

A Limerick Pianist Remembered

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 Frederic 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

by Morgan McCloskey

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 Fetsis and eventually embarked on a career as a teacher of



St. Mary's Cathedral (interior), Limerick



Catherine Hayes

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 Hallé Orchestra in Manchester.

It was soon after he moved to Paris that he met the pianist Frederic Chopin, newly arrived from Poland. Both strangers in Paris, but with the common bond of music, they became friends and remained so all their lives. So close was the bond that Osborne shared the stage with Chopin when he gave his debut concert in Paris. It was, in fact, a very special occasion and difficult to appreciate today. In addition to Chopin, there were six other pianists playing six grand pianos, executing a polonaise composed by Kalkbrenner, and Osborne played one of them. This type of entertainment was made possible by the versatility of the grand piano. It was the golden age of the grand piano, an instrument achieved through many years of development. For a great number of years efforts had been to produce, in effect, a harp that could be played mechanically. For example, there was the

harpsichord, where the strings were arranged in a flat frame and the sound was produced by plucking the strings mechanically through an action resulting from pressure on one of the keys on a keyboard array. The spinet was a smaller version of the harpsichord, in which the sound was also made by mechanical plucking of the strings. The actual plucking movement was made by part of the quill from the feathers of the Condor bird or by small leather wedges. The biggest advance was the clavichord, where the strings were also in a flat frame and were struck by small brass tangents operated by the player depressing one of the keys in the keyboard. This instrument was capable of producing variations of sound - soft (piano), forte (loud), crescendo and diminuendo. In its final form the grand piano was called pianoforte - a reference to the foot pedals provided for the player to produce soft or loud notes. Kalkbrenner placed great emphasis on the correct use of the pedals when teaching. Public recital by pianists in those days were very much in vogue and Osborne, like many others, composed music for his own public recitals. This meant that each pianist had his or her own following, who wished to hear their music because it was not published. Chopin was the one exception at that time, because his constitution did not allow him to under-

take the rigours of the recital circuit. He supplemented his income by publishing items and by teaching.

However, there was to be a need for published piano music or "sheet music," as it became known. This was due to the next big step in the development of the piano - the upright. By enclosing the strings in an upright container and rearranging the mechanical striking mechanism, a much smaller version of the piano emerged. The instrument took up less space, so that it could be fitted in smaller rooms and, of course, it cost less to buy. More and more people became piano owners, so more teachers were required and there was an increased need for sheet music. Osborne took advantage of this opportunity and some of his music can still be found. One requirement was that the music had to be within the abilities of beginners.

Osborne frequently travelled to London from Paris to give recitals and in 1842, he married an English lady and eventually, in 1844, they returned to live permanently in England. It was while he was part of a recital given 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 Balfe 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

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Shower of Pearls, CD by RTE Lyric, presentation by Bernard Clarke, produced by Eoin Brady.
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