

# ULRR

## 'Irish country house music collections: Birr Castle, Co. Offaly'

Item Type	Article
Authors	Mullaney-Dignam, Karol
Citation	Brio: Journal of the International Association of Music Libraries;49 (2), pp. 23-36
Download date	2026-03-07 18:55:22
Item License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10344/8084">https://hdl.handle.net/10344/8084</a>

## IRISH COUNTRY HOUSE MUSIC COLLECTIONS: BIRR CASTLE, CO. OFFALY

*Karol Mullaney-Dignam*

The country house is currently enjoying something of a renaissance in popular culture, both in Ireland and the United Kingdom, due in part to the success of television productions like *Downton Abbey*. In their heyday, country houses “combined public and private functions, as places of residence and hospitality, as well as of political and estate administration.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, given this backdrop, remarkably little scholarly attention has been paid to the historical significance of social life in these houses and particularly to domiciliary music-making. This article draws on findings of a unique research initiative that seeks to identify music holdings in selected Irish country houses and to investigate the circumstances within which these were acquired, utilised and maintained during the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> It focuses on the largest collection of music and music-related holdings uncovered to date, at Birr Castle in Birr, County Offaly, formerly King’s County.<sup>3</sup> Unlike many properties in Ireland, Birr Castle remains the private home of the original owners, the Parsons family, Earls of Rosse. (The title Earl of Rosse has been created twice in the Peerage of Ireland for the family and should not be confused with the Scottish title Earl of Ross.) The music collection at Birr is an extensive assemblage of documents, recordings, instruments and other mechanical music-making apparatus.

### **Birr Castle, Co. Offaly**

Located in the Irish midlands, Birr Castle was built in the 1620s in the precincts of an earlier structure which had been confiscated from the O’Carroll family. The confiscation of lands owned by “disloyal” Roman Catholics was a feature of English governance from the 1500s as successive monarchs, who had long asserted control over the city of Dublin and its

<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Musson, *Up and down stairs: the history of the country house servant*. London: John Murray, 2010, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> For further details of this initiative see Karol Mullaney-Dignam ‘The *Music in the Irish Country House* project: origins and objectives’ in Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (eds), *The Irish country house: its past, present and future*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011, p. 166-183.

<sup>3</sup> A rudimentary catalogue of this collection was compiled during a scoping study conducted at Birr Castle in 2008.



Fig.1. Birr Castle, Birr, Co. Offaly

surrounding countryside, began to extend their influence over the rest of the island. The confiscated lands were then resettled with people who, like the Parsons family, were loyal to the English state and its established religion. Owing to the inevitable conflicts that ensued, dwellings constructed by landowners during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries typically took the form of defensive castles or fortified tower-houses.<sup>4</sup> The castle at Birr was used as a military garrison and, during the 1641 rebellion, was burned by Catholic Confederation forces that were said to have “blew up their bagpipes and beat up their drums and fell a dauncinge [dancing] on the hills” in triumph.<sup>5</sup> During the eighteenth century, conflict and confiscation gradually gave way to political stability and economic growth. Landlords grew more settled, more prosperous and more inclined to renovate or construct new unfortified houses in the country. At Birr, older structures and office ranges were swept away to make way for a great lawn and formal gardens. Family lore has it that around this time Sir William Parsons (d.1740), second baronet, became acquainted with George Frederick Handel (1685-1759), whose *Messiah* had its premiere in Dublin in 1742. Handel is said to have presented

<sup>4</sup> For examples see Jacqueline O’Brien and Desmond Guinness, *Great Irish houses and castles*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, reprint, 2005, p. 12-51.

<sup>5</sup> Diary of Captain William Parsons, 13 April 1642 (Birr Castle, Rosse papers, A/9). See also Thomas Lalor Cooke, *The early history of the town of Birr, or Parsonstown*. Dublin: Robertson & Co., 1875.

the family with an engraved walking stick in gratitude for their patronage, although this is no longer in the family's possession.<sup>6</sup>

Many of the extant musical instruments at Birr are believed to date from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries and include a ten-string lyre guitar and a fourteen-string cittern from the 1790s, a 41-string painted German table-zither from the early 1800s, a John Egan harp, circa 1820, and a concert harp by Sebastien and Pierre Erard, circa 1830.<sup>7</sup> It was from this time that Birr Castle was enlarged and remodelled in Gothic style.<sup>8</sup> Although it was now technically a refashioned Victorian house with some original seventeenth-century features and new decorative castellations, it retained its designation as a "castle". The majority of the extant music documents there date from this period. As at many Irish country houses, however, these have not been treated as part of – or with the same care as – the family and estate archive which continues to be held in a designated Muniment Room to this day. (The Rosse papers, an exhaustive calendar of which was published by the Irish Manuscripts Commission in 2008, are an impressive repository attesting to the connections and influence of the Parsons family over four centuries.) Music documents, on the other hand, were stored on shelves, in boxes or simply in piles on the floor of one of the towers, which was also inhabited by pigeons! The present (seventh) Earl of Rosse wrote to the Irish branch of the Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM) in 2007:

"It naturally saddens and distresses us that we have never been able to prioritise the rescue and conservation of this musical side of our heritage at Birr, where there has been more crying out to be done than we have been able to achieve; and where we have felt we just had to give priority first to our scientific heritage, then to that of our works of art, with the restoration and cleaning of pictures etc."<sup>9</sup>

A scoping study carried out at Birr Castle in 2008 uncovered more than 500 items of printed music, the majority of which were retrieved from the aforementioned tower. This total, which includes song books, choral scores, sets of piano exercises and bound volumes as well as numerous unbound music sheets, amounts to well in excess of 1,100 individual pieces of music. Some of these are solo instrumental pieces; others concerted arrangements or

<sup>6</sup> Information supplied by the Earl of Rosse in July 2008. See also A.P.W. Malcomson, *Calendar of the Rosse Papers*. Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2008, ix. It is unclear if the purported presentation was made to Sir William Parsons (d.1740), second baronet, or to his grandson Laurence (d.1757), third baronet.

<sup>7</sup> The dates given here are based on those inscribed on the items at Birr Castle, on information provided by the Earl and Countess of Rosse and on comparisons made with instruments catalogued elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Bence-Jones, *A guide to Irish country houses*. London: Constable, revised ed., 1990, p. 41-42.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from the Earl of Rosse to Dr Ann Buckley, RISM Ireland, 3 Sept. 2007 (in private ownership).

ensemble part-music. Some of the scores are autographed and/or dated with the year of acquisition by their owners. Many contain pencilled annotations and performance markings, revealing their use as performance material.

### **Bound volumes of printed music**

There are forty-nine bound volumes of printed music at Birr Castle, comprising eighteen single volumes, and nine sets of performance parts for duets, trios, quartets and quintets. Large bound volumes, often with embossed bindings, commonly feature in country house music collections, both in Ireland and in the United Kingdom; the very fact that they are bound is often the only reason they survive today. They typically comprise personal collections of favourite printed music purchased in sheet form, and are sometimes inscribed with a title, date and the name of the owner or compiler. Such albums are particularly significant in that they signal intent to preserve or “collect”, with their impressive bindings indicating how they might have been prized. It is difficult to ascertain whether or not these would have been displayed on the shelves of a country house library; the evidence suggests that they were probably not.

There is, however, some element of organisation in the compilation of the volumes at Birr, suggesting what Jeanice Brooks has termed “a gestation of music albums”.<sup>10</sup> For example, there are volumes of piano works by Chopin, volumes labelled “Harp” and “Harp and Piano” which primarily contain songs, airs and fantasias by N.C. Bochsa, and a volume “National Airs” comprising four sets of Irish and Welsh airs arranged for piano. It is unclear where or when most of these albums were bound, and which members of the Parsons family may have been responsible for their compilation. There is, though, strong evidence pointing to the children of Laurence Parsons (1758-1841), second Earl of Rosse, specifically to his daughters Jane (d.1883) and Alicia (c.1815-1885).

Jane and Alicia Parsons would have taken music lessons as part of their social edification, music-making being a requisite “accomplishment” for women of – or aspiring to – rank and fortune. Indeed, as the collection at Birr Castle indicates, and research conducted at other Irish properties confirms, most of the music found in country houses today was associated with – that is, dedicated to, acquired or performed by – the women of the house.<sup>11</sup> The names or initials of the Parsons sisters appear on several pieces of music at Birr and one of the bound volumes bears the title “Lady Alicia Parsons” in

<sup>10</sup> Jeanice Brooks, ‘Musical monuments for the country house: music, collection, and display at Tatton Park’ in *Music and Letters*, vol. 91, no.4 (2010), p. 513-535.

<sup>11</sup> For examples see Karol Mullaney-Dignam’s *Music and dancing at Castletown, Co. Kildare, 1759-1821*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011, and “‘Spacious and splendid’: music, dancing and social life at Glin Castle, 1781-1854’ in *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, vol. xiv (2012), p. 16-37.

gold lettering on the front cover. This album contains more than thirty items, mainly variations on airs, songs from operas, quadrilles and waltzes arranged for piano. Unusually, details of the binder of this volume are contained on a sticker affixed inside the front cover – R. White, Parsonstown – revealing that it was bound locally. Most of the sheet music contained within, on the other hand, was published, and probably purchased, in London and in Dublin.



Fig.2. Ladies Alicia and Jane Parsons

### **Musical dedications to the Parsons family**

Another of the volumes, which bears the spine title “Quadrilles, Waltzes, Polkes [sic] 1849”, contains two printed works expressly dedicated to members of the Parsons family. The first, *The Nunnery Waltzes*, comprises five waltzes composed for piano by Miss Henrietta Johnston, dedicated to the Countess of Rosse and published “for the author” by Marcus Moses of Westmoreland Street in Dublin. The second, *The Oxmantown Quadrilles and Waltz*, were “composed and dedicated by permission to the Countess of Rosse” by William John Klophele. Nothing is known of these composers or the exact dates of the publication of their works; thus, it is not entirely certain which countess was the dedicatee. The inclusion of the works in a volume dated “1849” points to Mary (1813-1885), the third Countess of Rosse, who was the eldest daughter and co-heir of John Wilmer Field of Heaton Hall, near Bradford in Yorkshire. In 1836, she married William Parsons (1800-1867), a celebrated astronomer who succeeded his father as Earl of Rosse in 1841; she herself was an amateur scientist, architect and pioneering photographer.<sup>12</sup> The identification of Mary as the dedicatee of

<sup>12</sup> H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, xlii, p. 934-35.

Klophel's work is called into question, however, by the final piece of music in the volume, the "Parsonstown Waltz ... inscribed by permission to Lady Alicia Parsons". Alicia was Mary's sister-in-law; having eloped and married Edward Conroy (1809-1869) in 1837 she would have been known as Lady Alicia Conroy thereafter.<sup>13</sup> Klophel, therefore, must have composed his quadrilles and waltz before 1837, suggesting that his dedication was to Alicia's mother, Alice (d.1867), the second Countess of Rosse.<sup>14</sup>

A remarkable aspect of the collection of music documents held at Birr Castle is the paucity of manuscript items, which number just three: a book of exercises for the cello which appears to bear the date 1752; the second violin part of a duet "composed expressly for Lord Oxmantown" by John Tate; and a piano piece entitled "The Northumberlnd Quadrill's [*sic*] and Waltz. Composed & Dedic[a]ted to Lady Jane Parsons" by "Miss E.L.W.". The dedication of the latter piece indicates that it was written prior to the marriage of Lady Jane Parsons to Arthur Edward Knox of Castle Rea, Co. Mayo in 1835.<sup>15</sup> As in this case, the paratexts – dedications, images, inscriptions or autographs – which accompany manuscript or printed music can often provide invaluable historical information; this also points to the value of including such details in catalogues or databases created by music libraries, archives and documentation centres.

Aside from issues of historical dating, the manuscripts at Birr Castle raise a host of other questions about the identities of the composers, the occasions for which their compositions were written, and their form, particularly in the case of the quadrilles and waltz for Lady Jane. Even the identity of Lord Oxmantown, for whom John Tate composed the violin duet, is uncertain.<sup>16</sup> Nothing is known about the nature of the relationships between these composers and members of the Parsons family. Nor is it known in what context or settings their works may have been performed. It is known, however, that from the late 1850s there was plenty of musical activity in the vicinity of Birr Castle.

### **Social and musical life**

Birr Castle was an important venue for high-society gatherings from the mid-nineteenth century, and there are numerous newspaper and magazine reports detailing the entertainment of "several distinguished friends".<sup>17</sup> One

<sup>13</sup> A.P.W. Malcomson, *The pursuit of the heiress: aristocratic marriage in Ireland 1740-1840*. Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2006, p. 157-162.

<sup>14</sup> In 1797, Alice, the daughter of John Lloyd of Gloster in King's Co., married Laurence Parsons (1758-1841), an eloquent politician who succeeded his uncle as the second Earl of Rosse in 1807.

<sup>15</sup> The identity of this "Lady Jane Parsons" is not completely certain because Jane and Alicia's sister-in-law was also named Jane. The eldest daughter of the second Baron Feversham, of Duncombe Park, Yorkshire, she married Laurence Parsons (1805-1894), in 1849.

<sup>16</sup> Lord Oxmantown is the courtesy title of the heir apparent to the earldom of Rosse.

<sup>17</sup> See, for examples, *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 Oct. 1857; *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Oct. 1857; *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 Oct. 1858; *Belfast Newsletter*, 21 Jan. 1859.

widely reported event was “a ball on a magnificently grand scale” held on 9 December 1875 and attended by hundreds of people including “the *élite* of the King’s County, Tipperary and Galway”. The spacious ballroom of the castle was “tastefully decorated for the occasion”, and supper was supplied by Messrs Mitchell and Sons of Grafton Street in Dublin. Dancing commenced at eleven o’clock “to the music of Mr Liddell’s string band, Dublin, and was kept up to an advanced hour in the morning.”<sup>18</sup>

The acquisition of the musical services of John Liddell (1829-1899) indicates the importance and position of the Parsons family in fashionable Irish society. Born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, Liddell received his early musical education from the German-born conductor and composer, Charles d’Albert (1809-1886), and arrived in Dublin in 1865, where he became the first conductor of the orchestra in the Gaiety Theatre. In 1867 he was appointed as the musical director of the Viceregal Band at Dublin Castle which was well-known in both Dublin and London. His band was “famous for its interpretation of dance music” and played at most of the social gatherings given by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

That the Parsons family had a genuine interest in music, and that Birr, then generally known as Parsonstown, had a vibrant musical culture in the late nineteenth century, is evident on a number of fronts. As early as December 1863, the *Musical Times* published a notice addressed to “Cornopean Players and Pianoforte Tuners” which sought “as Bugle Major, in the King’s County Rifles, a good performer on the above instrument capable of giving instruction ... If competent to tune piano-fortes a large addition to his income would be realised.”<sup>20</sup> The following May, it was reported in the *Musical Times* that a choral society had been established at Parsonstown with the first concert taking place “in the Lecture Room, Printing House Building, on the evening of the 1st ult. The programme contained some of the best glees and part-songs...The concert gave great satisfaction.”<sup>21</sup>

Six months later, the *Musical Times* was used to seek an organist for Parsonstown Church. The advertisement stated: “The neighbourhood of Parsonstown affords a very promising field for a professional man of ability and exertion, if he be thoroughly qualified to instruct in vocal and instrumental music.” The successful candidate was not subsequently identified, but we know that for a salary of £50 per annum he was required “to instruct the choir (composed of amateurs)” as part of his duties.<sup>22</sup> In 1866, the position

<sup>18</sup> *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 11 Dec. 1875; *Irish Times*, 11 Dec. 1875.

<sup>19</sup> *Musical Times*, 1 April 1899; *Irish Times*, 28 Feb 1899.

<sup>20</sup> *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 11, no. 250 (1 Dec. 1863), p. 172.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 11, no. 255 (1 May 1864), p. 289.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 11, no. 261 (1 Nov. 1864), p. 396.

was filled for a time by James C. Culwick, a distinguished musician who would go on to rank foremost among the members of his profession in Ireland.<sup>23</sup>

### Choral activity

Given the large amount of vocal music which has survived at Birr Castle, it seems likely that members of the Parsons family were involved in amateur choral activity in Parsonstown. The Birr collection includes 56 choral scores published by the Novello firm (which advertised extensively in the *Musical Times*) and features works by Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak, Elgar, Gounod, Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Rossini, Schubert and Spohr. Because many of these scores were autographed and dated, ownership can be attributed to members of the immediate and extended Parsons family, particularly the Hawke family of Towton in Yorkshire. In 1870, Laurence Parsons (1840-1908), fourth Earl of Rosse, married Frances Cassandra Harvey-Hawke, only daughter of Edward William Harvey-Hawke (1799-1869), fourth Baron Hawke.<sup>24</sup> Frances' family were prominent patrons of music, especially in Leeds, and the names of Lord and Lady Hawke feature not only on choral scores at Birr but also in one of the bound volumes: an untitled collection of airs selected from operas composed by Bellini, Meyerbeer and Verdi and arranged for the pianoforte, with a flute accompaniment, by William Forde. This suggests that Frances took with her from Yorkshire music belonging to her family - reminding us of the cultural influences between country houses, and that any single country house music collection might have been assembled in a number of different ways. It also underscores the connections between landed families in Ireland and Yorkshire; such connections were cultivated by successive generations of the Parsons family.

In 1871, the pastoral operetta, *The Merrie Men Of Sherwood Forest; or, Forest Days In The Olden Time*, was performed at Parsonstown, according to an advertisement placed in the *Musical Times* by its composer, W. H. Birch of 104, London Street, Reading. While Parsonstown was one of a number of places cited for the "triumphant success" of its performance, it was the only Irish venue cited.<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that the town was sometimes the only Irish place mentioned at all in the "country news" section of the *Musical Times* during the late nineteenth century. It is difficult to establish whether this reflected a distinctive musical culture there, or if it was the result of a concerted effort to report music-related news from the town.

<sup>23</sup> *Irish Times*, 17 Oct. 1807; *Musical Times*, vol. 48, no. 777 (1 Nov. 1907), p. 725.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Townend (ed.), *Burke's peerage and baronetage*. London: Burke's Peerage Ltd, 105th ed., 1970, p. 2298-9.

<sup>25</sup> *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 15, no. 344 (1 Oct. 1871), p. 227.

### Amateur ensembles

In May 1873, it was reported that Matthew Arnold of Harrogate had been appointed as organist to the parish church in Parsonstown.<sup>26</sup> Arnold's musical duties were not, however, confined to the church. In November, for instance, he gave his first concert in the Printing House Building: "The vocal music was highly appreciated, many encores being awarded but the gem of the evening was Beethoven's Sonata, for piano and violin, by Mrs Biggs and Mr Arnold, which created quite a furore."<sup>27</sup> Shortly afterwards, Arnold's name appeared in connection with the annual concert of Chesterfield College in the town:

"The students acquitted themselves very well in all their solos, glees, &c. The feature of the evening, however, was Haydn's No. II Symphony, arranged as a quintet and performed by Mrs Biggs, Miss Geogshan [sic], Major Bruce, R. Biggs, Esq., M.A., and Mr M.W. Arnold, Musical Professor to the College. The Trio from *Così fan Tutte* (Mozart), excellently given by R. Biggs, Esq., T.W. Harper, Esq., and Mr Arnold, was encored."<sup>28</sup>

The existence of such ensembles at Parsonstown may explain the bound sets of performance parts in the music collection at Birr Castle.

The first direct reference to any member of the Parsons family actively engaged in music outside the home occurs in the *Musical Times* in February 1875, after the Countess of Rosse played a piano duet at an amateur concert given at the residence of Mrs Atkinson, in aid of new schools in the locality. The first part of the programme was devoted to Mendelssohn's *Athalie*, and was reportedly "very effectively rendered, the *War March* being played as a pianoforte duet by the Countess of Rosse and Miss Trench, with violin obbligato (Mr. Arnold)." The second part consisted of instrumental and vocal solos with Arnold presiding at the piano. The performance was deemed "a great success, and the audience large and influential."<sup>29</sup>

By May 1875 it was reported that a new choral society had been formed in Parsonstown, and that the services of Matthew Arnold had been engaged as conductor. The Earl of Rosse was patron of the society, which had more than seventy members and rehearsed "important works and glees" weekly in John's Hall.<sup>30</sup> In their first performance in June 1875 the first part of the programme consisted of Mendelssohn's 42nd Psalm and Romberg's *Lay of the Bell*, the second part of vocal and instrumental solos. Miss Herbert, of

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 363 (1 May 1873), p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 370 (1 Dec. 1873), p. 333.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 371 (1 Jan. 1874), p. 368.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 16, no. 384 (1 Feb. 1875), p. 788.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 17, no. 387 (1 May 1875), p. 90.

Dublin, took the principal soprano part; the other soloists were Miss Harbourne, Miss Browne, Mr. R. Biggs, Rev. W. Ewing, Herr Dreyer, and Mr Arnold. The report in the *Musical Times* noted:

“Beethoven’s Sonata, Op. 24, for piano and violin, was admirably rendered by Mrs. Biggs and Mr M. Arnold, and Bach’s Prelude, arranged by Gounod, for violin, piano and harmonium, with Dr Biggs at the harmonium was also a feature in the programme. Great credit is due to the conductor, Mr Matthew Arnold, for the manner in which the choral portions were given, considering the short time the society has been in existence.”<sup>31</sup>

In December, however, the fourth Earl was actively involved in recruiting a new organist for the parish church, with the advertisement promising a “good opening for tuition” and applications for the position being made directly to him.<sup>32</sup> By 1876 Vincent Sykes had been appointed; he retained his post until at least the late 1880s.

### Other musical formats

Throughout the 1890s a succession of visitors to Birr Castle, including the Earl and Countess of Bandon (Co. Cork), Lord Cloncurry (Co. Kildare), and Lord and Lady Dunally (Co. Tipperary), were entertained by a variety of events, including dinner parties and balls during the shooting and hunting seasons.<sup>33</sup> The importance of Birr Castle as a social venue in the late nineteenth century was highlighted by the visit of the Lord Chancellor of Great Britain, Hardinge Stanley Giffard (1823-1921), 1st Earl of Halsbury, and his party in 1898.<sup>34</sup> Extant musical instruments dating from this decade include a Bechstein ebony piano and a pair of violins.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most celebrated members of the Parsons family at this time was Sir Charles Algernon Parsons (1854-1931), a brother of the fourth Earl. Charles invented the marine turbine steam engine but he was also responsible for developing a pneumatic amplification device known as the “auxetophone”. Produced as a gramophone application by the Victor Talking Machine Company until about 1918, the device could also increase the sound of stringed musical instruments. Although it was used on a double-bass for some time by the conductor, Sir Henry Wood (1869-1944), it was

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 17, no. 389 (1 Jul. 1875), p. 152.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 17, no. 393 (1 Nov. 1875), p. 262.

<sup>33</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 Nov. 1895 and 12 Dec. 1898.

<sup>34</sup> *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 Aug. 1898; *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 Aug. 1898.

<sup>35</sup> Information supplied by the Earl of Rosse.

generally boycotted by the musical fraternity because of fears that it would “reduce the number of executants from one-fifth to one-tenth for the same volume of sound.”<sup>36</sup>

Profound transformations were now occurring in the practice and reception of music. This is particularly evident in the vast collection of sound recordings at Birr Castle. There are 37 record albums, containing almost 260 double-sided 12-inch records, and 450 individual 10- and 12-inch records. These records fall into two general categories, the first being popular American dance records, including the jazz repertoire of Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Paul Whiteman and Fats Waller. These musical interests are mirrored in the numerous song sheets containing popular songs and Broadway show tunes of the 1920s and 1930s, which were made famous by performers such as The Savoy Orpheans, Jack Hylton and his band, Ethel Levey, Ukelele Ike (the stage name of Cliff Edwards), Clara Butt, and Adele and Fred Astaire. Some of these were probably collected by Laurence Michael Parsons (1906-1979), the sixth Earl who spent time travelling in America, most notably in the period after his coming-of-age in 1927.<sup>37</sup>

The collection at Birr also comprises records amassed by subscription. These mostly record music by the Viennese, German, Italian, French and Russian masters, performed by major orchestras of London, the USA and Milan. Original record packaging, containing customs declaration stickers and postage stamps, still held at the castle, confirms the musical enthusiasms of the sixth Earl, who had records sent from various music sellers in the USA in the 1930s. This highlights the place of country houses not only as repositories of music documents and instruments, but also of substantial audio collections, which offer a glimpse of musical life in the early twentieth century. Although once at the forefront of recording technology, the fragile formats upon which these are maintained are now obsolete and present serious challenges in relation to preservation and access.

## Conclusion

The range of musical materials uncovered at Birr Castle has prompted important questions about how typical this level of interest and activity was in the households of the Irish landowning elite, and about other similar collections which might exist. Information on similar collections is difficult to gather, and much work remains to be done to determine whether the collection at Birr Castle is representative of country house music collections in Ireland.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Cited in the *Irish Times*, 10 Sept. 1957.

<sup>37</sup> *Irish Times*, 8 Oct. 1927.

<sup>38</sup> See Pamela Thompson and Malcolm Lewis, *Access to Music: Music Libraries and Archives in the United Kingdom and Ireland: current themes and a realistic vision for the future*. London: IAML (UK & Ireland), 2003, p. 16 and p. 65.

Among the various challenges presented by doing research in private houses is that the owners or custodians may not know or realise what musical materials they own. The seventh Earl of Rosse observed in 2007:

“I suggest we may be far from the only ones with shelves and boxes of old music lying around in damp disrepair, gradually disintegrating till the day comes when it is burnt in a clearout without ever being looked at by anyone who might be able to recognise whatever interest the music might have.”<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, owners and custodians, in both the public and private sectors, find it difficult to appraise the significance of items they would never before have seen as a collection. Scholars of the Irish country house have been complicit to an extent by failing to recognise the extent and significance of music, particularly as an agent of domiciliary entertainment, hospitality and social education. The consideration of these aspects of contemporary country house life, however, offers a useful framework for investigating the homes, lives and possessions of the Irish landed elite.

As this article has sought to demonstrate, the study of music in the country house offers perspectives on the place of landowners and their families in their local communities as well as the social and familial relationships fostered by music-making. Thus, while ostensibly providing a framework for exploring elite musical observances, the interdisciplinary investigation of music in the country house will ultimately enhance interpretations of the history of music in Ireland within a much broader range of contexts. It is hoped that this, in turn, will generate a greater appreciation of the cultural heritage value of musical materials, particularly those held in private ownership, and facilitate greater access to or use of these holdings in the future.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author wishes to acknowledge the Irish Research Council funding of her *Music in the Irish Country House* project, and the seventh Earl and Countess of Rosse for facilitating her research at Birr Castle. Please note that the Birr Castle music collection is accessible, by appointment only, to persons subscribed as Friends of Birr Castle Demesne - see: [http://www.birrcastle.com/membership/cat\\_2.html](http://www.birrcastle.com/membership/cat_2.html)

<sup>39</sup> Letter from the Earl of Rosse to Dr Ann Buckley, RISM Ireland, 3 Sept. 2007 (in private ownership).

**Abstract**

This article briefly describes the music collection at Birr Castle, Co. Offaly, highlighting the cultural heritage value of musical materials held in private ownership and the need for a more comprehensive survey of such holdings.

*Karol Mullaney-Dignam is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, where her work has been funded by the Irish Research Council since 2010. She is an active member of the Répertoire International des Sources Musicales (RISM) Ireland Steering Committee.*