

PORTRAITS OF ANOMALY: NANNERL MOZART, FANNY MENDELSSOHN, CLARA SCHUMANN*

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Abstract

Women's Studies essay on the lives of three eminent women in music

"The Education of women should always be relative to men. To please, to be useful to us, to make us love and esteem them, to educate us when young and to take care of us when grown up, to advise, to console us, to render our lives easy and agreeable—these are the duties of women at all time and what they should be taught in their infancy." Rousseau [1] (Section 1: Notes)

"Among a hundred praise-worthy female composers hardly one can be found who fulfills simultaneously all the duties of a reasonable and good wife, an attentive and efficient housekeeper, and a concerned mother." Johann Campe [2] (Section 1: Notes)

In examining our own culture, and in cross-cultural comparisons of gender identity, we have seen now, up until around ten years ago, male bias has "informed" the literature of most disciplines; other than certain super-anomalous exceptions, women have been isolated in their nuclear families, and relegated to the "hot stove" and domestic sphere because of their reproductive functions. Men have been the masters of culture and a male world-view has prevailed. Women are seen as outside, and a threat to, the system that men represent. Power is in male hands and women have been trained to accept it. In this paper I will attempt to show how the three artists navigated the uneasy waters of social prejudice through the trajectory of their lives.

Although women had been composers since the Middle Ages [3] (Section 1: Notes), the advent of the 19th century brought a marked increase in the number of female musicians, along with journalistic recognition, and a wider audience. The greater participation of women in fields traditionally associated with men was brought about by European social and political currents, and especially by the invention of the piano. The climate of solo and chamber works (especially lieder, or song) fits comfortably into the domestic arena, a setting where women had long been accepted as performers. This contrasted with the public arena of large-scale works where opera, sacred and orchestral music were forbidden to respectable women. Female creative achievements of the 19th century - mainly lieder - include works which compare favorably with men, and some of which are equal to the best composers of the era.

As women were excluded from professional positions, (it is said there is no female Bach because no women had a position like his, as church organist with the duty of regularly composing music for religious services), modern musicological scholarship finds women absent from the conventional mainstream, not because of

*Version 1.4: Dec 31, 2006 12:45 pm US/Central

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their non-existence, but due to the nature of musicology, which tends to focus on documents (fewer of which exist for women's music) and artists who were the most progressive and were leaders in style change, as women have not been (until this century).

Social prejudice was a central factor in the paucity of feminine musical genius in the period 1750-1900. In the eighteenth century it was believed that women did not possess the intellectual and emotional capacity to learn and that it was unnecessary and even dangerous for women to acquire knowledge, as it would detract from their true calling of wife and mother. Even Moses Mendelssohn, thought to be an illuminate of his age, cautioned his fiancé: "Modest learning becomes a lady, but not scholarship. A girl who has read her eyes red deserves to be laughed at." [4] (Section 1: Notes)

As women were not allowed to go about without an escort, so concertizing was thought to endanger the morals and character of a young girl. This effectively cut off the meeting of helpful and influential individuals so necessary to catapult a name into prominence. Fanny Mendelssohn, though born into one of the most intellectually and culturally gifted families of the early 19th century, was not allowed to concertize in public until she was 32. Compositions, remaining unpublished, failed to draw the larger audience. Females belittled their own compositions, and required an inordinate amount of positive reinforcement to continue.

As women's horizons and accomplishments were confined to the home, there was a lack of professional training. When a woman did receive training, there was a sharp discrepancy between the high level of training and the negative attitude of society. Women's work was thought to inspire pity in the eyes of experts. To be female implied being amateur, and the air of dilettantism marked any discussion of women's work. Women were required to sublimate their talents to the emotional support of others and to household responsibility. What might have been yielded to an individual woman of genius or charm was not yielded to women collectively as a right. However, the growing need of women to support themselves transformed the question of women's right to work and hold professional positions into an issue of great economic importance.

During the 19th century, the problem became a matter of locating enough trained girls to take the feminine parts. The new interest in drama made them indispensable. Therefore, one of the new movements of the 17th and 18th centuries was the institution of girls' schools. [5] (Section 1: Notes) (Prior to this time, female music students were restricted to private tutoring in their homes, or to monastic schools, where they would become nuns.) Women had no access to study at cathedral schools or apprenticeship to a master player. Despite this, a few women, mostly singers, made their living in low-status jobs.

No history of Mozart fails to mention his able sister, Nannerl, who accompanied the young male genius and their parents on three European tours. And yet, as the catalog of their travels unfolds, there is always that point when the narrative continues without mention of the talented elder sister.

The girl Nannerl's talent is usually mentioned, however. On her third tour with parents and brother (which lasted until 1766) across western Europe, including London and Paris, the Baron Friedrich Meichor Grimm judged that she played the piano brilliantly and performed the greatest and most difficult pieces with an astonishing precision. She was said to have shown an early talent "scarcely inferior to her brother's" (Burney).

The tragedy of the following sentence from Grove's will not be lost on people of feeling: "From 1769 on Nannerl was permitted to show her artistic gifts only at home." She was eighteen years old. While her brother triumphed as a composer and virtuoso abroad, she remained with her mother in Salzburg. When she was thirty-three she married a magistrate at St. Gilgan. After three children, and her husband's death, she returned to Salzburg and lived a simple, peaceful life as a piano teacher. People were anxious to study with the sister of the great Mozart. In 1839, the year of her death, she was found to be blind, languid, exhausted, feeble and nearly speechless - afflicted with poverty and loneliness. [6] (Section 1: Notes) She had tried her hand at composition, with results her brother approved, but none of her compositions survived.

The question remains, what might Nannerl have done if it were true that she was, indeed, as able as her famous brother—perhaps the supreme musical genius of all time? Though they were close until their respective marriages, and her diaries and letters are central documents for the study of the Mozart family, one cannot help marvel at the unspeakable loss to the world.

Fanny Mendelssohn, a further development of the trajectory, showed early on a musical talent comparable to her brother's and was, like him, provided with instruction in piano and music theory from Berger and

Zelter - at which she is reported to have equaled her brother. The Oxford Dictionary insults her twice, once by saying she was "almost as good a pianist as her brother," and again by calling her an "amateur pianist and composer."

Fanny Mendelssohn persevered in composing despite her father's stern admonition against her becoming a professional musician and his insistence that she focus on domestic concerns and not the world at large. Felix's good opinion of her as a composer, central to her self-esteem, and his pride at being the brother of such a talent, stopped short of total support:

"I consider publishing something serious...and believe that one should do it only if one wants to appear as an author one's entire life and stick to it. Fanny...possesses neither the inclination nor calling for authorship. She is too much a woman for that, as is proper, and looks after her house and thinks neither about the public nor the musical world unless that primary occupation is accomplished. Publishing would only disturb her in these duties, and I cannot reconcile myself to it. If she decides on her own to publish, or to please Hensel, I am, as I said, ready to be helpful as much as possible, but to encourage her toward something I don't consider right is what I cannot do." [7] (Section 1: Notes)

Fanny was afforded a deep and penetrating introduction to the world via her comprehensive education and was then denied the opportunity to follow through on her training and participate fully in that world. Abraham Mendelssohn told her: "For you it (music) can and must only be an ornament. You must...prepare more earnestly and eagerly for your real calling, the only calling of a young woman - I mean the state of a housewife." [8] (Section 1: Notes) Though Felix's approval and support would have resulted in the publication of a much greater number of the 200 lieder she composed, her father and brother repeatedly discouraged her from considering composition as a career or publishing her works. Achievements of feminine lieder composers from 1775-1850 are magnificent and admirable, though mostly inaccessible to the public, awaiting serious scholarly investigation, publication, and performance.

When she married Hensel, a painter, at 24, Felix had already launched a brilliant career as composer and conductor. She followed her brother's triumphs closely, while devoting her own life to music "at home." Her isolation, centered as it was in the one outlet of Sunday musicals on the family estate in Berlin, allowed her to compose and conduct works of her own. Wilhelm Hensel encouraged her, though a very negative picture is painted of Felix's reaction to his sister's wish to publish and have her works known, and the notable effect of her limited public exposure on her productivity and self-esteem. She wrote:

"If nobody offers an opinion, or takes the slightest interest in one's productions, one loses in time not only all pleasure in them, but all power of judging their value." [9] (Section 1: Notes)

Three of Fanny's early songs were published in Felix's Op. 8 and 9; a duet composed by her is said to be the best in the collection. ("An des lust-gen Brunnes Rand.") While similar to her brother's, these early efforts show certain individual traits and figurations. In addition, she composed one overture and five vocal works which include orchestra. The majority of her works, including large-scale cantatas and oratorios, remain unpublished. The best composers and players of this era made constant efforts to avoid the extremes of sentimental salon music and pointless technique - two who happened to succeed were Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann.

Clara Wieck Schumann was accepted as one of the greatest talents of her century. What might have happened to her at an early time, I hope to have illustrated in the proceeding two synopses; what Clara Schumann has in common with them is the connection with some great artist or pedagogue. The Mozart children had Leopold, Fanny had the whole of the brilliant circle to which she was born, and Clara had her father, a man whose pedagogical instincts were said to be formidable.

Though more usually known as muse to her husband Robert (a Romantic figure party to a passionate friendship, a devoted wife and mother, a "consecrated loyal priestess"), Clara Schumann made a decisive mark on the musical life of the time, attaining a remarkable success in view of European society's general disapprobation of women in professional roles. As one of the genuinely great musicians and teachers of the century, she brought about many innovations in the musical as well as the personal sphere. To say that she ventured beyond the home is an astounding understatement; when her husband died, a sociological shift enabled fuller participation and she took up again the life of a concertizing artist she began at age nine, in order to support their seven children.

She was among the first to play recitals without the music in front of her and give recitals without supporting musicians. (In other words, as in modern practice.) Her programming and standards changed the character of the solo piano recital. She was a peer and had the respect of Paganini, Liszt, Thalberg, and Rubinstein - and tireless promoter of her husband's work as well as that of the young Brahms, who adored her. She popularized, through her exquisite playing, Beethoven's music, then considered baffling and obtruse. Her concerts were sold out, and she was everywhere greeted with wild applause, warm review, gifts and honors. Still she struggled to maintain her sense of priority as a composer:

"I have already made a few attempts on the Ruchert poems that Robert noted down for me; however, it is not working - I have no talent whatsoever for composing." [10] (Section 1: Notes)

Despite her international success, she is often, in her husband's biographies, a subordinate figure - or a reproach. She has yet to be accorded the dignity of a full-fledged scholarly study. Many of the details of her life have been glossed over, omitted - and the correspondence abridged. And yet no other performer of her century, male or female, maintained a career over such a span of time, playing more than 1,300 publicized concerts in England and Europe. Though beginning their careers with flashy debuts and brilliant appearances, the bulk of her female contemporaries gave up careers when they married or found the pressure too straining. Clara took the whole job of concert-managing on herself; she rented pianos, had them moved and tuned, made all the arrangements for the halls, lights, heat, had tickets printed, advertisements placed in papers and on posters, and tended to her own costume.

Her father considered her an extension of himself, and brought to bear on her his extraordinary gift for pedagogy. In 1816 he married Marianne, whose grandfather was a well-known and accomplished flutist. No credit has been given to the contribution Clara's mother may have had on her daughter, though she was an uncommonly talented signer and pianist. When the Wicks divorced, Clara's mother was only allowed to see her children at Wicks' pleasure, since according to Saxon law they were the father's property.

Though her father successfully trained her as a child wonder (his program of moderate work, physical exercise, performance attendance and contact with distinguished musicians was also used on Clara's sister), he treated her with extreme harshness when she decided to marry. She and Robert Schumann had to take the matter to court; when they won and were allowed to marry, her father took all her savings from her earnings and gave her nothing with which to start married life. Though her husband loved and admired her, they both took it for granted that she would arrange her daily routine around him. In her diary: "My playing is getting all behindhand, as is always the case when Robert is composing. I cannot find one little hour in the day for myself." [11] (Section 1: Notes)

However, Clara Schumann did recognize her own importance as a pianist. Because of the seven children and a husband who ended his days in an asylum, she resumed her concert career at 35. (Robert: "We found the solution. You took a companion with you, and I came back to the child and to my work." [12] (Section 1: Notes)) She considered herself an artist first and a parent second. While on tour, the children were deposited with family friends, grandparents, or in boarding school. She wrote them constantly and the eldest children were put in charge of managing family reunions (often for an entire summer), and arranging concert tours and teaching engagements, as soon as they were old enough. Robert, survived by her by forty years, was amazingly enlightened for the time. During their fourteen-year marriage, and eight children (one died in infancy, and there was one miscarriage), very little is ever mentioned of resentment by either party.

I hope these brief biographical notes have indicated the types of anomalous positions in which societal prejudice placed these three women of genius. There is something hopeful in their efforts; each person of this trilogy succeeded more than the last. Surely women of the future are continuing this trend, benefiting from a fairer distribution of educational and musical opportunities, as women become less anomalies and more acceptable as artists in society.

1 Notes

1. Women Making Music. The Western Artistic Tradition, 1150-1950. Jane Burrows and Judith Tice. University of Illinois Press. Chicago 1986.
2. Ibid. p. 226.

3. Hildegard of Bingen in the 12th century, Barbara Strozza in the 17th century, and Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre at the turn of the 18th century, to name a few.
4. Ibid.
5. During the reign of Louis XIV, the composer Lully began one of the first schools, which developed into L'Academie Francaise. Girls' tuition fees made such institutions profitable, and they soon existed in almost every major city. Ibid p. 236.
6. From the travel diaries of Vincent and Mary Novells, 1829. Grove Diction, p. 680.
7. Women in Music, p. 230.
8. Ibid, p. 245.
9. Ibid, p. 2430.
10. Ibid, p. 232.
11. Music and Women, Sophie Drucker. Zenger Publishing Company. Washington, D.C. 1977.
12. Ibid, p. 91.

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