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Judith Lang Zaimont's Musical Storytelling in *Virgie Rainey*

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Special points of interest:

Judith Lang Zaimont

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Virgie Rainey (2002) is designed in a different fashion from Judith Lang Zaimont's other songs, and from the vocal works of most composers who commonly use poetry as their texts. The text of this composition is chosen from two chapters of Eudora Welty's novel *The Golden Apples* (1949), which consists of a series of seven short stories that are ordered chronologically, concerning the small Mississippi town of Morgana in the first half of the 20th century. The lives of the characters are explored from the time they are born through to their maturity. *Virgie Rainey* gradually assumes the main role in the novel. She ultimately "becomes a figure that seeks to pass beyond the forces that contain and control all of the characters . . . [and] it is within *Virgie* that Welty is able to present an image of southern society that is integrated in all its aspects."¹ The two stories, 'June Recital' and 'The Wanderers' provide "dramatic examples of the shaping power of the act of focusing."² It was this aspect of Welty's text that attracted Zaimont and inspired her to compose the piece. In this article, I examine how Zaimont threads the various fragments of the stories into her music.

Without relating Welty's entire fictional tale, Zaimont takes a different approach in developing the female character *Virgie Rainey*, and reflecting what can be captured, interpreted, and heard about her in the music. The composer allows words to stimulate her musical imagination, and that is what draws one's attention to the composition.

Virgie Rainey is constructed in two Narratives. *Virgie* is portrayed as "an independent, willful young woman, limned in reflection by her response to two emotional pivot points, one deeply saddening and the other rather frivolous."³ Although throughout the piece there are musical contrasts that assist in telling

the story, Zaimont establishes in the music a fine balance between two different moods. To her, there is always more than one way to tell a story, interpret it, and translate mood into sound.

In her *Virgie Rainey*, Zaimont presents the story in a different sequence from the ordered arrangement of Welty's novel. Narrative 1 is based on portions of Chapter 7, "The Wanderers," whereas Narrative 2 is taken from portions of Chapter 2, "June Recital." Without focusing on a particular time frame of the novel's story, or developing a linear story line in her composition, Zaimont tells a different version of the tale by portraying the present and past time frames of Welty's *Virgie* through her own progression of storytelling. She creates music that is "always fresh, unexpected, subject to wild and sudden contrasts—and yet inevitable in hindsight."⁴ *Virgie Rainey* begins with fragmented stories of *Virgie*'s full maturity in Narrative 1, while Narrative 2 focuses on *Virgie*'s teenage years. Two different musical styles are explored to interpret the text. Similarly, two emotional contrasts are established between the Narratives. Such focusing not only serves as a means of balancing the story of *Virgie* in Zaimont's own way, but it also helps to portray two dimensions of the character's life.

Zaimont experiments with various creative ideas to relate the story and describe *Virgie*'s character. She manipulates texture, musical gestures and idioms to create musical images that enhance the emotions and sounds described in the text. Set for soprano and mezzo-soprano soloists, the work effectively conveys Zaimont's musical message. The piano accompaniment also has its own role: it not only depicts musical gestures and sound images that are vocally unobtainable, but also enhances the

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mood of the text. Throughout the composition, a wide range of expressions is demanded of the performers, challenging both the singers and pianist.

Zaimont treats the composition both as music written specifically for enjoyment, and as a narration. She simplifies the story, telling of Virgie from the composer's own perspective. Different combinations of musical styles are used to capture Virgie's moods and personality. There is also a great deal of dynamic variety in the score, enriching the story line and mirroring the emotional life of the central character.

Zaimont also portrays the text through exaggerated musical means. To aid the performers, she includes emotive instructions and indications for specific expressive nuances in the score. Drawing on various compositional techniques, she tailors the music to meet her expressive demands, and to create dramatic effect in describing Virgie's character in both the vocal lines and accompaniment. Zaimont's musical illustration of particular events is also apparent in her setting of the text, and she uses a variety of techniques to translate ambience into sound. As she explains, "I wanted to keep my music interesting on a moment-to-moment basis . . . the work needed to be fascinating from a sound standpoint."⁵

Although Zaimont's score is shaped in large part by the descriptions in the selected text, she occasionally introduces changes by creating precise moods in her music. Throughout the work, she experiments with recitative singing styles as if she intends to create a miniature operatic scene. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this appears in Narrative 2. There are also instances when Zaimont playfully exaggerates the emotional impact of the music to illustrate certain aspects of Welty's text and the character of Virgie.

Zaimont's selection of passages of text that address *Für Elise* also enables her to experiment with various ways to present this familiar melody to her listeners. *Für Elise* obviously stimulated Zaimont's imagination; she has shared the following thoughts about it: "*Für Elise* is not merely the sum total of three pages of Beethoven, but the Gestalt of every rendition of this lovely piece, from the beginning pianist, to Rubinstein's fluid version and even to its use as sinister background sound in the movie 'Rosemary's Baby.'"⁶

Despite the musical contrasts and different time-frames that appear in Zaimont's setting of the text, unity and consistency between the two Narratives are also evident. In addition, a strong link connecting the two Narratives is achieved through creative use of tones and semitones.

A Brief Background of the Characters in *Virgie Rainey*

Although there are many essential characters involved in Welty's *Golden Apples*, the characters and texts included in Zaimont's *Virgie Rainey* are carefully chosen. Other than the main character, Virgie, the composition involves other secondary characters

such as Katie Rainey, Miss Eckhart, and Cassie Morrison. Zaimont strives to demonstrate the essential relationships among them in order to create a more vivid picture of the story. If necessary, Zaimont also cuts text to accomplish her goal. She explains: "sometimes you have to know when . . . a text . . . is not conducive to what you want to express."⁷

An obvious contrast between the two Narratives is achieved through Zaimont's selection of texts. Narrative 1 introduces Virgie and her mother, Katie, who comes from a lower middle-class family, whereas Narrative 2 focuses on Virgie and the other secondary characters: Miss Eckhart and Cassie.

Some distinctive characteristics of Virgie's personality that are established in the novel are also captured in the music. Chapter 7, "The Wanderers," describes a funeral. For a time, Virgie lived away from Morgana, but she returned to be with her mother. Her understanding of reality increases with the decline and death of her aged mother. Zaimont captures a sonic image of Virgie's vision: "always in the house of death. . . . Not of the death's story, but the living's."⁸ The vision reflects Virgie's deepest thoughts about both the dead and the living, who have entered her life, and her discomfort with the attention of the mourners. When everyone has left, Virgie walks to the river and takes a swim. She experiences a feeling of oneness with the landscape.⁹

The subject of music plays a major part in Welty's chapter 2 "June Recital." Part of the chapter focuses on the personality of Virgie and perspectives on her talent for playing the piano, as well as on several of Morgana's children who also take piano lessons from Miss Eckhart. Virgie earns money playing piano at the local cinema, but she sometimes receives negative comments about her work attitude because she chooses songs that have little connection to the film that is being shown.¹⁰

The teenage Virgie is portrayed as a character who is passionately absorbed in her piano playing, and Miss Eckhart loves and praises her talents as a pianist. Although Virgie plays Beethoven's *Für Elise*, *Fantasia on the Ruins of Athens* and many other pieces that interest her, it is *Für Elise* that is her favourite.¹¹

Miss Eckhart is a German piano teacher, who takes great pleasure not only in her music, but in teaching music and being with children. She performs on the piano "as if it were Beethoven," but the music makes all the pupils uneasy, almost alarmed. It seems to them that "something had burst out, unwanted, exciting, from the wrong person's life."¹² Although Miss Eckhart hopes to pass her artistic passion on to Virgie, the two have never become close. To quote from the novel, "Miss Eckhart . . . was strict to the last in the way she gave all her love to Virgie Rainey and not to anybody else, the way she was strict in music; her love was just as

arbitrary and one-sided as music teaching. Her love never did anybody any good.”¹³

Zaimont also draws on the passage that relates how “Miss Eckhart worshipped her metronome.”¹⁴ The presence of the device was an essential feature of her piano lessons. But, one day Virgie refuses to continue playing unless the metronome is taken away. Miss Eckhart then makes an exception to her usual practice by allowing Virgie to play without it.

When they were teens, Cassie, who is from a middle-class family, always lagged behind Virgie as a piano student. She believes that Virgie is special and that it is only Virgie who can reject the use of the metronome. When later reminiscing about her piano lessons, Cassie tells of hearing Virgie playing a phrase of *Für Elise*; “for years, Cassie thought Virgie wrote it, and Virgie never would deny it.”¹⁵ Cassie dislikes Virgie and is jealous of both her musical talent and of Miss Eckhart’s love of her.¹⁶

Zaimont’s selection of stories from Welty’s novel not only introduces us to the characters in Virgie’s life, but also offers a glimpse into her social environment. In light of Zaimont’s history of promoting the achievements of women in the music profession, her emphasis on the role of female characters in this composition is hardly surprising. As a teacher and through her writings, she has been a source of encouragement and support to other women composers throughout her career.¹⁷ It is also significant that many of her songs and choral works are settings of texts by women.

The Characters of *Virgie Rainey Clothed in Music*

One of Zaimont’s most recognizable stylistic traits is her treatment of rhythm. Rhythmic flexibility and diversity are heard throughout this composition. Rhythmic contrasts occur between Narratives 1 and 2, differentiating the two time periods and contexts of the stories. Narrative 1 has relatively less rhythmic activity than Narrative 2. The former is saturated with eighth notes and long note values, with occasional triplets appearing in both vocal parts and in the accompaniment, whereas the latter Narrative features primarily short note values such as sixteenth notes and thirty-second notes, as well as polyrhythms such as 4:3, 3:4, and 3:2. These rhythms are used to set the atmosphere and to help describe events.

Zaimont chooses to omit a time signature in Narrative 1, allowing the music to unfold in a free-flowing manner. In contrast, Narrative 2 contains continually changing meters and tempos. There are also passages without barlines in both Narratives. All of these devices work to create different musical environments, and are significant characteristics of Zaimont’s compositional style.

Zaimont favours a more flexible treatment of form in her compositions. She explains that “much 18th-century music to me is of little appeal, because the balanced-period phrase

structures drive the music absolutely, to the detriment of harmonic venturing (or misleading) and rhythmic refreshments.”¹⁸ She often turns musical form to her own advantage for exploiting every possible idea and resource in her compositions. She says, that, like a novelist letting a character lead the novelist into how the next scene should play, she allows the musical materials themselves to speak to her.¹⁹

In *Virgie Rainey*, both narratives are cast in composed structures, each having one or two musical introductions. The two vocal parts are not in dialogue with each other; rather they are the narrators taking turns telling the story. At times, they form an interlocking accompaniment to one another.

For Zaimont, setting the text to music is the most important part of creating a work such as this. She writes: “it’s not enough to just frame or mimic . . . the words. Any musical setting makes definite one particularized reading of the words. . . . I know that texts are susceptible of many interpretations.”²⁰

As in Zaimont’s other vocal music, a syllabic recitative style predominates in her setting of the two Narratives. The piano accompaniment is not necessarily notated in chordal-like style; it is crafted to evoke the emotion of the words, demonstrating interesting interactions of music and text. Indeed, Zaimont takes many liberties in setting the text. She arranges the descriptive passages of the story as if they are stanzas of a poem; at the end of each sentence or line of text she tends to use long note values, tied notes or pauses to isolate specific ideas and events.

Each Narrative stresses its opening and ending pitch intervals differently in the soprano; Narrative 1 begins and ends with descending notes a whole tone apart; whereas Narrative 2 begins and ends with a descending semitone. Generally, chromatic pitches are more often stressed in Narrative 2, in order to produce an obvious contrast to the previous Narrative. Zaimont emphasizes the repeating descending notes in a whole-tone gesture in Narrative 1, with the purpose of preparing the upcoming descending semitone in Narrative 2. The musical gesture of repeating descending pitch in the vocal parts is also emphasized throughout the entire composition, creating musical unity.

Selected pitches are used in the vocal lines of the Narratives to suggest the various characters. The pitch G is used in the vocal parts whenever the name Cassie appears, whereas the names of Virgie Rainey and Miss Eckhart are associated with wider pitch ranges. Narrative 1 has emphases on pitches A, B flat, and C on the word Virgie, whereas in Narrative 2 Zaimont expands the pitch range. In Narrative 2 the name Miss Eckhart first appears on pitch G and gradually expands to other pitches as the music and story progress. Throughout the composition, G plays a significant role in the music. Not only does Zaimont begin the vocal lines of Narrative 1 on G and end the piano accompaniment of that Narrative with the same pitch, but she also uses G as building material for sound effects in the music.

Narrative 1 is a partial description of Virgie’s personal encoun-

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ter with full maturity. Zaimont effectively captures the feelings of sorrow and longing that are expressed in the text. She explains that “in Narrative One Virgie learns of the death of someone close to her and then proceeds, as if in a trance, down to the river to immerse herself (in quasi-baptismal sorrow).”²¹ The first two measures of the music begin on pitch G4 (with reference to middle C) in both vocal parts. This brief passage, a setting of an incomplete bit of text (“always wishing for a little more”), serves as an introduction to Narrative 1. The text sums up Virgie’s inner impulses, necessities and desires, and is restated in its complete form (“always wishing for a little more of what had just been”)²² at the end of the Narrative. This approach to text setting demonstrates Zaimont’s strategy of discovering something in the text itself that is a thematic element of the poem, a “global aspect of the text,” that must then be brought forward, properly embodied in music.²³ In her setting of the initial fragment of text, Zaimont bases the two lyrical vocal lines on the pitches G4 and B-flat4, and creates a reflective mood by means of a slow tempo and an expressive mezzo-piano dynamic level. The end of the two-measure section is indicated not only by a double barline, but by the insertion of rests, creating imaginative space for listeners to consider what Virgie might be wishing for.

After the brief opening, Zaimont presents another short introduction which extends from measures 3–6 of the piano accompaniment, and is marked “hesitant.” Pauses and breaks inserted between groups of pitches, and slight changes in recurring musical gestures enhance the sense of hesitation.

The story begins to unfold at measure 7, and the soprano and mezzo soprano enter in measure 8 on C5 and C4 respectively. The entire Narrative 1 concludes on soprano C5, forming an easy transition to Narrative 2. The second Narrative begins with a fragment of *Für Elise*, pitched on E5–D#5. As a further reminder that *Für Elise* is Virgie’s favourite piano piece, Zaimont ends Narrative 2 on A, which is also the final pitch of Beethoven’s *Für Elise*.

Since the score of Narrative 1 is free from notated meters, both the vocal parts and piano accompaniment unfold in a continuous flow. Various musical gestures in free meter in a repeating manner are employed in the piano accompaniment to capture the events and moods described in the text. Beginning in measure 8 of Narrative 1, for instance, Zaimont introduces a free-meter piano accompaniment in thin texture—a soft-dynamic, single flowing melodic line in repetitive perpetual motion, which contains a series of a repeated pattern of eighth-note groups in different octave ranges of pitch G, to evoke the static, calm mood of Virgie. Similar musical gestures occur throughout the Narrative.

Another example of Zaimont’s approach to text setting is found in her treatment of the following passage: “Always in a house of death, Virgie was thinking, all the stories come evident, show forth from the person, become part of the public domain. Not the dead’s story, but the living’s.”²⁴ To bring out the meaning of the text, Zaimont stresses the words “dead’s” and “living’s” in the vocal lines with long note values, and also emphasizes “Not the dead’s story,

but the living’s” with a different musical character and contour in the piano accompaniment. The music is notated with less rhythmic activity, in a rising motion of a two-note group in a repeating manner for “Not the dead’s” and in descending motion for what has remained after a person’s death, creating contradiction between the piano accompaniment and the text.

Various rhythmic patterns are sometimes employed to imitate and illustrate a particular movement, motion or gesture that is mentioned in the text. In the piano accompaniment, there are several different ways of depicting Virgie’s walking style. For instance, two different pitches in eighth-note groups are employed. Zaimont also uses narrow, rising or falling small intervals, with a chord-like bass to interpret Virgie’s pace of walking down the hill. One also encounters silence in the piano accompaniment to represent Virgie closing her eyes.

Vocal lines notated in groups of five to seven pitches in ascending motion with breaks and long note values in between the groups are used in Narrative 1 to portray the sound of the wood thrush singing, as described in the text. Zaimont also uses different note-values and rhythms and instructions such as “stretch” and “very slow, ad libitum” as descriptive aids. In her treatment of the text “hushed its long moment” she captures the moment with a tied note and a pause with the instruction “long” in the soprano part.

Generally, in the first Narrative, apart from passages about the emotional impact of dealing with death and the challenges of living, Zaimont sets texts that involve nature such as a willow bank, river, water, sky, sun, and hill to show Virgie’s transformation. One such passage, for instance, reads: “She saw her waist disappear into reflectionless water; it was like walking into sky, . . . The river, herself, the sky, are vessels which the sun filled.”²⁵ In her musical translation, Zaimont utilizes half-, quarter- and eighth-note values in the vocal parts, with continuous, repeating pitch groups in eighth notes in the piano accompaniment to depict the flowing water.

While Narrative 1 evokes a subtle mood, Narrative 2 is characterized by more dramatic effects and lightness, creating a theatrical, dramatic ambience. Commenting on this, Zaimont said: “[M]y music was always dramatic . . . It would never stay in a single mode of discourse.”²⁶ This can be heard in such early vocal works as *The Magic World* (1979) and *From the Greatland* (1981).²⁷

Narrative 2 has been described as “a delicious comic tale of Virgie’s love-hate relationship with the piano.”²⁸ Zaimont begins the Narrative by quoting the two opening repeating descending-chromatic notes (E5–D#5) of Beethoven’s *Für Elise* in the piano accompaniment, though in different rhythmic patterns. This short musical gesture reappears in various

guises throughout the Narrative in both the piano accompaniment and vocal lines, producing a sonic image of the section of the text that relates how Virgie “would strike that little opening phrase [*Für Elise*] off the keys as she passed anybody’s piano.”²⁹ The Narrative is not only creatively conceived to portray aspects of the young Virgie’s personality, but it is also written in a musically playful style that invites performance. As Zaimont points out, “it’s not enough for a piece to be a document of the composer’s creative vision: it must also, in some valid sense, feel ‘good/exciting’ to play.”³⁰

As the story of Virgie and her favourite piano piece continues in Welty’s novel, we read: “*Für Elise* never got finished any more; it began, went a little way, and was interrupted by Virgie’s own clamorous hand.”³¹ In her treatment of this passage, Zaimont makes some alterations in pitches and rhythmic patterns. She also combines new and old music sources at the same instant, while including additional pitches in between, thus extending the vocal melodic line before reaching pitch A4 as heard in *Für Elise*. An example is found in measure 15 of the soprano part (Example 1).

ing vocal parts are notated with specific performance instructions such as “inward,” “shining,” “*a piacere*,” “easily,” “seductive,” and “stylishly” to achieve the intended vocal colours and effects. Not surprisingly, with such instructions, the performers need to exercise a degree of personal judgment in their singing.

Zaimont is never at a loss for interesting ideas and ways to create sonic images of the text. Musical gestures such as a continuous repeating pitch, and the reiteration of ascending and descending-chromatic notes serve as descriptive devices to capture certain passages of the text. Thus, the ticking sound of a metronome is imitated in the piano accompaniment and vocal lines by a continuous repeating pitch, and the chromatic figures are used at times to describe Virgie playing the piano.

The repeating sixteenth-note pattern, which is heard at the beginning of measure 62 in *Für Elise*, is present in Narrative 2 beginning at measure 30 in the piano accompaniment. A similar musical gesture also recurs elsewhere in the Narrative in fragmentation. In fact, musical fragments appear frequently throughout the composition, particularly in Narrative 2. They add an element of charm to the work and also serve to depict the character of young Virgie, who never finishes the piece.

In Narrative 2, different musical styles, gestures and fragments of various compositions are heard one after another in the vocal parts and in the piano accompaniment. For instance, the fragmented texture and musical character of the passage beginning at measure 12 reminds one of Sinding’s *Rustle of Spring*, and is followed by fragments of *Für Elise*. Since Zaimont does not provide the part of the text that mentions *Rustle of Spring*, the inclusion of a musical reference to the piece is unexpected. However, she has her purpose in introducing it. In the

The image shows a musical score for three parts: Soprano (S.), Mezzo-Soprano (M-S.), and Piano (Pno.).

- Measures 13-19:**
 - Soprano:** Lyrics: "sig - nal that Vir - gie had burst in She would strikethat little op'ning_". Performance instruction: *f* *stylishly*.
 - Mezzo-Soprano:** Lyrics: "sig - nal that Vir - gie had burst in".
 - Piano:** Accompaniment with a repeating sixteenth-note pattern. Performance instruction: *sub. f*.
- Measures 17-19:**
 - Soprano:** Lyrics: "phrase off the keys as she passed an y bod'y's pian - o._____". Performance instruction: *a tempo*.
 - Mezzo-Soprano:** Lyrics: "ev - en the one_ in the". Performance instruction: *commanding mf*.
 - Piano:** Accompaniment. Performance instructions: *(off)*, *poco f*, *sub. mf*.

Example 1: Judith Lang Zaimont’s *Virgie Rainey* (2002), mm. 13–19.

Distorted fragments of *Für Elise* are also heard throughout Narrative 2. At times they are unrecognizable. For example, two vocal lines based on the opening fragment of *Für Elise* are sung simultaneously. In measures 21–23 the soprano holds pitch E at measure 21–22 and moves to E-D#-E at measure 23; whereas the mezzo soprano sings the E-D-C-B-A at measures 21–22 and moves to G#-F#-G# at measure 23. Moreover, to draw attention to the melodic lines, the two vocal parts are presented without piano accompaniment, and the vocalists are instructed to sing with “false sadness.” Zaimont wants the singers to convey a false feeling for the text “She never abandoned *Für Elise*,” in order to suggest a different emotional state than the one conveyed by the music. Indeed, her score is replete with directions for the singers. Throughout both Narratives, the challeng-

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novel, *Rustle of Spring* is referred to in relation to Cassie's piano practice piece as follows: "Cassie's *Rustle of Spring* . . . was hard, harder than Missie Spights' piece."³²

Zaimont aims to establish a close relationship between the novel and her composition through musical references to carefully selected literary passages relating to Virgie and her environment. For instance, the chapter called "June Recital" includes the titles of various pieces by nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers, works such as Beethoven's *Für Elise* and *Fantasia on the Ruins of Athens* among many others, but she makes reference only to those that serve her purpose.

In Narrative 2, Zaimont quotes a fragment from the opening of the second movement of Beethoven's Sonata No. 8 in C Minor, op. 13 ("Pathétique"), a work that is not alluded to anywhere in Welty's "June Recital." This fragment appears transposed into a different key from the original, and with a faster tempo indication. It is heard at measure 54 in the piano accompaniment, and is used to accompany the following passage of text describing Virgie's piano teacher: "Timid Miss Eckhard, for all her being so strict and inexorable, in spite of her walk, which had no give whatsoever. Timid Miss Eckhard had a timid spot in her soul, a little weak spot in her, vulnerable."³³ As mentioned earlier, Zaimont makes use of various musical styles to differentiate between the characters in her score. In contrast to the previous part of the Narrative that tells about Cassie and Virgie in loud dynamics, here the vocalists are instructed to sing legato and *mezzo piano*, in order to depict the weakness of Miss Eckhard.

Several other styles and modes of expression are also explored in Narrative 2. For example, short passages are marked "waltz-like," and a section of the piano accompaniment includes the instruction "clipped military." Zaimont often enriches her score with different textures and tone colours in order to bring out the meaning of the text effectively, and she explores the idea of creating "a 'mock-opera' ambience."³⁴ To help the singers interpret their music operatically, the sections of the work that are set as recitatives include such markings as "soubrette," "flamboyant," and "like Carmen." Whereas Welty refers to the opera *Carmen* in the novel when discussing Virgie as a teenager ("All the time, she was eating. She ate all the ice cream she wanted . . . in the soft parts of *Carmen* or before the storm in *William Tell* . . . even during dramatic pauses in the speaking—Mrs. Ice Cream Rainey's voice could be heard quickly calling, 'Ice cream?')³⁵ Zaimont adds the direction "like Carmen" to her setting of the words "and she played it moodily."

Moreover, certain vocal skills are required of the singers to capture Virgie's intense moods and to create specific sound effects. In measure 82, for example, Zaimont places the instruction "shout" and the marking *sforzando*, along with a music symbol of rhythmic value without discernible pitch (a saltire for the note head) in the soprano part to create a sonic image of slamming the door, "bang," as described in the text. Indeed, precise instructions are

given to the singers and piano accompanist throughout the work for guidance in conveying both the appropriate emotional expression and the meaning of the words. In Zaimont's musical world, a particular mood never lasts for long; dramatic effects are created through changing moods. As she put it, "I do not stay at any one dynamic or emotional level for very long."³⁶

A variety of musical gestures are experimented with to convey the mood of Virgie. There is a moment beginning at measure 79 where Zaimont playfully reduces the piano accompaniment into one melodic line in a higher pitch register, and uses repeating descending musical gestures marked "like pistons" (Example 2), to portray Virgie's strong unwillingness to play with a metronome.

The mood of this passage is prepared beginning at measure 75, where two pitches an octave apart are presented in trills and *molto forte* in the piano accompaniment, reflecting Virgie's insistence that there be no metronome guidance for her piano playing. Moreover, Zaimont stresses the original text: "Virgie simply announced that she would not play another note with that thing in her face."³⁷ Zaimont continues to build tension with instructions for the vocalists to sing in a harsh voice, and by means of a faster pace of *tremoli* instrumental colour in the accompaniment. Through her musical manipulation and expression, Zaimont arouses feelings and emotions in the listeners that cannot be evoked by words alone.

Zaimont is able to develop colour in her composition as well. Glissandi and accents are employed throughout Narrative 2, producing different musical effects. At times, staccato is added on a single pitch in the vocal lines, thus stressing certain words of the text and creating unexpected sound colour. Zaimont says that it is crucial to project what her pieces are trying to convey: "I think of my pieces as both documents of expression (mine) and of communication (making a bridge to the listener)."³⁸

Other dramatic effects are also heard in Narrative 2. At measure 53, the text focusing on Virgie's piano lessons is read rather than sung. Here Zaimont marks the soprano part with the instruction "aghast spoken." This humorous touch adds an air of levity to the composition and creatively catches the listeners' attention. Other sound colours appear in the piano accompaniments of both Narratives. The use of notation such as squiggly up or down arrows to create strumming sounds, long trills in the bass and melodic lines, cluster sounds, acciaccatura and the like not only create an interesting sonic palette and colourful effects, but also serve to bring out the sounds that are unwritten in the text.

Both Narratives conclude with sustaining notes for a few measures in the vocal lines, though in contrasting moods. Narrative 1 ends in a lighter texture, a *piano* dynamic in the

79
S. in her face.
M-S. in her face.
Pno. like pistons *gna*
much *ben ff*
pedal

80
S. *poco f* At Vir - gie's word, Miss Eck - hart quick - ly stopped, *harsh molto f* al - most
M-S. *poco f* At Vir - gie's word, Miss Eck - hart quick - ly stopped,
(8)
Pno. *ffz*

Example 2: Judith Lang Zaimont's *Virgie Rainey* (2002), mm. 79–80.

accompaniment, and a darker mood with the expression mark *niente* (fade away or nothing) on “what had just been,” whereas Narrative 2 concludes with a thick, chord-like texture in the accompaniment, and a brighter mood with the dynamic marking *ben ff* (well fortissimo) emphasizing the words “Virgie’s own clamorous hand,” on which accents are stressed. Such conclusions demonstrate different perspectives and the spirit of the songs in relation to their time: solemn with the feeling of sorrow that mixes with desire in Narrative 1, and the expression of liveliness and confidence in Narrative 2.

Conclusion

Virgie Rainey demonstrates the typical characteristics of Zaimont’s compositional style, and the originality of her musical ideas. She has created an interesting way of retelling portions of Welty’s story. The narratives are musically linked in a variety of ways that fit the situation and fully capture the images of the characters. Zaimont refuses to engage with contemporary stylistic and technical developments; instead, she seeks her expressive freedom, and thus is able to bring about a better understanding of Virgie’s different emotional stages through her musical interpretation of the text.

Zaimont makes use of word painting techniques and rhythmic patterns to build dramatic effects and create musical descriptions. Specific pitches such as G and A, B flat, C are employed to symbolize the names of the central characters in the piece. She devises several ways of presenting *Für Elise*, in order to portray Virgie’s character and personality traits. Generally, Narrative 2 has more rhythmic activity than Narrative 1. Not only is music used as a plot device, but also as a complex and expressive vehicle to reveal the emotions of both the mature and the young Virgie. Zaimont fuses present and past timeframes of the story, choosing two very different timelines to expose Virgie in her music.

Zaimont presents the music in two ways: she has a subtle manner of integrating music and

text to create effect, and she also demonstrates a significant method of projecting the actions of Virgie. A combination of ideas and directions in the vocal parts and piano accompaniment evoke the desired emotions of the text. All of her expressed intentions, including detailed instructions for the singers and accompanist are revealed in her score, and it is for the performers to discover, interpret and reveal the emotions and dramatic power of the work. The composition is challenging and communicative, as well as entertaining for performers and listeners alike.

In *Virgie Rainey* one encounters not only a sense of connection to Welty’s text but also to Welty’s personality through Zaimont’s vivid portrait of the title character. The two Narratives are designed with whole-tones and semitones to connect the work as a whole, yet they are also distinct in themselves. Both Narratives overflow with the composer’s inspiration and demonstrate her exceptional ability to convey the meaning of the words effectively. Various musical styles, ideas, textures and sound colors are creatively and intellectually employed to render the text freely, and every selection of text included in the Narratives becomes its own musical motif for Zaimont.

Notes

- 1 Joel B. Peckham Jr., “Eudora Welty’s The Golden Apples: Abjection and Maternal South.” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43, no. 2 (2001): 215.
- 2 Lucinda H. MacKethan. “To See Things in Their Time: The Act of Focus in Eudora Welty’s Fiction.” *American Literature* 50, no. 2 (May, 1978): 262.
- 3 Judith Lang Zaimont, “Pure Colors,” liner notes for *Zaimont, Pure Colors* (various artists), Albany Records CD

TROY785, 2005.

4 Joe Brumeloe, "A Conversation with Judith Lang Zaimont by Joe Brumeloe" 2010, accessed 27 June 2017, <http://www.agocal.org/music/reviews/rv1112/zaimont.html>

5 Jeff Dunn, "Judith Lang Zaimont." *21st Century Music* 7, no. 1 (Jan. 2000), 15.

6 Judith Lang Zaimont, "Being a Composer—Ruminations on an Undescribable Art," keynote speech for March 2002 Minnesota Classical Music Listening List, accessed 27 June 2017, <http://www.jzaimont.com/bibliography/bibliography-on-being-a-composer.html>

7 Dunn, 20.

8 Eudora Welty, *The Golden Apples* (New York: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1977), 238.

9 James Hammond Shimkus, *Aspects of King MacLain in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples* (M.A. thesis, Georgia State University, 2006), 33.

10 Welty, 59.

11 Ibid., 44.

12 Ibid., 56.

13 Ibid., 64–65.

14 Ibid., 45.

15 Ibid., 44.

16 Ibid., 64.

17 Zaimont has written and/or edited a series of essays and books on women's music and related topics. Among them are *Contemporary Concert Music by Women*, *The Musical Woman: An International Perspective* (three volumes), and several journal articles. On the historical neglect of women composers, she has said: "Women need to become considered as integral to music's historical constitution and not merely as presences sprinkled on its surface from time to time . . . We need to accept that musical women represent a group of musical achievers." "Electronic Dialogue/1: Judith Lang Zaimont," *Sequenza21: The Contemporary Classical Music Weekly*, accessed 26 June 2017, sequenza21.com/Zaimont/html

18 Ibid.

19 Sharon Llewellyn, *Amy Beach and Judith Lang Zaimont: A Comparative Study of Their Lives and Songs* (D.M.A. diss., Arizona State University, 2008), 442.

20 Ibid., 443.

21 Zaimont, "Pure Colors."

22 Welty, 249.

23 Llewellyn, 443–444.

24 Welty, 238.

25 Ibid., 248.

26 Dunn, 14.

27 Ibid., 15.

28 Zaimont, "Pure Colors."

29 Welty, 44.

30 Brumeloe.

31 Welty, 60.

32 Ibid., 71–72.

33 Ibid., 45.

34 Zaimont, "Pure Colors."

35 Welty, 52.

36 Llewellyn, 26.

37 Welty, 46.

38 Zaimont, "Being a Composer—Ruminations on an Undescribable Art."

About the author:

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Mabel Daniels: An American Composer in Transition

MARYANN McCABE



An Ashgate Book



Mabel Daniels: An American Composer in Transition assesses Daniels within the context of American music of the first half of the twentieth century. Daniels wrote fresh sounding works that were performed by renowned orchestras and ensembles during her lifetime but her works have only recently begun to be performed again. The book explains why works by Daniels and other women composers fell out of favor and argues for their performance today. This study of Daniels's life and works evinces transition in women's roles in composition, the professionalization of women composers, and the role that Daniels played in the institutionalization of American art music. Daniels's dual role as a patron-composer is unique and expressive of her transitional status.

Maryann McCabe (PhD in musicology, New York University, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences) investigates issues in American music and current practices in art and music education. She is especially interested in the relationship among words, music, and the visual arts. McCabe currently teaches at the Cultural Academy for the Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn. The author was inspired, in part, to focus on Mabel Daniels because she and Daniels were born and studied in the Boston area.

“Where has this music been all my life?” On women composers in the 20th century

George Henderson

“Where has this music been all my life?” Amy Beach (1867–1944)

I own perhaps a hundred recordings of classical music, bought in op shops and second-hand shops over the past few years for as little as a few cents per disc. Until a few weeks ago, only two of these were of works by a female—Jenny McLeod’s soundtrack to *The Silent One* on LP and her *Rock Concerto* on CD. I bought these because I saw the *Silent One* on late-night TV years ago and fell in love with its soundtrack—and if you don’t hear something you won’t know if you’ll love it or not. But at \$1 a pop, you can take a risk. I’ve long been aware that I was missing female composers and wondered if they existed in the “Modern History” era of music I care about. I knew Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn composed, but the music of their era interests me less and nothing about their works, listened to on YouTube or the odd radio show, had stuck.

But the other day I was op-shopping in Richmond Road and saw a 2-CD set of late romantic piano concertos. That’s my era, but the romantic piano concerto is an over-supplied item, so I could have left it, but noticed a woman’s name among the contents—Mrs. H. H. A. Beach. That seemed to promise something stuffy and Victorian, but I had to give it a listen. And what a marvelous creation Amy Marcy Cheney Beach’s piano concerto is. I have listened to it over and over, in the car, in bed falling asleep, and find myself following the action from start to finish, Beach is a storyteller. I researched her history and learned that Amy Beach was a successful composer in her lifetime, honored until her death—books were written about her during her life—but forgotten soon after. On the same CD there’s a concerto by Edward McDowell that is also brilliant, from a similar time and place, with a similar reputation; this allows us to perform a comparison in which all variables other than sex are controlled as well as possible. McDowell’s second piano concerto has been recorded twenty times between 1934 and 2002, according to Wikipedia which has probably missed a few. Beach’s concerto has been recorded three times, and one of those recordings is the one I added to Wikipedia—the first recording in 1976 by Mary-Louise Boehm, who rediscovered the concerto that year. Boehm (who died in 2002) says in the liner notes that whenever she performs the piece people ask her “*where has this music been all my life?*” Where, indeed.

Amy Beach was as prodigious a talent as music has seen, learning forty songs by the age of one, composing piano music in her head by the age of four, you get the picture. Later in life she recorded bird song and folksong melodies to inspire her composition. She was a piano virtuoso and, like many virtuosos, wrote the concerto as a showcase for her talents, but added a great deal more to it. The melodies are based on earlier song settings of poems by her husband, a successful Boston surgeon, and, according to Beach’s modern biographer Adrienne Fried Block, the concerto is a commentary on her relationship with her husband and the mother who had married her off at the age of 18. Dr. Beach, like many husbands of female musicians in the olden days, extracted from Amy the promise that she would not tour on the concert circuit, unseemly for a married woman, but could instead focus on her composition. This

was a better deal than that offered most earlier female composers, who were discouraged from composing if they married, and while Amy chafed, she made the most of it, despite the presence of her mother, who had moved in with the newlyweds and sat with her daughter as she composed, knitting or interrupting her as she saw fit. Now, Sergei Prokofiev, a prodigy at a similarly young age, took his mother with him wherever he travelled, but is unlikely to have let her stay in the room while he worked. Besides, Sergei’s mother was doting and nurturing of his talents to an exceptional degree, whereas Amy’s was a Calvinist who had tried to restrict her access to the piano. While American male composers of the era like McDowell studied in Europe, hobnobbed with Liszt and Brahms, and so on, Beach, forbidden this experience, had taught herself composition in America, translating classic works on orchestration by Berlioz and others into English as she went.

Dr. Beach died in 1910 and Amy’s mother passed away soon after. When she recovered from this loss, Beach was finally able to tour Europe, where she played her concerto to critical acclaim, fleeing Belgium during the German invasion of 1914 then returning to Europe after the War to praise Mussolini in the press, as celebrities did in those days. When she died in 1944, Beach was both internationally famous and comfortably off; the first successful woman composer of art music in the USA.

And yet, the 1900 concerto, which is her masterpiece, wasn’t recorded till 1976, when it was rediscovered by a female musician.

“Girl conducts symphony” Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940)

Once I discovered Amy Beach, something interesting happened. As I listened through the rest of her work on YouTube, the algorithms kicked in. A lot of bad things get said about algorithms—why did we ever grant AI the freedom of speech we deny ourselves?—but sometimes the system works, and other female composers started to appear in my recommended videos. Classical music YouTube is a different world in any case—long threads of respectful comments like you wouldn’t believe, a model of what the internet could be if the world was more civilized. Choosing music by its date, I stumbled onto the works of Czech composer-conductor Vítězslava Kaprálová, a futuristic fusion of post-romanticism, modernism, neo-classicism, jazz, and Moravian tunefulness. Kaprálová’s story has everything—triumph and tragedy, home and exile, love and Nazis. If it is ever made into even a half-decent film it will win all the year’s Oscars.

Czechoslovakia, as a new democracy embodying the Liberal ideals of the inter-war era, was perhaps the ideal place for a young girl with musical talent and ambition to grow up in. Kaprálová’s father, a piano virtuoso and composer, had been a student of Leoš Janáček, the great Czech original, many of whose works, such as the first string quartet called “The Kreutzer Sonata” and the operas based on the naturalistic plays of Gabriela Preissová, carried a feminist message. She studied music, a double major in composing and conducting, at the Brno Conservatory and after graduating at the top of her class, age 20, conducted the first movement of her Piano Concerto, a glowing, unusually retro earworm of a concerto with echoes of Rachmaninov and Korngold. The next year she conducted

On Women Composers of the 20th Century

the concerto in full with the Brno Radio Orchestra. On each occasion the piano part was played by her father's friend Ludvík Kundera, father of the novelist. Secure in her role as composer and conductor, she seems never to have performed her several piano works herself in concert. Czech contemporaries described Kaprálová conducting as energetically as a man and with the certainty that was a spontaneous exercise of self-confidence. The word "courage" occurs often in the period reviews, and is a quality Kaprálová herself thought essential to her work. Most of her composing, before and after the Concerto, was in a modernist idiom, yet more accessible at first hearing than the work of her contemporaries, composers like Bartók and Berg. To my ears she seems to have synthesized the modernist, romantic and neo-classical ideas of her musical *zeitgeist* with clear tastefulness and not a little humor, rather than making a virtue of difficulty or dissonance.

She also has a wonderfully succinct quality; the songs are short and bitter-sweet. Her story is bound with the fate of her beloved country; 1937 and the growing Nazi threat saw her begin studying in Paris. Some months earlier in Prague she met the preeminent Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů who was there to negotiate the premiere of his opera *Julietta*. Twenty-five years her senior, and already married, Martinů became obsessed with both Kaprálová and her music, dedicating his fifth string quartet to her, becoming her teacher and soulmate, as well as a timely advocate on her behalf. Together they travelled to London in June 1938 for the International Society of Contemporary Music, where Kaprálová, or "the little girl conductor" as the English newspapers called her, opened proceedings by conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra in her *Military Sinfonietta*—a work dedicated to Czech president Dr. Beneš, which the programme carefully explained was in no way militaristic. Her performance was radio broadcast, sent by short-wave to the USA, and rebroadcast by CBS. The great British symphonist Havergal Brian was present and reviewed the *Military Sinfonietta* as "an amazing piece of orchestral writing: it was also of logical and well-balanced design."¹

On the 27th September 1938 the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain would describe the Czechoslovakians as "a people of whom we know nothing," as Hitler prepared to occupy the Sudetenland.

Kaprálová become an exile in Paris after the Nazi invasion of her homeland, which for a time ceased to exist as a country, living on scant commissions and at one point receiving help from Dr. Beneš. Realizing that Martinů would never divorce his wife, she married a man her own age, the Czech writer Jiří Mucha, son of the painter, whose second wife, Geraldine Thomson Mucha, would also be a composer. A few weeks later, Kaprálová became seriously ill, at the age of twenty-five, possibly from typhoid fever misdiagnosed as the military tuberculosis recorded on her death certificate. Evacuated to Montpellier on the Mediterranean coast, she died two days after the Germans entered Paris. Her last words, describing the music she heard as she lay dying, were "it is *Julietta*".²

At her death, Kaprálová left some fifty compositions, twenty-five opus numbers, including a large number of very distinctive art songs, and several chamber works and larger orchestral compositions. A strong voice at a young age, she created a lot in her short life that is perfect, unique, interesting, and satisfying enough to be durable. Kaprálová was equipped not only to write great music, but,

as a conductor, to be seen to do so, and to act as an arbiter of taste—in other words, to become a public figure and a household name.

She was not forgotten in her native land, the Czech composer and violinist Miloš Sokola (1913–1972) composing *Variace na téma Vítězslava Kaprálové* (Variations on a Theme by Vítězslava Kaprálová) in 1940, to be performed in 1957. Nor is she forgotten elsewhere. The Kapralova Society, based in Canada, promotes her music and that of other female composers, and a "once over lightly" treatment of her music and story made a welcome recent appearance in season three of the television series *Mozart in the Jungle*.

If we encounter sexism in the silence of Amy Beach, it is not obvious in Vítězslava Kaprálová's story; instead we have the bad luck of an early death. Two other female composers who should have been serious contenders also died in their twenties—Lili Boulanger (1893–1918) and Morfydd Llwyn Owen (1891–1918).

"A good performance of her music": Grace Williams (1906–1977)

It is something of a relief to turn to a female composer who gets her due in Mark Morris's indispensable guide *The Pimlico Dictionary of 20th Century Composers*, and one who succeeded in being prolific. Grace Mary Williams was a Welsh composer who wrote often in a restless strain of Celtic romanticism, beautiful and ecstatic. Somewhat like the idiom of Arnold Bax or Ralph Vaughan Williams (who was her teacher) to begin with, her style soon developed in ways that are highly individual, seeded with references to Welsh folk song melody and, after 1955, Welsh song design; attractive music with little to date it for an age where the late romantic idiom is being rediscovered by composers and audiences alike. In fact, I might digress here to speculate that the music of twentieth century women composers will become more and more popular precisely because so few of them fell into the Emperor's new clothes trap of dodecaphony and the other over-sold but inadequately musical trends in composition that cost male composers their mass audience and eventually undermined their self-confidence during the second half of the twentieth century. Experimental scales and intervals do frequently appear in Williams's writing, but are used for effect where appropriate, not as a system. Perhaps the rainbow didn't end with Richard Strauss after all—fit that in your canon.

(Fashion is thus likely a third factor in the neglect of music written by women; it's notable that I haven't been able to unearth a single female composer from Germany or Austria, the epicentres of twentieth century music theory).

Williams's *père* was an amateur director of choral music and an unconventional pedagogue who taught his musical family to learn music notation solely by allowing them unlimited access to his library of music scores and recordings. In 1926, already showing enough talent as a composer to win the scholarship created in Morfydd Owen's name, his daughter moved to London where she attended the Royal College of Music. Her teachers included Vaughan Williams, who encouraged his female students, including Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994), Dorothy Gow (1893–1982), and Imogen Holst (1907–1984), to meet frequently to hear and criticize each other's works. Maconchy in particular remained a close friend and correspondent for the rest of Williams's life. In 1930, Williams won the prestigious RCM Octavia Travelling Scholarship, enabling her to complete her training in Vienna with composer Egon Wellesz; the

influence of Mahler and Strauss that can sometimes be detected in her later work can be traced back to encounters in Vienna.

Williams destroyed most of her earliest works. *Sea Sketches* from 1944 was the first piece to show her mature style, said to be the most honest portrayal of the sea in music, its alternatively turbulent, swaying, surging opening is the sea as it is, and not the sea as anyone but the most windswept romantic—say, Shelley on his last day—would want to sail on. Living in London during wartime rationing and post-war austerity on the earnings of a music student wore down Williams's health and optimism (Owen, Boulanger and Kaprálová had all died in wartime), but a return to her parents' home in Barry in 1947 restored her energy and she worked, and became a successful composer, in Wales thereafter. In 1948 she became possibly the first woman anywhere, and certainly the first in Britain, to score a film, *Blue Scar* (dir. Jill Craigie), set in a Welsh mining village. Her Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1950) is a meltingly beautiful, sunset-coloured work, among the best of its type, with hints of Strauss in the first movement and Prokofiev in the scherzo. *Penillion*, a symphonic poem from 1955, shows a further progression as the orchestra emulates the progress of Welsh vocal improvisation, with the orchestral instruments (including her favorite, the trumpet) taking the place of harp and singers. From this period onwards Williams based her writing on Welsh speech patterns (similar to Janáček, who had based his melodies on Czech speech patterns); as a result of such practice she was one of the few composers to be able to turn the poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins into art songs. Grace Williams was offered an Order of the British Empire for her services to music in 1966 but turned it down; a good performance of her music, she said, meant more to her than a decoration.

There may have been more meaning in this comment than appears at first sight. By the time I became familiar with Grace Williams's music, I was getting a bit annoyed; though it has all been performed, there are far fewer studio recordings than there should be, which helps to explain why I've never seen them in second-hand shops. The problem seems to lie in what record companies and orchestras choose to record, with an eye on the bottom line, which is what the public have always bought, which is of course also what they've always heard, which is the male composers, even if it is some piece of music that has been recorded twenty or a hundred times already. The radio stations are a bit harder to explain – Radio New Zealand is practically a hot bed of feminist agitation, yet the RNZ concert program struggled to get Amy Beach on the playlist on Suffrage Day last year, with a correspondent responding to the rather mild explanation of her Piano Concerto given above with “Please don't use Suffrage Day as a chance for more anti male propaganda. We get enough of that from RNZ NATIONAL and RNZ 'news' without having it rammed down our throats by presenters on CONCERT FM [sic]. Have a great day.”

When I compiled 2 hours of works by twentieth century female composers for *The Audible World* show on 95bFM recently, I realized that this was more of such music than I could find in a week (168 hours) of RNZ Concert playlists.

My suggestion is, just add the works recommended below regularly to the usual programming on all the usual days. If necessary, start after midnight where there are no announcers. Listeners—even the grumpy correspondent, I reckon—will love them. There is indeed a lot to be said about these works, but it can be said later. The music is what we've been missing.

Suggested works:

Amy Beach: Piano Concerto in C-sharp Minor (1900), Piano Quintet, op. 67 (1907). Theme and variations for flute and string quartet (1916).

Vítězslava Kaprálová: *January* for voice, piano, flute, two violins and cello (1933), Piano Concerto in D Minor (1935), *Military Sinfonietta* (1937), Partita for strings and piano (1939).

Grace Williams: *Sea Sketches* (1944), Violin Concerto (1950), *Penillion* (1955).

Elizabeth Maconchy: Nocturne (1950).

Lili Boulanger: *Pie Jesu* (1918), *Vieille prière bouddhique* (1917), *D'un matin de printemps* (1917), *D'un soir triste* (1918).

Florence Price: Violin Concerto No. 2 (1952).

Morfydd Llwyn Owen: Nocturne for orchestra in D-flat Major (1913).

There are plenty of others, but you'll need to discover them for yourselves!

Notes

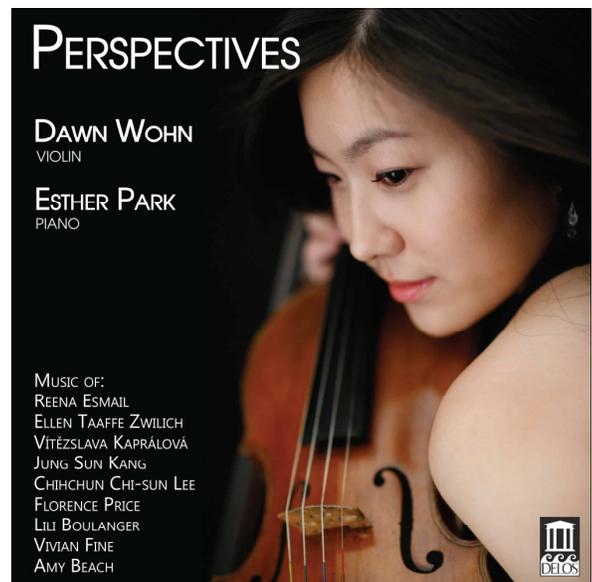
¹ *Musical Opinion*, July 1938, 858.

² as alleged by her husband who wrote about Kaprálová's last moments in his 1988 novel-autobiography. Jiří Mucha, *Podivné lásky* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1988), 431. *Julietta* is a 1937 opera by Bohuslav Martinů.

This article first appeared in Simon Sweetman's *Off the Tracks* on December 5, 2019. It is reprinted here by permission.

About the author

George Henderson was born in Scotland and lives in New Zealand where he has been creating music since the mid-1970s and releasing it fitfully since the mid-1980s, mainly as *The Puddle*. He released a string of Puddle albums on his brother/drummer Ian's Fishrider label. George also writes and records for/as *The New Existentialists*. After correcting various self-induced health problems including those most characteristic of that occupation, he now works at *PreKure*. You can read his views on the Twitter by checking him at @puddleg.



Issued on the Delos label (Delos DE 3547), this recording represents an enviable collection of music from women composers, both contemporary and historical. The disc is reviewed by George Henderson on pp. 14–15.

Women of the 19th Century Salon

Léonie Collongues, pianist, vocalist, improviser, composer

Tom Moore

The musical wealth of nineteenth-century Paris is perhaps best illustrated not by the figures which still remain as part of our musical culture almost two centuries later, but rather by the vast number of composers, performers, and compositions that have descended into almost complete oblivion despite their acclaim among their contemporaries. Among these hidden figures is the Collongues family, namely Gustave-Jules Collongues (father) and three of his children who made names and careers for themselves over the course of the nineteenth century: Alexis-Antoine Collongues (1826–1904), violinist; Gustave-Jules Collongues (1830–1906), violist; and Léonie (or Léonide) Collongues, pianist, for whom we have neither dates of birth or death.

This article will focus primarily on Léonie Collongues, whose career as performer and composer is, happily, richly documented. Many sources explicitly mention her performance in tandem with her brother, Alexis. It would be reasonable to assume, this being the case, that she was born either shortly prior to Alexis, or between Alexis (b. 1826) and Gustave-Jules (b. 1830). The three musical men are listed in the order of their joining the *Association des artistes-musiciens* in the 1850 annual of the association, together with the place of their employment (the Montansier, for father, and the Opéra Comique for the sons).¹ Léonie does not appear, evidently not having joined (or not being able to join) the Association.

I was not able to find contemporary biographies for any members of the family. Claudine Lacoste-Veysseyre provides a brief paragraph on Alexis in a footnote to a letter to Théophile Gautier from 1847 (in her edition of the author's collected correspondence).² Alexis is, perhaps, the oldest of the three children, since he is the first to appear in the press. He is the last musician to be mentioned (as "le petit Collonges (violon)" in a note for a matinée concert for the tenor Dailly, in May 1839, when he would have been twelve.³ Léonie (here spelled Léonide) Collongues is first mentioned by *Le Ménestrel* in 1845.⁴ In 1846, she appears with her brother Alexis:

At the final concert of the Athenaeum of the Arts, the Salle Saint-Jean, we noted the debuts of two young artists of the future, Monsieur and Mademoiselle Collongues de Maubas, who performed a duo concertant for piano and violin very well.⁵

Later that year, in April, they performed there once more:

The Athenaeum of the Arts last Sunday supported two young artists of merit, Mademoiselle Loïsa [sic] Collongues, distinguished pianist, and her brother, Monsieur Alexis Collongues, first violin at the Opéra-Comique. They both received considerable applause.⁶

The duo would be mentioned for a third time in December 1846, performing at the same venue, and described as "two young, talented artists" with a young tenor, Gozora.⁷ The good press continued in 1847:

Among the number of the young artists who take a good place in our concerts this year, we will mention M. A. Collongues, first violin of the Opéra-Comique, and Mademoiselle Léonide Collongues, excellent pianist. At the concert given last Satur-

day, by Mademoiselle Court, Monsieur and Mademoiselle Collongues received considerable applause, and this was just.⁸

The Feb. 28 issue of *Le Ménestrel* announces the upcoming concert for the benefit of Alexis as follows:

A truly extraordinary concert that will keep all its promises has been announced for Sunday, March 14, at 1 PM, at Mr. Herz's rooms ... for the benefit of Monsieur Alexis Collongues, first violin of the Opéra-Comique, a young artist of great talent who is part of this year's series. —One will also hear Messieurs Remusat,⁹ Viereck, Mesdemoiselles Henri and Léonide Collongues, and the little songs of Monsieur Germain.¹⁰

The last name must have been Léonie's future husband, because from now on, she will be mentioned as Madame Germain-Collongues. In December that year, we learn that Madame Germain-Collongues now has her own school for piano and singing:

Madame Léonide Germain-Collongues, who has just opened her course in piano and singing, at 12, Rue Coquillière, gave a musical matinée last Sunday at which Bou-Maza¹¹ was in attendance. M. Samary, Messieurs Collongues, Germain and Mademoiselle Léonide Collongues defrayed this interesting session. The first sextet by Bertini and the grand fantasy on Lucie were enthusiastically applauded. Bou-Maza seem very satisfied with this matinée. He has requested another one. He will have one, since Madame Léonide Germain will give musical performances every fortnight.¹²

Two months later, *Le Ménestrel* reviews another soirée:

The musical society of Paris¹³ gave its second soirée last Wednesday [...] At this same soirée we enthusiastically applauded Madame Germain Collongues, distinguished pianist, who played, very well, a *Reverie* and *Fanfare* by Ravina, as well as the duo of Guillaume Tell, with her brother Mr. Collongues, violinist of the Opéra-Comique. The concert concluded with the *Garçon d'Honneur* and the *Etrennes de mon Parrain*, chansonnettes perfectly presented by Mr. Germain.¹⁴

Sadly, the young marriage would soon come to an end the following year, 1849, with the demise of Mr. Germain.¹⁵

The year 1850 brings the first notice of a benefit concert for Germain-Collongues (she continues to use the hyphenated surname until at least five years after the death of her late husband). The benefit, which was given in the salons of M. Marcoski and took place on December 14, also is the first time we can see all three siblings performing in the same program. Léonie performed *Grand Trio* by Maysseder, with her brother Gustave and Monsieur Lebourg; *Fantasia arabe*; and Grand solo on the funeral march by Beethoven, while her brother Alexis per-

formed two violin solos, the second from *Lucie de Lammermoor*.¹⁶

The name of Madame Germain-Collongues continues to appear in the press along with that of her brother Alexis,¹⁷ whether in a testimonial for a singing method,¹⁸ or in a musical extravaganza with orchestra and chorus, the Battle of Austerlitz.¹⁹ On December 15, 1853, she was a featured performer in a concert devoted to the music of Jules Jean Baptiste Creste; on this occasion, Alexis does not seem to be present.²⁰ A review from the *Revue et Gazette Musicale* allows us to securely date her *Danse Chinoise* (evidently published the following year), and provides the only documentation of her singing in a public concert (although she had opened her studio, where she taught both singing and piano, in 1847):

Madame Germain-Collongues, assisted by her brother, violin at the Opéra-Comique, and by the Société philharmonique de Paris, appealed to music lovers at the Salle Sainte-Cécile, in order to let them hear a Chinese dance of her composition, and to show that with her talents as a composer she unites those of a pianist and singer. She succeeded perfectly.²¹

It is interesting to see that the *Revue* lists her first in a group of three women, along with Julie de Woher, and Louise Farrenc; the latter is still well-known today.

Between 1854 and 1858, Léonie returns to being Madame Collongues; this is how she is listed as appearing in concert with the noted Neapolitan flute virtuoso, Michele Folz:

A skilled flutist, Mr. Folz of Naples, gave a concert last Saturday in the salons of the Grand Orient. There we heard, among other artists, Mr. Porlehaut, of the Opéra, and Madame Collongues, pianist, whose Danse chinoise was encored.²²

In 1862 and 1863, *Le Ménestrel* does not mention in detail Madame Collongues but her programs are nevertheless included in the listings of upcoming concerts. Tantalizingly, her program in 1863 includes the participation of the Cuban soprano, Maria Martinez, known as the “black Malibran”.²³

After a decade with relatively little coverage from *Le Ménestrel*, Madame Collongues returns to the columns of the press in the 1870s, first with a review of her program in collaboration with Mademoiselle Lehuédé (“at the concert by Madame Collongues, the excellent professor Mademoiselle Lehuédé ... and the duo from the Magic Flute with Mr. Maubant”),²⁴ and then with news of her nuptials to a member of the French nobility, Eugène Vincent.²⁵ The union is also reported in *Le Dauphiné: courrier des eaux thermals*, which identifies the father of the groom as the former president of the tribunal of Vienna.

In December 1870, a grand benefit program includes both the performing and composing talents of Madame Collongues-Vincent, who is heard both in a trio for piano, violin and organ (with Hochmell, organist, and her brother, Alexis), and in her own *Danse chinoise*.²⁶ The reportage describes her as “improvisatrice,” which is intriguing. Did she improvise her own creations at the piano? Another source describing this period (after the devastation of the Franco-Prussian war), mentioning a similar benefit event, identifies her as “pianiste improvisateur”.²⁷

The last two appearances that Madame Collongues made in the press

are in 1874, when she organized a concert of ladies in her salons at 40, rue de Maubeuge,²⁸ (a grand residential block in the 9th arrondissement), and in 1877, when she was heard performing at an industrial conference on silk.²⁹

In 1881, her last publication appears, the *Train Poste – Galop*, in which the composer is described as pianist to the Countess Marie Lanskoj. The piece is dedicated to the operetta composer Olivier Metra (1830–1889), and we are told that it was performed by Léonie’s student, Mademoiselle Céline Limendoux, who has left no other trace.

Léonie Collongues’s brothers continue to appear in the press after this date, and the death of Alexis Collongues is noted internationally, with his obituary appearing in *Le Ménestrel* of January 17, 1904, as well as in the *Monthly Musical Record* (February 1) and in Italy, in *Art et Labor* (Vol. 59, p. 122). I have found no reference to Madame Collongues’s decease in the press; one may assume that it took place at some time after her latest publication.

All three of the siblings both composed and performed. Alexis has only one published score that I know of (*Plaisir et Bonheur*, a duo with words by Galoppe d’Onquaire, from 1864), although there are two items in manuscript in the Royal Library in Spain: an album of chant, and a tyrolienne for violin and piano. Gustave began publishing his works in about 1861; the latest is from 1890. They are predominantly for piano solo, or orchestra, or arrangements for violin. The compositions of Léonie are all either for piano solo, or voice and piano.

Léonide Collongues : Selected Works

Danse Chinoise. Eugène Mathieu, Éditeur. 30 Rue Bonaparte. Plate no. E.M. 15. 8 pp. Collection of the Author.

Polka del’ Impératrice pour le piano (Paris: S. St-Etienne). Listed in the *Courrier de la librairie* for 1856. BnF.

Léonessa. Polka pour piano (Paris: Bertin, 1865). Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF).

Les Larmes mélodie. Paroles de Mme Lesguillon (Paris: Emile Chatot, 1873). Plate no. E.C. 790. BnF.

Souvenir d’Orient. Marche pour le piano, ‘Dédié à M^f Jules Favre’ (Paris: Emile Chatot, 1873). BnF. Dépôt: 1873. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3965423> Jules Favre was a French statesman (1809–1880).

Train poste. Galop de concert avec grelots ad libitum pour piano / par Léonie Collongues Vincent, Pianiste de Madame La Comtesse Marie Lanskoj/ (Paris: E. Chatot, 1881). Plate no. E.C. 1776. “Hommage à O. Métra.” “Exécuté par mon élève Mlle Céline Limendoux.” Dépôt: 1881. BnF. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k396543g>

Notes

¹ Annuaire de l’Association des artistes musiciens (1850), 92 (the three men are listed under numbers 192, 1834, and 2516). The Théâtre National de Montansier was also known as the Théâtre du Palais Royal.

² “Antoine-Alexis Collongues, born July 5, 1826 at Orléans, entered the Conservatory on June 20, 1838. In December 1846, while already first violin at the Opéra-Comique, he asked to be readmitted to the Conservatory: his request was refused. After long years at the Opéra-Comique, he became second violin at the Opéra (June 1, 1868) where he remained until his retirement, January 1, 1894.” (Théophile Gautier, *Correspondance générale* 1, 179n1.)

³ *Le Ménestrel* : journal de musique, May 5, 1839.

⁴ *Le Ménestrel*, March 9, 1845.

⁵ *Le Ménestrel*, January 4, 1846.

⁶ *Le Ménestrel*, April 12, 1846.

⁷ *Le Ménestrel*, December 20, 1846.

⁸ *Le Ménestrel*, January 31, 1847.

⁹ The famous flutist.

¹⁰ *Le Ménestrel*, February 28, 1847.

¹¹ Cheik Boumaza (c. 1822–1879) was an important figure in Algerian resistance to French colonization.

¹² *Le Ménestrel*, May 12, 1847.

¹³ perhaps this was the title of Léonie Germain-Collongues's new concert series?

¹⁴ *Le Ménestrel*, February 20, 1848.

¹⁵ "In another sphere, we announce the death of Mr. German, comic singer, husband of Madame Germain-Collongues, distinguished pianist." *Le Ménestrel*, September 9, 1849.

¹⁶ *Le Nouvelliste* : quotidien politique, littéraire, industriel et commercial, December 14, 1850.

¹⁷ Not all reviews were kind to Alexis's artistry, however. *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* of April 20, 1851 printed the following: "Since everyone should have a place in the sun of publicity, for which some rays are at the disposition of the Gazette musicale, we will direct one of these rays to Mr. Alexis Collongues, also a violinist, in order to shed light on the path where he has entered. If we thought it necessary to present some critical observations regarding Vieuxtemps, then we can certainly advise Mr. Collongues to take care with the accuracy of his intonation, precise tuning being the first of the requirements for every instrumentalist who appears in public. We would also encourage him to give as much force, roundness, power as possible to this intonation, amplitude of sound being a condition that is no essential to the art of playing the violin than is tuning. It may also be equally necessary for M. Collongues, as for every violinist, to know that true expression in the melody comes from the heart, and is manifested to the listeners through the intelligent pressure of the bow on the strings, and not through shrugging of the shoulders. Once these premises are recognized and adopted by Mr. Collongues, we think that he will be able to become an agreeable violinist. His sister, M^{me} Germain-Collongues, already has this quality on the piano."

¹⁸ *Méthode musicale de M. Duchemin-Bouisjousse: La Musique en soixante leçons*, Paris, 28 septembre 1852.

¹⁹ *Le Ménestrel*, October 4, 1853.

²⁰ *Le Ménestrel*, December 25, 1853.

²¹ *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, March 29, 1857.

²² *Le Ménestrel*, August 29, 1858.

²³ *Le Ménestrel*, February 16, 1862; March 29, 1863. Salle Pleyel. M^{me} Léonie Collongues, avec le concours de la Malibran noire.

²⁴ *Le Ménestrel*, April 17, 1870.

²⁵ "13 juillet. –M. Eugène Vincent, son of André Vincent, former advocate-general at the court of Toulouse, and grandson of the Baron de Gentet, and the Baroness, née de la Chesnelières-Duplessis, with Madame, the widow Germain, née Léonie Collongues, pianist and composer (8e arr.)." *Annuaire de la noblesse de France et des maisons souveraines* 27 (1870), 322.

²⁶ *L'Orchestre: revue quotidienne des théâtres*, December 1870.

²⁷ Loredan Larchey, *Memorial illustré des deux Sièges de Paris*, 1870–1871, 232

²⁸ *Le Ménestrel*, April 19, 1874.

²⁹ *Le Ménestrel*, April 8, 1877.

Perspectives (Delos Music, 2019, DE 3547), a collection of shorter works for violin and piano by women composers from the 1890s to the present day, starts with a thin and very high violin note, promising something like a late Bacewicz quartet, till this swoops down into curlicues of melody from two Indian folksongs, played with a swift glissando that easily convinces us that this has always been violin music, against sparkling piano arpeggios. This is Renna Esmail's enjoyable *Jhula-Jhule*, based on two Hindustani melodies passed down by grandparents; the setting conveys both the time-travel and the loving aspects of culture shared across the stream of time. It is followed by two Episodes by Ellen Taffe Zwilich, the first of which resembles *Jhula-Juhle* in its piano part; the programming on this CD, which sometimes brings out connections between different composers, is indicative of how well Dawn Wohn (violin) and Esther Park (piano) understand their material – Zwilich's second *Episode*, vivace, supplies some spectacular piano runs against which the violin takes skittering flight. The notes say these pieces are atonal, but they are so skilfully written that they do not sound atonal.

Legenda (1932) is an early work in the short but brilliant career of Czech composer-conductor Vítězslava Kaprálová, composed when she was 18, and the first of 3 pieces she wrote for violin and piano. In this student phase she can be heard as modernizing the Czech influences around her, which she did so well, with her superlative gift for bittersweet melodic invention, that this music still sounds modern. The piano writing is dense, fine musical carpentry characteristic of the older Czech style mingling with Kaprálová's developing voice, and in the pizzicato and double-stopping passages gives an orchestral effect, which Wohn and Park fully exploit. Jung Sun Kang's *Star-Crossed*, the most modern work on the program in both date and style, is an improvisatory meditation on what may be three chords remembered from *Legenda*, with a mid-section in convincing rock ostinato style, and an ear-catching modulatory bridge passage. The highlight among the newer music in this collection for this listener is Chinchun Chi Sun Lee's *Provincia*, "Sunset of Chihkan Tower", an avant-garde work for almost-solo violin, which tells the history of a Taiwanese landmark, and includes a vivid description of aerial combat in sound, complete with bomb effects. Written originally for the two-stringed Chinese fiddle, the ehru, and using both Dutch and indigenous Taiwanese musical material, *Provincia* manages to be scholarly and exciting in equal measure. Praise is also due to the recording engineer, who has captured an outstanding performance in vivid detail.

The two pieces by the 20th Century African-American composer Florence Price showcase characteristic aspects of her music; the first, the short *Deserted Garden* (1933) begins with a bluesy, spiritual theme of painful sadness, transitions to a memory of past gaiety, then returns to melancholy, something no-one did quite as convincingly as Price in this period. As program music, we get a real sense of what this garden means to the visitor as she imagines its past. The undated *Elfentanz* would be worth buying this disc for on its own;

one of Price's happiest melodic inventions, framing an interesting set of ideas in trio form, and perhaps drawn from the same dance as Delius's *La Calinda*, its bouncy yet elegant vitality is rendered by Wohn and Park with panache. Lili Boulanger's short, mysterious *Nocturne* (1911) takes us beyond the conventions of its impressionistic style, with soft jazzy elements that remind us that impressionism alone among the classical genres gave back as much as it took from African-American popular culture, and hints of a game being played with us, an affair of private jokes; when she quotes both Wagner and Debussy, is she being merely the naïve fan, or commenting on a dilemma in contemporary French composition, the very problem she would solve in her later music by welding impressionist tropes into engines of Wagnerian power?

Portal (1990) by the late Vivian Fine is an assertive example of modernism that does not give two pennies for your comfort, but eventually makes itself grudgingly admired, like the intransigence of a cranky relative whom one understands only too well. I do not think that I will ever like *Portal*, but I do not know that I was ever supposed to.

Saving some of the best for last, Amy Beach's *Romance* is a beautiful representation of passion in the Gilded Age; like much of her work song-like, it evokes a world of moustachioed men and bustled women as real people with deep feelings, feelings which they very much enjoyed having stirred by music; and lucky they were to have heard *Romance*, which the liner notes tell us received a standing ovation and encore on its first performance, by Beach and violinist Maude Powell, an early champion of women's careers in music, in 1893.

Wohn and Park's mission was to present rarely-heard music by a diverse selection of female composers; they have also curated an enjoyable diversity of styles. As Wohn writes, with understated irony, "I truly enjoy introducing listeners to music they have not heard before, and music by women composers often falls into that category". Her enjoyment is evident in her playing, in which precision is matched by clarity and depth of tone, variations of timbre differentiate the styles, and an energy or insight appears in the material that may not always have been on the page, but that comes from living alongside the work. Park, a long-time accompanist of Wohn, excels; one can tune into and enjoy the accompaniments for their own, often considerable merits.

A woman composer today has a good chance of being included on a concert program, but a woman composer from the past is under a greater disadvantage – her works were rarely committed to vinyl, and vinyl informed the musical tastes of generations, and its availability dictated radio programming until relatively recently. Thus, intermingling the old and the new in a compilation format is an intelligent choice, one that exposes the modern listener to the previously neglected, and the historical listener to the composers of the future. When such well-chosen work is played and produced as well as the pieces on *Perspectives*, we have a recording with wide appeal, and one that deserves a commercial success; *Perspectives* is the kind of CD that is worth buying for a gift, as well as one's own education and enjoyment.

George Henderson

This review was first published, in a slightly modified form, in the IAWM Journal 26 no. 2 (Fall 2020): 35–36. It is reprinted here by permission.



Don't look away just because the composer's name is unfamiliar and has too many syllables. Kaprálová (1915–1940) is a vital link in Czech music, her death at 25 the closure of a century of genius. This comprehensive account of her piano music gives strong hints of where she was heading. A sonata appassionata of 1933 takes percussive elements from Bartók and its elliptical narrative lines from Janáček; the voice is powerful but not yet formed. Her piano masterpiece dates from 1937 and is dedicated to the pianist Rudolf Firkušný, who had introduced her to Martinů. *Dubnová Preludia* (April preludes) calls to mind the Slavonic fixation with climate, from Tchaikovsky's *Seasons* to Janáček's *In the Mists*, with a touch of April in Paris. Kaprálová's expression is uniquely her own, inflected with hints of Debussy and Berg but original, vivacious and captivating. Just nine minutes long, it gives the strongest possible indication of her untapped potential. With Kaprálová's tragic death and her country's totalitarian subjugation, Czech music went flat for a very long time. Giorgio Koukl's chronicle of her life at the piano provides compelling listening.

From a review by Norman Lebrecht for *La scena musicale*.

Vif, plein de fantaisie, le jeu de Koukl (serveur patente de la musique de Martinů) met en valeur toute la singularité de la *Passacaille grotesque*, des *Pièces* op. 9, des *Deux bouquets de fleurs* de 1935 et d'autres miniatures (*Ostinato Fox*, *Fanfare festive*). On découvre aussi, grâce à lui, deux pages majeures regorgeant d'énergie juvénile, d'idées fraîches et hardies : les quatre beaux *Préludes d'avril* op.13 (1937) et les *Variations sur le carillon de l'église Saint-Etienne-du-Mont* op.16 (1938), parfaite illustration du vocabulaire musical assez recherche de la jeune Tchèque, avec ses harmonies extrêmement originale.

From a review by Patrick Szersnovicz for *Diapason*.
(Diapason d'or for the month of May 2017.)

VÍTĚZSLAVA KAPRÁLOVÁ



TEMATICKÝ KATALOG

Vítězslava Kaprálová: Tematický katalog skladeb a korespondence s nakladateli. (Thematic Catalogue of the Works and Correspondence with Publishers.) Prague: Czech Radio, 2020. 1st edition—R317. ISBN 978-0-9940425-5-2. 384 pages, 163 incipits.

The publication is divided into four main sections: The Introduction focuses on Kaprálová's legacy in the context of Czech music, the status of her autographs, the first lists of works, both published and unpublished, and her publishers. Thematic Catalogue of the Works is preceded by a brief introduction to the structure of the catalogue and a list of abbreviations used. The catalogue proper is further divided into five subsections: Main Catalogue; Compositions from Childhood and Juvenilia; Torsos; Lost and Unrealized Compositions; and Dubious Works. The catalogue is annotated and the section concludes with endnotes. The Correspondence with Publishers section presents the composer's correspondence with HMUB, Melantrich and Universal Edition (London). The last section of the book includes the editor's notes, bibliography, lists of published scores, recordings and other lists, and two indexes. While the publication is in Czech, the numerous incipits and scoring use Italian musical terms, thus making it relevant also to non-Czech readers.

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