

Women at the Piano

Solo Works by Female Composers
of the Nineteenth Century

Edited by Nicholas Hopkins



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Introduction

“Nannerl”

The whole education of women ought to relate to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to make herself loved and honored by them, to raise them when young, to care for them when grown, to counsel them, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and sweet—these are the duties of women at all times, and they ought to be taught from childhood.

— Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or on Education*, 1762¹

In a letter of August 1763, a proud Leopold Mozart wrote to his friend Lorenz Hagenauer, “Nannerl no longer suffers by comparison with the boy, for she plays so beautifully that everyone is talking about her and admiring her execution.”² In the following summer, a still prouder Leopold composed another letter for Hagenauer, elaborating in greater details on the progress of his children: “What it all amounts to is this, that my little girl, although she is only twelve years old, is one of the most skillful players in Europe, and that, in a word, my boy knows in his eighth year what one would expect only from a man of forty.”³ His two children, Maria Anna Walburga Ignatia, born in 1751, and Wolfgang Amadeus, born in 1756, as well as their mother Anna Maria Pertl, had been engaged on a three-and-a-half-year tour of Europe—the “Grand Tour,” as it has come to be known—visiting the major European capitals and playing before distinguished members of nobility. They had entertained and astounded such dignitaries as Louis XV in Paris, George III in London and Empress Maria Theresa in Vienna. They had greatly expanded their musical horizons beyond what was offered in their native provincial Salzburg, experiencing new cultures and learning new languages. They were rewarded with priceless gifts. Leopold, always respected as an outstanding teacher and violinist, returned to Salzburg a celebrity: “He and his children had written a new chapter in the history of music, and were celebrated throughout Europe beyond all expectation.”⁴

“Nannerl,” the nickname given by Wolfgang to his older sister, began harpsichord and fortepiano lessons with her father at age seven. The three-year-old Wolfgang was most likely drawn to music through observing his sister; perhaps this was also a way to reclaim some of the paternal attention that she was receiving. Leopold would be their only teacher, instructing them in writing, reading, arithmetic, history and geography; and, of course, extensive training in all aspects of music. Instruction would involve performance on the keyboard and violin, singing and, as was compulsory for their time, composition, which entailed detailed studies in theory, harmony and orchestration. Regrettably, none of Nannerl’s compositions has survived, yet she must have mastered these topics as thoroughly as Wolfgang did. For example, when Wolfgang first undertook symphonic composition at age eight, she assisted him in matters related to orchestration.⁵ And in a letter of 1770, Wolfgang would express great admiration for a song she had written, observing that, “I was truly amazed that you could compose so well...you should try this more often.”⁶ Clearly, Nannerl must have been an able composer as well as a crucial musical pedagogue for Wolfgang, both assisting with advanced topics and supplementing concepts taught by Leopold.

The “Grand Tour” that the Mozart family undertook from 1763 to 1766 would prove to be a high point in Nannerl’s musical career; unlike Wolfgang, it would prove to be her last. In 1769, Wolfgang, now age thirteen, and Leopold embarked on their first tour of Italy, although without Anna Maria and Nannerl, now age eighteen. Three more trips to Italy would follow in the next four years, all of which were undertaken without mother and sister. These Italian trips would prove to be immensely rewarding for Wolfgang. It was a period of important exposure to Italian music—opera, in particular—a period for developing crucial contacts and for experiencing events that would influence the remainder of his career. For Nannerl, 1769 would mark the beginning of her life as a domestic keeper with her mother in the Mozart household. Her music training and concertizing would be replaced by servitude and compliance with her father’s wishes. All forms of education would cease, as would the cosmopolitan

1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile, or on Education*, trans. and ed. by Christopher Kelly and Allan Bloom. (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 540.

2 Quoted in Jane Glover. *Mozart’s Women: His Family, His Friends, His Music*. (London: Pan Books, 2006), 20.

3 Quoted in Ibid., 22.

4 Maynard Solomon. *Mozart: A Life*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 45.

5 Jane Glover. *Mozart’s Women: His Family, His Friends, His Music*, 23.

6 *Mozart’s Letters, Mozart’s Life: Selected Letters*, ed. and trans. by Robert Spaethling. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2000), 17.

The Female Composer of the Nineteenth Century

Do not believe...that the artistic career is more accessible to my sex. This is a grave error. The steps are infinitely more difficult, and the good fellowship, which helps so many artists, is in a way shut out from a woman who has the good—or the ill—luck to be born a musician.
— Augusta Holmès¹⁰

History has convinced us to believe that the composers of all the music that we hear are men; which is to say, male composers are responsible for our Western-music heritage. Textbooks, anthologies, dictionaries and encyclopedias on music—that is, the educational resources available to us—confirm this by means of historical and cultural exclusion; women are simply not mentioned. Once we become aware that our heritage is in fact composed of a rich variety of female composers, various commentaries rush to justify their exclusion from recognition by degrading their musical achievements; inevitably, quality determines longevity. Such questions are posed as, why is none of their names familiar? Why is their music not played? Why does none of them equal the stature of, say, Beethoven? *Why are there no great women composers?* The answers to these questions tend to focus on the female body, the female personality and even brain size, rather than the more likely influences of cultural and social issues. In this way, patriarchal society has objectified and has thereby controlled the female composer: Her femininity has become the critical focus, not her creativity.

Patriarchal control in the nineteenth century was accomplished in a variety of ways. One significant way was to restrict the genres and forms available to the female composer. Small forms such as songs and piano pieces were allowed—in effect, “tolerated”—for the woman, but larger forms, such as symphony and opera, were reserved for the male composer. The performance venue would be restricted as well, this being another significant way. Music by female composers would be excluded from the concert hall and the opera house—women were discouraged from composing symphonies and operas anyway—which were places for the male composer. Her music would be relegated to a domestic environment, and this form of control led to the development of the musical salon. Ultimately, such control and restrictions would drastically undermine a female composer’s sense of worth. An “anxiety of authorship” would weaken her self-confidence and lead her to question her role and her abilities as a composer; self-doubt and ambivalence are common threads in the writings of the nineteenth-century female artist. Yet it is important to note that control in this instance does not imply suppression. The former suggests power or influence over an ideology, in the sense of restricting it; the latter, a more thorough obliteration, and this was not the case.

“Why No Great Women Composers?”

There is no female Mozart because there is no female Jack the Ripper.
— Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*¹¹

One justification for the historical absence of a great female composer was presented in a 1940 article candidly titled “Why No Great Women Composers?” by the Swiss music psychologist Carl E. Seashore. Following a checklist of considerations, he concluded that the absence of female composers from history should be attributed to the innate differences in psychology between men and women, in effect, gender essentialism: “Women’s fundamental urge is to be beautiful, loved and adored as a person; man’s urge is to provide and achieve in a career.”¹² Motivation is what is lacking for the woman, simply because she is a woman; culture, society and education are not at fault. Seashore’s arguments will strike modern readers as misinformed, even ludicrous, yet he was not alone. Further back in time, an unsigned entry in *The Musical Times* in 1887 likewise questioned the lack of a first-rank female composer, even a second-rank one, although many women had been successful in literature and painting. The author placed the blame on feminine psychology, concluding that “...it is just one of those odd things in woman, who is altogether an unaccountable creature, full of whims and vagaries.”¹³ In 1894, Edith

10 Quoted in James Ross. “Music in the French Salon,” in *French Music since Berlioz*, ed. by Richard Langham Smith and Caroline Potter. (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2016), 99.

11 Camille Paglia. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 247.

12 Carl E. Seashore. “Why No Great Women Composers?” in *Music Educators Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (March 1940), 88.

13 “Women as Composers,” in *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 28, No. 528 (February 1887), 80.

Notes on the Pieces

Biographical information can be highly revealing for a nineteenth-century female composer, more so than for a male composer, for such details can illustrate the various forms of cultural and social discrimination that she was forced to endure, details that may be shocking for us to realize. For this reason, some introductory biographical data is provided for each of the composers in this edition. However, such information will be noticeably unbalanced, inasmuch as documentation is lacking for some composers, yet abundant for others. Biographical information for Helene Riese-Liebmann, for example, is virtually nonexistent following her marriage—in itself suggestive of her predicament—yet ample information is available for Clara Wieck-Schumann following her marriage, thanks largely to the careful preservation of the composer's letters and diaries. Birth and death dates of certain composers are often indeterminate, as are the dates of some compositions. Establishing details of the lives and works of these composers may pose a variety of challenges, but what is available, regardless of quantity, will assist in the proper recognition of their achievements.

Maria Wolowska-Szymanowska (1789–1831)

Moderato, No. 2 from *Vingt Exercices et Préludes pour le pianoforte*

Le murmure, Nocturne in Ab Major for piano, 3 hands

In the ways that she challenged the gender restrictions of her day, the Polish composer Maria Wolowska-Szymanowska should be appreciated as one of the most radical female composers of the early nineteenth century. Her childhood education in piano and composition was swift and auspicious, yet her ten-year marriage to an older nobleman was unsupportive and controlling. He forced her to remain in isolation to fulfill her domestic responsibilities, yet she eventually separated from him and embarked on a career as an international piano virtuoso, appearing to great acclaim in concerts in the major European capitals. She achieved such financial success through earnings from concert appearances and publications that she was able to support her siblings and her three children. Her playing earned respect and praise from a number of renowned male musicians. Johann Nepomuk Hummel and John Field dedicated pieces to her,⁶⁹ and the German writer Goethe, for whom she performed in Weimar, is said to have ordained her “the charming Almighty of sound.”⁷⁰ Once her children reached adulthood she settled in 1828 in St. Petersburg, providing music lessons to aristocrats associated with the imperial court.⁷¹ In 1831 she died of cholera, the same disease that would take Tchaikovsky sixty-two years later. Her fight for social independence and her ability to achieve it set her apart from many other female composers of this time.

Piano miniatures are the most numerous and most appealing of her approximately 100 compositions, most of which were composed during the isolated years of her marriage. The Nocturne in Ab Major, *Le murmure*, is indicative of her compositional style: simplicity of form, uniformity in texture and rhythm (emulating the nineteenth-century ideal of baroque music) and harmonies based on a rich chromatic vocabulary. The music introduces a character and concept in the opening measures and maintains these for the duration of the piece, for which reason the miniature is the preferred genre. What is especially unique about the piece is its call for a third hand to play the uppermost treble staff. Although not indicated by the composer, the piece most likely was intended for a teacher and a student, the lower two staves designed as accompaniment—this perhaps being the “whispering” aspect of the piece—for a treble part that features complex passagework and brilliant ornamentation, both of which are absent from the accompanying part. It is also worthy to note that Wolowska-Szymanowska's use of the term “nocturne” predates Chopin's more well-known examples. His first set of nocturnes, Op. 9, dates from 1830, five years after *Le murmure* and one year before her death.

Robert Schumann extolled Wolowska-Szymanowska's *Vingt Exercices et Préludes*, describing them, with characteristic chauvinistic verbiage, as written by the “feminine Field,” further noting that “...in character and invention presenting the most remarkable qualities for a woman composer, that we have met with.”⁷² Above all, the etudes demonstrate her technical prowess as a pianist, particularly in the demanding stretches in the second etude, for the left hand in mm. 1 and 5, and for the right hand in mm. 2–5. Like *Le murmure*, the etude introduces its character in the opening measure and maintains this character for the duration of the piece, which, perforce, is short. Despite the harmonic coloring

69 *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, ed. by Julie Anne Sadie and Rhian Samuel. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1995). 450.

70 *A Romantic Century in Polish Music*, ed. by Maja Trochimczyk. (Los Angeles: Moonrise Press, 2009), 7.

71 *Ibid.*, 8.

72 *The Norton/Grove Dictionary of Women Composers*, 450.

Moderato

No. 2 from *Vingt Exercices et Préludes pour le piano* (1820)
(Twenty Exercises and Preludes for Piano)

MARIA WOŁOWSKA-SZYMANOWSKA
(1789–1831)

Moderato [$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 92-96$]

p *ma ben marcato*

con Pedale

rf

rf

Le murmure

(The Whisper)

Nocturne in A \flat Major for Piano, 3 Hands (1825)

MARIA WOŁOWSKA-SZYMANOWSKA

(1789–1831)

Allegretto [♩ = c. 138–144]

1) The indication for the damper pedal in the opening measure is canceled in m. 8 of the first printed edition. It is not clear if this indicates that the pedal should be sustained throughout these eight measures, or if the opening indication is a general request for the performer to use the pedal. The same is found in mm. 9–16.

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Grande Sonate pour le pianoforte

Op. 3, Movement 1 (undated)

HELENE RIESE-LIEBMANN

(1796–c. 1835)

Allegro moderato [$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 92-96$]

The score is written for piano and consists of 16 measures. It begins with a piano (*p*) introduction. The tempo is marked **Allegro moderato** with a metronome marking of approximately 92-96 beats per minute. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major). The time signature is 4/4. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings (*p*, *f*, *ff*, *sf*). The piece is dedicated to Madame La Grande Duchesse Marie Paulowne, Princesse Héritière de Saxe-Weimar.

Etude No. 21from *Trente études dans tous les tons, majeurs et mineurs*, Op. 26 (1838)

(Thirty Etudes in all Keys, Major and Minor)

LOUISE DUMONT-FARRENC

(1804–1875)

Adagio ♩ = 69

The musical score for Etude No. 21 is written in B-flat major (two flats) and 2/4 time. It begins with a tempo marking of Adagio and a metronome indication of ♩ = 69. The piece is marked *[p] dolce e legato*. The score is divided into systems, with measures 5, 9, and 13 indicated at the start of their respective systems. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, trills (tr), and fingerings (1, 2, 3, 4, 5). A large, faint watermark 'Sample' is visible across the page.