The pianist was George Alexander Osborne, who was born in Limerick on 24th September 1806. He was the third son of Charles Grady Osborne, who was the organist and choir master at St. Mary's cathedral in Limerick. His mother was a MacMahon and cousin of the famous Marshal MacMahon. In Ferrar's Limerick Directory of 1769 he is listed as 'teacher of the harpsichord'. He was also a composer and is credited with some 300 works for the piano. His son George, whom he taught, was destined to become an outstanding pianist and composer and, at quite a young age, was proficient enough to deputise for his father as organist at St. Mary's. However, in spite of his brilliant career abroad, little, if anything, is known about him in Limerick.

It is thanks to the diligent work carried out by the well-known pianist, Una Hunt, that his name and his achievements have come to light. During her reading of the several works on the life of Frederick Chopin, she came upon frequent references to a fellow-pianist described by Chopin as "my friend George Osborne". Already living in Paris, the Irishman befriended the newly arrived Pole and their friendship lasted for many years. Bit by bit the story emerged and we are fortunate now to have a record in words and music in a CD entitled *Shower of Pearls*, which was one of Osborne's compositions. The CD is a presentation by Bernard Clarke and is produced by Eoin Brady of RTE's Lyric Studio in Limerick and the music is played by Una Hunt. Young Osborne's association with the cathedral may have given rise to the assumption that he was interested in pursuing a clerical career and taking Holy Orders. This belief persisted when, at the age of 18, his father arranged for him to visit an aunt in Brussels who was reported to be ill. Young George must have liked the Belgian capital and, perhaps, was given the opportunity to display his pianistic talents, because he no longer looked to the Church for his future. Instead he decided to make music his career and it was probably his piano playing that brought him to the attention of Prince de Chimay. The prince, described as a minor aristocrat, hailed from the small town of Chimay in the Belgian district of Hainaut, where his chateau may still be visited. He moved in musical circles and must have been impressed by the ability of young George enough to introduce him to the composer, Luigi Cherubini, and other musical luminaries of his acquaintance. Osborne became involved in the Belgian Revolution of 1830 as a volunteer on the Royalist side, when he was captured and imprisoned. It is assumed that his release was secured by the intercession of his friend, Prince de Chimay.

In 1831, Osborne decided to go to Paris. The suggestion for this move came from one of the personalities he met - the Belgian violinist, Charles de Beriot. His stay in Paris extended to fourteen years, during which he studied with Frederic Kalkbrenner, the most esteemed pianist of his time, who was also a leading composer. He also studied composition with Francois Fetis and eventually embarked on a career as a teacher of
piano and a composer, in addition to giving public recitals of his own and other composer's works. Amongst his acquaintances was Hector Berlioz, whom he assisted because Berlioz did not play the piano. He knew Franz Liszt, whom he considered the greatest pianist of his time. Osborne was the teacher of Charles Hallé when he was a student in Paris and was unable to afford the fees charged by Liszt. Hallé was, of course, the founder of the famous Halle Orchestra in Manchester.

It was soon after he moved to Paris that Osborne came to know of this young Limerickman's abilities. Apart from his obvious musical ability, his French must have been of a high standard, but his English still showed traces of his Limerick origin. In addition to Chopin, when he gave his debut concert in Manchester that he met Chopin for the last time. His old friend, now in poor health, asked Osborne not to listen to his playing, but Osborne listened unseen and later gave his opinion that Chopin's playing had, as he put it, "grown small". Osborne himself continued to compose and publish music - not just for the piano - and his cello sonata, composed about 1876, shows his wide range and versatility. Osborne didn't forget his Irish roots. When he had set up home in Paris, it was to him that the Limerick-born soprano, Catherine Hayes, was sent through the interest of Edward Knox, Bishop of Limerick. Osborne also attended Catherine's wedding. He is also believed to have befriended the composers Balle and Arthur O'Leary. In 1844, George Osborne was appointed to a teaching post at the Royal Academy of Music in London and he and his wife moved to London, where he continued his life as a professional musician. He died at 5, Ulster Terrace, Regent's Park, London, on 17th November 1893.

We are fortunate that we have been able to learn of this young Limerickman's success. Apart from his obvious musical ability, his French must have been of a high standard, but his English still showed traces of his Limerick origin. In addition to his lifelong friendship with Chopin, he moved amongst the greats even to the extent, as already mentioned, of assisting Berlioz. He also knew Mendelssohn, Liszt, Rossini, Heller, Thalberg and his tutor, Kalkbrenner.

REFERENCES
Dictionary of National Biography
Shower of Pearls, CD by RTE Lyric, presentation by Bernard Clarke, produced by Eoin Brady.
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Catherine Hayes