

The Career of Franco-Irish Composer Joseph O’Kelly (1828-1885) through the Eyes of the French Press

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This session is headed ‘Cultural Transfer: Foreigners in Paris’. This is true for *me*, as I am a foreigner in Paris and I do some sort of cultural transfer today. For the object of my study it is not quite true, as he was born in France and lived here all his life. Only after I had been busy with Joseph O’Kelly and his family for some three years I discovered that he indeed never took French citizenship. This was when I found out that when he became a chevalier of the Legion d’Honneur in 1881 he was suggested by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²

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It is interesting that despite his undoubted achievements he seems almost totally forgotten today. So let me briefly sum up his career and explain why I am spending so much time with him.

Joseph O’Kelly is (or was) the most prominent member of a family of Irish origin of which there were four generations of musicians active in roughly a hundred years between the mid-1820s and the mid-1920s. The first was the immigrant from Ireland, who was also called Joseph. He was born in Dublin and settled in Boulogne-sur-mer as a piano teacher. He found a French wife whom he married in 1826 and with whom he had four sons in quick succession: Joseph junior in 1828 who became a pianist, composer and conductor; Auguste in 1829 who became a music publisher in Paris; Charles in 1830 who became a respected business man; and George in 1831 who became, like Joseph, a pianist and composer. A fifth son who did not live very long was born in 1841 when the family already lived in Paris. There is no time today to look into the careers of Joseph’s brothers or the next two generations of composers, organists, piano makers, double bass players, etc., but you can read all about them in my forthcoming book on the O’Kelly family in France which I hope to complete during this year.

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Joseph wrote eleven operas, four of which were published, three large cantatas with soloists, choir and orchestra, some choral works and numerous piano pieces and songs of which some 230 were published by a wide range of established publishers including Chabal, Choudens, Gambogi, Gerard, Girod, Grus, Heugel, Lemoine, Mayaud, Meissonnier, and of course by his brother Auguste. He was a pupil of Halévy and Dourlen for composition and of Kalbrenner and Osborne for the piano. He was decorated with the national orders of merit of Brazil (1859) and Portugal (1865) and became a Chevalier of the Legion d’Honneur, as you already heard.

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¹ Numbers at the right-hand margin refer to the page of the accompanying powerpoint presentation.

² Letter by the Grande Chancellerie de la Legion d’Honneur dated 24 May 2011.

Yet, despite this obvious success, Joseph O’Kelly (not to speak of the rest of the family) faded completely from today’s perception. He is not included in Fauquet’s voluminous *Dictionnaire de la musique en France au XIXème Siècle* (2003).³ There has never been an academic study which included his name. His music has never been recorded and probably not even been performed during the past 100 years.

How could this happen, I asked myself, and in this paper today I am sharing my views on this, based on O’Kelly’s perception in the press of his time. Of course, the easiest answer is “He was just not important enough”. I am aware of that, and it is an argument that cannot be dismissed out of hand. So why do I spend so much time on musicians who are not important?

I can tell you I spent some time on this question as well. And after some hard thinking this is why I consider my study important:

I have the strong opinion that it is not the task of musicologists to say eternal praise to the great geniuses in musical history. Out of mere admiration of the ever same great figures of the past we will never significantly expand our knowledge. What we see on the concert and recital platforms today is a pale shadow of musical history as it really was when it wasn’t ‘history’ yet. Musicology should not repeat in academia the sad state of today’s repertoire in the recital halls. Musicology *must* make new discoveries and make the unknown known.

From this logic follows that the history of music is not confined to the names we still regard as representative today. This is immediately apparent after but a short look into any of the music journals and newspapers of 19th-century France. In order to understand musical history properly we must study the lesser known composers alongside the better known. In this perspective, the O’Kellys in France are one of many examples of the average minor composer who filled the concert programmes to a greater extent than the ‘greater’ composers.

Now it’s high time to look at Joseph O’Kelly properly. The first time that someone took notice of him was in August 1847 when Théophile Gautier commented on a vocal duo written by O’Kelly which was performed in the ‘Chateau des Fleurs’, a large temporary tent that had been built for various kinds of artistic performances during the summer months in the Jardin Beaujon on Champs Élysées. O’Kelly’s duo, he notes, “a produit beaucoup d’effet”.⁴

Next his name comes up in the course of a conflict in 1849 between Monsieur Bocage, the director of the Théâtre de l’Odéon, and Jules de Premaray, the feuilleton editor of the newspaper *La Patrie*.⁵ O’Kelly is only mentioned once in connection with an unnamed comic opera to a libretto by Théodore Labourieu which appears to have been refused at the Odéon. I later found out that this refers to the opera *La chasse du roi* and which was later offered to the Théâtre de la Gaîté. A letter by O’Kelly which I found in

³ Joël-Marie Fauquet (ed.): *Dictionnaire de la musique en France au XIXème siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

⁴ In a note dated 2 Aug. 1847, in Théophile Gautier: *L’Histoire de l’art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, vol. 5 (Paris: Édition Hetzel, 1859), p. 127.

⁵ Short note in *La Presse*, 4 Aug. 1850, p. 3, referring to an event in Nov. 1849.

the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF)⁶ suggests that Labourieu also played a part in the unsuccessful first attempt at a performance because he wasn't able to complete his text. O'Kelly's letter sounds very angry.

Because Labourieu was also active as a music critic I see the following 1853 eulogy of O'Kelly in *La Tintamarre* as a kind of atonement or recompense for his previous failure. This relates to O'Kelly's own performance of his opus 7 which is a piano fantasy on Schubert's famous "Trout" song:

“Rien de faux, de prétentieux, de psalmodique dans son jeu; ce n'est plus là le pianiste lymphatique, l'eunuque de l'harmonie à l'eau de rose, c'est l'homme de talent qui simplement s'inspire de la vérité, sans emphase et sans contorsion.”⁷

But even without this recompensation aspect, O'Kelly received positive reviews in his early years, and this included Hector Berlioz in the *Journal des débats* where in the issue of 17 April 1855 he reviewed the publication of O'Kelly's *Album de la Légion d'Honneur*, a collection of six songs to texts by Jules Montini which were dedicated to the superintendent of the school of the Légion d'Honneur in Saint-Denis. In his own inimitable way he wonders whether the music would be fit for its target group, the teen-age girls at the school:

“Les demoiselles de la maison de Saint-Denis ne sont ni des héroïnes de roman, ni de jeunes philosophes, ni des couturières, ni des sœurs de charité, ni des religieuses. Il s'agissait de trouver une poésie de seize ans, une musique de seize ans pour ces jeunes cantatrices de seize ans. MM. Montini et O'Kelly ont résolu le problème sans effort et même avec beaucoup de bonheur. Plusieurs morceaux de leur album charmeraient même des cantatrices de trente-deux ans. [...]

Les accompagnements de ces six petites pièces sont en outre (et c'est un point important) d'une facilité telle que les jeunes pianistes de la maison de Saint-Denis elles-mêmes peuvent les exécuter sans hésitation.”⁸

Of course, a certain irony is unmistakable here, but Berlioz certainly acknowledges that O'Kelly's unpretentious *Album* has its inherent value.

Hervé Lacombe in his 1997 book *Les Voies de l'Opéra français au XIXe Siècle* has pointed out how difficult it was for young composers to have operas performed in Paris in the mid-19th century. For all aspiring young opera composers, the Théâtre Lyrique was the place in which they put all their hopes.⁹

O'Kelly played a smart move in getting a performance there in August 1855 with his second opera *Paraguassú*. He chose a time when the theatre was actually closed for the summer and arranged the performance as a benefit for the Association des Artistes Musiciens. The disadvantage of this procedure, of course, was that he could get no more than a single performance outside the regular programme, but the advantage was

⁶ Letter at BnF dated “Dimanche matin”, addressed to “Mon cher Monsieur”, shelf mark BNF-LA-81 212, which I interpret as being addressed to Théodore Labourieu and written between 1850 and 1853.

⁷ In *La Tintamarre*, 9 January 1853. O'Kelly's *Fantaisie brillante sur une mélodie (La Truite) de Fr. Schubert* op. 6 was published in 1852 by Richault.

⁸ Hector Berlioz in *Journal des débats*, 17 April 1855, p. 3.

⁹ Paraphrased from the English edition, *The Keys to French Opera in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 211.

that he could justifiably claim to have an opera performed at the Théâtre Lyrique by the regular professional staff of the house, including a publication of the score with Choudens, altogether not a bad thing to have for an unknown 27-year-old composer.

Paraguassú is a musical collaboration with the librettist, Junius de Villeneuve, who had spent several years in Brazil and who will have suggested the plot, an historical legend of 16th-century Brazil combined, of course, with a love-story involving the heroine of the title and a Portuguese invader. The work is dedicated to the Brazilian emperor Dom Pedro II which resulted in O’Kelly getting the national order of merit from Brazil four years later.

Honours of this kind do not necessarily say anything about the quality of the music performed on this occasion. As it was, the musical press was critical, but polite, commending a few well-made melodies, but limiting its criticism with a reference to the beneficial character of the performance. There were four reviews, in the *Revue et Gazette musicale*, *Le Ménestrel*, *L’Illustration* and the *Revue de Paris*. They are somehow summed up in the following excerpt from *Le Ménestrel*, with Jules Lovy speaking of “quelques motifs agréables” but also of “insuffisances musicales”:

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“Quant à la musique, elle renferme quelques motifs agréables, notamment la barcarolle chantée par Dulaurens et Mme Deligne-Lauters. Nous ne relèverons pas les insuffisances musicales de cette oeuvre, que les auteurs ont exhibée dans de fort louables intentions, puisqu’elle a été représentée au profit de l’Association des artistes-musiciens.”¹⁰

Louis Dubreuilh in the *Revue et Gazette* explains these shortcomings by wishing for “plus d’originalité” and “en peu plus de couleur locale”:

“La troisième partie contenait encore quelques passages dignes d’être remarqués ; mais en général on aurait désiré dans les morceaux assez nombreux qui composent cette oeuvre plus d’originalité, et, puisque la scène se passe au bord de la rivière des Amazones, un peu plus de couleur locale.”¹¹

The harshest criticism came from L. Girard in the *Revue de Paris* who applauded the quality of the performance but explicitly exempts the music from this assessment, describing it as “banale, incolore, absolument dépourvue d’originalité”:

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“L’exécution de *Paraguassú* a donc été remarquable. Nous voudrions pouvoir en dire autant de l’oeuvre-même, malheureusement la vérité nous oblige à dire que cette musique nous a paru banale, incolore, absolument dépourvue d’originalité.”¹²

From this time on we can observe a kind of split perception of O’Kelly’s qualities as a composer. Reviews of his piano music and songs are usually positive, often *very* positive, whereas he met with often severe negative criticism of his beloved genre, opera.

And it must have been a beloved genre. Why else would he again and again write an opera in the face of the kind of criticism you just heard? To be fair, there were favour-

¹⁰ *Le Ménestrel*, 5 August 1855, p. 3.

¹¹ *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 5 August 1855, p. 247.

¹² *Revue de Paris*, 1 October 1855, p. 156.

able reviews of his operas as well, such as that of his 1859 opérette *Stella* which had been performed in the course of a benefit concert for himself in an unnamed salon. Gustave Héquet wrote of this work in *L'Illustration* that it was not a bad way to start a career in the difficult area of dramatic music:

“M. O’Kelly n’en est encore qu’aux premiers pas dans cette difficile carrière de la composition dramatique: mais on ne saurait commencer mieux.”¹³

Frequently the critics simply seemed to forget that O’Kelly had written operas since 1849, such as in an announcement of a performance of his fourth opera *L’Arracheuse de dents* in January 1869 which was described as the operatic debut of a composer well-known from concerts and salons:

“Le théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques va mettre prochainement en répétition un opéra-bouffe, que l’on dit de la plus excentrique originalité. Il est intitulé : *L’arracheuse de dents*. Le poème est de M. Bernard Lopez, et la partition sera le début, au théâtre, d’un musicien avantageusement connu dans les concerts et les salons, M. Joseph O’Kelly.”¹⁴

His sixth opera *Le mariage de Martine* of 1874 was well-received by *Le Ménestrel* as “musique vraiment charmante”, with “melodies claires et spirituelles”, and pointing out “une romance et un madrigal pleins de sentiments et de fraîcheur”.¹⁵

Still, the majority of reviews of his large-scale works, and by this I mean his operas and cantatas, is negative. A particularly bad example is a work that probably had the widest exposure by being staged in the regular programme of the Opéra Comique in February 1879. It’s his eighth opera, called *La zingarella*, to a libretto by Jules Adenis and Jules Montini. Of this work I found 20 reviews, with 14 from France, 2 each from Britain and the United States, and one each from Germany and Spain. Several of them again claimed that this opera was O’Kelly’s operatic debut. Looking at the character of the reviews I consider six as positive, ten as negative, and the remaining four as more or less neutral by balancing positive and negative aspects. The more polemic reviews I leave for you to read in my forthcoming O’Kelly book. But let me quote one of the balanced ones, which I think describes his achievements very well and is thoughtful about his talents as an operatic composer:

“De la musique de *la Zingarella*, j’aurai peu de chose à dire, n’en ayant entendu que la dernière moitié, écrite par un musicien, cela est incontestable, mais sans relief suffisant pour la scène. M. O’Kelly, élève distingué d’Halévy, a publié de bonnes mélodies et c’est de plus, je crois, un excellent professeur de piano. Son talent n’est donc pas en cause, mais pour aborder le théâtre, lors même qu’on est parfait musicien, il faut avoir ce que l’on appelle « la vocation ». Or, le compositeur de la petite partition de *la Zingarella*, est-il né pour le théâtre ? Nous n’oserions l’affirmer.”¹⁶

¹³ *L’Illustration*, 6 August 1855, p. 126.

¹⁴ *Le Ménestrel*, 27 December 1868, p. 30.

¹⁵ *Le Ménestrel*, 3 May 1874, p. 175.

¹⁶ *Le Ménestrel*, 2 March 1879, p. 107.

As I said, there were considerably more negative comments, including several indications that O’Kelly’s music was regarded as old-fashioned. For instance, Léon Kerst wrote in *La Presse*: “Oh ! non ! Ce musicien pianiste est de la vieille école.”¹⁷

Despite the public failure of *La zingarella*, O’Kelly continued to write operas, and his eleventh, *La barbière improvisée* of 1882, was, for instance, successfully performed for three years and the score was published. But it did little to change the overall impression planted into the musical memory of Paris by a work so intensively discussed because of its performance in the Opéra Comique.

Let me show you a few reviews of his piano music and songs.

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His 1861 song *Vieille chanson du jeune temps* to words by Victor Hugo was repeatedly praised by critics as “une très-heureuse inspiration”¹⁸ or “une mélodie à la fois empreinte de poésie, d’amour et de candeur [...] c’est une oeuvre distinguée et qui offre de grandes ressources au chanteur”¹⁹ Another Victor Hugo setting, *Tristesse d’Olympio* of 1866(?), has been described as a “morceau de la meilleure facture et plein de charme”²⁰

His song *Sous les branches* of 1870 is described as “une ravissante mélodie”²¹ and his *Stances à l’immortalité* have been called a “maître-morceau”²². A review of O’Kelly’s piano piece *Après la tempête* which he dedicated to Sarah Bernhardt ends with this assessment:

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“Ce sont cinq pages en tout, mais cinq pages suffisamment remplies, puisqu’elles sont d’un sentiment juste et que le développement y est conséquent avec la donnée.”²³

Etcetera etcetera.

Now, what are we to make of all this? Nearly every composer has had his ups and downs, had successes and failures, had to endure negative criticism even if a work was not as bad as it seemed to some critics. But why was Joseph O’Kelly so quickly and so thoroughly forgotten? The study of contemporary newspaper criticism reveals that O’Kelly generally appears to have succeeded in the smaller forms of piano music and song and to have failed in larger works such as the majority of his eleven operas. But there is more than the difference between handling large and small forms. Reasons must also be sought in the fierce competition between the very large number of composers active in Paris at the time, and for stylistic reasons. On the one hand, Joseph 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 he was also acknowledged enough to be elected to the Légion d’Honneur.

¹⁷ *La Presse*, 4 March 1879, p. 2.

¹⁸ *Revue et gazette musicale*, 10 March 1861, p. 76.

¹⁹ *Les Beaux-arts*, 1862-63, p. 287.

²⁰ *Revue et gazette musicale*, 17 February 1867, p. 53.

²¹ *L’Abeille musicale*, 1-15 February 1870, p. 3.

²² *Le Ménestrel*, 31 March 1872, p. 144.

²³ *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, 2 July 1876, p. 214.

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 the 19th century music 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. With regard to his opera *La zingarella* some writers pointed out that he was of the "vieille école". A year later he was included in Arthur Pougin's edition of Fétis's *Biographie universelle*, and seemingly under the impression of that infamous opera he kind of signed O'Kelly's death sentence when he wrote:

“[...] il a publié [...] un assez grand nombre de compositions qui sont écrites non sans goût, 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.”²⁴

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It is a judgement that comes across as somewhat unfair with regard to his work as a whole. Besides, Pougin's article is full of mistakes pertaining to biographical details as much as to O'Kelly's list of works. Neither Pougin nor the majority of critics seemed to be really familiar with O'Kelly's oeuvre – and no-one seemed to have bothered to talk to him and ask before publishing potentially damaging criticism. So we are left with reviews that are selective and coloured by personal opinion. But these reviews, including Pougin's, were carved in stone for posterity, certainly for the twentieth century which laid O'Kelly at rest.

Today we are in a position that allows us to have a fresh look at the achievements of the O'Kellys in France. With an objective eye, it will be found that, although some of Joseph's music is derivative and outmoded by the standards of their time, it is always tastefully written, melodious, and rewarding for both pianists and singers. Our modern understanding of the fugacity of style and taste can explain O'Kelly's early neglect, but at the same time it also enables us to form a fresh assessment today. And I think this is our responsibility as musicologists. Merci beaucoup!

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²⁴ Fétis, François-Joseph: *Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique. Supplément et complément*, Arthur Pougin (ed.) (Paris, 1880), p. 286-287.