that these instruments were used as ceremonial pieces during sacred or religious rituals.

Simon O'Dwyer's research adds weight to that theory. He found that the horns are particularly sympathetic to one another and that the voice can be used to compliment and enrich each tune. They can produce rich harmonics, overtones and a range of tone alteration at first thought impossible.

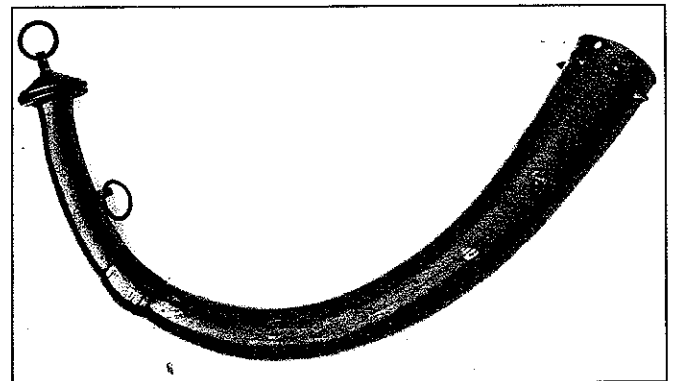
Research on Ireland's unique range of bronze-cast horns continues. Simon O'Dwyer's new CD, *Old to New*, features Bronze Age, Iron Age and Medieval instruments and is due out in November. For those interested in seeing the magnificent Derrynane Horn, it is on display at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. But now you can also hear what it might have sounded like when it was played in Kerry nearly 3,000 years ago. Further details at [bronzeagehorns@eircom.net](mailto:bronzeagehorns@eircom.net)

#### Sources

- \*Coles, John M. *Irish Bronze Age Horns and their relations with Northern Europe*. Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society for 1963. (Vol XXIX p.326).
- \*Wilde, WR. *Catalogue of the Museum of the Royal Academy* (MH Gill, 1857).
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#### Acknowledgements

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*The Derrynane Horn – made perhaps 3000 years ago, still playable to-day.*

(Picture: National Museum of Ireland)