

## **“Souvenir d’Irlande” – The European Response to Ireland and Irish Music in the Nineteenth Century**

© Axel Klein (Darmstadt, Germany), June 2008

As a Continental European it seemed appropriate for me to present a paper on 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish music in Europe when coming to a conference in Ireland. The most charming aspect of it is that I am following in the footsteps of the subjects of my presentation – European composers writing a piece of music devoted to Ireland, often as a result of visiting the country. If I would put myself in the shoes of my predecessors, what would have been my motivation? Well – I am showing respect to my hosts, I am paying a tribute to a musical tradition which is normally not part of my environment, and I feel the excitement of trying my hand at something I have not touched upon so much before. I suspect that these – my – motivations may not differ greatly from what my composer-predecessors felt. If there is no further connection to Ireland, for instance through temporary residence, then in most cases, this Irish involvement will produce no more than a single composition, a once-off, induced by a particular journey.

The easiest way of making a piece of music sound Irish is by utilizing Irish traditional music, mostly well-known melodies. As we shall see, this can have the form of a composer who happens to be a performer as well playing some variations on an Irish song for his audience. The other form is by writing a piece of music later, in memory of an impressive visit. Then it would often be called ‘Recollections of Ireland’ or its French and German equivalent, ‘Souvenir d’Irlande’ and ‘Erinnerungen an Irland’. An Irish audience may never hear such a composition unless the composer returns or 200 years of history have passed.

## Handout 1

On your Handout no. 1 I have listed most of the relevant pieces I could find. This really covers the 19<sup>th</sup> century proper, not the so-called “long 19<sup>th</sup> century”. I am excluding the many long-term residents from Europe in England and Ireland, because this would considerably expand the list of relevant works and it would be beyond the point of my paper. Let me just point out that there are quite a number of compositions referring to Ireland in the work-lists of the Germans Johann Baptist Cramer, Johann Bernhard Logier, and Julius Benedict; the Scandinavians George Kiallmark and Lawrence Cornelius Nielsen, the Italian Michele Esposito, etc. or composers of Irish extraction such as Arthur Sullivan in England and Joseph O’Kelly or Augusta Holmès in France.

On the handout you see that, of course, there are numerous examples when variations on Irish folksongs were NOT based on an actual visit to Ireland, such as in the cases of Beethoven and Mendelssohn, to quote only the best-known figures. Some composers like Ries, Dizi, Spohr and Kalkbrenner wrote pieces inspired by Irish traditional music after visits to or short-term residences in *England*, and they did NOT confuse English with Irish music. Others travelled to Ireland, wrote an Irish souvenir piece, but didn’t give it a title such as ‘Recollections’, examples would be found in Paganini or Bochsá. We also have examples of composers travelling to Ireland and NOT writing an Irish piece afterwards, such as Franz Liszt after his concert tour of 1841 and many more in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. And finally, to disclose a last secret, there are souvenir pieces that aren’t souvenirs at all, such as Carl Czerny who wrote *Reminiscences of Ireland* opus 675 for piano in 1842 without ever having set foot on Irish soil.

So, what are we to do with all this? Frankly, my initial research interest was to find out whether souvenir pieces were better in quality than other folksong variations because of the more authentic experience of the composer involved.

But I am sorry to say that I could not seriously interpret my research results in this direction. The quality of a composition is, as could be expected, much more determined by a creative personality than by any external influences. Thus, Mendelssohn's *Variations on 'The Last Rose of Summer'* are better than the ones by Leonhard Schulz, because Mendelssohn was a better composer than Schulz, and that's all that can be said about it.

If I had hoped to establish an independent genre of souvenir pieces as being different than folksong variations, I failed. Yet, I felt obliged to go into some positivistic research about 19<sup>th</sup> century souvenir pieces about Ireland and other works by Continental Europeans relating to Ireland. I still think there is something valuable in knowing this special repertory. Firstly, it provides an interesting point of reference to Irish musicians today that connects their formerly so isolated country to the European mainstream. Secondly, and although Ireland in the 19th century did not produce a "great" composer of international importance, this repertory shows that the influence of Irish music in continental Europe was not as tiny as it may seem. Souvenir pieces and related music attest to the attraction that Ireland undoubtedly had for Continental Europeans. Finally, while we know a lot about 'allemands' and 'ecossaises' I have not seen any systematic research into 'irlandaíses' yet, one reason being, of course, that the sheer number of 'ecossaises' is so much bigger.

Although I am aware that these terms are somewhat interchangeable, particularly 'ecossaises' and 'irlandaíses', it is a difference worth noting. Firstly, the terms were used arbitrarily by many composers of the time, with the effect that 'ecossaises' (Scottish pieces) could mean Irish folksongs, but it is a noteworthy fact that this never happened the other way round. Calling a piece on the basis of a folksong an 'irlandaíse' therefore means the composer has gained some knowledge about the various nations of the British Isles and not lumping

them together as Brits or Scots. Thus, Beethoven may call the ‘Last Rose’ a Scottish piece in his *Six National Airs* op. 105 (1819) and the Frenchman Tulou uses it in his *Souvenir anglais* op. 51 (1828), because they never travelled to Ireland and didn’t know any better. Beethoven received the tune by mail from his Scottish publisher, albeit for publication in the second volume of *Irish Songs* of 1816, but he quite obviously didn’t care. Kalkbrenner on the other hand calls it “a favourite Irish melody” in his *Eighth Fantasia for the Piano Forte* op. 50 of 1821, because he obviously learned such sensibilities during his residence in London from 1814 to 1823, which actually precedes his concert tour of Ireland in August/September 1824. His ‘Irish piece’ therefore is more of an anticipation than a recollection of Ireland, albeit an informed one.

That there were audiences in Europe familiar with the histories of the British Isles can also be seen in the reception that Irish emigrant composer-performers enjoyed in Europe. Michael Kelly, for example, was once engaged as a tenor at an Italian opera house, expressly because he was Irish and not English. In France, it was Hector Berlioz who pointed out in relation to Michael Balfe’s opera *Les quatre fils Aymon*:

“There are people who are amazed that an Englishman could have written this pretty music, but first of all Balfe is not English, he is a son of Ireland, the green Erin, the sweet country of the harp, as Tom Moore calls it.”

Berlioz, too, is an informed contemporary not least through his personal relationship to the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, a relationship that resulted in the song cycle *Neuf Melodies* op. 2 (1829) that he later renamed *Irlande* using the poetry but not the music of Thomas Moore.

Let us first have a look at pieces that are actually called ‘recollections’ or ‘souvenirs’.

## Handout 2

We get a variety of compositions that are by no means similar in design or scope. Progressing in temporal order, we have a number of large-scale pieces such as the piano concerto *Recollections of Ireland* by Ignaz Moscheles from 1826 and works for violin and orchestra by Nicolò Paganini and Ole Bull dating from 1831 and 1836 respectively. Here we may well include Louis Spohr's *Potpourri on Irish Themes* op. 59 of 1820 for violin and orchestra, written after a visit to London. Later in the century, such souvenirs are all written for solo instruments, in particular piano pieces by the Austrian composers Herz, Czerny and Dreyschock and the Dutchman Willem Coenen, or the Austrian guitarist Leonhard Schulz.

Which of these pieces were the result of a visit to Ireland is not easy to tell. Visits were evidently made by Moscheles, Schunke, Paganini, Bull and Schulz. Schulz in fact travelled together with Moscheles in 1826, but he was 14 years of age at the time and can't have written his op. 41 for guitar before the 1840s, which is my guess. Matanya Ophee, the editor of a 1984 modern edition of the piece, presumes that Schulz's *Recollections* may not even have been written on account of actual memories of the visit but that he used printed editions of Irish music as source material. But I don't know why this should be the case, in particular since two of the three folksongs he uses are the same as Moscheles in his *Recollections*, which Schulz undoubtedly knew. Likewise, Schunke travelled with Ferdinand Ries when the latter left Germany for London in 1813, but while Schunke visited Ireland in 1827, Ries never did. Ries, however, contributed at least six compositions to the Irish repertory between 1816 and 1821 which is more than can be said of any other European composer.

Paganini's variations on 'St. Patrick's Day' were written before or during his own visit to Ireland where he performed it to great acclaim at a festival in Dublin in May 1831. The solo violin part unfortunately is lost. Five years later, another violin virtuoso, the Norwegian Ole Bull played in Ireland in several recitals in February and March 1836. When playing in Cork on 4 March, he was announced as performing a "National Concerto for violin solo called *Homage to the Land of Melody* – in which he will introduce Variations on several favorite Irish Airs, including 'Rory O'More' and 'St. Patrick's Day'". Bull used to improvise on national melodies wherever he went to play so it is not likely that this piece was ever written down. But it may have formed the basis for his *Concerto irlandais – Farewell to Ireland* for violin and orchestra. However, as this whole piece appears to be lost, this must remain a matter of speculation.

With Paganini's and Bull's orchestral compositions lost, at least partly, the most substantial souvenir piece to examine remains the one by Moscheles. His *Recollections of Ireland* op. 69 has enjoyed some recent popularity – it was issued on a CD with the Hyperion label in 2005 and has last been performed in Dublin less than 12 months ago with Una Hunt playing the solo part. The piece was written shortly after the composer's three week visit to Ireland in January 1826, and apparently as an act of gratitude for having survived an extremely stormy crossing from Holyhead to Dublin. In the CD booklet, Henry Roche writes: "His profound gratitude for a safe arrival, and his consistently enthusiastic welcome, seem to have lent a special warmth and ebullience to this work." The piece takes the form of an orchestral introduction followed by variations on three Irish folksongs, 'The Groves of Blarney', better known as 'The Last Rose of Summer', 'Garry Owen', and 'St. Patrick's Day'. The piece goes well beyond mere folksong arrangements and displays a variety of variation techniques, often only hinting at elements of the folksong.

The central song clearly is ‘The Groves of Blarney’ aka ‘The Last Rose of Summer’. Thomas Moore had indicated ‘The Groves of Blarney’ as a melodic source in his own version as ‘Last Rose’, but Moscheles will have acknowledged that the ‘Last Rose’ means Moore’s poem and ‘The Groves of Blarney’ the music. The song may have occurred to him in Ireland as a popular tune, but it is even more likely that he knew it as ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ as well, since it is already called an “admired air” in a sextet by Ries of 1819 and “a favourite Irish melody” by Kalkbrenner in 1821. The song is the most central in this work: It is the only one hinted at in the orchestral introduction, it is the longest of the three sets of variations, and it forms the basis of a synthesis of all three tunes in the final passage.

Moscheles gave the first performance in London in April of the same year and has played it repeatedly in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere during his travels. This again speaks for a certain elevated position the piece enjoyed in his own esteem, for instance, he didn’t do the same with a similar piece called *Anticipations of Scotland* written during the same extended journey.

Rain and storm prevented Felix Mendelssohn to travel to Ireland in August 1829 when he was in England, Scotland and on the Hebrides. And yet we have an Irish composition by Mendelssohn, one that predates his various Scottish compositions by at least two years. It’s a *Fantasia on ‘The Last Rose of Summer’* op 15 for piano. As we shall see later, most piano variations on the ‘Last Rose’ date from after the late 1840s. So how did Mendelssohn come to know the melody? Could he have seen Kalkbrenner’s *Eighth Fantasia* of 1821? It is not too likely since there was no relationship between the two at this time, and they didn’t meet before 1830 in Paris. A clue could be given by the date which is usually given as “circa 1827”. It *can* be from 1827 or from the second half of 1826. My theory is that Mendelssohn knew it from Moscheles, who had

been his teacher in 1824 and remained a good friend ever since. I can well imagine that Moscheles told Mendelssohn about his experiences in England, including the visit to Ireland, and will have played parts of the *Recollections of Ireland* to Mendelssohn. It was Moscheles, too, who prepared Mendelssohn's journey through Britain in 1829, when he may have suggested to include Ireland. It is somewhat speculative, of course, but very well possible that the 'Last Rose of Summer' came to Mendelssohn via Moscheles' souvenir piece.

The Moscheles connection in Mendelssohn is certainly more likely than any direct knowledge of Moore's *Irish Melodies* on Mendelssohn's part. Certainly after his first British journey in 1829 Mendelssohn knew Moore since in that year he set a poem by Moore to music, *Der Blumenkranz / The Garland*. But this is not one of the *Irish Melodies*. And for a long time there was no German translation of the *Melodies* with music, a fact much deplored by Franz Bouffier in an 1856 article in the *Neue Berliner Musikzeitung*.

### Handout 3

There are some interesting arrangements of 'The Last Rose' before the 1840s, in particular a guitar version by Mauro Giuliani of about 1825 and a beautiful setting by Friedrich Kuhlau for flute and piano of 1829. But certainly, from 1847 onwards the by far most popular version of the 'Last Rose' in Continental Europe is in Friedrich von Flotow's opera *Martha*. The 'Letzte Rose' aria is the most often quoted item from this opera and because of its text the connection to Moore is obvious. From *Martha* onwards, 'The Last Rose of Summer' evidently became the most popular Irish tune in Europe, by far exceeding any other of Moore's collections, and certainly not because of its beauty was superior to the others but because of the success of *Martha*. Immediately after *Martha's* first productions we have a plethora of arrangements including versions by Charles Mayer, a Russian pupil of John Field's in St. Petersburg, Mikhail Glinka, in turn



a pupil of Mayer, Joseph Joachim Raff, we have Czerny in about 1850, Thalberg 1857, Vieuxtemps 1860 and many rather minor figures in Germany, France and Italy. The more outstanding variations on this particular tune are Thalberg's extraordinary piano variations of 1857, Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst's violin variations of 1865, and I even found a choral version by Charles Gounod of 1873. No other Irish melody comes near the popularity of 'The Last Rose'. Some titles of pieces after *Martha* actually refer to the opera as the source for variations and not to Irish folksong. With all these we can no longer argue for an influence of Moore's *Irish Melodies* but rather of Flotow's *Martha*.

Let me sum up by repeating my two main theses. Both are related to Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*, but would mean that their influence in 19<sup>th</sup> century European music has somewhat been overestimated which has come as a surprise to me as well. The first is that I think it was Moscheles and Mendelssohn, and later Flotow, who spread word about Irish traditional melodies in Continental Europe and not primarily Moore. And the second is that although Flotow uses a translation of Moore's verse to the 'Last Rose' it has been Flotow's opera and not Moore that has enabled the extraordinary success of this particular melody in Europe.

A third, somewhat minor result of my research is that you will see that many compositions are by performing composers who wrote for their own instrument. Thus we have piano works by Kalkbrenner, Moscheles, Czerny, Herz, Dreyschock, Thalberg; violin works by Spohr, Paganini, Bull, Vieuxtemps, Ernst; guitar works by Giuliani, Schulz and Shand; flute works by Tulou and Kuhlau; and harp works by Dizi and Bochsa.