

## **Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Dublin (IAWM Journal, 2009)**

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Over the course of the nineteenth century, women in Dublin, Ireland became increasingly involved in all aspects of the city's musical life, and one of the reasons was political. With the Act of Union in 1800, when the Kingdom of Ireland and the Kingdom of Great Britain merged, Parliament moved to London, along with much of the Irish aristocracy and the rich cultural life they supported. This move did not lead to the demise of cultural activities in the city; instead, it allowed the middle class to emerge as the new dominant class.

As musical activities among the middle class continued to grow, so too, did the level of female participation as teachers, performers, composers, promoters, and writers. To be socially accepted, women throughout Europe at that time were expected to devote themselves to home and family, but Dublin was one of the more progressive cities in terms of music, thus a number of women were able to pursue their talents without being held back because of their gender. By 1900, in both numbers and status, women musicians were equal to men.

In Irish musicological studies, however, the role of women in music remains, to a large extent, unnoticed and unappreciated. Recent publications may make brief references to women, but research dedicated to their importance in the development of music in Ireland has been neglected. This article presents a brief introduction to some of Dublin's most prominent women in the nineteenth century and highlights their involvement in the growth of music in that city.

At the start of the century, there is little evidence that women musicians held positions other than as singers, but as the years progressed music gradually became an acceptable and profitable form of employment, particularly as piano teachers. By 1850 women comprised about twenty percent of the city's private teachers and by 1900 forty-eight percent.<sup>1</sup> In many cases they established their own schools of music or musical academies such as the Allen Academy. Mrs. Allen was the daughter of Johann Logier, inventor of the chiroplast and creator of the Logier method of teaching used by many, including Clara Schumann's father.<sup>2</sup> After her husband's death in 1833, Mrs. Allen became the director of the academy, which boasted fourteen pianofortes and presented several student recitals each year.<sup>3</sup> She managed to run the academy while also raising ten children. Upon her death, the academy was continued by her daughters, and it was still in existence in 1900.

### **Fanny Arthur Robinson (1831-1879)**

In 1848, with the founding of the Irish Academy of Music, later called the Royal Irish Academy of Music (RIAM), and more importantly, with its reorganization in 1856, new opportunities were available to female music teachers in Dublin. Fanny Arthur Robinson, appointed professor of piano that year, was the first woman faculty member to be hired, and her faculty rank was second only to her husband Joseph. Fanny Arthur was born in Southampton, Great Britain in 1831 and began her music education with Sir William Sterndale Bennett, one of the most distinguished English composers of the time. She traveled to Dublin for her professional debut at "Mr. Gustave L. Geary's First full-dress subscription concert" on February 19, 1849, and she played works by Mendelssohn and Weber. In *Freeman's Journal* the following day, she was the only woman to be mentioned in the review, which praised her performance as "extraordinary and exquisite" and noted that "she was encored with enthusiasm."<sup>4</sup>

The concert was important on a personal as well as a professional level, since it was the setting for her first meeting with her future husband.<sup>5</sup> Fanny Arthur and Joseph Robinson were married four months later, and from 1849 on she became a regular performer in Dublin,

often in conjunction with her husband, who no doubt helped further her career. She was the first woman, indeed the first person, to introduce Liszt's concept of a recital to Ireland. She presented her first recital in the Antient Concert Rooms in April 1856. Her substantial program was quite unprecedented for a solo performer in Dublin. The concert offered a wide variety of music: a suite by Bach, Mozart's Sonata in C minor, K. 457, Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata, *The Lake* and *The Fountain* by Sterndale Bennett, a Berceuse by Chopin, and *Les Arpèges* by Kullak. In *Saunders's Newsletter*, the reviewer commented that no previous pianist had undertaken such a challenging task and that her listeners demonstrated their pleasure "no less by their homage of silence, than by the frequent bursts of applause."<sup>6</sup> She continued to perform in Dublin and occasionally in London, and in 1864 she gave her first performance in Paris at the Salle Erard.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Robinson suffered from depression throughout her life, and by the late 1860s the illness prevented her from performing regularly.

In 1856, when Robinson was appointed to the teaching staff at the RIAM, her salary was a clear illustration of the important position she held, for she earned an amount equal to that of her male colleagues. For example, in 1869, when the RIAM was eager to add Sir Robert Prescott Stewart to the teaching staff, he was offered a position as a second piano professor, alongside Fanny, with Joseph Robinson remaining the primary piano professor.<sup>8</sup> Stewart earned £100 per annum—the same salary that both Joseph and Fanny were receiving.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to other women in Ireland this was a large amount. For example, a private governess working in Ireland in the 1850s would earn a maximum of £60 per annum and often a lot less.<sup>10</sup> Fanny's salary was also progressive in comparison to female teachers in Europe because, as Nancy Reich has pointed out, "except for superstars like Clara Schumann, women professors were generally not accorded the respect, rank and salaries of their male counterparts."<sup>11</sup> As to why Robinson was treated so well, one can only speculate. It is probable that when she was first employed by the RIAM, she was to them what Clara Schumann had been to the Hoch Conservatory in 1878: she was their superstar.<sup>12</sup>

Robinson was also one of the first professional women composers active in Dublin. She began composing shortly after she moved to Ireland. Her compositional output consisted of piano pieces and one sacred cantata, *God is Love*. Her piano pieces are usually dismissed as being too simplistic or "ephemeral," and while they may be basic in their construction they remain important for the information they provide on the composer herself.<sup>13</sup> Each piece is accompanied by a quote from poetry or literature, and each has a dedication, thus illustrating the people whom Robinson knew and respected as well as her taste in literature. No record exists that Robinson played the pieces herself. Most likely her piano music supplemented her teaching material, providing her students with simple yet charming pieces that suited their ability. This theory is supported by an examination of the copies of her music held in the library of the RIAM, where the score to her composition *Laughing Water* has fingerings and instructions that appear to be in the composer's own handwriting.

She had been composing piano music since her early twenties, but it was her cantata, *God is Love*, composed in 1868, that established her reputation as a significant composer in Dublin.<sup>14</sup> She wrote the work while she was recovering from a period of illness and dedicated all proceeds from its publication to charity. It remained popular in Dublin for decades, and it was often performed in sections as anthems in the Dublin cathedrals.<sup>15</sup> The compositional output of Robinson is not comparable to that of her European peers, but it deserves a place in Ireland's music history. She is notable as the first woman who paved a place for herself among Ireland's composers, and she made a lasting contribution to music in Dublin. Unfortunately, her life ended tragically on the morning of October 31, 1879 when she committed suicide.<sup>16</sup>

## The O'Hea Sisters

The RIAM continued to be progressive in its attitude toward women after Robinson's death. By 1889 the Academy employed twenty-seven teachers, ten of whom were women.<sup>17</sup> The women were still teaching only piano and voice, the two disciplines viewed as suitable for a young lady, but they were teaching in the country's only major music academy and were earning salaries that were equal to and sometimes greater than that of their male peers.

Margaret, Mary, and Alice O'Hea were teachers at the RIAM, and they gave a combined 136 years of service to the institution.<sup>18</sup> Margaret was a pianist and music lecturer, Alice a professor of voice, and Mary a professor of elocution and also an actress. The fourth and youngest sister, Ellen, died at an early age, but she was well known as a composer who had several compositions performed and published. The four O'Hea sisters were often referred to as the "remarkable O'Hea family," but unlike many of their European counterparts they were not born into a musical family.<sup>19</sup>

Margaret O'Hea (1843-1938) was one of Dublin's important musicians in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The eldest of the O'Hea family, Margaret showed an interest in music from an early age. In 1865 she enrolled at the RIAM as a student of Fanny Arthur Robinson, and in 1873 she was offered a position teaching piano there.<sup>20</sup> O'Hea remained on the teaching staff for fifty-five years before finally retiring in 1928, at the age of 85.

O'Hea seems to have been very well respected by both her students and her peers. She was an outstanding teacher and among her students were the next generation of teachers and performers in Dublin. They included Annie Lord, Edith Boxwell, Madeleine Larchet, Maud Aiken, Dorothy Stokes, and Dina Copeman, who remarked that "like all great teachers she had the admirable qualities of patience and enthusiasm and took a deep personal interest in each of her pupils."<sup>21</sup> Another of O'Hea's students commented, "What a teacher she is! She goes into the matter so thoroughly and explains every difficulty so clearly that it is impossible to be quite ignorant after one received a lesson from her, no matter how dense one's receptive powers may be."<sup>22</sup>

In addition to her work as a teacher, Margaret O'Hea was also active in several organizations. She was on the provisional committee of the Dublin Orchestral Society and was also the first female member of the council of the Leinster branch of the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM). In January of 1895 she gave an address to the ISM on the responsibilities of the music teacher in which she encouraged all those present to cultivate a breed of students who would be above average. Her comments seemed a bit harsh, but she was addressing some of the best music teachers in the country. O'Hea, who traveled regularly to London, was well aware that Dublin had a long way to go to reach the standards of Britain and the rest of Europe.

Ellen O'Hea (dates unknown, active in the late 1860s and 1870s) was also one of Mrs. Robinson's students at the RIAM, where she studied voice, piano, and harmony. She showed a talent for composition, which was nurtured by her harmony teacher, Sir Robert Prescott Stewart, who is reported to have said that she "had her foot firmly on the ladder of fame." Ellen composed and performed under the name Elena Norton, probably to distinguish herself from her sisters. She composed several songs and operettas, and her most successful composition was a comic opera entitled *The Rose and the Ring*, based on William Thackeray's fairytale of the same name.<sup>23</sup> It was premiered on a small scale at the RIAM in November of 1876 and was so well received that a full production with orchestral accompaniment took place in the Antient Concert Rooms in February of the following year. The opera was praised by the contemporary press; the reviewer for the *Irish Times* wrote that "no female foot has trodden in the ranks of the great composers," and he commented that no "lady had produced a successful opera but perhaps Miss Norton may break the spell and

inscribe her name on the roll of fame...where it will be an example and encouragement to the musical sisterhood.”<sup>24</sup> Norton was a well-known singer and she performed regularly in concerts that sometimes included several of her own works. Despite her popularity her works fell out of favor, and the scores of her operas have disappeared.

Women were fortunate to receive the praise and support of their male colleagues, but both male and female composers suffered the same fate—after their deaths, their music and their accomplishments were almost completely forgotten; there is no record that the compositions of Ellen O’Hea and Fanny Arthur Robinson have been performed in Ireland in the last one hundred years.

### **Edith Oldham (1865-1950)**

Edith Oldham, an accomplished pianist and teacher at the RIAM, was an important contributor to music in Dublin in the final decade of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. Today, she is usually remembered only as the young Irish girl who stole the heart of Sir George Grove rather than for her work as a musician.<sup>25</sup> Oldham began her tuition at the RIAM at an early age, and 1883 she received a scholarship to study at the newly opened Royal College of Music in London. The competition for scholarships was fierce, and fifty places were finally awarded but only six went to Ireland, with three to students of the RIAM, one of whom was Edith Oldham.<sup>26</sup> When she moved to London, she and Grove developed a close friendship that continued after her return to Ireland in 1887, as evidenced in his letters to her. The letters span the years 1883 to 1899 and they cover a wide range of topics, from Oldham’s teachers and studies to Grove’s marriage and the concerts he attended.<sup>27</sup> Their relationship has often been misinterpreted as a love affair, however this is unlikely, particularly since Grove was forty years her senior.

One of Oldham’s lasting achievements was her work, along with Annie Patterson, in the early stages of the annual Feis Ceoil (Festival of Music). The festival was originally suggested by Patterson to the Gaelic League as a revival of the Antient Irish Feiseanna.<sup>28</sup> They saw the Feis as a means of bringing musicians from all over the country together to compete and also as a means of increasing public interest in the music of their country, particularly traditional Irish music. In the years leading up to the first festival they organized meetings, gave lectures, and published articles promoting and illustrating the work of the festival.<sup>29</sup> Edith Oldham became the honorary secretary in 1895. Although traditional Irish music did not remain the main focus of the festival, the competition helped to initiate the inclusion of traditional Irish music into the schools and competitive performances. It gave musicians of many disciplines the opportunity to compete and perform irrespective of their class, religion, or gender. It has gone on to become “one of the strongest forces in improving musical conditions in Ireland.”<sup>30</sup> The competition continues to this day, now in its 113th year, with young performers coming from around the country to compete.<sup>31</sup>

### **Annie Patterson (1868-1934)**

In addition to her work in founding and organizing the Feis Ceoil, Annie Patterson, organist, composer, lecturer, and author, devoted much of her energy to the promotion of music in Ireland. She began her music education at the RIAM, where she studied organ and harmony with Sir Robert Prescott Stewart.<sup>32</sup> She also attended Alexandra College and the Royal University of Ireland. In 1889 she was the first woman in Ireland, and in all of the British Isles, to earn the doctor of music degree.<sup>33</sup> She wrote several articles for the British publication, the *Girls Own Paper*, including two about the music of the Emerald Isle. Between 1899 and 1901 she wrote a series of articles for the *Weekly Irish Times* that showcased some of Ireland’s talented musicians and composers, and she covered many of the musical events, which she always praised enthusiastically.<sup>34</sup> She was particularly interested in

music appreciation for the amateur musician and concert goer, and her articles included a section for questions and answers. She was anxious to make music an important part of Irish culture, and she encouraged the general public to participate and support Dublin's musical activities.

Her articles differed from the work of most other writers, who focused more on history and biography. She was concerned with simplifying music for the amateur enthusiast. In the early twentieth century, Patterson turned her attention from writing articles to writing books. She published seven books in total: in 1902, a volume on the oratorio as part of *The Music Story* series, edited by Frederick J. Crowest; in 1903, a volume on Robert Schumann for *The Master Musicians* series; in 1907, *Chats with Music Lovers*; in 1909, *Beautiful Song and the Singer: An Appreciation of the Methods of Jenny Lind*; in 1913, *How to Listen to an Orchestra*; in 1926, a volume on the native music of Ireland; and in 1928, *The Profession of Music and How to Prepare for It*. In many ways, the books were a continuation of her articles. They were aimed at helping to educate the amateur musician and the student. She dealt with her subjects in a manner that was easy to understand and yet well researched.

Annie Patterson was also active as a composer. She wrote several songs and solo piano works, all based upon Irish themes and melodies. The most notable of these are her *Six Gaelic Songs*, which she published in 1897 as a means of promoting the Feis Ceoil; each song was dedicated to someone involved with the competition.<sup>35</sup> Later in life she moved to Cork, where she became a lecturer on Irish music and a regular participant on radio broadcasts.

## Summary and Conclusion

The nineteenth century saw Dublin begin to develop as a musical city, with women involved in increasing numbers. Because music was a field that allowed women to seek employment and defy the social norms of the time, it was an appealing profession and a means of making a good salary. One of the reasons women managed to gain a level of equality in Dublin was that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Dublin lacked an adequate system of music education. With the opening of the RIAM, the community was eager to create a center of music similar to the established institutions in England and Europe, and the school employed anyone, male or female, who could aid in the success of that venture.

It is difficult to compare female musicians in Ireland with their European counterparts because their situation was so different. The standards of education and musical experience were not comparable. It is also worth noting that many of the successful European composers and performers came from musical families, where they grew up with music and guidance in the discipline. Irish women musicians set upon their careers by their own choice and paved their own way. In consideration of the conditions that existed in Ireland, these women made a large contribution to the changes that occurred in music in nineteenth-century Dublin. In comparison with women in other areas of Irish society, their treatment was progressive, particularly in terms of their salaries and status. By 1861 there was no other profession in Ireland open to a woman in which she could receive the same salary as her male co-worker.

The success of the Feis Ceoil competition, which was primarily organized by women, became an example to women in other areas, even those outside of music. In many ways, Patterson's work with the Feis is comparable to that of Lady Augusta Gregory and her work in the promotion of Irish theatre through the spectrum of the Abbey Theatre.<sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf claimed that "a woman must have money and a room of her own."<sup>37</sup> The female musicians of nineteenth-century Dublin earned a room for teaching or composing, a good salary, and perhaps most important of all, good social standing.

## NOTES

1. Merchant and Trader Listings in *Thom's Irish Almanac and Official Directory of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1851 and 1900.
2. Nancy B. Reich, *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 280.
3. Derek Collins, "Music in Dublin, 1800-1848," *To Talent Alone: The Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848-1998*, eds. Richard Pine and Charles Acton (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998), 25. (Hereafter referred to as *To Talent Alone*)
4. *The Freeman's Journal* (20 February 1849).
5. Joseph Robinson was a well known personality on the Dublin music scene and an important influence on music in Dublin throughout the nineteenth century. Born in 1816, he was a conductor, composer, and baritone. He was instrumental in the establishment of the RIAM and became one of its professors of pianoforte and singing. He was also involved in many of the city's musical societies and organizations. For more on Joseph Robinson, see Caitriona Doran, "The Robinsons, a nineteenth century Dublin family of musicians and their contribution towards the musical life in Dublin" (unpublished MA dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1998).
6. *Saunders Newsletter* (10 April 1856).
7. Aaron I. Cohen, *International Encyclopaedia of Women Composers*, 2nd edition, volume 1 (London: Books and Music UK, 1987), 589.
8. For more on Sir Robert Prescott Stewart, see Lisa Parker, "Robert Prescott Stewart (1825-1894): A Victorian Musician in Dublin" (unpublished PhD dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2009).
9. *To Talent Alone*, 85.
10. Marianne Moffett, "The pay and position of Teachers," *Annual Report of the Association of Irish Schoolmistresses and Other Ladies interested in Education* (Dublin, 1887), reproduced in *Women in Ireland, 1800-1918: A Documentary History*, ed. Maria Luddy (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), 147-151.
11. Nancy B. Reich, "European composers and musicians, ca.1800-1890," *Women and Music*, ed. Karin Pendle (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 101.
12. Reich, *Clara Schumann*, 284.
13. Philip Shields, "The special collections of the Academy Library," in *To Talent Alone*, 484.
14. "Mrs Joseph Robinson's Sacred Cantata," *The Irish Times* (14 December 1868): 4.
15. Grindle, W.H., *Irish Cathedral Music: A History of Music at the Cathedrals of the Church of Ireland* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies, The Queens University of Belfast, 1989), 198.
16. "Melancholy Death of Mrs Joseph Robinson," *The Freeman's Journal* 1 (November 1879).
17. *To Talent Alone*, 152-153.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Annie Patterson, "Margaret O'Hea," *Weekly Irish Times* (10 November 1900): 3.
20. *To Talent Alone*, 104.
21. T.S.C. Dagg, *A Centenary Souvenir*, 47.
22. Annie Patterson, "Margaret O'Hea continued," *Weekly Irish Times* (17 November 1900): 3.
23. Annie Patterson, "Margaret O'Hea," *Weekly Irish Times* (10 November 1900): 3.
24. *The Irish Times* (11 November 1876): 2.

25. Percy M. Young, *George Grove 1820-1900: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 168.
26. *Ibid*, 113-115.
27. Extracts from the letters and an evaluation of their content have been included in Percy Young's 1980 biography of George Grove and in an *Intermezzo* in the 1998 publication on the Royal Irish Academy of Music, *To Talent Alone*.
28. *Feis Ceoil Programmes, 1897-1917*, NLI, IR 780941 f2.
29. For example, Edith Oldham gave a lecture in 1896 comparing the Feis to the Eisteddfod festival in Wales on which it was based; it was later published. See Edith Oldham, "Eisteddfod and the Feis Ceoil," *The New Ireland Review* 8 (February 1898): 349-361.
30. Marie McCarthy, "The Transmission of Music and the Formation of National Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland," *Irish Musical Studies* 5, ed. Patrick F. Devine and Harry White (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1996), 153.
31. For more on the Feis Ceoil Association, see [www.feisceoil.ie](http://www.feisceoil.ie).
32. Annie Patterson, "The Royal Irish Academy of Music," *Weekly Irish Times* (12 May 1900): 4.
33. Judith Barger, *Elizabeth Stirling and the Musical Life of Female Organists in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007), 17.
34. *Weekly Irish Times* (14 October 1899): 4, and (28 December 1901): 4.
35. Annie W. Patterson, *Six Gaelic Songs* (London: Boosey & Co., 1896).
36. For more information on the life and work of Lady Gregory, see Judith Hill, *Lady Gregory: An Irish Life* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2005).
37. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928; Penguin Books, 1945), 4.

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Photos: Captions

Edith Oldham in 1905

Annie Patterson