

Adela Maddison (1863-1929) and the Difficulty of Defining an Irish Composer

© Copyright by Axel Klein, April 2010

The life-dates of the subject of my paper sound like a typical emigrant's story in Irish music: born in Ireland in 1863, educated in England and on the Continent, died near London in 1929. However, the commonplace definition of an Irish composer as being Irish by birth can only be applied with caution for Adela Maddison. For in most cases, when we think of contemporary emigrants like Stanford, Wood, Harty, Hughes, we have a strong identification with things Irish that is visible in a substantial body of works relating to Ireland or in frequent visits to the country, in works performed here, etc. The same applies to many lesser-known figures of the time, and this list would probably include female emigrants like Alicia Needham and Mary Dickenson-Auner.

Assessing Adela Maddison's life and work, especially in an Irish context, poses a number of problems. The key problem is that there are so many facets of her life we simply don't know anything about. And despite my attempts in the course of the past months I have not been able to shed light on some aspects I consider important. For instance, we neither know the exact date nor the exact place of her birth. We don't know when or why she left Ireland. We don't know anything about her attitude to Ireland, or anything definite about the importance Ireland had for her.

In addition to what we simply don't know, we also have to rely on research by others who don't provide sources. In particular this applies to the work of English musicologist Sophie Fuller who is Maddison's main biographer so far and a key source for my paper today as well. She wrote Maddison's entries to the *New Grove Dictionary*, to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and

as the earliest recent source, of her short chapter in the *Pandora Guide to Women Composers*, published in 1994. Fuller remains vague about Maddison's Irish origins. In the *Pandora Guide* she writes "born into an Irish family", but she doesn't say where. An Irish family could live anywhere in the world. In both the *New Grove* and the *Oxford DNB* she gives "Ireland" as place of birth. And in many e-mail requests since last year (which she did receive) she did not become more specific. This is not meant to blame somebody who has done valuable research. Maybe it is simply difficult to find out.

So, for all we *don't* know, what *do* we know? If we accept Fuller's assertion that she was Irish-born, we know that her parents were an English vice-admiral named Louis Symonds Tindal and Henrietta Maria O'Donel Whyte, an Anglo-Irish lady born on the Channel island of Guernsey. Adela was born Katherine Mary Adela Tindal. A genealogical website of the Tindal family even states she was born in London¹. But in order to limit our confusion let's take Fuller's assertion for granted as it does correspond with some other early twentieth-century sources referring to Maddison's Irish nationality. Besides, if we don't, I wouldn't have had to write this paper and stand here in front of you.

As for her birth date, most sources state she was born in 1866 without further details. Fuller established the 15th of December, but for the year she gives 1862 *or* 1863, citing the fact that in the British Census of 1881 her age was given as 18. From which *I* conclude that if the Census didn't take place in the last two weeks of the year, which is highly unlikely, she was born in 1863. When, however, the family left Ireland we don't know, nor do we have any reason for it, but it is likely it had something to do with the military career of her father.

¹ <http://www.sewellgenealogy.com/p489.htm>

So for her Irish background we are moving on thin ice. An Anglo-Irish mother, a father from a family with wide-spread ties among the so-called ‘landed gentry’ – these facts speak for an upper class background with little exposure to native Irish culture, especially if their period of residence in Ireland was so short. In either London or Ireland she is also presumed to have had a measure of private musical tuition, but this is again pure speculation – we know nothing about her early musical education.

We are on much safer ground for everything else that follows. At age 19 she married Frederick Brunning Maddison, one of the directors of the music publishing firm Metzler & Co. and more than 30 years her senior, and, as luck would have it, Metzler published her first pieces of music, a song and a piano piece, in 1882. She had two children in 1886 and 1888. The Maddisons entertained their own musical salon in London which included composers published by Metzler which in turn included the French composer Gabriel Fauré who was to have a profound impact on her life. Not only did she receive tuition from Fauré, when he was in England. Both Maddisons developed a close friendship with the Frenchman, and in Adela’s case possibly more than that. For in 1898 she left husband and children to move to Paris and be closer to Fauré. At least there is one explicit French source to this end, suggesting an intimate affair between the two, and Fauré’s biographers seem to have taken this for granted. In fact, apart from a diary entry of a French noblewoman of the time there is little else to support this claim. Again, we simply don’t know. There were certainly close ties: Fauré was instrumental in arranging publications of Maddison’s music in France from 1896, he stayed in the Maddison holiday home in Brittany, he dedicated his 7th piano prelude to Maddison, while she translated Fauré’s songs into English for the Metzler publications and also provided a translation for the Leeds performance in 1898 of Fauré’s cantata *La Naissance de Venus*.

However, it is just as well possible that Maddison was simply fascinated by French musical culture and the contacts she enjoyed with Delius, Ravel, and others. I found references in French musical periodicals suggesting that Maddison was a pupil of Claude Debussy as much as of Fauré. Besides, she spent a lot of time in the company of the princesse de Polignac, one of the most notable patrons of music in Paris at the time around 1900. De Polignac was noted for her affairs with women, and it is highly likely that in Paris Maddison had her ‘coming out’ as a lesbian. Later in Germany and England, Maddison lived in a long-term relationship with a German woman called Martha Mundt and moved in well-known lesbian circles. Thus, the rumours about a relationship with Fauré probably can’t be substantiated.

However, the influence of both Fauré and the Impressionist school is quite evident in Maddison’s music at least from the early to mid-1890s. In Paris, she was quite successful in getting publications of songs to words by French poets like Sully Prudhomme, Paul Verlaine and Edmond Harancourt, and also a setting of three poems by Goethe in German with a French translation. A look into the score of *Ob ich dich liebe* from this collection, published in 1901, reveals the Impressionist influence in her overt use of widely spaced chords, frequently using the intervals of fourths and fifths and movements of parallel octaves – elements that were wide-spread in French music of this time:

It has been suggested² that Maddison’s musical style changed according to her environment, particularly from an easy balladesque style in her early English music, to an Impressionist style during her years in Paris which lasted until 1905, to adopting a post-Romantic style influenced by Richard Strauss in her

² In a lecture recital by Sylvia Kahan and Lisa Lutter entitled *Composer Adela Maddison: International Woman of Mystery* at the 6th Biennial Conference on Music in 19th-Century Britain, Birmingham, 5-8 July 2007.

German years between 1905 and 1914. But, without having seen her larger scores written in Germany, in the smaller forms she never strays far from an Impressionist idiom which remains evident throughout her creative life as we shall see later on.

By 1905 Maddison had moved to Berlin – again we don't know any immediate reason, Fuller suggesting that the relationship with Fauré had become more remote during the previous year. She began to organise concerts of French music, an activity she continued for many years to come including her later life in England. She also tried her hand at music of a larger scale, including her only known orchestral piece and her first opera.

The orchestral piece would have been a welcome opportunity to assess her approach to an Irish theme. It dates from 1909 and is called *Irische Ballade*, but that is as much as we know. The score is lost, and we know nothing about its length, movements, melodic material, and general ideas. The German title seems to suggest the intention to have it performed before a German audience, but whether this actually occurred we don't know.

The opera is a work in four acts called *Der Talisman* based on a satirical fairy play of the same title by Ludwig Fulda. It was first performed on 19 November 1910 at the municipal theatre of Leipzig. With no previous opera to boast with, with an Irish/English/French background, and, added to this, by a woman, it is a remarkable achievement for a composer of her background at this period in time.

The performance of the work created some excitement in Leipzig, and all three local daily newspapers carried lengthy reviews. Some of the excitement was due to the fact, as one paper explained that Leipzig had not had a first performance

of a full-scale opera for many years. We should be aware of the fact that by 1910 the time when the city could boast with talents from Bach to Mendelssohn was long over.

Interestingly, while the news of the performance was covered in English, American and French periodicals, it is in the French ones that Maddison is described as having Irish nationality, while the Leipzig papers without exception describe her as English. I wonder whether this was the result of her own self-marketing which perhaps was different in France and in Germany, or the French media were more keen on making the difference.

Two of the three Leipzig reviews are quite negative about Maddison's achievement. While all three claim that Ludwig Fulda's text was not suitable as an opera libretto and that as a composer of music for the stage she should have been aware of that, it is only the author in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* who finds substantial talent in her music despite the shortcomings of the text. Even this anonymous critic is not wholly enthusiastic, though. He states that "Frau Maddison, eine in Deutschland lebende Engländerin" does have a talent for writing opera, "wenn auch kein absolut ausgesprochenes" ("even though not a particularly distinctive one"). He applauds the honesty and artistic energy of the score, but on the other hand joins the writers of the other two papers in criticising her piecemeal approach to melodic line that does not allow for any extended development of the key motifs.

That at least some of the criticism is due to gender prejudices is quite evident from a sentence in the *Leipziger Volkszeitung*: "Should women ever possess great musical creativity and be able to add to it this amount of energy, then, that is for sure, their competition will become of crucial importance."

A Dr Detlef Schulz, writing in the *Leipziger Neueste Nachrichten*, describes the music as a mere decoration and criticises Maddison's approach not to develop thematic material but instead to prefer harmonic colouring. While conceding that these are elements of the "young French Impressionists" ("jungfranzösische Impressionisten") and even detecting Debussy-like "Farbentupfen" (spots of colour), it is quite evident that Schulz disapproves of this whole process. And so in these reviews we witness not only gender prejudices but French-German national rivalry as well.

The opera was performed eight times in Leipzig with considerable public success, a critic in *The Times* even describing it as the first "real success" of a British opera in Germany.³

At some point in Maddison's ten years in Berlin she got to know her long-time female partner Martha Mundt, as mentioned before, and shortly before the outbreak of World War I the couple moved back to Paris where Mundt became a secretary for the Princesse de Polignac. This was short-lived, though, as Germans were regarded as undesirable in France when the war came, and, "to Maddison's disgust" as Fuller puts it, this was shared by de Polignac. So they moved on to London where Maddison's husband had died about four years previously.

According to Fuller, "they arrived in London with very little money and nowhere to live and seem to have depended on help from friends"⁴. Maddison again organised concerts with music by French composers and continued to write her own music which, she complained, was described by her audience as "Wagner, Debussy and Fauré served in a gravy of my own".⁵ She was able to

³ Fuller, *Pandora Guide*, p. 204.

⁴ Fuller, *Pandora Guide*, p. 205.

⁵ Fuller, *Pandora Guide*, p. 205.

publish a few songs with London publishers and wrote a substantial four-movement Piano Quintet in 1916 which was first performed at the Wigmore Hall in 1920 and published at her own expense by Curwen in 1925. This led to a number of further performances including one in Paris in March 1927, when the reviewer (again?) emphasises her Irish nationality and applauds the “very personal feminine grace without any shallowness which rendered the performance wholly seductive”⁶. Lewis Foreman, in his CD booklet notes for the recording of the quintet which appeared last year⁷, describes the half-hour long work as standing “in the tradition of those large-scale autobiographical quintets so beloved by French composers at the time” and finds parallels to Elgar and Howells. Let’s hear the beginning of the third movement which again brings Maddison’s Impressionist influences to the fore.

Sound example: from String Quintet (1916), 3rd movt., fade out after c. 2’10

In England, Maddison developed good contacts to Rutland Boughton’s Glastonbury Festival, and wrote a number of pieces of incidental music and ballets performed there. There are two more examples of her Irish-related work in the 1920s. One is a ballet on the Celtic legend of *The Children of Lir*, performed at London’s Old Vic in 1920, and a song published in 1924 called *The Heart of the Wood*, being a setting of an anonymous Irish poem in a translation by Lady Gregory which Fuller describes as “hauntingly atmospheric”⁸.

To sum up, Maddison’s Irish-related work adds up to three pieces: the *Irish Ballade* for orchestra of 1909, a ballet on the *Children of Lir* of 1920 and a song of 1924. Certainly, this is not a substantial part of her oeuvre – even non-Irish

⁶ “... une grâce féminine très personnelle et sans fadeur qui en rend l’audition entièrement séduisante”, in: *Le Ménestrel*, 25 Feb.-4 March 1927.

⁷ Dutton Epoch CDLX 7220, CD (2009), performed by The Fibonacci Sequence.

⁸ Fuller, Pandora Guide, p. 206.

composers in England like Bax or Boughton wrote more Irish music. The Irish influence was stronger than an English one, though, and I regard the parallels that Foreman detected in his CD booklet text as mere coincidence. What we certainly have, however, is a *French* composer who despite years of residence in Germany and England remained profoundly and lastingly influenced by her years in France.

Writers attempting to explain why Maddison remained so unknown in Britain until very recently point out that despite many years of residence in London, she always stood somewhat outside the British musical establishment. Maybe this is because she was in fact a French composer with Irish roots. Luckily we don't have anything like an *Irish* musical establishment so we need not ask any further!