

O’Kelly – An Irish Musical Family in 19th-Century France

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Note: The “PPT”-boxes at the right margin refer to the page in the accompanying powerpoint presentation.

Thanks etc.

PPT 1

The cultural life of France has for a long time been an attraction to musical composers from Ireland. Especially during the 19th century, when Ireland was starving both literally and musically, several Irish composers spent time in France, particularly in Paris, with periods ranging from a few weeks to several years. As I have devoted a previous paper to this topic which you find on my website I will say no more about them today.

Of Irish musicians in France, the O’Kelly family is probably the least well-known today, but the most interesting in my opinion from the viewpoint of Franco-Irish relations. And this is because there is probably no better example in the history of music of such a close integration of an Irish family in French music such as that of the O’Kellys in the 19th- and early 20th-century. My paper will trace the steps the O’Kellys took from immigration in the 1820s to their assimilation into the musical life – and in some cases the business world – of France in the course of three generations. I will also try to give an answer to the obvious question of why this family is so totally forgotten today – that is to say, until today, of course.

I have often devoted time to unearthing composers who I thought were unjustly neglected. But I must say that I have never before been so attracted to a subject than with this family, and this is due to a number of circumstances. The first is that about two years ago when I merely tried to establish the life dates and work-list of Joseph O’Kelly for an article in a dictionary I noticed some incoherent information, and in clarifying it I noticed that there was another composer beside Joseph called O’Kelly. And in going deeper into it I found out there were in fact three brothers O’Kelly in French music, plus a second Joseph who was their father, and later generations which included two different Henri O’Kellys, among others. So I ended up in drawing up a genealogical family tree which you also find on my website and to which the last additions were made only last Tuesday.

Another reason for my fascination is the fact that the music I found in antiquarian shops all over Europe is actually very good and would deserve to be played in public again. A third reason is that I tried to find traces of their Irish heritage, and did indeed find some. And a fourth reason is I that have done all this research on my laptop in Germany, with just one

weekend outing to Paris – it’s just fascinating what you can do today with all the digitised material from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the État Civil in Paris, and the archives of Pas-de-Calais. I would really like to express my gratitude for the progress in digitisation that you have reached here in France. C’est vraiment fantastique. I should not forget to mention the immense help I received in person from a lady in the Archives Municipales in Boulogne-sur-mer. Within two years of leisurely activity I have now gathered enough material to fill a book, which is indeed what I am going to do.

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The whole story starts with the emigration from Ireland of the Dublin-born musician Joseph Kelly – note: not O’Kelly – in about 1825. He established himself in Boulogne-sur-mer as a ‘professeur de musique’, which is usually a piano teacher. Why Boulogne-sur-mer? We have to be aware that Boulogne at this time was a major seaport for ships from and to England. For many years the town had a Hibernian Hotel, a Hotel Byron, and similar places which testify to the considerable influx of English-speaking people. My research has revealed many English and Irish names in family documents, from birth registries to graveyards.

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In November 1826 Kelly married a woman from the town of Desvres, and then his first four sons were born in short succession: the composer and pianist Joseph O’Kelly in January 1828, the music publisher Auguste O’Kelly in July 1829, the business man Charles in November 1830, and the pianist and composer George O’Kelly in October 1831. A fifth son, Gustave Alfred who did not become a musician, was born ten years later when the family had already moved to Paris.

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Some time during the mid to late 1830s the family must have moved to Paris. On 19 October 1838, Joseph gained French citizenship, and in the certificate of naturalisation he was registered as living in Paris. Probably the family lived in Paris at least two years prior to that, as is indicated by the only known composition of his. In late 1835 or early 1836 the Paris firm of Tabareau published a piece of music called *Les Boulonnaises - Contredanses pour le piano avec accompagnement de violon et de basse (ad lib)* by one ‘J. Kelly’ which is most likely his work – there were no other Kellys (or O’Kellys) active in France at this time. The title also refers to Kelly’s initial place of residence in the country. Being in Paris at this time would have facilitated contacts with music publishers and with teachers for the advanced training of his sons.

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Kelly lived in Rue de Faubourg Poissonnière in the 9th arrondissement of Paris, a lively quarter close to Montmartre which boasted several small publishing houses, theatres, and was close to the Conservatoire, the opera house and the Opéra Comique. The street and its vicinity was to be the home for several members of the O’Kelly family for the next decades. For some reason yet unknown he died prematurely, aged 52, in October 1856. As far as I know, he never officially changed his name to O’Kelly as his sons did a few years later. But on his death certificate he is called O’Kelly, and later his sons gave their father’s name as O’Kelly in all family-related official documents. And when Joseph junior succeeded in having an opera of his performed at the Opéra Comique in 1879 – certainly a moment of great significance for him – he dedicated it “À la mémoire de mon père, Joseph O’Kelly”.

The change of name from Kelly to O’Kelly is a step all brothers took simultaneously. And they went to do that to their hometown Boulogne-sur-mer in January 1859. The birth certificates of the four brothers who were born there have this little notice in a later hand

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which you can see here in the birth certificate of Auguste O’Kelly. In fact, however, the family had already used the name considerably longer. I have not seen the birth certificate of Gustave Alfred in Paris of 1841, which would have been the earliest document. But in the absence of that I can say that Joseph O’Kelly’s first published compositions in 1847 appear as O’Kelly, and with the exception of the original immigrant none of his family ever used Kelly as their name.

For me, the name change is a significant element of Irish identity. For one thing, it could of course smooth relationships in French society where being English would certainly have been a disadvantage. As ‘Kelly’ it was easier in a British-occupied Ireland, where it seems they had anglicised their name. But as ‘O’Kelly’ it was easier to build positive relationships in France.



The best known member of the family was the first-born son, Joseph O’Kelly who lived 1828 to 1885. If any of the O’Kellys appears in a musical dictionary or other contemporary sources it is him who is listed. Undoubtedly he received his first piano tuition from his father, but he quickly proceeded to study piano with George Alexander Osborne, an Irish pianist and composer from Limerick who lived in Paris for 13 years, and with Osborne’s teacher, the German-born Frédéric Kalkbrenner. He also studied composition with Fromental Halévy, composer of the famous opera ‘La Juive’, and with Victor Douren. Both were teachers at the Conservatoire, but there is no record of any Kelly or O’Kelly at the Conservatoire at this time so I presume these were private studies.

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Joseph quickly established himself as a pianist and composer. His first published compositions are songs and piano pieces, published with several Paris publishing houses from late 1847 when Joseph was merely 19 years of age. He is regularly mentioned in newspapers and musical periodicals from 1850, the first reference being to an opera of his that was intended for performance at the Théâtre de l’Odéon in the previous year but failed. In fact, his interest in opera never left him. Some dictionaries which list Joseph O’Kelly mention three such works, but I identified eight and perhaps nine operas of his between 1849 and 1884. It clearly shows that O’Kelly had a deep interest in music theatre throughout his creative life and was fairly successful in getting his works performed.

Apart from operas he also wrote three large cantatas for soloists, choir and orchestra, the first performed at Amiens in 1867, the third at Versailles in 1878, and the second perhaps in 1875 or 1878 in Dublin, which I still have to verify. It certainly was intended to be performed there, a work called *La Veille de la Bataille* to words by the Vicomte François Henry O’Neill de Tyrone, after Thomas Davis.

Overall I was able to identify some 220 individual works by Joseph O’Kelly. Many were available in beautiful editions, and from the late 1850s quite a few of his pieces were published in Germany, Spain, Italy, and England as well. When Auguste O’Kelly began his publishing business in 1872, some but not all of his music was published with him. Auguste also re-published some of Joseph’s earlier music.

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There are some but few Irish references in his work. In 1863 he wrote an arrangement of Thomas Moore’s *Last Rose of Summer* in a series of light arrangements of popular melodies. In 1877 he published an *Air irlandais* op. 58 which is a set of variations on *The Wearing of the Green*. This is remarkable for its selection, as it is none of the popular ‘Irish Melodies’ by

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Moore. The melody was only published in Dublin in 1841¹, long after Joseph's father had left Ireland, so it was evidently not a melody transmitted within the family. The O'Kellys appear to have moved within the Irish community in Paris which included families that had left Ireland after the Flight of the Earls. This is supported by the fact that some of Joseph's music bears dedications to members of this community such as the Vicomte O'Neill de Tyrone, le Comte Théobald Walsh. He was also friendly with John Patrick Leonard, an Irish-born professor at the Collège Chaptal, and a secret supporter of the Fenian movement in Ireland who wrote a letter of recommendation for him. Apart from his Irish works, Joseph was equally proud of his French nationality. This shows, for example, in a vocal work called *Ne Touchez pas à la France*, one of the earliest items in Auguste O'Kelly's publishing business, published shortly after the Franco-Prussian war.

Stylistically, O'Kelly's music up to about 1860 is heavily influenced by older models, such as Kalkbrenner whose music was already getting old-fashioned when O'Kelly studied with him. Berlioz and Chopin are clear models as well. There is a marked improvement I think in works like the early-1860s settings of poems by Victor Hugo, particularly his *Vieille chanson du jeune temps* of 1862, a real gem in its interplay between vocal line and motivic work on the piano. O'Kelly was a contemporary of César Franck and Edouard Lalo, who were a little older and Camille Saint-Saëns and Léo Délibes who were a little younger. Some of O'Kelly's songs and piano pieces since the 1860s certainly compare well with works by these composers.

For reasons of time let me mention that Joseph received a number of public honours, such as the national order of merit from Brazil for his opera *Paraguassú* of 1855, and that of Portugal in 1865 for his arrangement of the Portuguese national anthem. In 1881, he was elected to the *Legion d'Honneur* together with two other musicians.

« Un troisième musicien est décoré, mais par la grande chancellerie, si ce n'est par le ministre des affaires étrangères, en sa qualité d'Irlandais, bien qu'ayant toujours habité la France. L'heureux décoré en question est M. Joseph O'Kelly, auteur d'un grand nombre d'estimables mélodies, de cantates, de pièces de piano et d'un petit opéra: *la Zingarella ...* »

Obviously, the author of this notice missed out on a number of other operas.

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The second son was Auguste O'Kelly, 1829-1900. Little to nothing is known about his early life. When his son Gustave was born in October 1872 he registered his profession as 'négociant', a dealer, probably in pianos. In May of that year, however, he had taken over a publishing business called 'Magasin de Musique du Conservatoire'. Within 16 and a half years until November 1888 he published more than 1,400 pieces of music which averages about 85 a year. His catalogue consisted mainly of piano music and songs, but also included some chamber music, educational works and quite a few piano reductions of one-act operas. He mainly published music by young French talents, for which he received a bronze medal at the *Exposition Universelle Internationale* in 1878. Part of my research is to identify his complete catalogue, with catalogue numbers and years of publication, and what I found will constitute an appendix to my O'Kelly book. Since 1888, Auguste's copyright has changed owners four times, the last time in 1958, but his music was not reprinted after World War I.

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¹ Fleischmann (1998), tune no. 6187.

Probably, during all these years he continued selling pianos using the brand of his publishing house. Most likely, he was not a piano *maker*, but merely *sold* pianos under his name. After 1888, he worked as a librarian at the *École Française de Musique et de Déclamation*, retiring in 1892, as well as acting as secretary of the *Association des Artistes Musiciens*.

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The third son, Charles Frédéric O’Kelly, became an important business man in Boulogne-sur-mer. He joined the company Blanzzy Poure et Cie. in 1852, a company founded in 1846 to import metal quills (“plumes métalliques”) from England. He was instrumental in transforming the company from an importing to a producing company after he became managing director in 1867. For decades, Blanzzy Poure was a household name in France for high-quality quills, and O’Kelly lay the founding stone to this success. He was also known for his social responsibility, as the magazine *L’Illustration* pointed out in an obituary:

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« M. O’Kelly [...] était un philanthrope, qui savait soulager, sans les humilier, les misères des ouvriers. »

And he was also suggested for the Legion d’Honneur, as the obituary continues:

« Ses amis attendaient et réclamaient pour lui, depuis plusieurs années, la croix de la Légion d’honneur; cette récompense méritée allait enfin lui être accordée, quand la mort est venue couper court aux bonnes intentions tardives du gouvernement. »



The fourth son was the pianist and composer George Alexandre O’Kelly, born 1831. He always stood somewhat in Joseph’s shadow, to the extent that George’s works were confused with Joseph’s. After his Paris studies which I can only presume, he relocated to Boulogne-sur-mer in 1851 where he married, had two sons, and lived until about 1880 when he returned to Paris where he composed and published music at least until 1907. His main work is an Irish opera called *Le Lutin de Galway*, first performed in September 1878 in Boulogne-sur-mer, with a plot based in 18th-century county Galway. It was described by the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* as “un peu ambitieuse pour son cadre”. I also found records of at least three orchestral works as well as of 22 piano works and 18 songs. He died some time after 1914, outliving all of his brothers, four sisters-in-law, nieces and one of his own sons.

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I don’t have the time to go into the next generation. But let me mention that there was a son of Joseph’s called Henri, a fellow student of Claude Debussy at the Conservatoire, with whom he shared all academic distinctions, and who became an excellent pianist, organist, choir director and also a composer, albeit less active than his father. He also had a son called Henri who was a distinguished double bass player and the composer of studies for cello or bass.

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Auguste had a son called Gustave who became a piano maker in Paris with many years of business.

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Of Charles’s family, one son became a priest, and another a business man, too, who became an internationally active fruit and vegetable dealer in London and Marseille.

Only George’s line of the family appears to have survived into our time, living in various suburbs of Paris today.

But the last musician was the younger Henri, who died prematurely in 1922.



Now, apart from the obvious confusion between the various O’Kellys which pervades the scant research on this family, why is even the most prominent member, Joseph O’Kelly, so forgotten today? I think it is a mixture of the fierce competition between the very large number of composers active in Paris, and of stylistic reasons. On the one hand, O’Kelly was known enough 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 the reviews of published music and of performances were mostly positive. He was also acknowledged enough to be elected to the Legion d’Honneur. But, on the other hand, competition wasn’t only fierce because of the quantity of composers, but also in terms of stylistic development. Contrary to today, in music the 19th century was marked by a strong belief in progress in terms of style, harmony, and expression. Particularly during Joseph’s lifetime, these shifts in style and public taste were so strong that, although his music had followers, it was not regarded as progressive. Also, he seems to have had problems with larger forms which can be deduced from a number of reviews, he obviously was a much better composer in the smaller forms of piano music and songs. By 1880, still in his lifetime, when he was for the first time included in an important French biographical dictionary, the influential writer Arthur Pougin sounded a kind of death-knell to him when he wrote:

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« [...] il a publié [...] un assez grand nombre de compositions qui sont écrites non sans gout, 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. »



Today, as we are able to view both O’Kelly’s music and quotes like the above from an historical perspective – music which had its time and artistic assessments which had theirs – we are in a new position that may allow us to have a fresh look at the achievements of the O’Kellys. For example, I invite you to form your own opinion with a short music example, the song *Vieille chanson du jeune temps* of 1862, which friends recorded for me with a flute instead of the vocal line.

< music example >

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Merci beaucoup.

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