

# French Connection: Irish Composers in Nineteenth-Century France

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The “PPT” boxes at the edge refer to the number of the slide in the accompanying powerpoint presentation.

When considering the mutual influences between emigrant Irish musicians in the 19th century and their adopted homes in other parts of the world, France is a country rarely in focus. Despite a long history of friendship between Ireland and France on a national and political level, in musical terms few names would come to mind, the most prominent would probably be George Alexander Osborne and Augusta Holmès.

So what is the ‘French Connection’ in Irish music? This timeline shows all Irish composers who left their trace in France OR in whose work France has left its trace. You can see the life-times of the composers in a dotted line, and the time a composer spent in France in a bold line. The list does not include composers who merely visited France for performances. Then the list would undoubtedly grow considerably longer.

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For the purpose of this paper I would like to spend no more than 5 minutes on the names above the timeline and then devote the main part of the paper on the O’Kelly family, a research that has kept me busy for the past 18 months or so.

Osborne is significant insofar as he has been the composer of Irish birth who has spent the longest time in France – an almost uninterrupted 14 years. He was born in Limerick, studied mainly in Brussels, followed by further studies in Paris with François-Joseph Fétis and Frédéric Kalkbrenner, the former a minor composer and a major writer on music, the latter a major composer of virtuoso piano music. Osborne clearly followed in the Kalkbrenner tradition. He enjoyed considerable success in Paris as composer and performer, and counted many influential musicians among his friends, including Berlioz and Chopin, with whom he performed together at Chopin’s first Paris recitals. He also supported Balfe, who wouldn’t have had the chance to have three of his operas<sup>1</sup> performed in Paris without Osborne’s connections. I haven’t included Balfe in my list, because he never lived in France. Osborne left many piano works with French titles, including arrangements of and variations on Irish folksongs which demonstrate that he was very much aware of his Irish heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Puits d’Amour* (April 1843), *Les Quatres Fils d’Aymon* (July 1844, Opéra Comique), *L’Étoile de Seville* (Dec 1845, Opéra [Théâtre de l’Académie Royale de Musique]), plus *La Bohémienne* (April 1862, Rouen; Dec 1869 in Paris [Théâtre Lyrique]).

James Lynam Molloy is considerably less well-known than Osborne, but this has not always been like that. He was a popular composer of Irish ballads in Victorian England and wrote some songs of enduring fame such as *The Kerry Dance* (1879) and *Bantry Bay* (1889), and Joyce made his *Love's Old Sweet Song* (1884) immortal. Since, as a person, he is much less known than these songs, few people know that he studied in France in the early 1860s, law as it were. One of his activities was to act as war correspondent on the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and 1871. Besides a few songs in French or on French subjects, he made a name for himself in circles that are even smaller than Irish musicology, with this book: *Our Autumn Holiday on French Rivers*, published in 1874, a travel journal of a few weeks in a rowing boat on Northern and Middle French rivers, which is much sought-after on the antiquarian book market today since it contains valuable information on local history.

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Augusta Holmès of course is a name that rings familiar with regard to French-Irish musical relations, although she was not Irish-born. Her father was an Irish army officer, and she was known to be very proud of her Irish heritage. The older she became the more she grew passionate about the Irish cause. In 1897 she dedicated her orchestral tone poem *Irlande*, written 15 years previously, to the Gaelic League and ordered that the proceeds from performances of this work should be paid out to this organisation. She also wrote a few songs referring to Ireland, these examples date from 1875 and 1897.

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Arthur Hervey didn't actually live in France very long, but he was born in Paris and became an acknowledged expert on French music, influenced by French-born composers Bernard Tours and Edouard Marlois who taught in London. He wrote four books on French composers, two of them biographies, between 1894 and 1921. His music, particularly his late 19th-century chamber music, is heavily influenced by contemporary French music.

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Hope Temple studied in London with Edouard Silas, another heavily French-influenced composer of mixed Dutch and German heritage, and during the early 1890s in Paris with André Wormser and André Messager. With Messager she became quite friendly and even assisted him in writing his operetta *Mirette* of 1894. The French influence is visible in her own operetta *The Wooden Spoon* of 1892 and in a number of song settings to words by French poets. She stopped composing in the early 1900s and was popular in her day for some of her Victorian ballads, some on Irish themes among them as well.

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Finally, Adela Maddison spent about seven years in Paris between 1898 and 1905. A personal friend and pupil of Gabriel Fauré she moved in musical circles that included the famous impressionists Ravel and Debussy and was influenced by their music ever since. There are many songs in French language, but her

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earliest compositions showing traces of her Irishness actually postdate her time in France.

It would be interesting to know whether these Irish-related composers actually knew each other or were influenced in his or her decision to go to France by one of the others. From what little we know about most of them today it can almost be excluded. We know that Osborne helped Balfe, and that he knew the O'Kellys. But for most of the others their lives hardly touched each others. I could imagine that Holmès knew some of the second generation of the O'Kellys or that she may have met Maddison at one of the Paris salons of the day. But this is mere speculation. Hervey mentions Holmès in his book *French Music the XIXth Century*<sup>2</sup> where he notes that she was of Irish extraction. But whether he actually knew her personally I don't know.

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Even lesser known than anyone mentioned before is the O'Kelly family in France. Let me tell you how I came across them and how I proceeded. The most prominent name of the family is Joseph O'Kelly. He is mentioned by William Henry Grattan Flood in his debatable History of Irish Music of 1905 in a list of names towards the end of the book. It was one of a few names that didn't ring a bell with me and I tried to look him up in standard biographical dictionaries, with little success. I first found these two little entries in British dictionaries, one of 1886 which still kind of speculates whether he was Irish, and another, Brown's and Stratton's British Musical Biography of 1897 which has just a little more information. It was enough to arouse my interest, especially since he appeared to have written a number of large-scale works including a cantata for the O'Connell Centenary in Dublin and an opera on an Irish subject, both from 1878. And, as you see, he was a pupil of both Kalkbrenner and Osborne, which must have been before 1844 when Osborne left France. Both entries are full of inaccuracies and mistakes, as I was to find out.

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Obviously, a French dictionary was needed, and it will be seen that this is the source of those mistakes. O'Kelly has a fairly long article in the 1880 supplement volumes to Fétis's famous *Biographie universelle des musiciens*, edited by Arthur Pougin, and the mistakes are surprising since Pougin knew O'Kelly from various committee work for the Paris Conservatory. But this article has really been the source for all later ones and nobody until the year 2010 has questioned it.

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First, Pougin probably asked O'Kelly for his age and not for his date of birth. Thus he wrote that he was born in Boulogne-sur-mer in 1829. While Boulogne

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<sup>2</sup> A. Hervey, *French Music in the XIXth Century*, London: Grant Richards, 1903, p. 254

is correct, O’Kelly was born on 29th of January 1828. Pougin, for his involvement with the Conservatory, is more precise about his studies, saying that he studied the piano with Osborne and Kalkbrenner, and composition with Victor Dourlen and Fromental Halévy. The latter two taught at the Conservatory, while Osborne and Kalkbrenner did not, so this points to a combination of studies at the Conservatory and additional piano studies taken privately. With the registry records of the Conservatory buried deep in the National Archives in Paris we don’t know the exact years yet, but this will have taken place in the early 1840s.

Other mistakes include minor details of the work-list which I will spare you except one major fault and one serious doubt. The fault is the opera *Le Lutin de Galway*, mentioned here with a performance in Boulogne-sur-mer in September 1878. We will see later that this was not by Joseph O’Kelly, but by a brother of his who is not recorded in any biographical work. And the serious doubt is about the O’Connell cantata for the centenary in 1878, doubtful because this centenary was not in 1878 at all but in 1875, and because there is no record whatsoever in Irish periodicals of the time about a composer named O’Kelly.

We learn further from this article that O’Kelly composed a large number of songs and piano pieces, and mention is made of three cantatas and three operas, one each of these wrong or doubtful. And we also receive a possible reason for our prevailing ignorance of O’Kelly, as he apparently wasn’t really considered a great composer. We read here that his compositions were written ‘not without taste, but in a form that is lacking in great ideas’ and, more positively, adding that his music was written in a ‘liberal attitude’ and a ‘new breath’ that were ‘signs of the new French school of composition’.

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But how did a composer with an Irish name come to be born in Boulogne-sur-mer and end up in Paris? Here, the internet proved to be a much better help than any current encyclopedia. I found a genealogical website by one Patrick O’Kelly who gave details of his research into his family. It turned out that he was a descendant of George O’Kelly, pianist and composer, born in Boulogne-sur-mer, and a brother of Joseph. This website is now offline for more than a year because the provider went bankrupt, but it was time enough to gather the details I wanted. And in the meantime I have found so much more myself that relates to the musicians in the family while Patrick O’Kelly was mainly interested in his line of family history stemming from George.

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There are at least three generations of musicians in this family, beginning with Joseph Kelly (not O’Kelly) who was born in Dublin and settled in Boulogne-sur-mer in 1825. He married in this town in November 1826 and had four sons, three of whom became musicians. It was the older Joseph’s father Thomas Kelly

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who emigrated from Ireland with his family before Joseph was ten as in 1814 his mother is recorded as having died in London.

Joseph senior arrived in France aged 21 and established himself as a piano teacher. At this time, Boulogne-sur-mer was a major port for travellers and emigrants from Ireland and Britain, and for many years the town had an Hibernian Hotel, a Hotel Byron, and other places like this. In the year of Joseph's marriage (1826) Franz Liszt stayed at the Hibernian Hotel when he returned from his long concert tour of Britain and Ireland and gave a performance at the hotel. I wouldn't be surprised if Joseph Kelly would have been in the audience.

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Undoubtedly, he was the first piano teacher of his sons and prepared Joseph junior for his studies with Kalkbrenner and Osborne. The family may have lived in Paris since the mid- to late 1830s, although Patrick O'Kelly stated that Joseph only moved to Paris in January 1856 after George's marriage in Boulogne. But we have a record of his gaining French citizenship in Paris in 1838 and of a publication of a composition with a Paris publisher in 1836 of a piece called *Les Boulonnaises* by one 'J. Kelly' which is most likely his work. If Joseph senior lived in Paris he would have been able to look after his sons' advanced piano tuition with Osborne whom he therefore must have known.

The change of name from Kelly to O'Kelly is a clear sign of an Irish consciousness within the family. It must have taken place gradually. All four sons were born as Kelly, as this birth certificate for Auguste O'Kelly clearly shows. The little note on the left in a later hand is dated 22 January 1859, when Joseph senior had already died. The other birth certificates have exactly the same note. This is the official change of name, which undoubtedly reflects the wish to return to a name that was anglicised to Kelly by previous generations of the family. This was common practice in Ireland in the 18th century, and it will have been Joseph senior who explained this to his French-born sons. But the use of O'Kelly predates this official record by at least 11 years. For when Joseph junior published his first pieces in 1848 at age 20, he already called himself O'Kelly. In 1850, when George and Auguste became members of the Association des Artistes Musiciens, likewise registered as O'Kelly. Even Joseph senior's early death in 1856 in Paris was registered under O'Kelly, although he probably never officially changed his name.

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Joseph O'Kelly junior was the most prolific composer in the family. He did not only write those two or three operas as recorded by Pougin, but at least eight. And there is possibly a ninth, however, that may again be one by his brother George. In this list, numbers 1 and 4 have not been performed, and numbers 1, 3, 5, and 7 have not been published. It clearly shows that O'Kelly had a deep interest in music theatre throughout his creative life and was fairly successful in

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getting his works performed. The public success was mixed. For *Paraguassú* of 1855 he was awarded the national order of merit from the emperor of Brazil for his depiction of a Brazilian legend, although one contemporary commentator complained about the lack of local Latin-American colour. *L'arracheuse des dents* (1869) and *La barbière improvisée* (1881) were hailed as very entertaining. The broadest public feedback he received for *La Zingarella* of 1879, because it was performed at the large Opéra Comique in Paris. Some press commentators wrote that they would prefer not to write about it, another attributed the lack of success to the bad vocal performance of the two characters. But O'Kelly was evidently not discouraged and produced two further works, the last one being re-staged two times.

Overall I was able to identify some 220 individual works by Joseph O'Kelly, most of them published with all the known Paris publishers of the time. 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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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 who in their harmonic lightness and openness prepared the way for the 1890's impressionism. Pougin in his 1880 dictionary entry agrees with this.

There are some but few Irish references in his work. In 1863 he wrote an arrangement of Moore's *Last Rose of Summer* for two pianos 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 Moore. According to Fleischmann's *Sources of Irish Traditional Music*, the melody was only published in Dublin in 1841<sup>3</sup>, long after Joseph's ancestors had left Ireland, so it was evidently not a melody transmitted within the family. The O'Kelly's appear to have moved among the Irish community in Paris which was fairly large and

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<sup>3</sup> Tune no. 6187.

included noble families that had left Ireland after the Flight of the Earls. This is supported by the fact some of Joseph's music bears dedications to members of this community such as the Viscount François Henry O'Neill de Tyrone and Count Théobald Walsh.

For reasons of time let me mention that Joseph received further honours, such as the national order of merit from Portugal in 1865 for his arrangement of the Portuguese national anthem, and was elected to the French *Legion d'Honneur* in 1881. In January 1885 he died just short of his 57th birthday from stomach cancer, leaving an adult son, Henri, and a four-year old son from his second marriage. A daughter had already died aged 24.

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About Auguste O'Kelly's early life nothing has come to light so far. 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 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 young French talents, also a few professors from the Conservatory, and some pieces by Fauré, Délibes, Saint-Saëns and Gottschalk.

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Probably, all the while 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. Since 1888, Auguste's publishing catalogue has changed owners four times, the last time in 1958. Auguste left one son and a widow, his second wife, who died a year after him.

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George O'Kelly, the youngest of the four brothers, was a pianist and composer as well, but stood somewhat in Joseph's shadow, to the extent that George's works were confused with Joseph's. Besides his Irish opera, I have found records of an orchestral overture as well as of 22 piano works and 18 songs. 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 1884, when his wife died. After that incident he returned to Paris, married again and composed at least until 1907. 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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Before ending, let's have a short look into the next generation.

Henri O'Kelly, born in 1859, was a son of Joseph and his first wife. He became an excellent pianist and organist and a composer as well, a fellow student of Debussy at the Paris Conservatory with whom he shared both classes and academic distinctions. He worked for the piano maker Pleyel-Wolff until at least 1890 and occupied posts as organists at St-Germain-l'Auxerrois and St-Vincent-de-Paul. Of his compositions I identified nine printed piano pieces, five songs, some church and chamber music, and 24 arrangements of works by others for piano four-hands for the purpose of producing piano rolls, and this picture dated 1907 shows him on the left during the process of 'recording' such a piano roll, with the engineer visible in the background.

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There has been a second Henri O'Kelly, a son of the first Henri. He also studied at the Conservatory and must have been an excellent double bass player, winning awards and later playing in the orchestra of the Opéra Comique. He also became a member of the prestigious Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, albeit labouring under constant and severe health conditions forcing him to retire in 1920, and two years later he died, and with him this line of Joseph O'Kelly's family.

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Gustave O'Kelly was the only child of Auguste, the music publisher. Together with a partner called Ferry he became a piano maker, in a company that operated between 1898 and at least 1913. His name appears frequently in reports about the committee meetings of the Association des Artistes Musiciens between 1905 and 1936. In 1898 he had married his cousin Edith O'Kelly, daughter of the fourth brother of Joseph, Auguste and George, and the only one who had not become a musician.

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With Gustave and the younger of the Henris the musical members of the O'Kelly family appear to have disappeared during the 1920s and 30s. To my knowledge there haven't been any further notable musicians since then. The family itself, however, is still spread all over France, and in some an Irish and a musical tradition lives on.