

## ***“A Daughter of Music”***

### **– Alicia Adelaide Needham’s Anglo-Irish Life and Music**

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The subject of my presentation is an Irish female composer who died in 1945 without leaving any major impact on Irish musical history or in musical historiography. So the question ‘Why should we bother about her?’ is rather relevant. The facts are that Alicia Adelaide Needham used to be a household name in Irish musical circles on both sides of the Irish Sea from the mid-1890s to the early 1920s. In terms of frequency of performances of her music she probably equalled or perhaps surpassed male colleagues like Charles Stanford or Hamilton Harty who remained incomparably more famous than her. Compared to her former standing, today’s knowledge about her is almost non-existent. This alone justifies her rescue from oblivion.

First, let’s have some facts about her biography. Alicia Adelaide Needham was born on the 31st of October, 1863 in Oldcastle, Co. Meath, with the maiden name Montgomery. She went to boarding school in Derry for four years, but when exactly would mean more research, the same is true for the ensuing year which she spent in Castletown on the Isle of Man. She studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London, first for one year only, most likely the academic year 1880-1: piano with the Irish pianist and composer Arthur O’Leary, harmony and counterpoint with Frank Davenport and occasionally with George Macfarren and Ebenezer Prout. It is not clear what she did in the intervening three years before she resumed her studies in 1884, but she then graduated in 1887 and became a Licentiate of the Academy in 1889. In 1893 she also passed the examinations to the Associateship of the Royal College of Music. In the meantime she had married the London-based physician Joseph Needham in 1892 and in 1900 gave birth to their only child, also called Joseph, in 1900.

Actively supported by her husband who organised concerts for her and arranged her earliest publications, her musical career began in 1894 with a number of publications and piano and song recitals. Altogether she wrote some 700 compositions, most of which songs, but there are also some duets, trios and quartets for voices and piano, some piano music, some orchestrations of songs, choral hymns, marches for brass bands, and one church service. More than 200

published works can be found in the British Library, some of which are song cycles and similar collections with up to 12 pieces. She seems to have stopped composing before 1920 and little is heard of her henceforth. She died, largely unnoticed by the public, on Christmas Eve, 1945.

Thanks to her son's later fame as a highly distinguished biochemist, the private belongings – including the papers of his mother – of him were archived, first at the University of Bath, and now in Cambridge. So it's as the mother of a famous scientist that we find detailed information on our composer. This includes published music, private and professional correspondence for the years 1877 to 1921, extensive diaries covering the years 1879 to 1924, photographs, notebooks and the like. It seems like the ideal source to write a full biography for someone who would devote the time to it. I based my own account here on some published information and her typescript autobiography entitled 'A Daughter of Music', archived in Cambridge among the 'Joseph Needham Papers' as 'Ms.Needham:A.97'.

This autobiography is a strange document. It is obviously intended for publication, but was finished a time when her star had fallen very low indeed. It ends describing events of 1926, and although she mentions the intention of writing a second volume this doesn't seem to have been realised. The typescript, however, may date from 1935 or later, as can be deduced from one sentence on page 68 where she says that after her husband's death which took place in 1920 she moved into a flat where she stayed for 15 years. As I will try to explain later, neither in 1926 nor by 1935 anybody would have been interested in reading about her life anymore. Although a roughly chronological account, there are few actual dates in it so in most cases one has to guess how old the author may have been at a point in her description. She doesn't say when or where she was born, when she went to school, when she studied etc. – all the factual details that are the basis of any academic appreciation today. One is tempted to suspect that she didn't intend her autobiography to be a subject of academic research at all. Instead, she must have presumed that people would be interested in all the little personal anecdotes, travel accounts and meetings with blue-blood celebrities this volume is filled with.

Formally, the typescript is 122 pages long and divided into 15 chapters that are very uneven in length and style. Apart from a relatively substantial chapter 6, the page length averages about 5 or 6, mainly devoted to her childhood and

upbringing, education, artistic successes and her family life. But towards the end it turns into a mere travelogue about her repeated journeys to Germany, Austria and Italy, and the chapters grow considerably longer. The handout you have before you is a formal overview of the chapters in terms of page length and contents covered. About 50 percent of the total typescript consists of travel accounts. And these are private travels, not concert giving tours, so for a reader interested in her work as a musician, at least half of the typescript is worthless.

There is also a curious break in her chronological tale between chapters 6 and 11, in between which she jumps back ten years before she returns to her description of events during the first World War. Taking all this into consideration it doesn't surprise me that her typescript didn't find a publisher.

Her autobiography also excludes any personal emotions which wouldn't be expected from a woman of her social standing. For instance, the overview of the 'Joseph Needham Papers' at Cambridge mentions that her extensive diaries reveal a very unhappy marriage, but there is no word about it in the autobiography, probably because such details would not have been socially acceptable. Obviously at the beginning of the relationship she was happy about her husband's support of her in musical affairs, but later he doesn't seem to have played any major role in her life anymore apart, probably, from holding up her standard of living. One may glean something about his relative importance to her in the description of the circumstances of his death in chapter 12 where she simply writes "*he died in the drawing-room in the midst of the beautiful china and pictures he loved and had collected*" (p. 67).

Let me give you a taste of her writing style, in connection with some more biographical details. About her birth she writes: "*It happened on a Hallowe'en! On an October morning in the dim past ages a little wisp of a witch arrived in the middle of Ireland near the Royal and Ancient Hill of Tara!*" (p. 1). You would have to be from an English-speaking country or otherwise knowledgeable to know that Halloween is the 31st of October, but we neither learn of the year nor of the place of birth – the closest localities near the Hill of Tara being either the village of Tara or the town of Navan. That it was in fact Oldcastle in Co. Meath one can find in a portrait written by Annie Patterson in an issue of the *Weekly Irish Times* of June 1900. Even the annual volumes of the British 'Who's Who?' didn't have a date and just indicate 'County Meath'.

About her family she writes “*My father was of the Montgomerys of Ayrshire (Earl of Eglinton’s family) who settled in the County Down in the time of James I.*” (p. 3). No explanation is given for the fact that she was born in Oldcastle and not in Downpatrick which must have been the old family home and which was where the family moved in her early childhood years. She doesn’t even mention the town name of Downpatrick but describes the place as in “*in the very shadow of the Mourne Mountains*” (p. 6) and a town with a “*little old Cathedral, where Cromwell stabled his horses, and in the churchyard is the real authentic grave of St. Patrick.*” (p. 7). Of her mother she states her family “was of French Huguenot descent” which had settled in County Cavan, and that she had been, in her girlhood, a friend of Patrick Burns, one of the last itinerant Irish harpers (p. 4).

Of her early musicianship she says, “*I was a little musician from the age of five, and never tired of music or found any difficulty with it. [...] it is no trouble for me to practice through every conceivable kind of scale [...] in every key or through a whole concert program, and read the newspapers at the same time!*” (p. 8/9). With similar ease she seems to have composed her songs, as we shall see shortly.

The social tensions between protestants and catholics in the North seem to have been quite acute, even in these years of the late 1860s, although the young children didn’t feel much affected by them. She describes the processions of both confessions on specific days of the year, such as St Patrick’s Day and the 12th of July: “*On the 12th July we children would gather all the orange lilies and shove them through this [garden] gate on grateful perspiring participants in the procession. We were not at all bigoted either, and we also would search in the fields to do the same with shamrock for the St. Patrick’s Day people.*” But her childhood chapter is the only part of the autobiography with repeated references to political tensions in Ireland. Later, there is no word about the Easter Rising, and the founding of the Irish Free State doesn’t even get a footnote.

Her childhood must have been a very happy time for her, which might explain why she wrote so many children’s songs, and her collections of lullabies became her biggest commercial successes. About her early children’s songs she writes: “*How I used to love writing all these songs, pretending to myself they were children of my heart and sending them reluctantly out into the world, but after*

*so many hundreds I became like the old woman who lived in a shoe, and wrote so many I didn't know what to do.*" (p. 13).

After her marriage in 1892, and with the encouragement of her first publications from 1896 onwards, she continued writing music in a seemingly unending stream: "*For ten years, I might say twenty years and more, songs, piano soli, quartettes, trios, song cycles, hymns, all flowed from my happy pen. They were so prolific, these years, that I sometimes, if tired, feared to look at a poetry book lest a poem might strike me and set itself instantaneously to music in my head, and I should be inclined to run away and set it down.*" (p. 28). Her earliest success was called "*An Irish Lullaby*", and she writes about it: "*Certainly every teacher taught it, but this took time and a few years. After they were published such extraordinary nice press-notices of my songs appeared that I began to pluck up courage and give vent to my free thoughts in 'letting myself go', so to speak.*" (p. 29).

Another lullaby called "Husheen" became perhaps her best-known song, made famous by celebrity singers like Clara Butt. This is no. 9 from a collection of 12 songs entitled "An Album of Hush Songs" in 1897. The recording is a late one from a somewhat aged Clara Butt, dating from 1930:

Music example: "*Husheen*", from "*An Album of Hush Songs*" (1897)

From modesty to arrogance it's a short way sometimes, and we can sense something of it in her description of her successes in the composition contests at the Feis Ceoil: "*For about six years in succession I amused myself sending in songs, quartettes and arrangements of Irish airs to the Irish Musical Festival, the Feis Ceoil in Dublin, carrying off so many prizes that I thought at last it was time to stop and give way to others.*" (p. 30). There is a strange mixture of pride and contempt in her identification as an Irishwoman. The contempt shines through in the quote you just heard, and also when she wrote about achievements of her family, she ends the passage by saying "*I often think how many extraordinary men are lost among the limitations of little narrow-minded corners in this little ocean-girt isle.*" (p. 3). On the other hand she uses phrases like "we Celts" and "my Irish blood" in characterizing positive personal attributes which make clear that she used her Irishness as a way to distinguish herself from others on the Eastern parts of the British Isles. But, although she

never says it clearly, she was quite aware and proud of coming from a well-to-do family of the Protestant faith with a noble family background, seemingly strong ties with high society, and unquestioned loyalty to the British Crown.

One wonders, in fact, how much truth there is when she writes of ‘best friends’ which included bishops, lords and ladies, sirs, and other kinds of gentry. She even writes that she “came of the same good old stock” as US-president Wilson. Her son’s godfathers included Sir Dyke Bayliss, Lord Castletown of Upper Ossory and Rev. Canon Carver of Dulwich College, godmothers being Annie Patterson (the Irish composer and author), and Mrs. Hardy (wife of the writer Thomas Hardy).

Curiously enough, and without any family or musical relations to Wales, she was made the first woman President of the National Eisteddfod of Wales in 1906, with fellow presidents of the calibre like the Lord Mayor and the Bishop of London and two lords. A few years later she was also made a ‘Bardess of Wales’ under the title ‘Harp of Ireland’. She was the first woman to conduct at the Royal Albert Hall. And in 1910 she was a ‘V.I.P.’ at a banquet given in Dublin by Lord Aberdeen, the then Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to honour ‘Irish Women of Letters’.

Without doubt, her married life in London provided her with a safe and prosperous home, a big circle of influential friends, numerous social occasions, frequent visits to Ireland, and the freedom to sit down at her piano and ‘let music flow out of her pen’. Her biggest single commercial success was when she won the competition for the Prize Song for the coronation of King Edward VII in 1902. More than 300 composers sent in their contribution, and Alicia Needham went away with the £ 100 award for a song which she wrote in a last-minute fashion while she was accidentally staying in a room at Dublin’s Shelbourne Hotel. Other famous songs by her include an arrangement of “*The Dark Rosaleen*” to words by James Clarence Mangan which, she claims, became something like an Irish national anthem, songs written in an Irish folk-song style like “*The Donovans*”, “*The Exile’s Return*” – most of them written and published before 1900. She was also known for her Irish song cycle “*A Bunch of Shamrocks*” (1904), which she performed at a Mangan memorial concert in Dublin in May 1905, her “*Four Songs for Women Suffragists*” (1908) reflecting her commitment to the early women’s emancipation cause, and her “*Army and*

*Navy Song Cycle*” (1912) which was used extensively in recruiting soldiers for the British Army.

[Music Example 2: “The Donovans” (sung by James McCafferty) – if time]

The death of her husband in 1920 meant a serious change in Alicia Needham’s course of life. In those days without any government pension schemes for widows, she was forced to sell the house and furniture, paintings, books and china and had to move into a considerably smaller flat in a less fashionable district of the city. She writes “[...] *my music-room shelves left empty, and four tons of books sent away to storage, all the best things and treasures sold, I only keeping enough for a little flat!*” (p. 67/68). She probably lived from the sales of the house and family possessions for a few years, but her decline is clearly visible in that she doesn’t seem to have composed anymore after 1920, her collection of correspondence ends in 1921, her diaries end in 1924, her autobiography in 1926. She literally withdrew step by step from the public.

The ‘Joseph Needham Papers’ in Cambridge reveal that she turned to astrology and occultism, she began to believe in the rebirthing of the dead and devoted time to so-called ‘spirit photography’. She began explaining her course of life in terms like “*with the moon in the 9th house, how could I be other than an insatiable wanderer all my life*” (p. 1) or “*Uranus is going to be the death of me*”. Notices in *The Irish Times* and the *British Medical Journal* of 1933 reveal that by then she was in serious financial difficulty and had health problems, with a Dr J.S. Crone of the Irish Literary Society organising a ‘testimonial’. The last public notice I found about her is that she converted to the Catholic faith in December 1934. The autobiography of 1935 or later may have been another attempt at raising money.

But whether by 1926 or 1935, Ireland and the United Kingdom were considerably different from Needham’s active time as a successful composer, which actually predates World War I. Conditions for publication of her autobiography could not be worse, in addition to the formal and stylistic deficiencies mentioned at the beginning. In Ireland, it must have been difficult with all her identification and pride in being Irish that she didn’t mention in a single word the Irish Civil War or the Home Rule movement that preceded it. Quite obviously, she purposefully dismissed all separatist thoughts in both her

private life and in this memoir designed to be public. In fact, her rather anecdotal typescript is so dependent on currying favour with an audience willing to accept the Anglo-Irish view of the world that the very demise of this world after the Easter Rising, the First World War and the Irish Civil War robbed her of her audience on both sides of the Irish Sea. Ireland simply didn't want to hear anything anymore about the life of members of the Protestant ascendancy, and for England Ireland wasn't the pleasant if somewhat troublesome constituent of the Union anymore. As early as the 1920s Needham found herself in a completely changed political and social environment she couldn't cope with. Her Anglo-Irish world had gone down and left her in a withdrawn state surrounded by occult objects and spirits of the past.