

## ‘No Longer Second Fiddle’: Due Recognition for Josephine Keegan

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### Introduction

Until recently, the history and study of Irish traditional music has been dominated by men, creating an impression that female musicians are not as important in the tradition. Josephine Keegan (*b.*1935), a fiddle and piano player as well as a composer, now living in Mullaghbawn (or Mullaghbane) in south Armagh, exemplifies the different roles played and challenges faced by female Irish traditional musicians in the twentieth century. Keegan’s musical life and output highlight the role and influence of women in the tradition, knowledge of which contributes to a fuller understanding of the tradition. As Keegan has been overshadowed by the attention paid to her contemporaries and collaborators, including Seán McGuire (1927–2005) and Joe Burke (1939–2021), this chapter considers her multiple achievements: as piano accompanist to male soloists, fiddle soloist of note in her own right, collector and composer of Irish traditional music, and pedagogue. She was an innovator in the context of her solo recordings and corresponded widely with her contemporaries. The male dominance of the tradition, particularly in the past, may be explained by social and cultural norms including attitudes to appropriate behaviour and the presence of women in pubs, attitudes that Keegan challenged and overcame as a pioneering female performer in a male-dominated society. Informed by debates in musicological discourse and music journalism, this chapter recognises changing attitudes in recent years towards a greater appreciation of female performers and composers in Irish traditional music.

The invisibility of women in narratives of Irish traditional music misrepresents their presence and influence. The masculinity of space and gender norms in Irish society had a significant impact on the visibility of

women musicians.<sup>1</sup> P.J. Curtis writes: ‘There were in fact a great number of superb women musicians and singers up and down the country, but their talents were restricted to the privacy of their own homes.’<sup>2</sup> Christina Dolphin highlights the absence of women in the literature from many of the seminal texts on Irish traditional music in the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> such as those by Breandán Breathnach,<sup>4</sup> Ciarán Carson,<sup>5</sup> Tomás Ó Canainn,<sup>6</sup> Francis O’Neill<sup>7</sup> and Seán Ó Riada.<sup>8</sup> When revising his *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* for republication in 2017,<sup>9</sup> Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin included a new section on women in music, recognising the omission from the first edition and the fact that, despite their absence from the narratives, women contributed significantly to the development, transmission and performance of Irish traditional music.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most notable in exploring issues of gender in Irish traditional music is Tes Slominski, who has highlighted the roles of some of Keegan’s contemporaries in the development of Irish traditional music.<sup>11</sup> (See Slominski, Chapter 15, this volume.)

Attitudes to women entering pubs, the principal space for the performance of Irish traditional music, affected the visibility of women musicians in Irish traditional music.<sup>12</sup> Lucy Farr suggests that the pub was a place where women ‘sort of felt that you shouldn’t be’,<sup>13</sup> with Helen O’Shea noting the necessity of ‘having a powerful male mentor’ or ‘demonstrating a talent that is considered virtuosic’ in order to be accepted.<sup>14</sup> Many women engaged in Irish traditional music did so in their roles

- 1 Helen O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music* (Cork, 2008); Helen O’Shea, ‘“Good man, Mary!” Women Musicians and the Fraternity of Irish Traditional Music’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, 17: 1 (2008), 55–70; Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, *A Short History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin, 2017).
- 2 P.J. Curtis, *Notes from the Heart: A Celebration of Traditional Irish Music* (Dublin, 1994), p. 125.
- 3 Christina Dolphin, ‘Reels, Heels and Glass Ceilings: Women Musicians in the Professional Sphere of Irish Traditional Music’ (Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Limerick, 2013).
- 4 Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music and Dances of Ireland* (Dublin, 1971).
- 5 Ciarán Carson, *Pocket Guide to Irish Traditional Music* (Belfast, 1986).
- 6 Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (Cork, 1993).
- 7 Francis O’Neill *Irish Minstrels and Musicians* (Cork, 1987).
- 8 Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage* (Portlaoise, 1982).
- 9 Gearóid Ó hAlmhuráin, *Pocket History of Irish Traditional Music* (Dublin, 1997).
- 10 Ó hAlmhuráin, *Short History*, pp. 186–91.
- 11 Tes Slominski, *Trad Nation: Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Irish Traditional Music* (Connecticut, 2020).
- 12 Seán Williams, *Focus: Irish Traditional Music* (London, 2010), p. 201; Slominski, *Trad Nation*.
- 13 Fintan Vallely and Charlie Piggott, *Blooming Meadows: The World of Irish Traditional Musicians* (Dublin, 1998), p. 74.
- 14 O’Shea, *The Making of Irish Traditional Music*, p. 110.

as mothers and teachers, transmitting the music in local areas without gaining significant public profile or acclaim. At different times during her life, Keegan fulfilled various roles and sometimes challenged what was expected of a woman in Irish traditional music contexts.

Rina Schiller brought the issue of gender and Irish traditional music to the table at *Crosbhealach an Cheoil* in 1996, observing that 'the role model of the 1960s Irish traditional group was exclusively male'.<sup>15</sup> Drawing comparisons with Irish society in the 1960s, Liz Doherty studied women musicians in Cape Breton traditions, documenting how mothers and sisters acted as piano accompanists for male relatives on the fiddle.<sup>16</sup> Slominski has focused on some notable historical female figures in Irish traditional music, including fiddle players Treasa Ní hAlpín and Julia Clifford.<sup>17</sup> Slominski comments that 'many women musicians were visible at one time but have since been forgotten outside their families and immediate communities'.<sup>18</sup> Echoing the concept of second-degree visibility presented by Slominski,<sup>19</sup> and commented on by Doherty,<sup>20</sup> Naila Ceribašić considers relationships between men and women musicians in Croatian folk music, emphasising how a kinship relationship with a man 'often made it possible in the past, and still makes it possible for women to enter into the field of instrumental music in a more permanent, serious, and professional way'.<sup>21</sup> Keegan benefited from her father's participation in Irish traditional music and is often considered in relation to prominent male performers, chiefly Burke and McGuire, but deserves recognition for her individual contributions.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Rena Schiller, 'Gender and Traditional Irish Music', in F. Vallely et al. (eds), *Crosbhealach an Cheoil: The Crossroads Conference* (Dublin, 1996), pp. 200–5, at p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> Liz Doherty, 'The Paradox of the Periphery: Evolution of the Cape Breton Fiddle Tradition c.1928–1995', (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Limerick, 1996), pp. 77–83.

<sup>17</sup> Tes Slominski, 'Music, Gender, and the Public Sphere in Twentieth-Century Ireland', (Unpublished PhD dissertation, New York University, 2010); Slominski, *Trad Nation*.

<sup>18</sup> Slominski, 'Music, Gender', p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> Slominski, 'Music, Gender'; Slominski, *Trad Nation*.

<sup>20</sup> Doherty, 'The Paradox of the Periphery'.

<sup>21</sup> Naila Ceribašić, 'Social Canons Inherited from the Past: Women Players of Folk Music Instruments in Croatia', *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* T. 44, Fasc. 1/2 (2003), pp. 147–57, at p. 149.

<sup>22</sup> It is worth noting that Burke and McGuire were accompanied by Keegan on the recording *Two Champions* (Outlet SOLP1014, 1971); the title refers to the two male musicians but this should be read in the context whereby accompanists were often unnamed. The LP cover is notable as it features the names of the two male musicians but Keegan, unnamed, is in the foreground seated at the piano.

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Influenced by general questions posed by Bruno Nettl regarding the ethnomusicological study of women and music,<sup>23</sup> the following chapter provides a brief biography of Josephine Keegan. I reflect on Keegan's success as a fiddle performer and recording artist. Separately, I consider her piano playing and the second-degree visibility she experienced. Alongside her performing career, I outline Keegan's contribution to Irish musical traditions as a collector and composer, activities she pursued for much of her life. Finally, I trace the belated recognition for Keegan's achievements in the twenty-first century, symbolic of the generally increasing recognition for women in Irish traditional music.

### Josephine Keegan

Born in Dundee, Scotland, Keegan moved with her family to Co. Armagh, Northern Ireland in 1939 and later to Mullaghbawn in 1950.<sup>24</sup> Keegan's father Joe (*d.*1973) was a notable flute player. From Derryvilla near Portarlinton, he learnt music from his mother Anne Delaney before joining the Bishopswood Flute Band, with whom he learned to read and write music.<sup>25</sup> He broadcast as a solo artist on Radio Éireann in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> Keegan's mother Alice Kelly (*d.*1963) came from Rasan, Co. Louth, an area near the border between Monaghan in the Republic of Ireland and Armagh in Northern Ireland. Alice had a basic knowledge of piano technique and music theory; Keegan credits her mother with teaching her the rudiments and introducing her to the piano.

Josephine's two older sisters, Maymie and Eilish, had already begun to play piano.<sup>27</sup> Her father taught her tin whistle, introduced her to the flute and started her on the fiddle. Keegan attended the Convent of Mercy, Bessbrook and Our Lady's Grammar School in Newry. At Bessbrook she took piano lessons with Sister M. Paul (Hicks) and violin lessons with Sister M. Therese (Martin). She progressed to competition success at the Newry Feis and Castleblaney Feis.<sup>28</sup> She won the Oireachtas fiddle competition in 1955 and competed in Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann in Boyle in 1960.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (Illinois, 2005), p. 405.

<sup>24</sup> Tommy Fegan, 'Josephine Keegan', in Fintan Vallely (ed.), *Companion to Irish Traditional Music* (Cork, 2011), p. 377.

<sup>25</sup> Josephine Keegan, *The Keegan Tunes Cuid a Dó* (Mullaghbawn, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Ceol Camlocha, *Aoibhneas na Bealtaine: The Sweets of May: the Céilí Band Era, Music & Dance of South Armagh* (Armagh, 2008), p. 9.

<sup>27</sup> Maymie married Andy Cross in 1960 and lived in Rathangan, Co. Kildare until her death in 2011. Eilish (Dayap) emigrated to the United States where she married.

<sup>28</sup> Keegan, *The Keegan Tunes Cuid a Dó*, p. 25.

<sup>29</sup> Fegan, *Companion*, p. 377.

Keegan's early musical milieu involved house sessions and céilís, as is captured as part of the book and CD project *The Sweets of May*.<sup>30</sup> Concertina and melodeon player Paddy Murphy (1901–73) hosted evenings of music with his wife Mary in Cregganduff, while the Keegan family home also hosted evenings of music. While still at school in the 1940s, Keegan travelled to the Newry Feis where she first met piano player Seán O'Driscoll and experienced a céilí band performance by Ceol an Iubhair. With local fiddlers John (1929–96), Peter (1940–93) and Pat Murphy, she became involved in the John Murphy Céilí Band. She also played occasionally with the Dunreavy, Vincent Lowe and Johnny Pickering Céilí Bands. Early performances included playing céilís locally from 9pm until 3am for which the musicians received a modest fee, signifying their involvement in a semi-professional scene. These bands developed their repertoire to include waltzes and more modern music, but not everyone agreed with the inclusion of this repertoire.<sup>31</sup>

Keegan moved to Belfast to study education at St Mary's Training College before returning to teach in Mullaghbawn. During the late 1950s she developed a wide musical network by attending events such as Fleadhanna Cheoil and corresponding with other musicians. In the early 1960s she sought to bring together some of these musicians for a concert in Mullaghbawn Parish Hall. At this time, Keegan was married and teaching locally; with the support of the local parish priest and community, a night of music was held and a recording made of the night.<sup>32</sup>

## England

Keegan moved to London in 1963 and toured throughout England with musicians including Seán McGuire and Joe Burke. This decision and career path were highly unusual at that time for a woman from a rural Irish background. In contrast with the session scene documented by Reg Hall,<sup>33</sup> Keegan was primarily engaged in formal performances in venues where audiences would sit and listen. Writing about this period, Antóin MacGabhann records the musical collaboration between McGuire and Burke: 'Together with Josephine Keegan on piano they toured around Ireland and the Folk Clubs and Festivals of England, Scotland and Shetland. Seán had already formed a musical partnership with Josephine

<sup>30</sup> Ceol Camlocha, *Sweets of May*.

<sup>31</sup> *Cherish the Ladies*, first broadcast on RTÉ Radio 1, July 2006.

<sup>32</sup> The quality of this recording is impaired by the enthusiasm of a dancer located near the microphone.

<sup>33</sup> Reg Hall, 'Irish Music and Dance in London, 1890–1970: A Socio-Cultural History, Parts I and II' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Sussex, 1994).

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Keegan, herself a great fiddle player, who provided expert and sensitive piano accompaniment for most of his playing career.<sup>34</sup>

McGuire is an important figure in Keegan's career,<sup>35</sup> but is also implicated in her second-degree visibility.<sup>36</sup> Born in 1927 in Belfast, McGuire studied in Belfast with George Vincent and later his bowing style was influenced by May Nesbitt.<sup>37</sup> An extravagant player, he won the Oireachtas in 1949, achieving 100 per cent from all judges.<sup>38</sup> As well as gaining prominence as a soloist, he played in the Malachy Sweeney Céilí Band with his father and Johnny Pickering.<sup>39</sup> The development of Keegan's musical relationship with McGuire is important in understanding her significance in Irish traditional music and emergence as a professional artist during the 1960s. Like many aspects of her early life, her awareness of McGuire was influenced by her father. He had heard the young fiddler on the radio around 1946–47 and when Josephine left for college in Belfast, he insisted: 'you're going to have to make it your business to meet this man'.<sup>40</sup> Josephine called twice to McGuire's house where she met his mother, who told her he was not around. Shortly afterwards, McGuire's father John (Jack) called to the college and invited her to visit Seán again. Keegan and McGuire went on to play and record together regularly throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

While in London, Keegan occasionally played in a number of bands, including the Galtymore and Fulham. She gigged regularly on a Monday night in The Plough on Harrow Road with McGuire and Roger Sherlock.<sup>41</sup> The significance of the Plough sessions may be understood from acknowledging those in attendance; the audience included members of the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and many jazz musicians. Frank Lee and Leo Redmond, renowned céilí band musicians, also played there. Richie and Finbarr Dwyer, Paddy Taylor and Jimmy Power were also part of a community of musical practice in London at that time. Other female musicians on that London scene included Julia Clifford and Lucy Farr,

<sup>34</sup> Antóin MacGabhann, 'Seán McGuire', in *Honouring Seán McGuire and Kilcogy Musicians* (Dublin, 2012), pp. 13–16, at p. 14.

<sup>35</sup> Christened Maguire, Seán later changed his name; both names appear on recordings and ephemera.

<sup>36</sup> 'Traditional Fiddler who Opposed the Purists', *Irish Times*, 2 April 2005, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Geoff Harden, 'The Passing of the Fiddler', *Fortnight*, 436 (2005), 10–11.

<sup>38</sup> Martin McGinley, 'A Presence Wherever Folk Music is Played on the Fiddle', *Treoir*, 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Seán MacConnell, 'Death of Fiddler Sean McGuire', *Irish Times*, 25 March 2005, p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Josephine Keegan, 'There Will Never Be Another One!', in *Honouring Sean McGuire and Kilcogy Musicians* (Dublin, 2012), p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Sherlock, 'My Memories of Sean McGuire', in *Honouring Sean McGuire and Kilcogy Musicians* (Dublin, 2012), p. 18.

who feature on Reg Hall's recording *Paddy in the Smoke*, recorded at the Sunday morning sessions at The Favourite in Holloway in 1967.

## Back to Ireland

On return to Ireland around 1969, Keegan continued to perform in pubs with McGuire, with whom she had established a personal relationship. It was not a common occurrence for women to be present at, never mind perform in, what was then the male-dominated space of the pub. Initially, Keegan and McGuire were invited to play in a hotel in Glencolmille, Co. Donegal for a night. They were invited back for a weekend, then a week, and then for ten nights from Christmas until New Year. There were bar extensions every night and people travelled significant distances to hear them.

In 1971, after being spotted at a session in the Readypenny Inn near Ardee, Co. Louth, Keegan and McGuire were invited to the Céilí House bar in Oldcastle, Co. Meath.<sup>42</sup> By this time, the pair were widely known from their recordings and radio broadcasts. They played with publican Michael Lynch on double bass every Monday night for the rest of the decade and Lynch remembers people travelling from all over the world to listen to them. Photographs in Lynch's personal collection emphasise the importance of this space in the east of the country to Irish traditional music during the 1970s, contrary to a focus on the west of Ireland in narratives about the tradition.<sup>43</sup> The Lynch family's own musical network, developed through regular performances in Dublin, was influential in attracting musicians to Oldcastle, but the Keegan and McGuire duo are remembered as a 'star attraction'.<sup>44</sup>

Escaping the violence of the Northern Ireland 'Troubles', Keegan and McGuire moved to Ballinagh and later Mounthugent, then Mullagh, all in Co. Cavan.<sup>45</sup> McGuire's father was from Cavan and a monument in his memory stands in the village of Kilcogy. During the mid-1970s the potential for Irish traditional music to attract tourists was recognised and groups of American tourists would listen to Keegan and McGuire in Oldcastle and other nearby venues.<sup>46</sup>

At this time, McGuire was undoubtedly the more recognisable personality who received most of the attention, but Keegan's role should not be underestimated. In addition to accompanying McGuire, Keegan helped create a musical identity for the pair. John Daly asserts that 'Josephine

<sup>42</sup> Michael Lynch, interview, 21 September 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Daithí Kearney, 'Towards a Regional Understanding of Irish Traditional Music' (Unpublished PhD dissertation, University College Cork, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Lynch, interview, 21 September 2017.

<sup>45</sup> MacGabhann, 'Seán Maguire', p. 13; Lynch, interview, 21 September 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Lynch, interview, 21 September 2017.

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was an integral and defining part of the “McGuire package”. She sought to create something from his technical talents and her musicality.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Lynch remembers McGuire asking Keegan to play through tunes for him to learn. McGuire could sight read and learn by ear, but Keegan’s distinctive sense of phrasing was something he sought to develop in his own playing.<sup>48</sup> Despite the fact that Keegan taught many students throughout the years, Kevin Loughlin remembers her insisting that ‘you could never teach anyone music, you could simply help them’.<sup>49</sup>

### Recording

Keegan is a prolific recording artist in the context of Irish traditional music from the 1960s until the 1980s. Her impact in the recording world was initially as accompanist to musicians including Seán McGuire (1968, 1969, 1978), Joe Burke (1971), Roger Sherlock (1963, 1971), Séamus Tansey (1971), Kevin Loughlin (1971) and Jim McKillop (1980). In addition to these albums, further unreleased recordings were made during her time in London.<sup>50</sup> Prior to 1976 she tended to play piano predominantly in these recordings, but between 1977 and 1982 she recorded five solo albums on the fiddle (and providing her own piano accompaniment).<sup>51</sup> Some of these recordings feature newly composed pieces by Kevin Loughlin, Finbarr Dwyer, Brendan McGlinchy, Brian O’Kane, Paddy Taylor, Jimmy McHugh, Jim McKillop and several by Cavan-born composer Ed Reavy, some of which were first released on these recordings. Keegan also recorded sixteen of her own compositions.

While celebrated widely as an accompanist, Keegan’s five solo albums between 1977 and 1982 are valuable in establishing her identity as a fiddle player and solo artist. According to the cover notes for *Reels, Jigs and Hornpipes*: ‘On this recording she is no longer “second fiddle”. She is “first fiddle” and plays her own accompaniment.’<sup>52</sup> Many of the composers showcased by Keegan were friends and musical collaborators. Like Keegan, who had been awarded the Gold Medal at the Oireachtas in 1955, many of those she accompanied had also won competitions. While McGuire’s accomplishments have been mentioned, he was never

<sup>47</sup> John Daly, interview, 14 September 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Lynch, interview, 21 September 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Kevin Loughlin, interview, 1 October 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Paddy McGinty, interview, 1 October 2017.

<sup>51</sup> Josephine Keegan, *Irish Traditional Music*, LP, Outlet SOLP1033 (1977); *Irish Traditional Music: Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes, Airs*, LP, Outlet, OAS 3030 (1980); *Traditional Irish Music: Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes, Airs*, LP, Outlet SOLP1040 (1980); *Irish Traditional Music: Reels, Jigs, and Hornpipes*, LP, Outlet OAS 3037 (1982); *Josephine Keegan*, LP, Outlet SOLP1044 (1983).

<sup>52</sup> Josephine Keegan, *Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes, Airs* (Belfast: Outlet SOLP 1040 – 1980).



a champion at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, the competitions organised by Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. In these competitions, Séamus Connolly won senior fiddle titles in 1961 and 1963, while Brendan McGlinchy triumphed in 1962 and Jim McKillop in 1975. Kevin Loughlin won the senior competition for the three-row button accordion in 1964, as well as miscellaneous competitions in 1967 and 1968. Joe Burke secured senior button accordion titles in 1959 and 1960; Séamus Tansey received top prize in the senior flute competition in 1965. Flute player Roger Sherlock was a member of the 1966 All-Ireland winning Glenside Céilí Band (1966) and later the Thatch Céilí Band, who were successful in 1986 and 1987; like Burke, he toured the United States with Comhaltas in the 1970s.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the musicians Keegan accompanied on these recordings were of the highest calibre and duly recognised during this period.

On some of the releases by Outlet Records in Belfast, McGuire served as producer; it was he who decided that Keegan should perform as the accompanist.<sup>54</sup> The influence of Keegan's recordings with McGuire on the Irish traditional music soundscape continued when Keegan returned to the studio to accompany Jimmy Power on his 1985 LP *Fifty-Odd Years*. Reg Hall writes in the liner notes:

Jimmy has long admired the recordings of McGuire, so when Tom Power conceived this celebration of his father's half century in music he arranged for McGuire's accompanist, Josephine Keegan, to come over from Belfast for the recording. Josephine's unique and superb style of piano accompaniment is probably due to the complete understanding she holds for the fiddle, for she is indeed an excellent fiddle-player in her own right and pursues a busy career as a full-time music teacher in her native Northern Ireland.<sup>55</sup>

Keegan returned to recording her own compositions in the twenty-first century, with albums such as *Lifeswork* (2001) and *The Keegan Tunes* (2002), which feature over thirty musicians mostly drawn from the area around south Armagh.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Reg Hall, *A Few Good Tunes: A History of Irish Music and Dance in London, 1800–1980 & Beyond* (Topic Records, 2016), p. 610.

<sup>54</sup> Loughlin, interview, 1 October 2017.

<sup>55</sup> Hall also notes Power's regard for the playing of Seán McGuire in *A Few Good Tunes*, p. 898.

<sup>56</sup> Other later recordings include: Josephine Keegan, *The Nightingale and Other Lesser Spotted Tunes* (2006); *The Fairy Bridges* (2006); *A Few Tunes Now and Then* (2011); Josephine Keegan, *Around and About* (2012).

## Piano

In her dissertation *The Ivory Bridge*, Aileen Dillane states: 'An instrument can imply a gender status, becoming tied up with a specific sex. Historically, the piano was associated with the female. The taking of piano lessons was traditionally seen as an effeminate pursuit for boys.'<sup>57</sup> Dillane continues: 'When musicians in Ireland began to absorb the piano into their sound world – no doubt in part due to the influence of the 78rpm recordings – very few male pianists were available. As a result, women filled the gap and female pianists in Ireland enjoyed prominent positions in many groups and céilí bands.'<sup>58</sup> Keegan is part of this musical society and, in some ways, stereotyped as a pianist despite her excellence as a fiddle player. Dolphin's recognition that a modern trend is to 'Put the woman in the front' is in stark contrast to that of Keegan's era where she was so often in the background or to the side, as the piano accompanist to much more famous male counterparts.<sup>59</sup>

Keegan's career was shaped by a growing commercial music recording industry in the 1970s. Dillane notes: 'When the making of commercial recordings of Irish music began in Ireland, many musicians opted to include piano accompaniment.'<sup>60</sup> This extends to recordings made by Irish traditional musicians in England in the latter half of the twentieth century. Keegan regularly accompanied men, something that she recognises was a common practice; for example, her London-based friends Martin and Theresa MacMahon both played accordion, but in most instances Theresa would accompany her husband on piano.<sup>61</sup> Johnny Pickering's wife was also a pianist; the couple played with McGuire in the Malachy Sweeney Céilí Band.

Keegan had received rudimentary instruction from her mother and schoolteachers, but the first major influence on her traditional piano style was Seán O'Driscoll. While accompanying a school friend at a dancing feis in Newry, she heard O'Driscoll play and asked to look over his shoulder. Back at boarding school she persuaded fellow students to play simple melodies while she worked out chords in the bass, attempting to imitate O'Driscoll. Later she became influenced by Shetland piano

<sup>57</sup> Aileen Dillane, 'The Ivory Bridge: Piano Accompaniment on 78rpm Recorded Sources of Irish Traditional Dance Music in America c.1910–1945' (Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Limerick, 2000), p. 57.

<sup>58</sup> Dillane, 'The Ivory Bridge', p. 169.

<sup>59</sup> Dolphin, 'Reels, Heels', p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> Dillane, 'The Ivory Bridge', p. 179.

<sup>61</sup> Teresa MacMahon also recorded with Finbarr Dwyer: Finbarr Dwyer with Teresa MacMahon, *Pure Traditional Irish Accordion Music* (also issued as *Irish Traditional Accordionist*), Outlet Label PTICD 1004.

players, particularly Ronnie Cooper (1934–82)<sup>62</sup> and Violet Tulloch,<sup>63</sup> the latter known as the Queen of Shetland. It was with McGuire that Keegan first encountered Shetland fiddle music and they travelled to Shetland in 1972. McCann states: ‘The talented trio of McGuire, Keegan, and Burke made annual trips to Shetland for a decade. They played in Lerwick to capacity, enthusiastic and knowledgeable audiences.’<sup>64</sup> On these trips Keegan returned to playing fiddle, having primarily played piano in the years prior to that.<sup>65</sup>

Keegan’s approach to piano playing was valued by many of her contemporaries. Discussing her style and approach to accompaniment on the radio series *Cherish the Ladies*, Keegan states:

I think it’s a different sort of thing to play accompaniment to different people. You know each one is different ... the instrument’s different, the person’s different, their interpretation of the music is different. And, ah, as an accompanist that’s what you have to follow, rather than look for things you have to listen to what’s there and adapt the accompaniment really to that.<sup>66</sup>

On the album cover for *At Their Best* is written: ‘As ever the accompaniment of Josephine Keegan superbly unifies the ensemble playing and heightens the solos.’<sup>67</sup> Reflecting in 2012, Joe Burke wrote: ‘Josephine Keegan’s musicianship and her very creative piano accompaniment had a very positive effect on our music.’<sup>68</sup> While Keegan is usually considered a ‘sympathetic’ and ‘understated’ accompanist, Siobhán Long describes her style in accompanying Séamus Tansey as vigorous.<sup>69</sup> (For another discussion of women as accompanists, see Watson, Chapter 11, this volume.)

<sup>62</sup> Nicol McLaren, ‘Ronnie Cooper’ <<https://boxandfiddlearchive.weebly.com/ronnie-cooper-1982.html>> [accessed 1 March 2021].

<sup>63</sup> Gussie Angus, ‘Violet Tulloch “The Star”’ <<https://boxandfiddlearchive.weebly.com/violet-tulloch.html>> [accessed 1 March 2021].

<sup>64</sup> Kevin McCann, ‘Scottish Fiddle Playing and Its Irish Connections’, *Box and Fiddle*, 19: 03 (1995) <<https://boxandfiddlearchive.weebly.com/scottish-fiddle-playing-and-its-irish-connections.html>> [accessed 11 July 2022].

<sup>65</sup> Keegan’s decision to return to the fiddle was partly due to McGuire’s misfortune; he broke his wrist in the lead-up to a tour on Shetland with Keegan and Burke.

<sup>66</sup> *Cherish the Ladies*, RTÉ Radio 1, 18 July 2006.

<sup>67</sup> *At Their Best: Sean McGuire and Roger Sherlock*, Outlet SOLP 1008 (1971).

<sup>68</sup> Joe Burke, ‘He Made Great Music ... He Made History!’ *Honouring Sean McGuire and Kilcogy Musicians* (Dublin, 2012), pp. 8–9.

<sup>69</sup> Siobhán Long, ‘The Best of Seamus Tansey: Traditional Irish Flute’, *Irish Times*, 5 February 2010.

## Collecting

Keegan began collecting Irish traditional music while in boarding school. Her methods of collecting involved communicating with other musicians throughout the country, such as Frank O'Higgins, Leo Rowsome and Paddy Canny. Nicholas McAulliffe and Anne Sheehy sent tapes, as did their fellow Kerry musician Paddy Cronin, who had emigrated to Boston. There was an abundance of tune collections in the Keegan household but Josephine recognised that her father knew many more tunes not in the collections. Keegan also compiled four collections entitled *Irish Tunes by the 100*, which were published under the names of Keegan and McGuire by Dave Bulmer in 1975. Daly interprets these publications as an effort to create a dual identity, as too often Keegan remained in McGuire's shadow.<sup>70</sup> The books outline four aims in presenting the tunes for publication:

- 1 To preserve a number of tunes that might otherwise have been lost, by committing them to paper.
- 2 To circulate these and the other tunes accurately because we feel that the written note is the surest way of communicating music.
- 3 Hopefully to expand and enrich the repertoire of the reader.
- 4 To satisfy the appetites of those who would like to share these tunes with us, and in doing so give pleasure to our musical friends, young and old, old and new.<sup>71</sup>

Sources for the music include Jack McGuire and Joe Keegan, Seán and Josephine's fathers; further recognition is given to composers, many of whom hail from Ulster or Scotland, such as James McMahan, Paul Murphy and Keegan herself.

## Composition

Since 2002, Keegan has published four collections of her own compositions. She was awarded the TG4 Composer of the Year award in 2005. Despite composing since childhood, she asserts that she did not consider herself a composer until TG4 (a television channel that broadcasts predominantly in the Irish language) approached her in relation to the award. Recognition for Keegan the composer has increased through the inclusion of her work on numerous recordings more recently. These compositions are often considered difficult by instrumentalists in the tradition. Murphy posits that this is because many were initially written

<sup>70</sup> Daly, interview, 14 September 2017.

<sup>71</sup> Seán McGuire and Josephine Keegan, *Irish Tunes by the 100* (Lincolnshire, 1975).

at the piano and then reimagined for the fiddle.<sup>72</sup> An examination of the tunes reveals technical challenges relating to fingering, and leaps that require skipping over strings.

Although Keegan had included her own compositions on various recordings and published some in *Irish Tunes by the 100*, it was not until 2002 – encouraged by Tommy Fegan and Ciarán Burns, two local musicians with whom she had worked on *The Sweets of May* project – that she published her first collection of compositions. Subsequent volumes followed in 2006, 2010 and 2012. Notes on the tunes provide insight into Keegan’s life, particularly on people and places meaningful to her. In conversation with me, Keegan was unable to elaborate on the motivation or inspiration for tune titles but suggests that tunes are like an autobiography or a gathering of friends. In my experience, many musicians perform Keegan’s compositions without knowing their origin or knowing much about Keegan herself.

A distinctive aspect of Keegan’s compositions is the influence of a ‘Scottish style’, often in tunes composed for Scottish friends. Born in Dundee, Keegan never returned to the city of her birth but travelled extensively elsewhere in Scotland, particularly Shetland where she was influenced by the music and approach to transmission and performance. In her second collection of compositions, Keegan states: ‘I hasten to add that before deciding to include these Scottish style tunes I had them approved by a few knowledgeable musicians.’<sup>73</sup> Keegan remained a popular figure in Shetland, returning to perform at the Shetland Accordion and Fiddle Festival in 2005, 2007 and 2014.

## Home in South Armagh

Keegan asserts her identity as an Armagh woman in the notes she provided to accompany her compositions.<sup>74</sup> Yet she retains a great love of Scottish music. Her record collection features LPs by several Scottish fiddle players, including Willie Hunter and Aly Bain. Influenced by the Shetland fiddlers, especially Tom Anderson, she gathered a group of fiddle players in Mullaghbawn in the early 2000s, accompanied by piano and guitar. Attempting to create a unified sound rather than the heterophony typical of an Irish session, Keegan chose less well-known tunes and wrote them out for the musicians to sight read, thereby imitating the Shetland tradition.

Martina Murphy, a member of the Keegan fiddle group, remembers it as a social and relaxed gathering each week. Keegan recounted her

<sup>72</sup> Niall Murphy, interview, 7 June 2017.

<sup>73</sup> Keegan, *The Keegan Tunes Cuid a Dó*, p. 13.

<sup>74</sup> For example, in relation to ‘Burren Hill’, Keegan asserts: ‘I’m from Armagh’ (*The Keegan Tunes*, 2002), p. 18.

### *Due Recognition for Josephine Keegan*

experiences in Shetland. The venue was a building behind O'Hanlon's Bar in Mullaghbawn, a popular session venue. Amongst the members were Martina and her son Niall; Betty and Goretti Molloy from Moy, Co. Tyrone; Paula Rafferty; Niamh Gallagher; Joanne Millar; Shauna Hughes; Marie Savages; Ursula Byrne; the Carragher sisters from Crossmaglen; the Savage sisters from Outlacken; and Donal O'Hanlon from Newry on guitar.<sup>75</sup> The membership highlights the presence of families and a willingness to travel to participate.

The group's repertoire included compositions by Keegan, Paddy O'Brien, Ed Reavy and Charlie Lennon, among others. The decision to include old local tunes such as 'The Three Tunes', 'The Sweets of May' and 'Betty Black' demonstrated a sense of local cultural awareness that was replicated in the book and CD *The Sweets of May*. The group learnt the repertoire using sheet music.<sup>76</sup> Gradually, younger members left the area for university, prompting the group to disband, but some former members continue to teach and perform.

### Recognition

Keegan had performed in Canada in the late 1960s, playing with Jean Carrignon and Phillippe Bruno;<sup>77</sup> later, in 1972, she completed a coast-to-coast tour of the United States with Dermot O'Brien and the Clubmen, Larry Cunningham and Nita Norrie. Nevertheless, she had left the public eye by the 1980s, when she focused on teaching and, to some extent, became forgotten. Despite her long musical life, it is primarily in more recent years that Keegan has received recognition for her achievements. Writing in *Irish Music Magazine*, Seán Laffey explains:

Due fame has somehow eluded her outside of the knowing fraternity of discerning players [...] Maybe it's because for many years she was seen as an accompanist, maybe living in Armagh, Northern Ireland she is somehow cut off from the main media movers in Dublin and Belfast, maybe because her most sustained and prolific recording output is just now emerging, but more should be written about her and her music.<sup>78</sup>

In 2003, Keegan received an award from Boston College in appreciation of her lifelong dedication to Irish traditional music and invaluable

<sup>75</sup> Martina Murphy, correspondence, 23 September 2017.

<sup>76</sup> Murphy, interview, 7 June 2017.

<sup>77</sup> Miles Krassen identifies the influence of McGuire on the musical style of Carrignon. See Miles Krassen, 'An Analysis of a Jean Carrignon Record', *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* (1974); also noted by McGuire in Harden (2005), pp. 10–11.

<sup>78</sup> Seán Laffey, 'Review: Josephine Keegan *The Fairy Bridges*', *Irish Music Magazine*, 13: 5 (2007), 65.

contribution to Irish cultural preservation. In addition to the TG4 Composer of the Year award, her work was further celebrated in 2005 by the Newry and Mourne District Council. In Co. Louth, Dundalk Institute of Technology's Traditional Music Ensemble granted Keegan honorary membership in 2013. She garnered local recognition once more in 2018 as recipient of the Musical Icon Award at the Iúr Cinn Fleadh. In 2006, Keegan featured in the radio series *Cherish the Ladies*, presented and produced by Aoife Nic Cormaic.<sup>79</sup> The other women featured were Liz Carroll, Rosie Stewart, Liz and Yvonne Kane, Josephine Marsh and Kitty Hayes – all of whom reinforce the argument for a greater understanding of the role of women in Irish traditional music.

## Conclusion

Josephine Keegan was not the first Irish female musician to achieve prominence, but the multifaceted nature of her contribution to Irish traditional music sets her apart. She learnt to live in a man's world, in part through her relationship with Seán McGuire and her father's influence. Despite her skills as a fiddle player, she often took up a secondary position as piano accompanist. Keegan challenged social norms by playing professionally in pubs at a time when Irish traditional music and women were new to these spaces. She was an exceptional musician who gradually became invisible. Late in life, however, Keegan's career and reputation have grown. She has become a role model for the next generation, cited in Liz Carroll's acceptance speech for her 2006 TG4 Composer of the Year award. In examining Keegan's contribution to Irish traditional music, it becomes clear that a better understanding of the tradition requires a more thorough awareness and knowledge of the roles and lives of the women involved.

<sup>79</sup> *Cherish the Ladies*, RTÉ Radio 1, 18 July 2006.