



Études irlandaises

39-1 | 2014  
Varia

---

## Joseph O’Kelly (1828-1885) and the “Slings and Arrows of Fortune”

Axel Klein

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3726>  
DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3726  
ISSN: 2259-8863

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Rennes

### Printed version

Date of publication: 30 June 2014  
Number of pages: 23-39  
ISBN: 978-2-7535-3449-0  
ISSN: 0183-973X

### Electronic reference

Axel Klein, « Joseph O’Kelly (1828-1885) and the “Slings and Arrows of Fortune” », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 39-1 | 2014, Online since 30 June 2016, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/3726> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.3726

---

# Joseph O’Kelly (1828-1885) and the “Slings and Arrows of Fortune”

Axel KLEIN

University of Hildesheim

---

## Abstract

As the most prominent member of a family of four generations of Irish musicians in France, Joseph O’Kelly was part of the Irish community in 19th-century France. However, despite the presence of an active network of eminent musicians and prominent Irish exiles during his lifetime, and although he produced a prolific oeuvre of published compositions and received a number of public honours, his name was quickly forgotten after his early death. Today, his place in the histories of French or Irish music is less than prominent. Yet, the study of his music through press coverage of his performances reveals fascinating insights into a Franco-Irish biography, his astonishing perseverance in opera, his successes and failures, and possible reasons for his early neglect.

Keywords: Music; opera; Irish abroad; Franco-Irish relations

## Résumé

*Membre le plus éminent d’une famille de quatre générations de musiciens irlandais en France, Joseph O’Kelly faisait partie de la communauté irlandaise en France au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Cependant, malgré la présence d’un réseau actif d’éminents musiciens et d’exilés célèbres d’Irlande, et bien qu’il ait laissé une œuvre prolifique de compositions publiées et se soit vu décerner un certain nombre de récompenses publiques, son nom fut vite oublié après sa mort prématurée. Aujourd’hui, les histoires de la musique française et irlandaise lui font peu de place. Pourtant, l’étude de sa musique à travers les articles de presse qui relatent ses concerts révèle un aperçu fascinant d’une vie franco-irlandaise, une persévérance étonnante dans l’opéra, ses succès et échecs, et les raisons possibles de l’oubli dans lequel il est tombé si rapidement.*

*Mots clés : Musique ; opéra ; Irlandais de l’étranger ; relations franco-irlandaises*

---

The presence and activities of Irish musical composers in nineteenth-century France have attracted some measure of academic attention in recent years<sup>1</sup>

1. The Franco-Irish connection is developed, *inter alia*, in Una Hunt, *George Alexander Osborne. A Nineteenth-Century Irish Pianist-Composer*, Ph.D. thesis, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2006; Basil Walsh, *Michael W. Balfe – A Unique Victorian Composer*, Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2008; Una Hunt, “The Harpers’ Legacy: Irish National Airs and Pianoforte Composers”, *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* 6 (2010-11),

Whereas previously the focus of interest was mainly on England and parts of the United States as destinations for the emigration of musical talent from Ireland, the educational and performance opportunities and the resulting compositional influences of France are now coming more into focus, in particular with regard to the careers of George Alexander Osborne (1806-1893), Michael William Balfe (1808-1870) and William Vincent Wallace (1812-1865) during the first half of the century, and of Hope Temple (1859-1938) and Adela Maddison (1863-1929) in later decades. The career of Augusta Holmès (1847-1903), France's first significant female composer (and of Irish extraction), may already be regarded as sufficiently well-known. The increasing interest is also reflected in a number of recent releases of music by these composers on CD<sup>2</sup>, which not only demonstrate the obvious French influences but also open up new paths for appreciating their achievements outside the academic world.

The members of the O'Kelly family are arguably the most interesting musicians in terms of Franco-Irish cultural relations, yet the least well-known today. Four generations of musicians were indeed active for a hundred years between the 1820s and the 1920s. The first member of this family to set foot in France, where descendants still live, was an *émigré* from Dublin, a piano teacher called Joseph Kelly (1804-1856; note: not 'O'Kelly'). He arrived in Boulogne-sur-Mer, via London, around 1823. In November 1826 he married a Frenchwoman from the neighbouring town of Desvres and the couple had four sons in quick succession, all born in Boulogne: the composer and pianist Joseph O'Kelly (1828-1885) who became the best-known member of the family, the music publisher Auguste O'Kelly (1829-1900)<sup>3</sup>, the businessman Charles O'Kelly (1830-1897) who became managing director of Blanzly-Poure, then the best-known producer of steel pen nibs<sup>4</sup>, and the pianist and composer George O'Kelly (1831-1914), the composer notably of an Irish opera, *Le Lutin de Galway*, performed in 1878

---

p. 3-53; and, by the present writer, in White, Harry & Boydell, Barra (eds), *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, Dublin, UCD Press, 2013, article "Ireland: ideas and influences abroad", p. 523-526; and "Qualité d'Irlandais: The O'Kelly Family in Nineteenth-Century French Musical Life", in Eamon Maher and Catherine Maignant (dir.), *Franco-Irish Connections in Space and Time*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2012, p. 133-154.

2. For example, *Shower of Pearls: The Music of George Alexander Osborne*, perf. by Una Hunt (piano), Justin Pearson (cello) and the Triantán Piano Trio (RTÉ lyric fm CD 103, 2005); *Songs of Forgotten Women* (incl. seven songs by Adela Maddison), perf. by Julie Cross (mezzo) and Susan McDaniel (piano) (Beatriz Records, 2009); Adela Maddison's piano quintet is one of three pieces recorded by the ensemble Fibonacci Sequence (Dutton Epoch CDLX 7220, 2009); *William Vincent Wallace: Opera Fantasies and Paraphrases*, perf. by Rosemary Tuck and Richard Bonyngé (pianos) (Naxos 8.572774; 2011); *William Vincent Wallace: Chopinesque*, perf. by Rosemary Tuck and Richard Bonyngé (pianos) and the Tait Chamber Orchestra (Naxos 8.572776, 2012).

3. See Anik Devriès and François Lesure, *Dictionnaire des éditeurs de musique français*, tome 2: *De 1820 à 1914*, Genève, Minkoff, 1988, p. 330-331.

4. Georges Poure, *À la mémoire de M. Charles-Frédéric O'Kelly, gérant de l'usine Blanzly Poure & Cie.*, Boulogne-sur-Mer, 1897.

in Boulogne<sup>5</sup>. The third generation consisted of Henri O’Kelly (1859-1938), a son of Joseph’s, a fellow student of Claude Debussy at the Paris *Conservatoire* with whom he shared many academic distinctions and who was active as a pianist, organist, choir director and composer, and of Gustave O’Kelly (1872-1937), a son of Auguste’s, who was a piano maker and trader with a large shop at 93 rue Richelieu in Paris, across the street from the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, between 1898 and 1917. The fourth generation was represented by Henri O’Kelly junior (1881-1922), a son of Henri senior, who was a double bass player in the orchestras of the *Opéra Comique* and the *Société des Concerts du Conservatoire* and the editor of a volume of studies for bass clef instruments (such as double bass, violoncello, tuba, and many others)<sup>6</sup> which is dedicated, with permission, to Gabriel Fauré.

Although Boulogne-sur-Mer was frequently included in the activities of the O’Kellys, they spent their life and career mainly in Paris where the family moved to around 1835. After the premature death of their father, the brothers changed their name to O’Kelly, a change they justified as a correction when they collectively appeared at the *État Civil* in Boulogne in January 1859. By then, they had already used the name O’Kelly for about twelve years. The change of name is significant evidence of a reassertion of their Irish identity. It may have been calculated to smooth relationships in French society where being English could have been considered a disadvantage. Also, in British-occupied Ireland, the Anglicisation of Irish names was common practice in the 18th and 19th centuries. It therefore seems very likely that the Kellys had anglicized their name many years before in Ireland. In France however, there was no need for it, on the contrary. As O’Kelly it probably was easier to build positive relationships and thereby to distinguish oneself from the historic enemy. Thus, in the 1859 document at the *État Civil*, the change of name is described as a “*rectification*”. Their Irish consciousness is further underlined by the fact that the second and some members of the third generation remained Irish (i.e. in the days before Irish independence they had a British passport). Of course, another reason, apart from Irish consciousness, could have been that they avoided compulsory military service and being drafted into the various military conflicts of the period in question.

This paper concentrates on Joseph O’Kelly, the best-known member of the family and without doubt the most talented and prolific composer. There are many ways of drawing a sketch of someone’s biography and for the present purpose I chose to concentrate on newspaper articles and reviews. Their advantage is that they usually reflect contemporary attitudes and assessments of printed

---

5. The music to this opera remained unpublished and appears to be lost, but the libretto was printed in Boulogne-sur-Mer and a copy may be found in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*.

6. *Polyorgane: 160 Pièces pour les ‘Clés de fa’*, Paris, M. Sénart, 1920.

music and public performances. And while most are focusing on Paris I am also including some Irish papers in case of any significant articles.

## ■ A brief outline of Joseph O’Kelly’s life

Joseph O’Kelly was born in Boulogne-sur-Mer on 29 January 1828 as the first son of Joseph Kelly, a piano teacher from Dublin, and Marie Duval. From about 1835, he grew up in Paris where his family lived in the Faubourg Poissonnière area of the 9th arrondissement<sup>7</sup>. Records at the *Collège des Irlandais*, which don’t give a Christian name, indicate that he may have been a student there from late 1837 to early 1839<sup>8</sup>. He would have received his first piano lessons from his father but moved on to quite prominent teachers of the time. They included the German-born Frédéric Kalkbrenner and his Irish compatriot George Alexander Osborne for the piano and Fromental Halévy and Victor Douren for composition. With the exception of Osborne, all were teachers at the Paris *Conservatoire*, but there are no records at this institution of a Kelly or O’Kelly among their pupils. Indeed, it is rather unlikely that O’Kelly studied there, because in that period the *Conservatoire* didn’t accept foreign students. So, most likely, those were private studies that would have taken place during the mid-1840s.

His first published compositions dated from 1847, and by the mid-1850s he had established a reputation as a fluent writer of fashionable romances and virtuoso piano music in the style of Chopin or early Berlioz. But although he most frequently composed piano music and songs, he evidently had higher aims. Starting from 1849, Joseph wrote nine operas, four of which were published, and most of them performed<sup>9</sup>. He also completed four cantatas for soloists, choir and orchestra<sup>10</sup> and some choral works. The list of his published compositions reached more than 230 and included a wide range of established publishers such as Chabal, Choudens, Gambogi, Gérard, Girod, Grus, Heugel, Lemoine, Mayaud, Meissonnier, and of course his brother Auguste (who traded as “Magasin de

7. Before the restructuring of the Paris *arrondissements* in 1860 it was the 3rd.

8. *Registre de paiement des élèves et des professeurs et grand livre du Collège des Irlandais à Paris commencé en août 1837* (manuscript in the library of the Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris, call number A2.d7).

9. *La Chasse du roi* (1849, probably not performed; unpub.); *Stella* (Paris, salon performance, 1 March 1859; unpub.); *L’Arracheuse de dents* (Paris, Théâtre des Folies Dramatiques, Jan. 1869; unpub.); *Ruse contre ruse* (intended for performances in boarding schools; Paris, Magasin des demoiselles, 1873); *Le Mariage de Martine* (Paris, salon performance, 2 May 1874; unpub.); *La Zingarella* (Paris, Opéra Comique, 26 Feb. 1879; Paris, A. O’Kelly); *Les Secondes noces du bourgmestre* (Paris, Théâtre des Folies Dramatiques, c1881; unpub.); *La Barbrière improvisée* (Paris, Salon Herz, 10 Dec. 1882; Paris, A. O’Kelly, 1884); *Bibi-tapin* (Châtel Guyon, Casino, 29 Aug. 1882; unpub.).

10. *Paraguassú* (“*Poème lyrique en trois parties*”) (Paris, Théâtre Lyrique, 2 Aug. 1855; Paris, Choudens, 1855); *Cantate pour le fête de S. M. l’Impératrice* (Amiens, Théâtre, 15 Nov. 1867; unpub.); *Cantate des Irlandais de France au Centenaire d’O’Connell* (Dublin, Exhibition Palace, 7 Aug. 1875; unpub.); *Justice et Charité* (Versailles, Chapelle du Château, 13 June 1878; unpub.).

Musique du Conservatoire – A. O’Kelly” between 1872 and 1888). From about 1862, O’Kelly was employed by the famous piano firm Pleyel and represented it during the major international exhibitions of the following two decades. He was decorated with the national orders of merit of Brazil (1859) and Portugal (1865) and became a *Chevalier* of the *Légion d’Honneur* (1881). He married twice (1856, 1879) and had five children, but only two of them reached old age, one of them being the composer Henri.

O’Kelly clearly identified with his Irish heritage. He was a long-standing member of the Irish community in Paris known as the ‘*Anciens Irlandais*’, which was convened by John Patrick Leonard and which, among other activities, held an annual Saint Patrick’s Dinner for many years at the restaurant Véfour (still extant at the Grand Palais). Probably his only journey to Ireland took place in August 1875 for the O’Connell Centenary where a cantata by O’Kelly was performed to words by the Viscount O’Neill de Tyrone, another prominent member of the *Anciens Irlandais* (see below). Among his piano works, there is an *Air irlandais* op. 58 (1877), with variations on the tune of “The Wearing of the Green”. A number of his printed pieces have dedications to members of the Irish community in France. Despite all this, according to J.P. Leonard, O’Kelly “did not know a word of English<sup>11</sup>”.

Joseph O’Kelly died on 9 January 1885, aged almost 57, of bowel cancer. At the funeral mass at Saint Ferdinand’s (17th arr.), the eminent composer Camille Saint-Saëns played the organ, with further music being performed by representatives of the *Conservatoire* and by the *Orphéon Pleyel-Wolff*. He was buried in the Cimetière de Passy<sup>12</sup>.

Although his music was widely performed and published, although he evidently mixed with both the musical world and the Irish community of Paris, and although he received a number of public awards, Joseph O’Kelly (not to speak of the rest of his family) has faded completely from today’s perception. He is neither included in any of the major international musical encyclopaedias, nor in Fauquet’s voluminous dictionary of 19th-century French music<sup>13</sup>. There has never been an academic study that included his name<sup>14</sup>. His music has never been commercially recorded and probably not even been performed during the past one hundred years.

---

11. John Patrick Leonard, “Death of an Eminent Franco-Irish Composer”, *The Nation*, 31 Dec. 1885, p. 5.

12. Since about the year 2000 this grave is no longer extant. It was in Division 12 of the cemetery.

13. Joël-Marie Fauquet (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la musique en France au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 2003. The O’Kelly family now has an entry, by the present author, in the *Encyclopaedia of Music in Ireland*, p. 770-773 (see fn. 1).

14. See Axel Klein, *O’Kelly: an Irish Musical Family in Nineteenth-Century France*, Norderstedt, BoD, 2014.

## ■ Early public reception

The first time someone took public notice of Joseph O’Kelly was in August 1847 when Théophile Gautier commented on a vocal duo written by him which was performed in the *Château des Fleurs*, a large temporary tent that had been built for various kinds of artistic performances during the summer months in the Jardin Beaujon on Champs Élysées. O’Kelly’s duo, he noted, “*a produit beaucoup d’effet*<sup>15</sup>”.

Apart from public announcements of performances that included his music, his name came up next in the course of a conflict in 1849 between Monsieur Bocage, the director of the *Théâtre de l’Odéon*, and Jules de Premaray, the feuilleton editor of the newspaper *La Patrie*<sup>16</sup>. O’Kelly was only mentioned once in connection with an un-named comic opera to a libretto by Théodore Labourieu which appears to have been refused at the *Odéon*. This refers to the opera *La Chasse du roi*, which was later offered to the *Théâtre de la Gaîté*. A letter by O’Kelly, is kept in the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*<sup>17</sup>, suggests that Labourieu also played a part in the unsuccessful first attempt at a performance because he wasn’t able to complete his text. In his letter, O’Kelly sounds quite impatient.

Because Labourieu was also active as a music critic, the following 1853 eulogy of O’Kelly in *Le Tintamarre* may be a kind of atonement or recompense for his previous failure. This related to O’Kelly’s own performance of his opus 7, which is a piano fantasy on Schubert’s famous ‘Trout’ song:

*Rien de faux, de prétentieux, de psalmodique dans son jeu; ce n’est plus là le pianiste lymphatique, l’eunuque de l’harmonie à l’eau de rose, c’est l’homme de talent qui simplement s’inspire de la vérité, sans emphase et sans contorsion*<sup>18</sup>.

But even without this “recompensating” aspect, O’Kelly received positive reviews in his early years, and this included Hector Berlioz in the *Journal des débats* where he reviewed the publication of O’Kelly’s *Album de la Légion d’Honneur*, a collection of six songs to texts by Jules Montini, which were dedicated to the superintendent of the school of the *Légion d’Honneur* at Saint-Denis. In his own inimitable way, he wonders whether the music would be fit for its target group, the teen-age girls at the school:

---

15. In a note dated 2 Aug. 1847, in Théophile Gautier, *L’Histoire de l’art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, vol. 5, Paris, Édition Hetzel, 1859, p. 127.

16. Short note in *La Presse*, 4 Aug. 1850, p. 3, referring to an event in Nov. 1849.

17. Letter at BnF dated “Dimanche matin”, addressed to “Mon cher Monsieur”, shelf mark BNF-LA-81 212, which I interpret as being addressed to Théodore Labourieu and written between 1850 and 1853.

18. In *Le Tintamarre*, 9 January 1853. O’Kelly’s *Fantaisie brillante sur une mélodie (La Truite) de Fr. Schubert* op. 6 was published in 1852 by Richault.



*Les demoiselles de la maison de Saint-Denis ne sont ni des héroïnes de roman, ni de jeunes philosophes, ni des couturières, ni des sœurs de charité, ni des religieuses. Il s’agissait de trouver une poésie de seize ans, une musique de seize ans pour ces jeunes cantatrices de seize ans. MM. Montini et O’Kelly ont résolu le problème sans effort et même avec beaucoup de bonheur. Plusieurs morceaux de leur album charmeraient même des cantatrices de trente-deux ans. [...] Les accompagnements de ces six petites pièces sont en outre (et c’est un point important) d’une facilité telle que les jeunes pianistes de la maison de Saint-Denis elles-mêmes peuvent les exécuter sans hésitation*<sup>19</sup>.

Of course, a certain irony is unmistakable here, but Berlioz certainly acknowledged that O’Kelly’s unpretentious *Album* has its own inherent value.

Gustave Héquet, writing in *L’Illustration*, agreed when he said “*M. O’Kelly est un harmoniste élégant, et sa mélodie a beaucoup de grâce*”. In the same short article<sup>20</sup>, the author already referred to the upcoming performance of O’Kelly’s ‘poème lyrique’, *Paraguassú*:

*On nous annonce de lui pour le 2 août prochain un poème lyrique qui aura nom : Paraguassù, et qui sera exécuté au Théâtre Lyrique au bénéfice de l’Association des musiciens. Paraguassù est un titre passablement bizarre : mais nous offrons de parier que la musique de M. O’Kelly sera correcte, facile, et pleine de naturel.*

## ■ Operas and cantatas

In his *Les Voies de l’Opéra français au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Hervé Lacombe has pointed out how difficult it was for young composers to have major operatic works performed in Paris in the mid-19th century. For all aspiring young composers, the *Théâtre Lyrique* was the place in which they put all their hopes<sup>21</sup>.

O’Kelly played a smart move in getting a performance there in August 1855 with his work *Paraguassú*. He chose a time when the theatre was actually closed for the summer and arranged the performance as a benefit for the *Association des Artistes Musiciens*. The disadvantage of this procedure, of course, was that he couldn’t get more than a single performance outside the regular programme, but the advantage was that he could justifiably claim to have a major work performed at the *Théâtre Lyrique* by the regular professional staff of the house, including a

---

19. Hector Berlioz in *Journal des débats*, 17 April 1855, p. 3.

20. “Chronique musicale”, in *L’Illustration*, 4 August 1855, p. 82.

21. Paraphrased from the English edition, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2001 (French original published in 1997), p. 211.



publication of the score with Choudens, altogether not a bad thing to have for an unknown 27-year-old composer.

*Paraguassú* is a musical collaboration with the librettist Jules de Villeneuve who had spent several years in Brazil and who probably suggested the plot, an historical legend of 16th-century Brazil combined laced with a love story involving the heroine of the title and a Portuguese invader. Described as a '*poème lyrique*', the work was more like a cantata, involving a speaker who explained the story, also with stage design and costumes, but no acting as in an opera. The work was dedicated to the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II, which resulted in O'Kelly getting the national order of merit from Brazil four years later.

Honours of this kind do not necessarily say anything about the quality of the music performed on that occasion. As it was, the musical press was critical, but polite, commending a few well-made melodies, but limiting any negative criticism with a reference to the beneficial character of the performance. There were four reviews, which may be summed up in the following excerpt from *Le Ménestrel*, written by the critic Jules Lovy:

*Quant à la musique, elle renferme quelques motifs agréables, notamment la barcarolle chantée par Dulaurens et Mme Deligne-Lauters. Nous ne releverons pas les insuffisances musicales de cette oeuvre, que les auteurs ont exhibée dans de fort louables intentions, puisqu'elle a été représentée au profit de l'Association des artistes-musiciens*<sup>22</sup>.

Louis Dubreuilh in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* explained these shortcomings by wishing for more originality and local colour:

*La troisième partie contenait encore quelques passages dignes d'être remarqués ; mais en général on aurait désiré dans les morceaux assez nombreux qui composent cette oeuvre plus d'originalité, et, puisque la scène se passe au bord de la rivière des Amazones, un peu plus de couleur locale*<sup>23</sup>.

The harshest criticism came from L. Girard in the *Revue de Paris* who applauded the quality of the performance, but explicitly exempted the music from this assessment in quite direct language:

*L'exécution de Paraguassú a donc été remarquable. Nous voudrions pouvoir en dire autant de l'oeuvre-même, malheureusement la vérité nous oblige à dire que cette musique nous a paru banale, incolore, absolument dépourvue d'originalité*<sup>24</sup>.

---

22. *Le Ménestrel*, 5 August 1855, p. 3.

23. *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 5 August 1855, p. 247.

24. *Revue de Paris*, 1 October 1855, p. 156.

When Dom Pedro II returned to France (and Monaco) many years later, he wished to hear it again. So, on 20 January 1888, three years after O’Kelly’s death, it was performed at the Casino in Monte Carlo. Now the press reception was quite different. According to a critic writing in *Gil Blas*, “Paraguassu est en réalité une œuvre forte et bien conçue<sup>25</sup>”. *Le Gaulois* reported that the performance was a great success and the work itself “pleine de couleur<sup>26</sup>”.

Nevertheless, from the mid-1850s we can observe a kind of split perception of O’Kelly’s qualities as a composer. While reviews of his piano music and songs are usually positive, often *very* positive (see examples further below), he frequently met with severe negative criticism of his beloved genre, opera.

And it must have been a beloved genre. Why else would he again and again write an opera in the face of the kind of criticism above (and below)? To be fair, there were favourable reviews of his operas as well, such as that of his 1859 opéra *Stella* which had first been performed in the course of a benefit concert for himself in an unnamed salon. Gustave Héquet wrote of this work in *L’Illustration* that it was not a bad way to start a career in the difficult area of dramatic music:

*M. O’Kelly n’en est encore qu’aux premiers pas dans cette difficile carrière de la composition dramatique : mais on ne saurait commencer mieux<sup>27</sup>.*

Frequently the critics simply seemed to forget that O’Kelly had written operas since 1849, such as in an announcement of a performance of *L’Arracheuse de dents* in January 1869 which was described as an operatic *début*:

*Le théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques va mettre prochainement en répétition un opéra-bouffé, que l’on dit de la plus excentrique originalité. Il est intitulé : L’arracheuse de dents. Le poème est de M. Bernard Lopez, et la partition sera le début, au théâtre, d’un musicien avantageusement connu dans les concerts et les salons, M. Joseph O’Kelly<sup>28</sup>.*

His fifth opera *Le Mariage de Martine* of 1874 was well received by *Le Ménestrel* as “*musique vraiment charmante*”, with “*melodies claires et spirituelles*”, and pointing out “*une romance et un madrigal pleins de sentiments et de fraîcheur<sup>29</sup>*”.

Meanwhile, in Dublin, excerpts from O’Kelly’s third cantata received their first performance. The occasion was the O’Connell Centenary in August 1875. O’Kelly’s friend, the Viscount O’Neill de Tyrone (who also wrote the words to the cantata), had suggested the work to the organisers of the festivities in a

---

25. Fernand Bourgeat, “Echo théâtral de Monaco”, *Gil Blas*, 21 January 1888, p. 4.

26. Nicolet, “Courrier de Monaco”, *Le Gaulois*, 21 January 1888, p. 4. “Nicolet” was a pseudonym which was used by two writers in this newspaper, Edouard Noël and Lionel Meyer.

27. *L’Illustration*, 6 August 1855, p. 126.

28. *Le Ménestrel*, 27 December 1868, p. 30.

29. *Le Ménestrel*, 3 May 1874, p. 175.

letter reproduced in the Dublin newspaper *The Nation* of 26 June 1875. Probably, this came at rather short notice, as preparations for the musical part of the festivities were already well under way. According to the letter, the *Cantate des Irlandais de France au Centenaire d'O'Connell* was in four movements, approximately 20 minutes in length, in French language, and scored for tenor and bass solo voice, four-part (mixed) chorus and orchestra. Despite the short notice the cantata was indeed accepted and performed in Dublin, albeit as “selections” only, and along with the cantata *St Patrick at Tara* by the Irish composer and conductor John William Glover<sup>30</sup>. The score seems to have been circulated to the press, as an advance article in the *Irish Times*, signed by “Faust”, suggests, which was published two weeks before the event:

There is a prospect of some good music in connection with the celebration of the O'Connell Centenary. [...] I note that a cantata specially written for the O'Connell Centenary by the Comte O'Neill de Tyrone, the music furnished by another Frenchman, by name “O'Kelly,” is to be performed at the Exhibition Palace on Saturday night, under the direction of Professor Glover. I have been looking over some of its numbers, and the music strikes me as being of a bright and tuneful character, which is pretty certain to catch the ordinary ear<sup>31</sup>.

Unfortunately, the papers were not very eloquent about the musical celebration, compared to the social side, which took place on 7 August 1875. *The Nation* even quoted from another newspaper:

This concert, under the conductorship of Professor Glover, took place in the large concert hall of the Exhibition Palace, on Saturday night, and was attended by at least 3,000 persons, including the distinguished foreign guests. The number of performers was 500. The *Daily Express* says of it: – The grand national concert was held in the large concert hall of the Exhibition Palace, on Saturday evening. The hall was crowded, and the concert passed off with much success. The performance opened with a grand chorus, followed by selections from Professor Glover's oratorio “Tara”, in which the principal characters were sustained by Mr. Richard Smith, Mr. B. McGuckin, Madame Gedge, and Mrs. Scott Fennell. [...] Selections from the Centenary cantata composed by Viscount O'Neill de Tyrone were also given. Mr. Levey acted as leader, and Mr. Horan presided at the organ. The concert, which commenced at half-past seven

---

30. *The Nation*, 14 August 1875, p. 13.

31. *The Irish Times*, 2 August 1875, p. 3.

o’clock, was not over until eleven o’clock, but notwithstanding its unusual length every one appeared to enjoy it very much.

A review in the *Irish Times* named the (two) selections and their singers: “Mr Barton McGuckin sang ‘Me Souvenir de toi’ and Mr R Smith ‘Reunis sous la Tente’ from Viscomte O’Neill’s Cantata.” O’Kelly was mentioned briefly in a previous paragraph, but unfortunately the article is silent on the work itself except summing up the whole event in the words “The musical arrangement of the Centenary Celebration must be acknowledged to have been conspicuously successful<sup>32</sup>.”

In France, the majority of reviews of his operas remained negative. A particularly bad example related to a work that probably had the widest exposure by being staged in the regular programme of the *Opéra Comique* in February 1879. It’s his sixth opera, called *La Zingarella*, to a libretto by Jules Adenis and Jules Montini. Of this work I found 23 reviews, with 17 from France, two each from Britain and the United States, and one each from Germany and Spain. Several of them again claimed that this opera was O’Kelly’s operatic debut. Looking at the character of the reviews, eight can be considered as positive, ten as negative, and the remaining five as more or less neutral by balancing positive and negative aspects.

*La Zingarella* is an opera about an opera, describing the process through which the (historically real) composer Antonio Salieri came to writing the (totally fictitious) opera *La Zingarella* by finding inspiration in the singing of his beautiful and musical housemaid. Interesting though this concept may be, it failed to win the audience’s general approval and was taken off the schedule after but four performances.

Some of the reviews could be described as outright polemical or, at least, intentionally negative. See, for example, Arnold Mortier’s “introduction” of O’Kelly in *Les Soirées Parisiennes*, in which he alleged that his music was generally ignored by the public, that he was already an old man (at age 40!) and that hitherto he had composed nothing but songs:

*M. O’Kelly, est le type du musicien modeste qui dépense son talent dans une foule de morceaux de piano et de compositions estimables connus des dilettanti, mais ignorés du public. C’est un élève d’Halévy; inutile d’ajouter que ce n’est plus un jeune homme. Professeur distingué, il donne des leçons de piano et d’harmonie et est, en outre, attaché à la maison Pleyel. Ses œuvres consistent surtout en albums de chant*<sup>33</sup>.

---

32. *The Irish Times*, 10 August 1875, p. 6.

33. *Les Soirées Parisiennes de 1879, par un monsieur de l’orchestre (Arnold Mortier)*, Paris, E. Dentu, 1880, p. 93-94.

Some of the press comments clearly indicated that O’Kelly’s music was regarded as old-fashioned. For instance, Léon Kerst wrote in *La Presse*: “*Oh ! non ! Ce musicien pianiste est de la vieille école*”<sup>34</sup>.

“Bénédict”, writing in *Le Figaro*, agreed and suggested that O’Kelly should have resisted writing music to the libretto (by Jules Adenis and Jules Montini), which was probably deemed embarrassing by the author: “*M. O’Kelly n’a pas su résister à la tentation d’écrire la musique de la Zingarella, et il en a été puni – en compagnie du public*” – because he seemed to consider the music better than its text. But he, too, considered O’Kelly’s music old-fashioned:

*A la lecture au piano, la partition de M. O’Kelly peut avoir les qualités estimables et correctes d’un homme qui a réfléchi sur son art et étudié l’art d’écrire auprès d’un maître. Il y a très certainement, dans les sept morceaux de ce petit acte qui a fait si prodigieusement bâiller, du savoir, de l’élégance, des phrases bien faites; mais il manque à tout cela la vie et le mouvement de l’art contemporain : il semble que le compositeur se soit endormi dans la bibliothèque du Conservatoire [...]*<sup>35</sup>.

Among the more balanced ones, a review by Henri Heugel (writing as “H. Moreno”) described O’Kelly’s achievements quite fairly and was thoughtful about his talents as an operatic composer:

*De la musique de la Zingarella, j’aurai peu de chose à dire, n’en ayant entendu que la dernière moitié, écrite par un musicien, cela est incontestable, mais sans relief suffisant pour la scène. M. O’Kelly, élève distingué d’Halévy, a publié de bonnes mélodies et c’est de plus, je crois, un excellent professeur de piano. Son talent n’est donc pas en cause, mais pour aborder le théâtre, lors même qu’on est parfait musicien, il faut avoir ce que l’on appelle « la vocation ». Or, le compositeur de la petite partition de la Zingarella est-il né pour le théâtre ? Nous n’oserions l’affirmer*<sup>36</sup>.

Finally, there were positive voices as well, although they represent a minority view, showing that what appeared in the press is to a great extent influenced by the personal taste of the writer in question. Thus, Lucien Debroas in *Le Petit Parisien* thought: “*M. O’Kelly a fait une musique fine et agréable*”<sup>37</sup>. “Gérôme”, writing in *L’Univers illustré*, pointed out that “*M. Joseph O’Kelly a écrit sur cette donnée une courte partition, où j’ai remarqué un cantique d’une bonne facture et une romance pleine de charme et de tendresse*”<sup>38</sup>. The eminent critic (and composer) Ernest Reyer

34. *La Presse*, 4 March 1879, p. 2.

35. This, and the foregoing quote by Bénédict, “Opéra-Comique”, *Le Figaro*, 28 February 1879, p. 3.

36. *Le Ménestrel*, 2 March 1879, p. 107.

37. In *Le Petit Parisien*, 1 March 1879, p. 3.

38. “Gerome”, *L’Univers illustré*, 8 March 1879, p. 148.

acknowledged in the *Journal des débats* the opera’s small format and the public applause: “La Zingarella de M. O’Kelly n’est, à vrai dire, qu’un opéra de salon à deux personnages. On l’a écoutée avec plaisir et on a applaudi les deux interprètes, [...]”<sup>39</sup>.”

Despite the general public failure of *La Zingarella*, O’Kelly continued to write operas, and his ninth, *La Barbière improvisée* of 1882, was, for instance, successfully performed for three years, including, in 1884, a run of 31 performances at Jacques Offenbach’s *Bouffes-Parisiennes*, and the score was published<sup>40</sup>. Among the several positive reviews the following assessment published in *Le Parnasse* may be cited here: “*Etant donné le genre, les habitudes, le voulu de ce milieu, ce petit acte est supérieur à ce qu’on est accoutumé d’y entendre*”<sup>41</sup>.” Unfortunately, it did little to change the overall impression planted into the musical memory of Paris by a work so intensively discussed because of its performance in the *Opéra Comique*.

### ■ Positive reviews of piano music and songs

In contrast to the mixed reception of his operas, O’Kelly’s piano music and songs were generally applauded in the press. Apart from early (i.e. c.1847-55) romances which were clearly written to please public taste and to provide an income, many of his later *mélodies* were evidently treasured, especially his settings of poems by Victor Hugo. His 1861 song *Vieille chanson du jeune temps* was repeatedly praised by critics as “*une très-heureuse inspiration*”<sup>42</sup> and “*une mélodie à la fois empreinte de poésie, d’amour et de candeur [...] c’est une oeuvre distinguée et qui offre de grandes ressources au chanteur*”<sup>43</sup>. Another Victor Hugo setting, *Tristesse d’Olympio* of c.1866, has been described as a “*morceau de la meilleure facture et plein de charme*”<sup>44</sup>. And about yet another, *Faisons un rêve*, Ernest Reyer appears to have been quite enthusiastic:

*Si le rêve de M. O’Kelly est d’entendre dire aux artistes que ses mélodies sont l’oeuvre d’un musicien instruit et toujours bien inspiré, je ne demande pas mieux que d’aider, pour ma part, à la réalisation de ce rêve*<sup>45</sup>.

Further, his song *Sous les branches* (1870) was described as “*une ravissante mélodie*”<sup>46</sup>; his *Stances à l’immortalité* have been called a “*maître-morceau*”<sup>47</sup>. A per-

---

39. Ernest Reyer, “Revue musicale”, in *Journal des débats*, 11 March 1879, p. 2.

40. Paris, A. O’Kelly, 1884 (plate no. A.O.K. 1159).

41. *Le Parnasse*, 1 January 1885, p. 4.

42. *Revue et gazette musicale*, 10 March 1861, p. 76.

43. *Les Beaux-arts*, 1862-63, p. 287.

44. *Revue et gazette musicale*, 17 February 1867, p. 53.

45. *Journal des débats*, 11 May 1869, p. 2.

46. *L’Abeille musicale*, 1-15 February 1870, p. 3.

47. *Le Ménestrel*, 31 March 1872, p. 144.

formance of *Hosannah* (the first of his *Trois Mélodies* of 1876) ended with the words “*Ce morceau, appelé à un grand succès, est fort bien conçu ; il est à la fois mélodique et tragique*”<sup>48</sup>.

Likewise, his piano music enjoyed positive criticism. For example, his *La Bruyère* op. 22 has been commended for “*beaucoup de clarté et surtout d’élégance*”<sup>49</sup>; his simple arrangements, for students’ purposes, of popular classical pieces under the title of *Les Soirées enfantines* (1865) were summed up as being “*formé avec tant de soin, de goût et de sollicitude*”<sup>50</sup>; his *Les Castagnettes* op. 33 were praised as “*original, agréable à entendre et à exécuter*”<sup>51</sup>. A review of O’Kelly’s piano piece *Après la tempête* op. 53, which he dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt, ended with this assessment:

*Ce sont cinq pages en tout, mais cinq pages suffisamment remplies, puis qu’elles sont d’un sentiment juste et que le développement y est conséquent avec la donnée*<sup>52</sup>.

## ■ Obituaries and late assessments

As a composer of piano music and songs as well as operas of a mixed reputation, Joseph O’Kelly did not belong to the most prominent composers of his time. Thus it cannot be expected that many papers would have devoted much time to his passing. As it happened, we have many short notices of his death (in French, British and German papers), but only two that can be described as obituaries. As if to round off his Franco-Irish career, one appeared in France and the other in Ireland.

The French obituary appeared in *Le Ménestrel*, written by the paper’s editor Henri Heugel – himself a publisher of some of O’Kelly’s songs. He summed up O’Kelly’s legacy by pointing both to his many popular song compositions and to his remarkable commitment to opera:

*C’était un musicien distingué, qui laisse après lui un petit bagage de mélodies dont plusieurs eurent de la vogue. Nous en avons offert tout dernièrement à nos abonnés plusieurs d’un tour véritablement heureux. M. O’Kelly avait aussi tenté du théâtre, où il aurait pu à la longue réussir tout comme un autre. Mais on sait comme il est difficile aujourd’hui pour un compositeur*

---

48. *Le Monde Artiste*, 9 December 1876, p. 6.

49. *Revue et gazette musicale*, 9 March 1862, p. 80.

50. Hébert, in *Les Beaux-Arts*, issue of 1 January to 15 June 1865, p. 95.

51. G. Stradina, in *Le Moniteur des Pianistes*, 20 February 1868, p. 11.

52. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 2 July 1876, p. 214.



*d'enfoncer les portes de nos théâtres lyriques et d'apprendre la scène en s'y essayant*<sup>53</sup>.

Connected through their publishing partnership for a number of years, Heugel also knew O’Kelly personally and offered a glimpse into his personality:

*C'était un homme doux et de moeurs aimables, qui ne laissera après lui que des regrets.*

O’Kelly’s long-time Irish friend in Paris, John Patrick Leonard, was the author of the obituary in the Irish newspaper *The Nation*. As mentioned before, Leonard managed the ‘*Anciens Irlandais*’ group of Irishmen in Paris; he was also the driving force behind O’Kelly’s membership in the *Légion d’Honneur* and had accompanied him to the O’Connell Centenary celebrations in Dublin in 1875. Their friendship allowed for a rare insight into O’Kelly’s private life, which was not without its tragic aspects. Whether these related to family fates or to backlashes in his musical career is not entirely clear from the following; indeed it could be a mixture of both. While musical failures can be deducted from the press excerpts quoted above (relating, in particular, to his opera *La Zingarella*), family-related aspects could include the loss of his first wife (1877), the death of his daughter at age 23 (1881) and that of his first son with his second wife just before his fourth birthday (1884).

[...] a more gentle and warm-hearted being never lived. [...] [O’Kelly] was greatly esteemed by everyone. Modest and retiring, he won his way by real talent. Sensitive and kind-hearted, he was ill calculated to buffet the storms of life, of which he had his share. Like his great master Chopin, of whom he spoke to me with enthusiasm on his deathbed, he succumbed in the battle of life from feeling too deeply the “slings and arrows” of fortune.

If the fond affection of those who surrounded his deathbed and the tender love of a mother could console him, they, with religion, must have made his last hours less sad and given him resignation to leave a world where sorrow dwells<sup>54</sup>.

Perhaps this is, too, what Arthur Pougin meant when he spoke of “*pauvre O’Kelly*”<sup>55</sup>, a term that seems to include more than polite regret about someone’s passing.

---

53. Henri Heugel, “Nécrologie”, *Le Ménestrel*, 11 January 1885, p. 47. The next short quote is from the same source.

54. John Patrick Leonard, “Death of an Eminent Franco-Irish Composer”, *The Nation*, 31 Dec. 1885, p. 5.

55. In *Le Guide musical*, January 1885, p. 32.

## ■ Afterword

Now, what are we to make of all this? Nearly every composer has had his ups and downs, had successes and failures, had to endure negative criticism even if a piece of work was in reality not as bad as it seemed to some critics. But why was Joseph O’Kelly so quickly and so completely forgotten? The study of contemporary newspaper criticism reveals that O’Kelly generally appears to have succeeded in the smaller forms of piano music and song and to have failed in larger works such as the majority of his operas. But there is more than the difference between handling large and small forms. Reasons must also be sought in the fierce competition between the very large number of composers active in Paris at the time, and for stylistic reasons. On the one hand, O’Kelly was sufficiently well known to have enjoyed regular performances of almost everything he wrote. He had a circle of performers who obviously liked his music. He doesn’t seem to have had any difficulty in finding publishers. And he was also acknowledged enough to be awarded the *Légion d’Honneur*.

On the other hand however, competition wasn’t only fierce because of the quantity of composers, but also in terms of stylistic development. Contrary to today, in the 19th century music was marked by a strong belief in progress in terms of style, harmony, and expression. Particularly during O’Kelly’s lifetime, these shifts in style and public taste were so strong that, although his music had followers, it was not regarded as progressive. With regard to his opera *La zingarella* of 1879 some writers pointed out that he was of the “vieille école”. A year later he was included in Arthur Pougin’s edition of Fétis’s *Biographie universelle*, and seemingly under the impression of that infamous opera, he wrote:

[...] *il a publié [...] un assez grand nombre de compositions qui sont écrites non sans goût, mais dans une forme qui est loin de cadrer avec les idées larges, la libre allure et le souffle nouveau qui distinguent la jeune école française*<sup>56</sup>.

It is a judgement that comes across as somewhat unfair with regard to his work as a whole. Besides, Pougin’s article is full of mistakes pertaining to biographical details as much as to O’Kelly’s list of works. Neither Pougin nor the majority of critics seemed to be really familiar with O’Kelly’s oeuvre, and no-one seemed to have bothered to talk to him and ask before publishing potentially damaging criticism. So we are left with reviews that are highly selective and coloured by personal opinion. But these reviews, including Pougin’s dictionary article, were carved in stone for posterity, certainly for the twentieth century which laid O’Kelly at rest.

---

56. François-Joseph Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique. Supplément et complément*, Arthur Pougin (ed.), Paris, 1880, p. 286-287.

Today we are in a position that allows us to have a fresh look at the achievements of the O’Kellys in France. With an objective eye, it will be found that, although some of Joseph O’Kelly’s music is derivative and outmoded by the standards of their time, it is always tastefully written, melodious, and rewarding for both pianists and singers. Our modern understanding of the evanescence of style and taste can explain O’Kelly’s early neglect, but at the same time it also enables us to form a fresh assessment today.