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HARP PERSPECTIVES

the infant lyra
an Irish musical prodigy

MARY LOUISE O'DONNELL

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Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal.

One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our October edition, Mary Louise O'Donnell recounts the story of the Irish harp player Isabella Rudkin, a child prodigy known as the 'Infant Lyra' who was a musical phenomenon in the 1820s. By the age of 10 years, Isabella had performed for royalty and aristocracy, upstaged a young Franz Liszt at concerts in Manchester in 1824 and was celebrated as a 'specimen of Irish genius'.

In the coming months, we will be welcoming more voices to the conversation and provide new perspectives on current and future harp directions.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann and Eithne Benson

Editors

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THE INFANT LYRA: AN IRISH MUSICAL PRODIGY

Mary Louise O'Donnell

On 22 July 2014, I attended a concert at the City Recital Hall in Sydney as part of the World Harp Congress. One of the most memorable performances that evening was by Alisa Sadikova - an 11-year-old Russian harpist. In the lead up to the concert, local media covering the Congress focused on Sadikova's exceptional musical ability and her extraordinary back story.¹ Alisa's unique talent was discovered by Olga Shevelevich, a family friend and harp teacher, when she was 5 years old; by the age of 10 years, she had won several international competitions and performed at Carnegie Hall. At the tender age of 11, she was already an accomplished musician. Her performance of *Le Barde Muet* by Bernard Andrès with a chamber ensemble at the City Recital Hall was extraordinary but also profoundly moving.² A beautiful, seraphic little girl with a head of golden curls arrived on stage, bowed to the audience, positioned herself at her harp, nodded to the conductor and began a confident, technically accomplished performance that showed an astonishing musical maturity. At the end of the performance, she acknowledged the conductor, the leader and the ensemble, repeatedly bowed to her adoring audience and then left the stage with a spring in her step.

Unlike many musical prodigies who display precocious ability in childhood and struggle to transition into adolescence and adulthood, it appears that Sadikova, now 18 years old, will continue to excel in adult life as a professional musician. Although hundreds of videos on YouTube featuring children like Alisa Sadikova with exceptional talent in music, mathematics, visual arts, or sports might suggest that prodigies are common – this is not the case. Prodigies are rare and consequently intriguing.³ For centuries, the question has been posed – are prodigies born or made through intense practice? I am not an expert in developmental psychology, but no child is born with fully developed

1 Alisa Sniderman, "The 11-year-old harpist: "Only a genius can do what she does"", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July 2014, <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/music/the-11yearold-harpist-only-a-genius-can-do-what-she-does-20140720-zu14r.html>. (Accessed 12 June 2021).

2 This performance can be viewed at harpvio, *Bernard Andrès - Le Barde Muet (Harp - Alisa Sadikova 11 Years old)*, YouTube, 9 Jul 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PanDD-Fo-mo>. (Accessed 12 June 2021).

3 For further information on the phenomenon of the musical prodigy, see Gary E. McPherson (ed), *Musical Prodigies: Interpretations from Psychology, Education, Musicology, and Ethnomusicology* (Oxford, 2016).

skills, so a prodigy must be the product of a combination of genetic and environmental factors. A favourable family environment is crucial in producing and nurturing a prodigy in any field. The parents and siblings of a child prodigy must make enormous sacrifices to facilitate and fund the intensive training that is needed for a prodigy to excel. Musical parents often identify the extraordinary talents and further the musical careers of their children – for example, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Felix Mendelssohn and Yehudi Menuhin.



Figure 1. *Isabella Rudkin* (probably after Thomas Charles Wageman stipple engraving c. 1825). (Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery).

Ireland has produced many musical prodigies through the centuries – the collector/organist Edward Bunting, the pianist/composer John Field, and virtuoso fiddle player Frankie Gavin come to mind. I want to add another name to this list of musical giants - Isabella Rudkin (*figure 1*). She was known as ‘Little Lyra’ and, later, the ‘Infant Lyra’ and was a musical phenomenon in the 1820s. By the age of 10 years, she had performed for audiences in Ireland and Britain, given private concerts for royalty and aristocracy, upstaged a young Franz Liszt at concerts in Manchester in 1824 and was celebrated as a ‘specimen of Irish genius’, ‘prodigy of science’ and ‘phenomenon of the Age’. This is her story.

The Rudkin Family

Isabella was born c. 1820 to Arabella (née Cotter) and Henry Rudkin. Her father was a lieutenant in the Carlow Militia and later entered the army as an ensign in 1805. He was appointed to the Commission of the Peace for County Carlow following his retirement in 1810. Rudkin was the eldest son and therefore entitled to inherit the bulk of his family estate at the Corries, County Carlow (*figure 2*). His father, William, included a proviso in his will that, if Henry sold or mortgaged any part of the estate, he and his heirs would be excluded from any benefits of the will. Henry was ‘a man of extravagant habits’ and, between 1812 and 1817, before his father’s death, he sold his interest in the ‘settled estate, including the mansion house, and demesne.’⁴ His father died in June 1817, and Henry immediately challenged the validity of the will, stating that his father was not of sound mind and had been coerced into signing the document. His brother Mark and sister Jemima filed a bill in the Court of Chancery, the will was proved, and Henry and his heirs forfeited all rights to their inheritance. By the time Isabella was born, Henry and Arabella were struggling



Figure 2. Corries House, County Carlow. (Courtesy of County Carlow Ireland Genealogical Projects).

4 Edmund T. Bewley, ‘The Rudkins of the County Carlow’, in *The Genealogist: A Quarterly Magazine of Genealogical, Antiquarian, Topographical, and Heraldic research* 21 (1905): 145-62 (at 158).

financially to support a large family. The birth of Isabella and the discovery of her innate musical ability was, therefore, fortunate for the entire Rudkin family.

Several articles about Isabella's early childhood were published in popular journals and newspapers from 1824 onwards, so we know a lot about this phase of her musical development. 'Memoir of the Infant Lyra', published in *The European Magazine, and London Review* in May 1825, provides the most comprehensive account beginning with the recognition of Isabella's precocious talent at the age of nine months by her mother. Arabella, who was an accomplished singer, nurtured her daughter's 'musical genius' and, by the age of sixteen months, she could sing a wide selection of tunes.⁵ Although she enjoyed singing with her mother and older sisters, she was fascinated by the beautiful sound of the harp. At the age of two, her mother engaged a harp tutor to teach one of her older sisters, and she became obsessed with the instrument. She insisted on attending her sister's harp lessons and, afterwards, she climbed up on 'the chair or music stool, and practised the instructions she had heard'.⁶ Arabella realised that her daughter was exhibiting many of the traits associated with prodigious children. Isabella was intrinsically motivated, her practice sessions were frequent and intense, and she had an extraordinary ability to memorise pages of music very quickly. Her progress was rapid once she began regular harp lessons. At the age of 2 ½ years, she started composing – initially short melodies with simple bass parts, but later, pieces that modulated to various keys. It is not certain what type of harp she played as a beginner, but, at some point, she progressed to the pedal harp. The image of Isabella playing the harp (*figure 1*) suggests that she was unable to reach the pedals initially and rested her feet on a footstool.

Lyra's Performances

Her first performance was at the Rotunda in Dublin at the age of 3 years.⁷ This performance received scant press coverage, but from December 1823 onwards, Isabella's performances were frequent and well publicised in contemporary newspapers. Known as 'Little Lyra', she performed on 30 December 1823 at the Theatre Royal for Mr Hamblin's benefit. On that occasion, 'the greatest Musical Prodigy in the World

5 'Memoir of the Infant Lyra', in *The European Magazine, and London Review* (May 1825): 389-93.

6 Ibid. p. 392.

7 Ibid. p.393. Jonas Traudes has identified several concerts given at the Rotunda by members of the Rudkin family on piano and harp in 1822-23. See *Traudes, Musizierende Wunderkinder: Adoration und Observation in der Öffentlichkeit um 1800* (Köln, 2018), p. 307.

being only three years and an half old', performed a selection of national airs, including *Grand introduction and variations to Roy's wife* and the 'Last rose of summer', and *Ah! Vous dirai-je, maman* (with variations) - Isabella was blindfolded during the final piece to add to the spectacle.⁸ Isabella quickly became a musical sensation in Dublin. From March to the end of June 1824, she performed at two concerts per day at the New Theatre, Royal Arcade. In this setting, she shared the bill with Monsieur Jacques, 'the largest, best proportioned, and most agreeable Giant in Europe'⁹ and a musical automaton (self-operating mechanical figure) made by the Swiss clockmaker Henri Maillardet.¹⁰ Isabella's residency at the Arcade was scheduled to end on 12 June 1824, but it was extended for a further week due to demand.¹¹ A few days before her final performance in Dublin, the *Freeman's Journal* published an article encouraging the 'citizens of Dublin who delight in observing "the freaks of nature," but have hitherto deferred paying their visits to the Arcade...to procrastinate no longer.'¹² Little Lyra's successful residency at the Royal Arcade was facilitated by a contemporary fascination with curiosities or 'freaks' of nature – extraordinary figures that defied scientific or logical explanation.

Isabella was already a musical phenomenon when she arrived in the North of England in July 1824. She initially played at various venues in Liverpool¹³ and later moved to York, where her performances moved many audience members to tears.¹⁴ Her performances at the Theatre Royal in Manchester on the 2 and 4 August were undoubtedly the high point of her musical career up to that point. Manchester audiences' appetite for musical prodigies was amply satisfied at both concerts as Isabella, then known as the 'Infant Lyra', shared the bill with a 12-year-old piano prodigy from Hungary named Franz Liszt. A Manchester newspaper captured her extraordinary performance:

...she dropped a little short curtsey and kissed her hand to the smiling audience; and then climbed up to her chair, beside which stood a harp of a small size, but twice as big as herself...The simple airs were given not merely with accuracy, but with

8 *Freeman's Journal*, 29 December 1823.

9 *Freeman's Journal*, 29 April 1824.

10 *Freeman's Journal*, 12 April 1824.

11 See *Freeman's Journal*, 5 & 12 June 1824.

12 *Freeman's Journal*, 19 June 1824.

13 *Liverpool Mercury*, 23 July 1824.

14 *York Herald*, 31 July 1824.

feeling; and, though the physical exertion which was required to strike many chords afforded some amusement, the easier movements were elegantly executed, and the soft notes fell with a liquid sweetness from her tiny fingers.¹⁵

Isabella's performances from July to early December 1824 generated excitement and much-needed income for the Rudkin family, but London offered the promise of unrivalled musical opportunities and financial rewards. London audiences were accustomed to hearing performances by musical prodigies and eagerly anticipated Isabella's arrival. In December 1824, Isabella performed for the Duchess of Kent and her daughter Princess Victoria at Kensington Palace. Victoria, who was 5 years old at the time, relished the opportunity of being in the company of another child. When her mother left the room, Victoria encouraged Isabella to stop playing the harp and play with her and her toys instead.¹⁶ During 1824 and 1825, Isabella performed for most of the prominent members of the British royal family – these included George III's daughters, the Princesses Augusta, Sophia and Amelia, the Duke and Duchess of Gloucester and the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.¹⁷ The Rudkins were honoured to mix in illustrious circles. Still, they were keen to make it known that they were also of noble birth and deserving of attention from members of the upper echelons of British society. Consequently, the Rudkin family lineage was carefully publicised. Henry was described as 'an Irish gentleman, the descendant of a very ancient and respectable family' who had retired to his 'patrimonial estate' after military service; Arabella was an accomplished lady, 'the niece of an old baronet, and allied to families of the first distinction in Ireland.'¹⁸

From February 1825, Isabella was engaged to perform at two concerts per day at the Apollo Saloon, 94 Pall Mall, London. Evening recitals followed daily performances at 2 pm and 3.30 pm at the houses of the nobility and gentry where she was paid 4 guineas.¹⁹ The number of performances increased from May 1825, with four performances per day at 2 pm, 3.30 pm, 5 pm and 8 pm. She frequently added new repertoire, and various musicians and gimmicks were employed to vary the concert programme – these included the engagement of the pianist Ferdinand Panormo²⁰ and

15 Cited in Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt. Vol. 1, The virtuoso years: 1811-1847* (rev ed.) (New York, 1987), p. 109.

16 *The Standard*, 12 December 1896.

17 *Caledonian Mercury*, 17 December 1827.

18 'Memoir of the Infant Lyra', in *The European Magazine, and London Review* (May 1825): 392.

19 *Morning Post*, 25 February 1825

20 *Morning Chronicle*, 25 May 1825.

the inclusion of a self-acting (automatic) piano and organ.²¹

Thousands came to hear the Infant Lyra play, and detailed accounts of her performances were often included in newspapers and journals. For example, in the *European Magazine*, the writer noted:

...every note is accompanied by a corresponding motion of the body, and expression of countenance. The hand that is not employed upon the harp, is waving gracefully in the air, but always in perfect harmony with the music, and falls at the proper moment on the harp, as if by accident ... Her eyes inform you of the delight which her own harmony inspires, and she unites all the intelligence of age, with all the sweetness, simplicity, and innocence of youth ... We heard her harp one time out of tune, and the discordant string produced such ... anger, that the instrument was immediately removed from her, and put into tune.²²

Isabella's performances received overwhelmingly positive reviews. Few critics dared to question the suitability of allowing a young child to perform such a gruelling concert schedule – Mr Jordan, a critic with the *Literary Gazette*, was the exception. In an article for the journal, he decried the contemporary obsession with musical prodigies. He provoked the wrath of many people when he commented that it pained him to see 'a poor tiny girl, of some four or five years of age, sprawling over a harp like a spider over a web ... doomed to premature death at the rate of four exhibitions per day, and then to be farmed out to evening parties as a curiosity till past midnight. It is thoughtless, if not heartless, to encourage such cruelty.'²³ Jordan was mercilessly attacked for expressing his opinion²⁴ and his editor at the *Literary Gazette* eventually felt compelled to apologise for any offence caused to Isabella and her family and highlight 'that, notwithstanding all her exertions, she enjoys excellent health, and that her lively and playful appearance fully supported this fact.'²⁵

Jordan's criticism of the exploitation of the Infant Lyra and of musical prodigies should be understood in the context of the contemporary fascination with gifted children.

21 *Morning Chronicle*, 17 May 1825.

22 'Memoir of the Infant Lyra', in *The European Magazine, and London Review* (May 1825): 391.

23 'Sights of London: Infant Lyra', in *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles, Lettres, Arts, Sciences &c.*, (18 June 1825): 397.

24 See, for example, 'The Infant Lyra and the periodical press', in *The European Magazine, and London Review* (June 1825): 493-96.

25 'The Infant Lyra', in *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles, Lettres, Arts, Sciences &c.*, (25 June 1825): 414.

There seemed to be an endless stream of child prodigies on the London concert circuit in this period – each of which displayed exceptional talent. Even a branch of science called Phrenology endeavoured to prove that the indentations and overall shape of the skull could determine a person’s personality, behaviour and abilities – including musical talents. These characteristics and abilities were supposedly controlled by areas or ‘organs’ of the brain. Franz Joseph Gall and Johann Gaspar Spurzheim were the leading proponents of this research, and Isabella Rudkin was one of the many children whose skulls were measured and documented to prove that prodigious musical talents could be identified in early childhood. The *Phrenological Journal* noted that the organ of music ‘is so remarkably large in her [Isabella] as, on one side at least, to be an absolute bump’;²⁶ the *London Magazine* stated that ‘the forehead of this child presents a very unusual relative bulk or capacity. Somewhere within it, lies...musical genius.’²⁷

The Rudkins: A Musical Family

From August to November 1825, Isabella performed at concerts at various venues on the south coast of England at Margate,²⁸ Worthing,²⁹ Southampton³⁰ and Brighton.³¹ In January 1826, she performed at the Gothic Hall, London but later returned to the Pall Mall for a new series of concerts called the ‘Infant’s Family Concerts’ at which she was joined by her mother and three of her sisters. In addition to performing, one of her older sisters (Mrs J Gregory) offered harp tuition. Towards the middle of 1827, Isabella’s younger brother, who was 13 months old, began performing regularly with his family. His talent involved beating time ‘with singular precision to several popular airs’, and it was reported that his father was constructing an organ for his son that he would be able to play publicly by the time he was 19 months old.³² Unsurprisingly, the infant piqued the curiosity of several phrenologists who were keen to document the shape of his skull.

26 ‘Dr Elliotson’s address delivered to the London Phrenological Society’, in *The Phrenological Journal* 17 (1828/29): 70-82 (at 79).

27 ‘The Infant Lyra’, *The London Magazine and Review* (July 1825): 468-71 (at 469).

28 *Morning Post*, 30 July 1825.

29 *Morning Post*, 5 September 1825.

30 *Hampshire/Portsmouth Telegraph*, 19 September 1825.

31 *Morning Post*, 5 November 1825.

32 *Hampshire/Portsmouth Telegraph*, 21 May 1827.

The Rudkin family arrived in Edinburgh in December 1827 for four performances per day at the Gibb's Waterloo Rooms, and recitals at schools and the houses of the nobility and gentry. An advertisement in the *Caledonian Mercury* on 15 December 1827 noted that 200,000 people had heard Isabella perform.³³ It is an extraordinary figure but indicative of an intense performance and tour schedule throughout England over three and a half years. The concert programme had to be frequently varied to sustain this level of public interest in Isabella's performances. It is estimated that her repertoire consisted of approximately 200 pieces and that she could play over 500 pages of music by heart. Her repertoire included a selection of popular melodies with variations from Ireland, England and Scotland, for example, 'Paddy O'Rafferty', 'St Patrick's day', and 'My love she's but a lassie yet', compositions by the celebrated French harpist/composer Robert Nicholas Charles Bochsa, waltzes and country dances.³⁴ She performed some of her compositions at concerts – most of these were written in theme and variations form. Isabella also played piano at concerts and, from 1828 onwards, her brother sang and played the harp.³⁵

References to performances by Isabella and her brother are sporadic from 1828 onwards. It seems that Isabella was increasingly overshadowed in performance by her brother (then known as the 'Infant Mozart'), who was often described as even more gifted than his sister and 'a perfect miracle of science.'³⁶ In 1829, a rumour circulated that the Infant Lyra had died – this rumour persisted for several years. By 1832, several young female musicians were performing as the 'Infant Lyra' with the result that, at a concert with her brother at the New Strand Subscription Theatre, the promoters thought it necessary to highlight that Isabella was the 'original infant Lyra'.³⁷ Interestingly, when Isabella's niece, Fanny Gregory, performed at the Adelaide Gallery in 1842, she used the moniker 'Infant Lyra'.³⁸

33 *Caledonian Mercury*, 15 December 1827.

34 Traudes, *Musizierende Wunderkinder*, pp 378-81.

35 *Derby Mercury*, 14 January 1829.

36 *Morning Chronicle*, 5 November 1829.

37 *Morning Post*, 12 March 1832.

38 *Morning Post*, 4 October 1842.

Life after Lyra

History has shown that there is no certainty that because a child shows exceptional ability at an early age, they will continue to excel in adult life. Many prodigies struggle to transition into adolescence and adulthood, and Isabella could not sustain a successful musical career as an adult. She married her cousin George Sackville Cotter Hingston – a barrister and Church of Ireland minister – on 3 April 1841 at Gourock House, Renfrewshire, Scotland.³⁹ They had at least 10 children, including Annie Margaret, whose daughter Isabella Marina Spring (1882-1907) was a child prodigy specialising in piano, and Arabella Ann, whose grandchildren were child prodigies as violinists.⁴⁰ Isabella's mother died in 1845, and her father died the following year in Kent. George died in 1858 and, after his death, Isabella married George Rainy in 1860. Rainy, a partner in a Liverpool company trading sugar, rum and coffee from British Guiana, died in 1863. Isabella lived out the remainder of her life in London, where she died on 28 October 1888.

During her lifetime, Isabella was the subject of numerous poems which celebrated her incredible talent. It seems fitting to end with a few lines from a poem published when she was at the height of her musical success in 1825.⁴¹

So fair the beauties of thy cherub face,
Matchless in infant loveliness and grace:
Human thy song, yet ne'er, oh! ne'er did art
Weave spell like thine around the captive heart!
Heaven-taught, sweet Lyra! -Genius, from her throne,
Exulting, calls thee her's, and her's alone.

39 *Freeman's Journal*, 10 April 1841.

40 Arabella's grandchildren - Georgina, Hugh and Dorcas McClean - were the subject of Enid Noel Matthews, *The Sound of Strings* (Melbourne, 1975).

41 *Morning Post*, 31 March 1825.

Mary Louise O'Donnell

Mary Louise O'Donnell is a harpist and musicologist who has performed extensively throughout Ireland, Europe, Africa and Asia as a soloist and with various ensembles. She was awarded a doctorate by the University of Limerick in 2009 and, since then, has published widely on topics relating to Irish cultural history, semiotics and performance studies. Her first book, *Ireland's Harp: The Shaping of Irish Identity c. 1770-1880*, was published in 2014 by UCD Press. Mary Louise's other research on the history, performance practice and symbolism of the Irish harp has been published in *Utopian Studies*, *Éire*



Ireland, the *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland* and the *American Harp Journal*. Her current research interests include the genesis and development of the pedal harp tradition in Ireland from the eighteenth century to the present, the diverse ways in which the Irish harp was used to construct identity among Irish emigrants to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the pedagogical potential of harp music to assist children and young people with complex needs. This research will be published in *Creative Impulses*, *Cultural Accents* (UCD Press, 2021), *Harp Studies II: World Harp Traditions* (forthcoming) and *Irish Musical Studies 13* (forthcoming).

Mary Louise has received many awards and grants to further her research, including an Irish Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship, Fulbright Scholarship, Dobbin Scholarship (Ireland Canada University Foundation), Centre Culturel Irlandais Fellowship and a Georgian Papers Project Fellowship . In 2019, she was appointed Musician-in-Residence with Fingal County Council and in 2020, was awarded a bursary by Fingal Arts Office to commission Rhona Clarke to compose a new work for voice/harp; *Music, Stars & Atoms* was premiered in 2021. Mary Louise frequently collaborates with her sister Teresa and they released an album entitled *Heavenly harps, heavenly cloths: contemporary music for the Irish harp by Brian Boydell* in December 2020.