

MARIE JAËLL AND THE OTHER
WOMEN FRENCH COMPOSERS FROM
THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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At the time when Marie Jaëll was taking up composition, women composers were no longer unusual within French musical life, as they had been in preceding centuries and in the first half of the nineteenth century. The years 1870-1920, in contrast, represent a burgeoning period, as is reflected in the concert programmes of the Société Nationale de Musique, the Société Musicale Indépendante and the symphonic concert societies. Alongside Clémence de Grandval, Augusta Holmès and Cécile Chaminade, Marie Jaëll was part of the quartet of women composers who enjoyed both public success and the high regard of their peers at this time.

At many points, her career path differs from those of her three colleagues. In particular, she came belatedly to composition. The other three all set out on their careers at an early stage, having benefitted in their adolescence from composition classes from professional musicians, a form of training which they then completed as adults, respectively with Camille Saint-Saëns, César Franck and Benjamin Godard. Such training would have taken the form of private classes (well-to-do family circumstances being assumed), and was similar to that followed by women composers from earlier periods when women had no access to the classes at the Conservatoire de Paris in that discipline. Marie Jaëll is the only one of the four to have been taught within the established system. Being of provincial and rural origin, she was fortunate to have parents who took little account of the social

conventions held by Parisian bourgeois circles; it is known that Cécile Chaminade's father, when faced with his daughter's prodigious talent, forbade her from entering into the Conservatoire. In addition, Jaëll would have been able to study composition within the institution – the note 'for men' attached to the appropriate classes having disappeared from the regulations from 1850 onwards. The attendance of young women in these classes was scarcely registered until the end of the 1870s, and one can imagine that Marie Jaëll was not encouraged to break down what continued to be a very strong prejudice, the supposed incapacity of women to approach a superior level of composition. After reaching the age of 25, she took classes, first with César Franck, and then with Camille Saint-Saëns.

If access to a musical education through singing and piano lessons became a compulsory element of the training of young women of the rapidly-developing middle class during the course of the nineteenth century, such an education was not designed to open the way to a career as a female professional musician. At the same time, any such talent was an asset for eventual social advancement as a result of marriage, as well as for the status with which the family was consequently accorded. In such times when women were denied access to university studies and to the profitable professions – especially the highly-qualified ones – marriage was the only route open towards becoming well-off, unless a woman possessed a personal fortune or chose to pursue 'amorous adventures'. However, like with the theatre, the musical world offered an exception to this general rule: from the reign of Louis XIII onwards, professional women musicians acted as members of the royal court ensembles, and the singers of the Académie Royale de Musique paved the way for female singers to lead distinguished careers in the opera. In the eighteenth century this was followed by the emergence of women keyboard players and by a few female players of other instruments. The Conservatoire became the first professional mixed teaching institution, a century before the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the universities. Some amateur women musicians were thus able to sidestep the prohibitions of their social backgrounds in order to perform beyond the domestic realm as opera singers or pianists; in this way, on reaching adulthood Clémence de Grandval, Augusta Holmès and Cécile Chaminade gained reputations as experienced performers in the

Parisian musical world, establishing a network of contacts which would come in use to them in their careers as women composers.

The importance of marriage within women's life history, with its undivided focus on the ensuing obligations in the domestic realm, became, in the nineteenth century, a source of conflict for every woman musician with ambitions in a professional sphere. The composers Nadia Boulanger and Henriette Renié were among those who opted for celibacy in order to be able to focus totally on their calling. They may also have given up potential motherhood out of fear of the implications for their lives – maternal mortality being high at that time; as an example, the composer Mel [Mélanie] Bonis became the third wife of a manufacturer whose two previous wives had both died in childbirth. What then, about Marie Jaëll? Like the women composers Louise Farrenc (the wife of a flute player and music editor) and Loïsa Puget (married to a playwright) before her, she was fortunate in becoming the wife of an artist who not only understood her talent, but both encouraged it and associated it with his own work. Married in 1866, Marie and Alfred Jaëll gave a number of concerts together before Marie started her compositional studies in 1870. Alfred's correspondence with Franz Liszt vouches for his encouragement of his wife at the point when she started taking an interest in composing. The couple repeatedly gave Marie's *Valses* in performance. Alfred played the *Andante* and the *Scherzo* from her *Piano Quartet* during one of his tours in the north of France in 1877. By the time of her husband's death in 1882, Marie Jaëll had already composed half of her eventual output. The couple remained childless but, as is indicated by the careers of Pauline Viardot, Augusta Holmès and Clémence de Grandval, the presence of children would not necessarily have hindered Marie Jaëll as a composer; at that time it was the custom in the well-off circles to entrust the children to wet nurses and to governesses. However, despite the support of her husband, Marie Jaëll wrote:

For the woman, talented or otherwise, the man tends to take more or less everything for which strength is required in order to produce. He takes her life. I have lost sight of all my dreams on so many occasions as a result of one single action. The union of two beings can certainly be a fine, splendid and wonderful thing; but [...] must the female always give in and make the choice between the wings of the body and those of the heart, sacrificing each other? Cannot

she support four wings? It is a mystery which I have wanted to see an end to; was the dream too rash?

(Thérèse Klipffel, 'Biographie', Marie Jaëll, p16)

This observation is a good example of the constant conflicts that existed between the private and public realms facing women, raised as they were in an ideal of complete dedication to the family:

Let us believe and let us proclaim that the woman must, above all, remain in the home. This is excellent. But she must have such a home. It should be sufficient that female work, whatever it is, should not possess, as its driving force, the unhealthy tendency toward feminism. Let the driving force be making a contribution to the familial work when the family has come into existence; an element of independence and of dignity of existence, when it has not. But never something which dissipates, something capable of taking the woman away from her natural and normal functions, those which in their happy accomplishment she will always find the best chances for satisfaction, for esteem from others and for esteem from herself.

(Tante Marguerite, *La femme qui réussit*, p298)

Where then does composition fit into their lives? How do they find the necessary energy for the advancement of their work? Can a woman hope to achieve the standing of a professional composer? It comes as no surprise that Clémence de Grandval and Augusta Holmès left behind them important bodies of work, similar in size to those of their male contemporaries. Both came from affluent backgrounds. In addition, the first received the unstinting support of a music-loving husband who fulfilled the role of secretary, whilst the second never married, leaving the education of the children that she bore by Catulle Mendès to other family members. Beyond her role as 'housekeeper' (albeit assisted by domestic servants it is always the wife who sees to the household duties), Marie Jaëll needed to earn her living by concerts and by teaching work, as Louise Farrenc was required to do before her. Like every woman of the time, Jaëll was also expected to attend to matters regarding her appearance, to complex wardrobes demanding numerous fittings.

As long as a woman composer wrote vocal, piano or chamber music, she could, if she was also herself a pianist, promote her works

with the assistance of associates, professional musicians – both male and female – whom she had convinced of her talent. It was a quite different matter with the symphonic and operatic repertoires, where conductors and institutional decision-makers needed to be convinced before making their decisions. The woman composer's personality was thus a determining factor, as quite clearly was also the case with male composers, but with the added difficulty of prejudices against the intellectual capacities of women and the expectations of a society which extolled reserve and modesty as feminine qualities. In addition to their privileged positions, Clémence de Grandval and Augusta Holmès were 'fighters'; Louise Farrenc, Cécile Chaminade and Mel Bonis were introverts; Louise Héritte-Viardot (the daughter of Pauline Viardot) was a dark and tormented character, little inclined towards making compromise. Marie Jaëll was forever prey to doubt, and her correspondence with Théodore Parmentier is witness to this; this lack of confidence in herself was without doubt the reason why she published only little, even in a situation when the most important publishers were welcoming women composers into their catalogues.

Thus, only Clémence de Grandval and Augusta Holmès truly managed to move into the field of symphonic concerts and to have their works performed on operatic stages. The music of Augusta Holmès was scheduled on twenty-four occasions by the Association Artistique des Concerts Colonne between 1876 and 1900 and it was performed repeatedly by Pasdelpou and Lamoureux; her opera *La Montagne noire* was première at the Opéra de Paris in 1895. Besides her regular presence in the programmes of the concert societies, Clémence de Grandval had her *Messe* and *Stabat Mater* with orchestra regularly performed – particularly in churches in Paris and in the provinces; she had access to the Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique in 1868 and to the Grand-Théâtre de Bordeaux in 1892. Cécile Chaminade enjoyed repeated success with her symphonic music between 1881 and 1890, before withdrawing into a level of output dominated almost exclusively by *mélodies* and piano pieces. When Marie Jaëll addressed the question of the symphonic repertory with her concertos, she benefitted from her renown as a virtuoso. She was in a position to perform her *Concerto no 1 in D minor* nine times between its première in 1877 and 1880. Her *Cello Concerto in F major* (1884) was played several times by its dedicatee, Jules Delsart.

She herself performed her *Piano Concerto in C minor* at three concerts in 1884 and 1885. However, her works for voice and orchestra, *Ossiane* (1879) and *Am Grabe eines Kindes* (1880) were never performed again following their first performances and no pianist played her concertos more than the once. As with Cécile Chaminade, Marie Jaëll brought her symphonic ambitions to a close, but in an even more radical manner, as she composed virtually nothing after 1894, the publication date for her *Pièces* for piano, whose implicit orchestral writing she was nevertheless to stand up for in 1916.



The four women composers share an overall positive reception from the musical critics. This welcome remains however androcentric and the composer's sex is never ignored. If the most *handsome* compliment that could be made at that time to these artists was that they had written 'like a man', such a feeling of a too-present masculinity is disturbing: Arthur Pougin, in his enthusiastic review of Marie Jaëll's *Concerto in C minor*, praised 'the rare and precious qualities of this powerful, impassioned and poetic artist, from whom one might only hope for a little more *feminism*', this last term then being understood as 'femininity' (*Le Ménestrel*, 1885, p72). This feeling of discomfort and unease amongst contemporaries reflects the profound sensation of the unnatural exception which a woman composer was considered to represent: one who walks away from the 'domestic' and thus the 'feminine' musical genres – which are *mélodies* and piano pieces – and attempts to establish herself in the symphonic and operatic fields, these at the time being perceived as being essentially masculine and inevitably to be articulated in the public domain, a masculine place. One of the particular consequences of the 'illegitimacy' of the female artist – operating against her 'nature of woman' – was the disappearance of her works from the repertory after she had died or had brought her creative activities to an end. No tradition of the reception of the music composed by women is going to ensure the continued existence of her work.

This illegitimacy can be seen in the twentieth century in music history writing, which happened almost without the presence of female musicians – apart from opera singers – until relatively recently when, under the impetus of the 1970s feminist wave, a rereading of

the past has been slowly emerging. Slowly indeed, since one can still read in a recent work:

Women, both as composers and as performers, played a completely secondary rôle in nineteenth-century piano history.

(Rossana Dalmonte, "Le piano au XIX^e siècle", *Musiques*, Vol 4, p1168)

It needs to be recorded that, despite a growing interest in women composers from the past, the conditions for posthumous revival are unequal. Augusta Holmès' output, divided as it is between *mélodies* (a genre currently neglected in the concert hall) and symphonic and operatic works (costly to perform) is problematic, despite the fact that it all exists in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and in the Bibliothèque de Versailles. In the case of Clémence de Grandval, only her oboe pieces have truly commanded attention so far: her symphonic, sacred and operatic works are handicapped by the almost total disappearance of their orchestral parts. Cécile Chaminade suffers from her image as a 'woman salon composer'. The dramatic revivals of the oeuvres of Marie Jaëll and Mel Bonis have been possible because of the works' accessibility (held respectively in the Bibliothèque Nationale Universitaire de Strasbourg and in family archives), because of their versatile natures and finally because of existing and new editions volunteered by male and female musicians alike, impassioned by their talent.
