

Jun-1996

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Recommended Citation

Kreiling, Jean (1996). Women of Note: Composers for the Music History Canon. *Bridgewater Review*, 15(1), 7-10.
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol15/iss1/6

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WOMEN OF NOTE: Three Composers for the Music History Canon

Jean Kreiling

The term “struggling artist” gains new resonance when the artist in question is a female composer living before 1900. Obstacles created by church, court, educational institutions, and family greatly limited the chances of a woman’s success in the field of musical composition, yet many women persisted; in fact, one of the earliest composers we know by name is Kassia, a woman of ninth-century Greece. We are fortunate that despite both the conditions of their own times and the apparent oversights of historians, we know of hundreds of women who placed musical values above personal ease, and who left us some remarkably appealing and significant works of art.

The names of some women composers have in fact become familiar to connoisseurs of art music. The work of the twelfth-century nun and visionary Hildegard of Bingen has become prominent as part of the recent commercial interest in medieval chant; Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (sister of Felix Mendelssohn) and Clara Wieck Schumann (wife of Robert Schumann) have begun to draw attention for more than just their famous family connections. Indeed, the life stories of these women provide

fascinating glimpses into social and cultural history, and their music reflects both passion and intellect. Among the many other women composers working before 1900, three more obscure individuals aptly represent both historically important musical styles and the diverse contexts of music by women composers. The inclusion of the work of Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre, Marianne Martínez, and Louise Farrenc could greatly enrich the standard music history canon.

Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre (c. 1666-1729) belongs to the Baroque period of music history, the era of George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach. Jacquet de la Guerre could easily fit into the slot most music history courses reserve for François Couperin (1668-1733). Almost exact contemporaries, both Couperin and Jacquet de la Guerre served Louis XIV, though only Couperin secured a formal appointment. Elisabeth Jacquet first came to the attention of the king when she was only seven years old, one of several talented children brought to entertain at court; at that time, she sang difficult works at first sight, she accompanied at the keyboard, and she composed “in all keys.” Louis XIV placed Jacquet in the care of his mistress, and encouraged her career by having her music performed at court and by allowing her to dedicate pieces to him. Jacquet married an organist named Martin de la Guerre and had one son; both husband and son had died by 1704, but Jacquet de la Guerre continued her musical career, giving concerts in her home that were attended by the notables of musical Paris.

Like Couperin, Jacquet de la Guerre was a masterful harpsichordist, and composed many works for that instrument, most of them short pieces in the simple binary form of the day, collected into suites. While publication dates do not reliably indicate exact times of composition, it seems notable that Couperin’s first book of harpsichord pieces did not appear until he was in his forties (1713), while Jacquet de la Guerre’s first



Elisabeth-Claude Jaquet de la Guerre

book appeared when she was only twenty years old (1687). Also like Couperin, Jacquet de la Guerre wrote instrumental chamber music and both sacred and secular vocal music. She was among the first composers to write trio sonatas, a genre that would be central to the output of Couperin and Arcangelo Corelli; she was the first French woman to compose cantatas, and the only one known to have published whole books of cantatas.

Jacquet de la Guerre’s *Jonas*, a cantata for high voice, violins, and continuo, reflects many of the important stylistic trends in Baroque music. Composed in 1708, it tells the familiar biblical story of Jonas and the whale in eight separate movements. The opening instrumental Prelude features an almost continuously moving melody in the violins, typical of the Baroque taste for relentlessly flowing melody, accompanied by a bass line marked with figures, from which continuo players (probably harpsichordist and cellist) would improvise harmonies. Next, the scene of the drama is set in a recitative, which uses a declamatory, almost speech-like vocal style to convey information necessary to the plot; similar numbers provide narrative and explanatory detail in cantatas and operas throughout the Baroque and Classical periods in music history. The subsequent movement, entirely instrumental, portrays the raging sea with energetic rhythms and a chromatic melody; Vivaldi’s famous *Four Seasons* was not the first work to depict a

storm with frenetic violins! As in most Baroque cantatas and operas, this one uses *Airs* (or “arias”) to focus on single ideas or emotions; the fourth movement uses an elaborate, ornamental vocal part (accompanied by the instruments) to express the terror of a witness to the storm at sea. Subsequent recitatives and *airs* complete the story, creating drama and musical interest out of the standard tools of the Baroque musician, including *da capo* aria form, expressive ornamentation, and a sonority based on a high-pitched melody supported by the firm continuo foundation.

Jacquet de la Guerre’s qualifications as a significant composer seem clear, and the appearance of recent recordings suggests that her work may soon become better known. Her present obscurity can likely be attributed to her lack of a professional appointment, and the subsequently lesser opportunities for performance, publication, and lasting fame. Her musical accomplishments, however, may eventually overcome the handicapping circumstances of her own times, and can certainly contribute to a more complete picture of Baroque music history.

In studying the Classical period of music history, most of us learn of two giants: Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). Their genius certainly merits the intense focus their lives and works have received, but it seems unfortunate that these masters have almost completely overshadowed some of the lesser, but worthwhile, musicians of their day, men like Luigi Boccherini, Anton Reicha, and William Boyce. Small wonder that we rarely hear of female Classical composers, such as Marianna von Auenbrugger, Maddalena Sirmen, and Marianne Martínez.

Martínez (1744-1812), however, had personal connections to both Haydn and Mozart, a convenient segue for the music history professor. As a young girl growing up in Vienna, Martínez lived on the third

floor of a large house that included attic apartments for young professionals, including Joseph Haydn. Martínez studied composition with Haydn in daily lessons that spanned three years—an opportunity that was available to her because of her father’s prestigious position as a church diplomat and the friendship of her family with the court poet Pietro Metastasio. Much later, she would host musical evenings in her own household, whose wealth she owed to an inheritance from Metastasio; among her guests was Mozart, with whom she performed keyboard duets. She was known in Vienna as a pianist, singer, and composer, but “she never held a professional appointment, which would apparently have been unacceptable in her social class.”



Marianne von Martínez

Like Haydn and Mozart, Martínez composed sacred and secular vocal music, keyboard music, and orchestral music. Her orchestral output is small, almost certainly because the usual venue for performances of her works was her own musical soirés, or “salons,” which could not accommodate larger performing forces. In fact, it has been suggested that her true importance in music history lies in “the stimulus that she gave to the musical life of her day” in these salons, rather than in her own creative work. The phenomenon of the salon, along with the concept of “salon music,” raises a thorny issue in the study of women composers.

Salons apparently originated as literary gatherings, beginning in the early seventeenth century, almost always hosted by women; they became important institutions of private music-making and hosted the premieres of many important works by Beethoven, Chopin, and others. Yet the home was generally considered “a female domain,” and the salon audience came to be viewed as an “undiscriminating clientele, composed mostly of women . . .” Thus, the phrase “salon music” has come to suggest triviality and amateurism, with smaller works like piano pieces and songs often accorded less respect than symphonies or concerti simply on the basis of their scope. Such an unfortunate assumption would underestimate the worth not only of much music by women, but also many works by the best-known masters of musical composition: while Schubert’s *Lieder* and Chopin’s *Nocturnes* were clearly intended for the drawing-room, we find much to study and enjoy in such pieces.

Among the more serious and substantial genres of “salon music” is the piano sonata, a work usually consisting of three or four movements and employing sophisticated formal techniques. Mozart composed approximately two dozen keyboard sonatas, Haydn close to four dozen; Martínez reportedly wrote thirty-one, though most are now lost. Martínez’ *Sonata in A major*, composed in 1765, ably illustrates the early phases of what would become the most widely used structure in Classical and Romantic music, *sonata-allegro* form. The first movement presents two contrasting themes in different keys, with an artful transition between them, followed by transposition and fragmentation of both themes in a development section, then a recapitulation which restates both themes in the original key (rather than in contrasting keys); this scheme represents the basis of *sonata-allegro* form. Perhaps more immediately noticeable to the ear is the complex nature of Martínez’ melodies and accompaniments; they overflow with rhythmic variety and ornamentation, in

the highly decorative style associated with the Pre-Classical or "Rococo" period. Melodies tend to fall into groups of short phrases, in contrast to the more continuous thread of Baroque melody; the left-hand part varies from almost continuo-like chordal accompaniment to an equal partnership with the right-hand's melodic and rhythmic virtuosity. The movement has both flash and logic, a balance frequently heard in the best Classical-period works.

The second movement of Martínez' Sonata in A major uses a related key (A minor) and a simpler version of sonata-allegro form that might just as easily be classified as binary form, the structure found in many Baroque keyboard pieces; such a "transitional" form teaches us much about the evolution of musical forms and conventions. This movement also makes use of a standard accompaniment called an Alberti bass, featuring regularly alternating pitches that outline basic harmonies--a pattern frequently associated with Mozart. The third and final movement of the work combines the mood of a lively minuet (frequently found in Classical third movements) with rounded binary form, a sort of compromise between binary and sonata-allegro forms that appears throughout mid-eighteenth-century music.

A final issue to be addressed with respect to Martínez' Sonata is whether it should be performed on the harpsichord or the newer piano. Haydn and Mozart wrote for both instruments, each changing over to the piano late in his career. While Martínez was referred to as a pianist rather than a harpsichordist as early as 1773, the Sonata in A major was published in a harpsichord anthology in 1765. Recordings are currently available on both harpsichord and on fortepiano (an early form of the piano); Martínez' style suits both instruments well.

Though we know relatively little of Martínez, we know even less of some of her female contemporaries. Marianna von

Auenbrugger (d. 1786) was another friend of both Haydn and Mozart, respected as a composer of keyboard sonatas, but absent from the standard biographical reference works in music. Amélie-Julie Candeille (1767-1834), a singer, pianist, harpist, and composer, is said to have "moved with assurance in the professional, men's world of music," but her music is generally unavailable in scores or recordings. Several other women of the Classical period deserve further attention.



Luoise Farrenc

By the nineteenth century, professional and educational opportunities for women had expanded somewhat, but many women were still restrained by family objections or notions of decorum. Particularly distressing is the case of Fanny Hensel (1805-1847), whose father maintained that for her, music "must only be an ornament" and insisted that she prepare for her "real calling, the *only* calling of a young woman--I mean the state of a housewife . . ." Hensel's famous brother Felix Mendelssohn discouraged her from publishing her music, asserting that she was "too much a woman for that, as is proper, and looks after her house and thinks neither about the public nor the musical world . . ." Despite these obstacles, Hensel composed hundreds of pieces of music, finally submitting a few of them to publishers in the last year of her life. Most of her works were never published; one wonders what

she might have produced had she found more encouragement.

Similar objections faced many nineteenth-century women composers, along with persistent barriers in education and the professions. But more intriguing (and perhaps troubling) are the women composers who received encouragement and achieved professional successes--and yet are practically lost to history. For example, Agathe Backer-Grøndahl (1847-1907), a Norwegian concert pianist and composer, had a triumphant performing career and wrote hundreds of pieces (over one hundred of them published), in a style that has been likened to that of Mendelssohn; she even claimed that her roles as a wife and mother gave her the experience it took to become an artist. The parents of Luise Le Beau (1850-1927) moved their family more than once in order to secure the best musical environment for their daughter, who succeeded as a pianist, composer, and music critic. She composed over sixty works, in various genres, over half of them published; she earned favorable reviews, the admiration of renowned composers Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) and Franz Liszt (1811-1886), and an international award. But neither Backer-Grøndahl nor Le Beau appears in the standard musical canon today. It seems likely that their exclusion reflects the prejudicial attitudes of the nineteenth-century historians who could have preserved their legacy. Typical was a critic of Le Beau who wrote in 1883, "Certainly a man, when he finds a feminine name listed on the program of the fourth chamber music concert, would cherish a slight misgiving concerning the worth and success of this composition, for, in general, one cannot trust all that much the productive capacity of women in the area of music. From the eighteenth century until well into the twentieth, many historians claimed that women lacked the emotional control, intellectual capacity, or creative imagination that a competent composer needs. Such bias surely accounts for some of the difficulties in finding information on and music by women composers today.

Among the women whom music history textbooks have inexplicably ignored is Louise Dumont Farrenc (1804-1875), a composer, pianist, teacher, and scholar--in short, a successful woman who seems to have been accepted by the musical establishment of her day, though she is now all but forgotten. A descendant of several artists who enjoyed royal patronage, she received excellent musical training while still an adolescent. Her earliest published compositions appeared in 1825, shortly after her marriage to flutist and music publisher Aristide Farrenc. Far from stifling her professional ambitions, her marriage appears to have broadened her musical interests. She and her husband collaborated on *Le trésor des pianistes*, a multi-volume, annotated collection of keyboard music spanning three hundred years; Aristide did the historical and biographical research, while Louise played a key role in making editing decisions and wrote a detailed introduction on ornamentation. She performed regularly as a piano soloist and accompanist, and she held a position as professor of piano at the Paris Conservatoire from 1842 until 1873--the only woman musician at the Conservatoire in the nineteenth century to hold a permanent chair of this rank and importance. Her *Nonetto* (piece for nine instruments), op. 38, brought her such renown that the director of the Conservatoire "raised her salary to a level comparable to that received by male professors in the instrumental division."

Farrenc composed mostly piano and chamber music, and her Piano Quintet No. 1, op. 30 (composed in 1839), typifies her style. It combines the order and logic of Classical forms with the lyrical melodies and dramatic harmonies of the Romantic style--a balance also characteristic of the music of Brahms. Its four movements take the conventional nineteenth-century forms: sonata-allegro form for the first and last movements, a slow rondo for the second movement, and a lively scherzo for the third movement. Especially notable are the virtuoso quality of the piano part and the movement of the melody through

all instruments except the double bass. The very fast scherzo, by definition a playful movement, nevertheless uses complex imitative and developmental procedures; its elfin lightness recalls Mendelssohn's style, while the aggressive syncopation of the contrasting middle section suggests a Beethovenian influence. The finale contrasts long passages of nearly perpetual motion with a typically Romantic theme marked *dolce* (sweet) and *espressivo* (expressive). Throughout the work, memorable themes, graceful modulations, and diverse textures offer ample material for analysis of the early Romantic style.

Farrenc's first Piano Quintet, along with her second work in the same genre (1840), "established Farrenc's reputation among critics and cognoscenti"; her two piano trios were also well received. Each of her three symphonies was performed more than once, and her piano *Etudes* were adopted by the Conservatoire as required study for all piano classes. Yet her fame and success in her own time did not translate into the immortality achieved by male composers who wrote in these genres, for example, Felix Mendelssohn and Robert Schumann.

Whether or not simple (and regrettable) bias explains our relative lack of knowledge concerning women composers, the situation has recently shown steady improvement, as these artists have received increasing scholarly attention. In the last ten to fifteen years, dozens of publications have addressed the general history of women in music, explored the question of gender in music and musicology, offered comprehensive studies of individual women, and provided the first modern scores--in some cases the first printed scores--for music by women. Perusal of these materials gives one a sense of significant accomplishments unheralded and enormous promise unfulfilled--even as they stimulate the scholar, musician, and/or listener to learn more about these remarkable women and their work.

In addition to Farrenc, Martínez, and Jacquet de la Guerre, many other women composers could be selected for inclusion in the standard music history canon, as representatives of important stylistic trends and for insight into some intriguing aspects of social and cultural history. On the other hand, such efforts to expand the conventional survey should not be so extensive as to skew the realities of history: until the present century, the female composer was relatively rare, and male composers created masterpieces that must continue to form the bulk of the musical canon. The in-depth study of women composers will most appropriately remain a specialty, to be addressed in an elective beyond the survey courses--an elective packed with fascinating life stories, provocative philosophical questions, and attractive music.



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