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Bokken Lasson: Norwegian Feminist, Artist and Entrepreneur

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Special points of interest:

Bokken Lasson (1871–1970)

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The most important appearance is undoubtedly that of BOKKEN LASSON. She has only to throw one of her mischievous glances at her audience and immediately all hearts are won. She has only to sing in her own, simple, truthful style, her folk songs of all lands, and everyone is led captive. Whether she sings in French, Spanish, Italian or German, one falls under the spell of the folk song of which she seems the very embodiment.¹

Bokken Lasson (1871–1970) is best known as the founder of Norway's literary cabaret, Chat Noir, established in Kristiania (Oslo) in 1912. She was also a singer, both in the formal European classical song tradition, and in folk and cabaret styles. The fact that a woman born in the late 19th century founded, ran and performed in her own successful cabaret is astounding, especially considering women did not even have the right to vote in Norway until 1913. In trying to understand her accomplishments, two main themes emerge.

First, Lasson fought conventional views of women and their assigned roles, including the traditions of the institution of marriage. And secondly, like her international peers Yvette Guilbert and Dame Vera Lynn, she struggled her entire life with reconciling the concept of the classical tradition as opposed to popular music. She wondered if ordinary people's lives could even be considered cultural. Was music created and performed in a folk tradition actually art? Could she, as a performer of folk music, be considered a true artist? These questions loomed large for Lasson, who would build her own artistic life on her own terms.²

Childhood and Youth

Bokken Lasson was born in 1871 and lived her formative years in a rare peaceful and creative time in European history. La Belle Époque, the time period between the end of the Franco/Prussian war and the beginning of WWI (1870–1914) was unique in Europe's war-torn history. The Industrial Revolution,

the Workers' Movements, technological and scientific discoveries, revolutionary philosophical and social thoughts, the Women's Movement, explosive creativity and changes in art and music abounded. Paris, the creative center of this period, housed artists from all over the world. Nationalism had not yet entered the European landscape on a political level, and people of means, artists of all kinds, traveled and lived where they wished – no visas or passports were required. All European social classes were involved in the aura of the time, but particularly Europe's upper crust, the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, intellectuals, writers, musicians, and artists in general. However, beneath the surface lived a sense of unease and impending disaster as nationalism and WWI loomed.

Lasson was born into an elite social class in Norway. Her grandfather was a chief justice, her father a prominent lawyer and her mother came from Russian nobility. The Lasson family belonged comfortably in the social circle surrounding the then Swedish/Norwegian king, Oscar I. Their economic reality, however, was tight, in line with others in their elite social positions.³ Lasson's autobiography *Slik var det dengang (That's How It Was Then)*, gives a picture of a woman who was driven to make her own way in the world and, above all, to support herself economically. "To be independent, earn my own money, that was my goal and my most ardent wish."⁴ And: "I don't want to be dependent on anyone. So, work! Become something!" she admonished herself.⁵

Bokken Lasson

There were 10 children in the Lasson family – 8 girls and 2 boys. All of Lasson's sisters were feminists, despite their father's conservatism. The visitors to the Lasson home (and the girls' marriage prospects) belonged to the artistic, literary and political Norwegian elite, people who, by and large, embraced the new, bohemian anti-establishment conventions of the time. Bokken herself felt buffeted by the times and contrasting opinions she was presented with. She describes herself at that time:

I was born a cotton ball and had mostly adhered to other peoples' tastes and opinions, in part not to anger them (to please them) and in part because I didn't have any meanings and convictions of my own.⁶

The dilemma for the Lasson girls was that they still lived in a world where women had few social rights. Lasson writes with a tender fondness about the old-fashioned standards of her own mother, and she writes with sarcasm about the many famous modern radical men and their traditional wives and families.⁷ She also expressed an understanding of expectations for sons and daughters during her childhood and youth:

[E]verything was of course different and more complex and worrisome concerning daughters than sons. Young girls were generally just meant to be married and be good housewives and mothers to as many children as our father in heaven would send them. If they got as much as one spot on their reputation . . . then their future was quite unsure. Not to mention if they should encounter such an unthinkable shame as to have a child before they were married! Then they simply had no future – just a past.⁸

Sons should, according to all tradition, get an education as good as the family could manage to pay for. But the daughters of good families, who were too 'elevated' to work in a shop or too weak to dig in the earth, had very few options. Bokken wrote:

Our father knew no other solution than to protect his daughters from danger by forbidding them everything. No ice skating, no country excursions, and not the unfeminine skiing. Everything was forbidden, but could everything really be wrong? We [the sisters] pondered the question. And the solution was that we took both the choice and the responsibility ourselves.⁹

This level of keen speculation and determination was going to become a hallmark of Lasson's life. However much of a 'cotton ball' Bokken Lasson may have felt herself to be as a child, her personal life became far from traditional, and her musical life was about to be the catalyst for the emergence of a budding entrepreneur.

Searching for Financial Independence

In her constant search to make something of herself, to work and to support herself economically, Bokken had tried different paths. Teaching did not appeal to her. She tried a job sewing ties, but she had no talent for sewing. Being a pharmacist was one of the few professions available to women around the turn of the 20th century. Bokken took the necessary exams in Latin and math, and in 1890, at the age of 19, she was employed at Løve Apoteket (The Lion Pharmacy). The discipline was very strict, and Lasson eventually "concluded that marriage was more attractive than a career as a pharmacist."¹⁰

Several people around her felt she should go into theatre and drama, perhaps opera or operetta. In Bokken's opinion, she was not at all sure that operetta was a genre worthy of being called art.¹¹ This is one of the first indications we get of her conflicting feelings between popular and classical music. An operetta was 'light' opera, no heavy drama or conflicts, just pure entertainment. Bokken wondered if the function of the music was to entertain, to amuse, not necessarily to engage deeper emotions and higher thoughts, could it possibly be art? Lasson's feelings about music having to fit into an established mold of what is considered art is still a current topic of discussion amongst artists and musicians.

The only path for a respectable upper-class woman who wanted to pursue music was Western art music. Opera could be considered, but, for most women of the 19th and 20th centuries, musical choices were limited to small, appropriately female genres such as piano compositions and art songs. Perhaps a chamber work for piano and strings would be acceptable for female composers. Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, Agathe Backer, and Nina Grieg have all composed in this tradition. Operatic arias or art songs performed at home for the family or in front of an 'appropriate' audience were also socially acceptable for female singers from the upper social strata.

But, as Lasson claimed, singing was the only profession she could imagine for herself. Father Lasson was adamantly against any of his children becoming artists or musicians. Public stage performances for one of his daughters were completely unacceptable: "My father could not imagine allowing me to pursue an education that would lead to public performances."¹² However blustery father Lasson appeared, he always supported his children and eventually he consented to voice lessons for Bokken, but only in the Western art music tradition.

Women's role in society is a striking topic here. A proper female in Western Europe at the beginning of the 20th century did not venture out of the framework of *küchen*, *kinder* and *kirche* (kitchen, children, church). There was an enter-

tainment path open for women that was modeled after the German singing ideal: a proper, beautiful, modestly dressed woman with exquisite manners and mannerisms. She could sing either German Lieder or, if the voice should happen to be large and impressive, she could sing opera arias. Anything connected with a lower form of entertainment, such as vaudeville, circus, or cabaret, was considered sinful, and only suited for lower class women deficient in moral fiber.

Singing – Lessons

Lasson took voice lessons with various teachers in Norway, Denmark and Germany. Her first voice teacher was Eva Nansen, the famous explorer Fridtjof Nansen's wife. Eva gave her a year of free lessons before she consented to prepare Bokken for her first recital. The recital took place in Brødrene Hals' concert venue in Kristiania, and the repertoire consisted entirely of art songs by Norwegian composers. This was her debut concert, and she was kindly and well received by the audience. The reviews were all 'very encouraging to the debutante'.¹³ The encouragement was enough for Bokken Lasson to gain confidence, and she felt that she was now on the right career path: "I finally knew what I wanted to be! I just didn't know what enormous amounts of time, study and money the field would demand!"¹⁴

Lasson took her first study trip abroad in October 1891. She accompanied her youngest sister, Betsy, to Dresden, Germany. Education for children was important in European upper social circles, and travel and foreign study were part of that educational context. Even though the Lasson family struggled with finances, Father Lasson felt that Dresden would be the best place for Betsy to finish her education. Betsy was considered to be a rebel, and she had been permanently expelled from the Misses Sylow's school for girls after she set off fireworks in downtown Kristiania.¹⁵ Bokken's job was to look after her sister, to learn German and English thoroughly, to play the piano, "and finally I had been allowed to take voice lessons as well."¹⁶

Bokken's new voice teacher was Manja Freitag, a mezzo-soprano oratorio singer at the Dresden Conservatory. Lasson's "large, blond and beautiful teacher of singing" felt that Bokken would become a successful *romansesangerinne* (Lieder singer) if she completed her studies in Germany.¹⁷ She was not as lucky with her piano teacher, as her lessons came to an abrupt end when the teacher made romantic advances towards her. "[T]o start with, I had tremendous respect for my 'Herr Professor' and practiced diligently in order not to awake his disapproval. I have—this I say in parenthesis—always been afraid that creation's so-called masters should become angry with me."¹⁸ Now the 'Herr Professor' had fallen off his pedestal, and all respect for him vanished. Lasson stopped practicing and refused to perform at a required recital.¹⁹ But, Bokken loved to sing and performed at the required Dresden conservatory voice recital.

Not that I thought I knew anything really, but I had always sung, singing was in a way a part of my personality. I dared to present a few little things by German composers who were fashionable at the time. Manja sent me her big, bright smile with her big, red mouth full of big, white teeth.²⁰

Lasson's lessons in Western art music were, by and large, frustrating and unsatisfying. She loved her lessons with Eva Nansen, but the method consisted mostly of imitation and metaphor. "I cannot exactly point to a method or a system that Eva Nansen used, and, by the way, I had not noticed any method or system at the conservatory in Dresden either."²¹ She described one of her German voice teachers: "So dry and without inspiration or ability to inspire was this master of German pedagogy, that I never could bear to look at my favorite songs after she had scratched her sharp gothic runes in my scores."²² Even though Bokken seemed to get very little out of her voice studies, she explored, absorbed, and enjoyed the German social and musical environment.²³

Singing beyond Western Art Music

It seems unlikely that Bokken was a good enough singer to become a performer of Western art music. Her teachers implied that her voice was not yet ready in terms of the *bel canto* standards of a classical singer, but if she kept working, she might become a successful concert performer. Her reviews, once she started to sing publicly in recitals and concerts, were lukewarm. She did not have a traditional bright, loud operatic soprano voice. Her strength was text interpretation and communicating the emotional context of the song to the audience. Here she seems to echo one of her contemporary Norwegian colleagues, Nina Grieg. Like Bokken, Nina's forte was not the beauty of her voice, but the emotion she brought to her interpretation of the text.

Lasson's struggle to secure money for her study and travel gives a glimpse of the fight women had to undertake to get support while pursuing non-traditional female roles. She applied for financial aid throughout her career and was never successful. "I have never managed to get even the smallest sliver of a stipend."²⁴ The stipend judges carried the familiar prejudices of their time: the *bel canto* voice was the only acceptable one, and there was a prevailing sentiment that women should really just stay at home. The judges felt that her voice was not resonant and deep enough. Moreover, when the committee had given stipends to women before, the result was always the same: women just came home and got married, which the judges felt was a total waste of the stipend.²⁵

However much Lasson loved the classical vocal genre, she was being pushed into a more informal type of repertoire. This music had also been a part of her youth, as the Lasson family

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listened to all kinds of music, including *viser* (folk music) in the form of both children's songs and satirical folk styles.²⁶ Considering 'the common man' as worthy of study and, in addition, considering the common man's culture as art were part of an emerging trend in European enlightened philosophy in the 1800s. Equality, workers' rights, and women's rights were revolutionary themes of the time, and frequent topics in the Lasson home. Lasson worked throughout her life to define and accept her type of folk art as true art. With that came the definition and acceptance of her as a true artist.

Lasson was influenced by the Swedish folk singer and lute player, Sven Scholander. Through Sven, Bokken began to see the possibility of accepting and believing that folk culture could be true art. The famous Danish poet, Holger Drachmann, also became a major influence, both in her personal and her public life. Drachmann encouraged Lasson to develop her own folk music style. The relationship between the older poet and Bokken is unclear, but she was publicly denounced from the pulpit by a Norwegian preacher for her unconventional and supposedly immoral lifestyle for living, unmarried, with Drachmann.²⁷

In the Spring of 1893, Bokken went to Paris to stay with one of her sisters, Alexandra, and her husband, the painter, Frits Thaulow. She wanted to experience the new light entertainment venues, particularly the operettas. Alexandra informed her that operettas were largely on their way out in Paris, but that other entertainment venues flourished. Bokken went to see Monsieur Salis' little bar, which eventually became the famous cabaret Chat Noir. This became a model for all later cabarets, including Bokken's Kristiania cabaret Chat Noir.²⁸

It was here that Bokken saw the famous diseuse and innovator within the French chanson tradition, Yvette Guilbert. Guilbert was just a bit older than Lasson, and it is not known whether Lasson met Guilbert personally. The two singers came from extremely different backgrounds: Lasson from the elite and Guilbert from the lower class, but they were both passionate about acknowledging that working class cultures were producing real art for art's sake.²⁹ Guilbert's influence on Lasson cannot be overstated. Bokken comments at length about her performances and their impact upon her. She felt that Yvette wanted her audience to see a depiction of real life and empathize with those who struggle in all kinds of miserable conditions. She wanted to expose the hypocrisy shown by the members of upper class society who thought they were superior to others without experiencing anything but privilege. To Lasson, Guilbert opened the way for human empathy with those who are born into a social setting that the bourgeoisie and the upper classes knew nothing about.³⁰

Yvette Guilbert became an ideal model for Bokken Lasson's own cabaret career. She presented folk art as an art form to be admired, and posited that such subjects as the common man's, the prostitute's, and the criminal's lives were indeed culture. Yvette

used satire and humor to draw her audiences, and Bokken felt this was the perfect way to entertain and educate the lower classes, as well as to educate and humor the elite at the same time.

Lasson's Career as a Folk Singer

Lasson's repertoire and interests had included folk music, children's songs, and satirical folk styles since childhood. There was always music in the Lasson family, and Bokken's description of music of all kinds in her home and the importance of music to her and the other members of her family is telling. She says in her autobiography that the value of folk music in her development was extremely significant, but very difficult for her to explain: "song is a necessity of life – for children."³¹ Bokken attended the Misses Sylow's school for girls and lamented that "there was nothing called singing class" at the school.³² She and three of her friends decided to start a song club to fill the gap. They divided up into soprano 1, 2 and alto. Bokken held the alto part: "We sang three and four part patriotic songs, hymns, songs about spring, and satirical folk songs (*skjemteviser*). We even dared to sing solo with chorus!"³³

All the Lasson children took piano lessons and sang. Her sister, Marie (Mimi) in particular, was devoted to music and played the piano. She was a great influence in Bokken's life after their mother died. She read to her younger siblings. She taught them songs and played Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, and Schumann. "When she practiced Chopin, Mimi glued herself tight to the piano forte as if she would have liked to crawl into the instrument to the music itself."³⁴

The Lasson children all loved the new, modern composer, Edvard Grieg. "Grieg was new at that time. The Sonata in C minor and the piano concerto, the Norwegian folk dances, 'the Bridal march' and everything, we devoured tone for tone. We loved them and owned them."³⁵ Father Lasson was apparently not as enamored of Grieg and felt there were too many parallel fifths that sounded like screeching saws.³⁶ Father Lasson also played the guitar and sang, and promised to give the guitar to the child who learned to play it, which Bokken did. According to Bokken, her father's songs, apparently biting, funny satirical social comments on their own acquaintances in the upper class, may have been her initial inspiration to pursue the genre.³⁷

Lasson eventually exchanged her guitar for a 12 stringed lute, which gave her an easily recognizable performance image. She began to work intensely on a repertoire of folk songs from different countries and increased her study of foreign languages. She performed at different venues to work on her musical and performance skills and traveled to America twice to entertain an immigrant Scandinavian population. Audiences received her with enthusiasm and her critical reviews were

good. Lasson had found her art in her own personality and strengths.

During Easter 1902, Lasson auditioned and was hired by Baron von Wolzogen's Kabarett Überbrettl at Bunttes Theater in Berlin. Überbrettl had been losing audiences, and three foreign performers were engaged to elevate the cultural level of the cabaret: Japanese artist Sada Yacco, American dancer Loie Fuller, and Bokken Lasson. These three women succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.³⁸ When the Überbrettl cabaret toured Norway, the capital's newspapers overflowed with praise about Bokken Lasson's ballad artistry. They were especially delighted that, by her participation, she raised the genre artistically. This meant that the mannered classes could now show a tacit interest for this type of entertainment genre.³⁹

Lasson was quickly becoming a star, and one of the best-known performers at the Überbrettl cabaret. Überbrettl itself failed, but Lasson's career was flourishing. She appeared in variety shows all over Europe and Scandinavia, and audiences loved her.⁴⁰ By 1908 she was touring on her own with a large folk music program, singing in English, French, German, Russian, Dutch, Danish and Norwegian.

Booken Lasson and the Kristiania Chat Noir

Bokken Lasson returned to Norway for good in 1911. Her partner at this time, Vilhelm (Billy) Dybwad, was as interested in European entertainment venues as she was. He had studied in Paris for a year, and Bokken had visited her sisters there on many occasions.⁴¹ Conferring with her sister Alexandra (Alex), there was a discussion about job opportunities for Bokken in Kristiania. Alex was confident that Bokken and Billy had what it took to recreate the famous Parisian cabaret scene: "You have both experienced so much separately. The two of you must be the ones to transfer something like that to a Norwegian setting."⁴² Lasson was seeking what she had sought since the beginning of her career: folk art as a true art form, and a blend of low and high cultures.

Lasson began by looking for a location. She chose a second-floor venue that had reasonable rent, close to other popular entertainment spots in Kristiania. The National Theatre, founded in 1899, also had its home in this area. She decided to name the business Chat Noir, a mirror of the famous Parisian cabaret aimed to appeal to all Norwegian social levels. The venue itself was decorated in the Parisian cabaret tradition. Helgesen says in her book: "The newly renovated cabaret venue was not extravagant, but it was permeated by continental taste."⁴³

There were images of black cats with orange backgrounds. An enormous spider hung in a net in the middle of the room. The stage itself was small and triangular, with just enough space for a piano and a single performer. The tables and chairs for the audience were all painted in a brilliant, bright red.⁴⁴

Lasson's next task was to find performers who fit the cabaret context. No one had experience with cabaret among Norwegian actors/singers/dancers at the time, and her performers needed to find a balance between crude, bawdy folk material and more sophisticated repertoire. In addition, they had to be able to communicate the material and connect intimately with a diverse audience. There was another hurdle: since the cabaret genre was considered to be lower class, performers who already had a high-class reputation could risk losing their good name, status and jobs.⁴⁵

Lasson hoped to hire four permanent performers for her first show and beyond; she planned to anchor the performances herself. She eventually settled on her cast: Lilian Plychron Hansen, a classically trained singer in the German Lieder tradition; Hans Edmark, an opera singer; Halfdan Meyer (stage name: Robert Sterling), a tap dancer and singer of English folk songs and ballads, and Maja Flagstad, mother of Kirsten Flagstad, a pianist who accompanied the ensemble performers. Lilian and Hans "never managed to communicate effectively with a cabaret audience"⁴⁶ but Maja and Halfdan succeeded. They managed to give the appropriate meaning to the content and sold it to a delighted public.

Lasson's first show took place on March 1, 1912. It was a sold-out performance to 200 people, due in part to Bokken's own marketing efforts. She ran from newspaper to newspaper advertising her cabaret and the opening performance: "Something completely new was about to happen in the cultural landscape in Kristiania!"⁴⁷ Lasson had hired Dr. Bjarne Eide to introduce the cabaret for this performance. Eide did not show up, so Lasson gave the introductory speech herself. She brilliantly aimed barbs at the absent Master of Ceremonies, and heaped praise on the poet Herman Wildenvey, Eide's last minute substitute. She emphasized her own prominent role in founding, creating and performing in the cabaret, charming audience and critics alike. Wildenvey praised Lasson in turn and gave her a title that stayed with her during her entire Chat Noir career: The Manager (*Bestyrinnen*).⁴⁸

Lasson's Chat Noir period lasted from 1912–1919. She was the main administrator, responsible for all employees and talent, managing the audience and the Kristiania press. She was also the cabaret's main performer and attraction. "She was present every evening – the cabaret performed 7 days a week."⁴⁹ Bokken performed her own theme song during the opening performance. She sang it often, and it became an audience favorite: *Det lille vandspand* (*The Little Watering Can*), also entitled *Næste dag stod hun like fornøiet* (*The Next Day She Stood There Just as Content*). Lasson hoped that the public would not consider the song silly and childish but see it as a metaphor for her own persistence, perseverance and work ethic. Her nephew, Per Krogh, brought the song from Paris to

his aunt Bokken. Her partner Billy Dybwad translated it to Norwegian.⁵⁰ The first verse is translated here into English:⁵¹

I wonder if anyone in this world / has been through as much as / the happy, innocent girl whom this song is about? / With force she was taken by bandits / and kidnapped at a quarter to 12.

Refrain: But the next day she stood just as content / and watered roses on her balcony / and with a charming little gleam in her eye / she poured water from her little watering can.

In the next verse she encounters even more hardships: she is cleaved in two, loses an arm to a fish, is hung by her hair, and her purse is stolen, but after each verse, there she is on her balcony, watering her roses, just as content. The audience loved the song and gleefully sang the refrain with the performer, on their way out of the theater and in the streets on the way home. It quickly became Lasson's most popular song.

Lasson's roots in the French cabaret tradition stand out in this dramatic, childish, and ridiculously gruesome piece. The song seems to have its origins in the poetry of the Hydrophates, French Bohemian artists that were prevalent in the development of the original Chat Noir in Paris. One of these Bohemian poets, Maurice Rollinat, was also a favorite of Yvette Guilbert.⁵² Rollinat had a taste for the morbid and macabre and The Hydrophates often described disturbing social issues with "poems in the spirit of childish play."⁵³ *Det lille vandspand* is a clear example of this style.

Most of the cabarets in Europe where Lasson performed as a star eventually closed, having failed to succeed in integrating artistic content from both high and low cultural sources.⁵⁴ But Kristiania's Chat Noir, with Bokken Lasson as performer and director, became a lasting success. Lasson managed the impossible by creating and running Kristiania's Chat Noir from 1912–1919. She worked successfully as a performer and manager/director in a man's world. She integrated different levels of entertainment, made the repertoire relevant, and communicated effectively to diverse audiences. She was lauded by critics for her successes: "Bokken Lasson has an unusual ability to keep her audience engaged, evening after evening, year after year."⁵⁵

The performers and the repertoire changed over time, but the venue remained popular until Lasson lost leadership in 1919. To her intense sorrow, she was pushed aside by a new business structure and management.⁵⁶ Chat Noir, however, has survived under many different directors, all male, and is still in operation in Oslo today. The dichotomy in Lasson's professional life, her struggle to define herself as a true artist in a folk-art form, reached a satisfying resolution in her Chat Noir cabaret. Her driving questions of what constituted good art, and who could be considered a real artist, resulted in the creation of a true star and brilliant businesswoman who could financially support herself. With Chat Noir, Lasson had achieved what she had always wished for: financial and artistic freedom, and a true authority on what might constitute art and an artist.

NOTES

1 Review from *Bremer General Anzeiger*, Theaterhistorisk arkiv, no date.

2 Anne Helgesen, *Bokken Lasson, Neste dag stod hun like fornøiet* (Oslo: Aschehoug & Co., 2012), 9.

3 Ibid, 15, 16.

4 Bokken Lasson, *Slik var det dengang* (Oslo: Gyndendal Norsk Forlag, 1938), 51.

5 Ibid, 52.

6 Ibid, 134.

7 Ibid, 189.

8 Ibid, 192.

9 Ibid, 76–77.

10 Helgesen, 61.

11 Lasson, 140.

12 Ibid, 119.

13 Ibid, 153.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 125.

16 Ibid, 126.

17 Ibid, 130.

18 Ibid, 131.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid, 132.

21 Ibid, 136.

22 Ibid, 154.

23 Ibid, 155.

24 Ibid, 114.

25 Ibid, 153.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid, 172–73.

28 Ibid, 143.

29 Ibid, 143–44.

30 Ibid, 144.

31 Ibid, 44.

32 Ibid, 47.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid, 58.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid, 29.

38 Helgesen, 191.

39 Ibid, 195–96.

40 Ibid, 214.

41 Ibid, 266.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid, 268.

44 Ibid, 269.

45 Ibid, 268.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid, 269.

49 Ibid, 270.

50 Ibid.

51 Bokken Lasson, 67 *Viser fra det Gamle Chat Noir* (Christiania: J. Dybwad, 1920).

52 Howard B. Segel, *Turn-Of-The-Century Cabaret: Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Cracow, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Zurich* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 13–14.

53 Ibid, 13.

54 Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Studies in Cultural History) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 36.

55 Helgesen, 264.

56 Ibid, 283–87.

Listening to Ladies: An interview with Elisabeth Blair about her trailblazer podcast series

Listening to Ladies is a podcast which first aired on September 26th, 2016. Its episodes feature interviews with women composers and sample their work. Each interview covers two main themes: the composer's experience of being a woman in this field, and her music and aesthetics. The interviewed women have included both established and emerging or under-recognized composers from the U.S., Canada, Argentina, Israel, Iran, United Kingdom, and Australia. The podcast series is the brainchild of poet and multidisciplinary artist Elisabeth Blair. By 2019, when she wrapped up the series, she was able to produce thirty episodes (spending 40 to 50 hours on each) that feature a diverse roster of contemporary composers: Pamela Z, August Ceconi-Bates, Lainie Fefferman, Whitney George, Ingrid Stölzel, Jessie Montgomery, Aftab Darvishi, Andrea Reinkemeyer, Bobbie-Jane Gardner, Beth Anderson, Dganit Elyakim, Sakari Dixon Vanderveer, Emily Doolittle, Jenn Kirby, Elizabeth A. Baker, Lauren Sarah Hayes, Marga Richter, Mari Kimura, Reena Esmail, Nicole Murphy, Judith Shatin, Kaley Lane Eaton, Dolores White, Anna Höstman, Alondra Vega-Zaldivar, Mara Gibson, Patricia Martínez, Eleanor Alberga, Ayumi Okada, and Elizabeth Lain.

First the rather obvious question: Why did you create the podcast, what prompted you to produce it?

After performing as a singer-songwriter for many years, I began learning more complex theory, composing, and arranging, and was accepted into a graduate program in music composition. As I was studying for the program's entrance exams, I was appalled at how few women were featured in the many textbooks and compendiums of composers. For example, a book covering all of classical music history, divided into eras (Baroque, Romantic, etc) had almost no women, and even the 20th century section had 90+ men and just 6 women. I found myself—a feminist—feeling discouraged and even experiencing thoughts like, “well, maybe women just can't compose classical music.” In the folk/rock world, there were plenty of women role models, whereas the classical music world was apparently still operating in the Victorian era. The final straw for me was discovering in 2015 that a woman's music would be performed the following year at the Metropolitan Opera House for the first time in 113 years. This was mentioned as a by-the-way side note in a longer article about the upcoming season at the Met. I felt disgusted with the messages these books, exams, and concert programs were sending; that women composers, where they even exist, are sub-par, mere footnotes, exceptions to a patriarchal rule. So I set out to find women who composed music. As I grew more ambitious, this evolved from posting to a Facebook page to traveling around the country interviewing composers for a podcast.

One of the two topics you focused on in your interviews of women composers was their experience of being a woman in this field. Were there any common themes that emerged?

Yes, there were many common themes. I'll divide them into two categories: education and career.

Education: Surprise was a big recurring theme. Many composers I interviewed experienced a sort of shock around the time of becoming an adult or attending college, when they first realized how few role models had been made available to them, and how isolated and unusual they felt as composers. Many told me they never learned about a single living woman composer until they reached graduate school. Many experienced insulting condescension, rudeness, and low expectations. One composer's professor told her, “you conduct like a girl.” Another composer suffered through the lewd jokes of her professor (whose vision was impaired) in the classroom, until she cut her hair off and looked vaguely more male-presenting, and he stopped. Another woman de-

scribed how, after she got married, her graduate school colleagues asked her when she would be quitting music. Then there was a repeated theme of sexist treatment around interaction with technology. For example, at performances, venue staff assuming a woman performer must have a boyfriend who owned and/or operated the tech equipment she was using. And in classes, as Pamela Z put it, the message was essentially to not “worry [her] pretty little head” about learning to use electronic equipment.

Career: Many of my interviewees have felt isolated, often finding themselves to be the only woman or the only person of color at a conference or concert. They've also experienced being tokenized—whether for women's history month, Black history month, or a concert that needed to look “diverse.” They frequently reported being offered commissions to compose works on themes around their identities, such as being a woman or being Black, as if that is the only thing women or composers of color have experience with or have to offer creatively. There was also a great deal of stereotyping reported. For example, a Black composer being told to go find a “more suitable” venue for their music, or having their classical/experimental performances reviewed using completely irrelevant, racialized descriptors such as “soulful” or “street smart.” There was a lot of discussion around the necessity of the phrase “woman composer.” It was frequently cited as a frustrating moniker—we no longer specify in other fields (i.e. “woman doctor” or “woman lawyer”), so why must we specify with composers? Also brought up several times was the fact that composers who identify neither as a “woman” or a “man” are frequently kept out of opportunities which claim to support underrepresented composers, but in practice limit this support to just one demographic (cisgender and/or trans women). I myself made this mistake with the name of my podcast, “Listening to Ladies,” and with the scope of it. Setting out initially to champion those who identify as women (like myself), I was not mindful that plenty of other folks (for example, cisgender men of color, genderqueer or nonbinary folks, folks with disabilities) are kept out of the inner circle of classical music just as much as women, and that I would be serving the cause much better if I helped to lift up everyone who is disen-

franchised. In this way the process of making the podcast was a deeply valuable education for me, and I'm heartened to see other initiatives being so much wiser and more inclusive than I was.

What strategies did women employ to persevere in their profession, given the usual lack of encouragement, absence of women composers from the music history curricula, lack of mentors or female figures among mentors, inherent sexism in the recording industry?

Many composers spoke about (and embodied) a kind of outright stubbornness; a spirited reaction to being told—whether directly or indirectly—that they couldn't become a composer. Many also cited a fundamental inability to not compose; they experienced their careers as an inner calling that could not be ignored. Some had helpful resources, such as forward-thinking, supportive parents or mentors. Some were enrolled in progressive music programs as children. Many spoke of single masterclasses or one-off lessons with a visiting composer in high school or college as being life-changing.

The second focus of the Listening to Ladies episodes is the composers' music and its aesthetics. While I suspect it would be as diverse as the composers themselves, some have argued that men's and women's music differ. Did you, yourself, find some recurring inclinations or preferences?

I found absolutely no sign of any kind of differences that could not be wholly explained by the structural and systemic sexism and racism inherent in the classical music world. For example, many of the women I interviewed were not focused on making orchestral works. Of course, some simply have no interest in writing orchestral works. But for the rest, this omission was not because they were not capable or, in many cases, not inclined to compose orchestral works, but because of deeply entrenched structural inequities. Most American orchestras devote about 2–3% of their programming to works by women. It is difficult enough to get new work performed by an orchestra as a living, white, male composer (given the overall predilection in the classical music world for dead composers), but add in extra identities like woman, trans, Black, or nonbinary and it becomes nearly impossible. So composers with these identities often end up focusing on pieces for smaller ensembles, or electronics, or those which they can perform themselves, because these works have a stronger chance of actually getting performed. And while some of the composers I spoke with were able to apply their resources toward finding ways to have orchestral works performed, the majority took a practical approach to the barriers they encountered, focusing their limited energy, money, and time on opportunities that are more readily available. It's also important to highlight the issue of class and its intersections with other identities. Competitions make up many of the available pathways to orchestral performances. However, composers with identities that do not benefit from white cisgender patriarchy are less likely to be able to afford the hefty submission fees commonly associated with orchestral competitions. Academia, with its attendant musical and networking resources, is another pathway to getting works performed by large ensembles. But here again, the expense of such an education makes it very difficult or impossible for some to access.

How can we counteract the persisting notion even among young people that women's music is somehow less valuable than that of men?

We need to make sure that we ourselves do the work to intimately understand the structures underlying inequity, racism, and sexism, and how these structures set an individual up for either success or hardship. There are systemic, structural, cultural, and societal reasons for why the “master” composers throughout the centuries have been white and male. It's vital to understand these reasons and share them with folks who have not yet thought this through. We need to also be sure to understand and share how implicit bias limits opportunities, and how controlling for it can open up opportunities, such as the fact that after blind auditions were put into place in the 1980s, orchestras suddenly hired many more women. Despite most of us earnestly intending to treat others equitably, we are still subject to the subtle and overt messages we receive from society, and we will act under their influences, unless we deliberately do the work to counteract them. This is particularly true for those of us with privilege.

Much has changed since 2016 when you began podcasting your series, with the MeToo and BLM movements and ensuing calls for more equitable programming at some major classical music festivals. How broad in general and how sustainable in particular are these changes, and what needs to be done, in your opinion, to broaden and sustain them?

Sexism and racism have not gone away because of these powerful movements, but the more we speak up about systemic inequities, the more we all learn about the ways many of us participate in maintaining those inequities – and how we can stop. It has also become fashionable now to have equitable and diverse programming, and some privileged folks who might not otherwise think too hard about equity are now experiencing social pressure to make sure their events pass muster with their peers. Social mores do matter when it comes to tangible change on the front lines. Still, fashions and mores don't necessarily change hearts and minds. I think it will take consistent work over a long period of time to do that. It makes sense to assume that since these structures were created over many generations, and were upheld for many more generations, then serious change will also take many generations. In this field, as in so many others, one of the primary changes that needs to occur is to ensure underrepresented folks are in positions of power, acting as directors, advisors, educators, decision-makers, and gatekeepers. And as I've already noted, those of us with privilege need to thoroughly and constantly educate ourselves on how we can better support underrepresented communities with each day's words, thoughts, and actions.

<http://listeningtoladies.com/>



La Muse Oubliée. Mana Zucca: Prelude, op. 73; Amy Beach: Scottish Legend; Mel Bonis: Femmes de Légend; Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre: Pièces de Clavecin; Ethel Smyth: Klavierstück in E; Clara Wieck Schumann: Drei Romanzen, op. 21; Lili Boulanger: Trois morceaux pour piano; Emiliana de Zubeldia: Esquisses d'une après midi Basque; Germaine Tailleferre: Pastorale; Ruth Crawford Seeger: Prelude no. 6 Andante Mystico; Lucija Garuta: Prelude in E; Vítězslava Kaprálová: April Preludes; Fanny Mendelssohn: Mélodie, op. 4, no. 2. Antonio Oyarzabal, piano. Recorded 28–30.8.2020 in Granada. IBS Classical (2021). Available from: <https://ibsclassical.es/product/antonio-oyarzabal/>

Charmes. Alma Mahler Werfel: Five Songs; Clara Schumann: Liebste du um Schönheit, Er ist gekommen, op. 12/2, Warum willst du and're fragen, op. 12/11, O Lust, o Lust, vom Berg ein Lied, op. 23/6, Geheimes Flüstern hier und dort, op. 32/3; Pauline Viardot Garcia: The mermaid Rushfoot, I am sad, The Gardener, On Georgian hills, Two roses, Golden glow of the mountain peaks, Do not sing, my beauty; Vítězslava Kaprálová: Navždy, op. 12/1, Potkali se včera lidé dva, Až jednoho dne se budeš ptát, Ruce, op. 12/3. Olena Tokar, soprano, Igor Gryshyn, piano. Orchid Classics, CD ORC 100154 (2021). Available from: <https://www.orchidclassics.com/releases/orc100154-olena-tokar/>. Olena Tokar was a BBC New Generation Artist for the 2013–14 and 2014–15 seasons. She is currently a member of the Leipzig Opera. Igor Gryshyn has been teaching piano at the Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy University of Music and Theater in Leipzig.





Vítězslava KAPRÁLOVÁ
(1915–1940)

Waving Farewell

Prélude de Noël
Military Sinfonietta
Sad Evening
Suite en miniature
Piano Concerto

Nicholas Phan, Tenor
Amy I-Lin Cheng, Piano
University of Michigan
Symphony Orchestra
Kenneth Kiesler



Naxos CD 8.574144 (2021). Recorded on September 28 and December 13, 2015 and on March 28, 2016 at Hill Auditorium, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA. Released: June 25, 2021.

American tenor **Nicholas Phan** is an artist with an incredibly diverse repertoire that ranges from Monteverdi to Nico Muhly. Phan is an avid recitalist and a passionate advocate for art song and vocal chamber music. His album, *Gods and Monsters*, was nominated for the 2017 GRAMMY Award for Best Classical Vocal Solo Album and his growing discography also includes the GRAMMY Award nominated recording of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* with Pierre Boulez and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the world premiere recording of Carter's orchestral song cycle, *A Sunbeam's Architecture*.

Born in Taiwan, pianist **Amy I-Lin Cheng** is a graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music, Yale School of Music and the New England Conservatory, she is currently a faculty member at the School of Music, Theatre & Dance at the University of Michigan.

The University of Michigan Symphony Orchestra (UMSO) has been conducted by its music director **Kenneth Kiesler**, a GRAMMY-Award nominee and winner of the American Prize in Conducting, since 1995. The orchestra's reputation was affirmed in 2005 when it received the GRAMMY Award for Best Classical Album for the premiere recording of William Bolcom's *Songs of Innocence* and of *Experience* (Naxos 8.559216-18); in 2011 as recipient of The American Prize in Orchestral Performance; as two-time recipient of the Adventurous Programming Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP); and in 2014 when its premiere recording of Darius Milhaud's *L'Orestie d'Eschyle* was nominated for a GRAMMY Award (Naxos 8.660349-51). The UMSO has premiered dozens of new works by contemporary composers, and has several recordings currently available on Naxos, Equilibrium, Pierian and Centaur.

In Review



Brister, Wanda and Jay Rosenblatt. *Madeleine Dring: Lady Composer*. Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2020.

It can be difficult to contextualize the patriarchal curtain that female musicians operated behind during the early 20th century. By some accounts, even sometimes her own, Madeleine Dring was a composer of lightweight material, who was full of self-deprecation and dry humor. The deep dive into every aspect of her musical life that is contained in Wanda Brister and Jay Rosenblatt's biography, *Madeleine Dring: Lady Composer*, begs to differ. In this fully comprehensive retrospective of Dring's life, we are offered a close look at an intelligent and thoughtful musician and composer, who produced an immense catalog of diverse work that began in childhood.

Madeleine Dring was born in 1923 during the Great Slump in London. She came from a family with diverse musical talents: her father was a pianist and cellist, and her mother was a music teacher and singer. Madeleine identified herself as a budding com-

poser in one of several utterly charming childhood journals she kept. These diaries provide a wonderful glimpse into her daily life and show a nascent sense of humor that threaded through her compositional and performing life.

Dring was admitted to the Royal College of Music at the precocious age of 10 and studied there until she was 18 years old. Her extensive music education included piano, violin and composition studies, and her diaries give a charming picture of her love of musical study. Her descriptions and analyses of her musical tastes show incredible insight, and a deep understanding of music, artistic content, and new ideas. She was especially drawn to the arts and showed absolute delight in everything she chose to consume, from classical music, traditional and non-traditional music, art, and theater.

The organization of the book seems at times a bit disjointed. "The Interlude," for example, appears amidst chapters that are clearly marked by date. It is, however, one of the more compelling parts of the book, offering an intimate look into the daily life of a young girl living through war time England. The excitement and horror are cut by the banal: her many visits to the dentist because of "soft teeth" yield hilarious passages about Mr. Sutton the dentist, and her multiple tooth extractions and fillings. She wrote very little about her brother, Cecil, who was conscripted at the age of 20, although what she did say paints him as very young and immature. The Blitz is treated with a typical stiff upper lip and a growing sense of familiarity and exhaustion with bombs and machine guns.

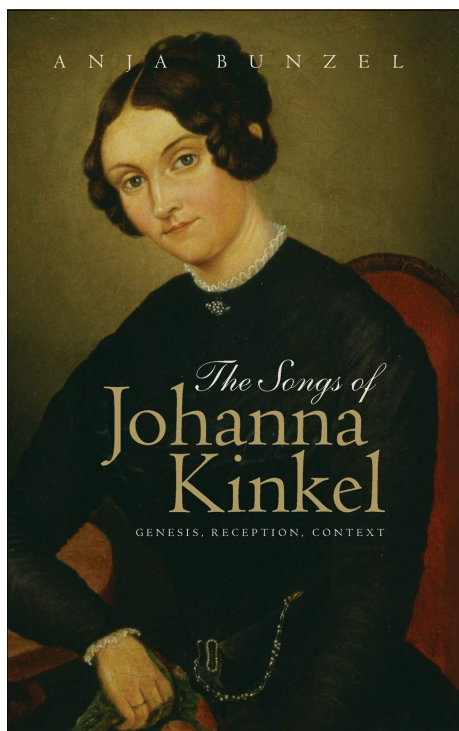
By 1941, Dring was a full-time student at the Royal College of Music. Her journal entries taper off with a more serious tone and a bit of morbid humor worked in. She began composing, producing, accompanying and acting in school plays, as well as adding voice lessons to her studies. Her main subject was listed as composition, but it was acknowledged at the time that this field of study was not very acceptable for young ladies. Nevertheless, the college made sure she had teachers of various competency levels, the best of which being the Anglican church music composer, Herbert Howells.

Dring's compositional breadth is truly astonishing. Her larger works include plays, radio works, operas, ballets, revues and television programming, and extend to a large catalog of both vocal and instrumental compositions. Because her journaling ended after 1943, the authors have left no stone unturned in seeking out what details might be had relating to her professional life. The result, though impressive, sometimes lacks the soft balance that Dring's own voice gives to the first part of the book.

During her thirties and forties, Dring found many spaces to be a performer of both her own works and those of others. She sang in her own group, the Kensington-Gores, a comedic troupe that dressed in Victorian costumes and made fun of Victorian society. Her compositions continued to be performed, though as she says in her signature song, *The Lady Composer*, "No work is played-TWICE!" Brister and Rosenblatt have included detailed analyses of several of her works, including this one.

In *Madeleine Dring: Lady Composer* the authors have managed to convey the successful life of a working freelance woman composer. Without the help of published work and recordings, or a famous reputation, Madeleine Dring stands out as a prolific, incredibly talented and diverse musician who worked tirelessly within contemporary popular and traditional classical genres as a composer, singer, actor, and pianist. An unbelievable amount of effort was obviously expended by the authors to trace and document her unpublished and unrecorded work but the best and most moving part of the book is the personal writing about daily life, music, art and war by the young Madeleine Dring.

Erin Hackel



Author Anja Bunzel has written a tributary monograph focusing exclusively on composer Johanna Kinkel's (1810-1848) oeuvre of German Lieder, which quantitatively (she wrote seventy-eight) constitute the largest chunk of her compositional output. Bunzel stresses that Kinkel was not only a composer of Lieder for the concert hall, but wrote also popular sub-genres such as salon songs, drinking songs and lullabies.¹ Moreover, Kinkel, who split much of her adult musical life between the German cities of Bonn and Berlin, copped an interdisciplinary kaleidoscopic career in music of the type usually reserved for male practitioners. Kinkel's complete professional resumé includes: performing pianist, poet, music pedagogue and writer of pedagogical treatises, director of a famous salon which merged aesthetics to a political cause, editor of two music journals, novelist, and oh yes, twice a wife, a divorcée and mother of four children. Kinkel poured her strength of character, rare intellect and wry sense of what lightheartedness she could muster (within what at times was a very dark world) into each and every one of these responsibilities. Her achievements are indeed staggering, and, as we learn of the great dramas—successes and tragedies—of Kinkel's life, particularly as af-

fected by the socio-political upheavals of the time which gravely affected both her work and her family, we come to be filled with great admiration.

Bunzel's Lieder-specific agenda is not a biography *per se*, but in parlaying the works' compositional attributes and historical contexts in which Kinkel's songs were generated, publicly essayed, and received by critics, she reveals an autobiographical analytical stance. Kinkel's interdisciplinary bed of activity formed the backdrop of her signature musical aesthetics and style, and the short-form Romantic Lied—with all of its well-documented abilities to encapsulate the particular sentiments of that historical period, both private and political,—seemed the perfect cameo form to coalesce the variant flowing threads of Kinkel's aesthetic agenda into a single 'quilt'. In other words, Kinkel wrote her own life into her songs. Bunzel liberally spotlights the trope "the lyrical I", the first-person pronoun ("Ich" in German) as found throughout the many song texts, whether the poem is penned by Kinkel herself or another (usually male) author. Bunzel's go-to denotation of this pronoun is "they" or "she" when the first person pronoun is not obviously male. Bunzel makes the case that Kinkel's love songs in particular reflected the trauma-dramas of her personal [read: marital] situations; Kinkel's many political songs and songs extolling nature and Germany-as-homeland were more allegorical.

Thus, modally and academically, this book situates itself as a work of *historical-semiotic* musicology. The historical-semiotic musicological approach has been a time-honored analytical method for musical works accompanied by texts, and for the German Lied in particular. Feminist musicologists of the 1990s, such as Susan McClary, often used a semiotic approach to 'suss out' double standards in musical motivic material which simultaneously positioned men in lofty, idealistic realms but relegated female [characters, personas] to the pejorative. Bunzel exercises full semiotic license in allowing certain "sensitive" details of Kinkel's life (i.e., those that might label and seal her in notoriety as a "female" composer) to be first broached and revealed through her choice of song texts and accompaniments, which are often self-indulgent. Yet Bunzel's autobiographical-semiotic analyses of the Lieder manage to steer clear of essentialist-feminist verbiage to focus equally on technical construction, and thus Kinkel's work shines objectively on its own theoretical and creative merits.

Bunzel also takes deliberate care not to constantly weigh any of Kinkel's specific musical works against similar endeavors by Schumann² and Schubert, who were Kinkel's immediate and more famous contemporaries, and even allows Kinkel some relevatory critical *touchés* if you will, hurled insightfully, even humorously, toward the 'Lords of the Lied.'³ Bunzel does offer a liberal purview of analytical comparisons of the songs of more minor Lied composers, both male and female, to identical texts set by Kinkel, in her final Chapter *Compositional Aesthetics*.

Even as she pursues her methodologies squarely and with a view to unearthing a complete profile of Kinkel as viewed through the lens of her lieder, Bunzel takes great care to acknowledge a primary fact of autobiographical-historical analysis, particularly for songs of personal affection and emotion. Bunzel cites Unseld who reminds us that:

Autobiographical documents may be particularly prone to (mis)readings as historical sources, because their authenticity and objectivity are questionable. Nevertheless, such documents can be valuable in tracing links between music and life . . . however, 'there is no such thing as a biographical truth' and . . . according to Unseld, (auto)biographical works bear a dialogical balance of inventory self ('inventorisches Ich') and the inventive self ('inventarisches Ich').⁴

And Worthen cautions us of taking a phenomenological approach to semiotics:

When we look for "meaning" other than the sound itself, we plunge down the "rabbit hole" into the interpretation of the signs themselves. The moment we ascribe a certain meaning to a particular sign, we find that it does not withstand the scientific test by which we can replicate that meaning. Each listener will have a different combination of auditory memory, acculturated experience, and emotional response.⁵

In Review

Semiotics works because everyone exposed to a particular culture of meaning—whether it be an entire language, cultural habit or a specialized disciplinary lingo—agrees on the established motivic coding of those meanings. For the many genres of Art, semiotics works to successfully keep the genre alive over time by reinforcing continuity of interpretation, even if this distinctly couches the work as artifact relevant only to an extremely limited time period. In German lieder, for example, the bouncy, ongoing repetitions of sextuplet semi-quavers of Schubert's *Wohin?* tend to cue listener's response to the sign "babbling brook". But sextuplets in various contextual settings do not *always* and *necessarily* denote a happy pastoral stream. As Bunzel writes of Kinkel's song *Der Müllerin Nachbar*:

At an *Allegro vivace* tempo, the semi-quavers in the right-hand piano part stress the lyrical I's inner disturbance caused by the mill-maid's behavior. The fast pace imitates the tireless moves of the windmill's blades, which symbolizes passing time – the time the mill-maid's neighbor loses in his attempt to win over the mill-maid.⁶

There is both danger and value for a 21st-century chronicler who employs known semiotic systems in an attempt to flesh out a clearer, more extant profile of her previously underrepresented subject via that subject's oeuvre. Particularly for a feminist cause, those events/compositional choices which leave open a female composer to criticism as a *female*, or *feminine* practitioner, analysts must rise above the obvious choices that might lodge a woman composer into a gender-restrictive slot.

Even given a range of accepted interpretations within any closed semiotic system, I myself have always questioned the autobiographical-semiotic approach as too straitjacketing. Better to use analyses which can be verified and documented within a system of signs that represent an objectively stable system of facts. Happily, Bunzel has enough instances of the latter⁷ in support of Kinkel's work to show that it shines on its own objective merit within the system of technical requirements of compositional musicianship, beyond any gendered ramifications or subjective assessments. Ultimately, I maintain that in cases where neglected musicianship *must* be resurrected and brought to the fore in order both to give credit where credit is due and to flesh out bodies of historical knowledge into more complete and accurate representations, both historical and sign-system analysis have proven indispensable to certain relevancies/relations of Life to Art.

The monograph is well-organized into an Introduction, Six Chapters, and an Afterword, and along with customary requirements (lists of figures, tables, musical examples, Acknowledgements, Bibliography and Index) includes an impressive Appendix of Kinkel's compositions.

Tamara Cashour

Notes:

- 1 David Gramit details how the Lied lived a double existence in both the artistic and commercial realms. See: David Gramit, "The Circulation of the Lied: The Double Life of an Artwork and a Commodity," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Lied*, ed. James Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 301–14 (301 and 306).
- 2 Except for a comparative analysis in the last chapter to Schubert's *An den Mond*.
- 3 Anja Bunzel, *The Songs of Johanna Kinkel: Genesis, Reception, Context* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2020), 118–120 and 203–204.
- 4 Ibid, 45, fn. 4.
- 5 Douglas Worthen, "Understanding Semiotics in Music" (2010). *Faculty Papers*. Paper 1 http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/safmusicpapers_faculty/1
- 6 Bunzel, 60.
- 7 Ibid, 51.

Mabel Daniels: An American Composer in Transition

MARYANN McCABE



An Ashgate Book



About the author: Maryann McCabe (PhD from New York University) investigates issues in American music and current practices in art and music education. An artist and singer, she has taught a range of courses in music and the humanities at colleges and universities in New York and New Jersey, and currently teaches at the Cultural Academy for the Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn.

When considering the history of American women in music, and specifically women's work in the field of composing, the first geographic location always discussed is Boston – and rightly so. The city of Boston and the Second New England School that flourished there throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries provided a remarkable haven for women composers unlike anywhere else in the world. Composers and music educators, such as George Chadwick and Edward MacDowell, were happy to provide not only education but opportunities to whomever crossed their paths, and the progressive climate of within the city meant that Boston was the first professional orchestra in the United States to give a performance of an orchestral work by a woman composer (Margaret Ruthven Lang's *Dramatic Overture* in 1893) and the first symphony by a woman composer (Amy Beach's *Symphony in E Minor* in 1896).

Among this key group of women that paved the way for so many more to follow, was Mabel

Wheeler Daniels. The youngest of the group (which also included Helen Hopekirk and Clara Rogers), Daniels shared in the camaraderie of her peers, while taking advantage of opportunities that were not available to the older members in years prior. As Maryann McCabe chronicles in her excellent book, *Mabel Daniels: An American Composer in Transition*, Daniels was a key figure in the sometimes difficult shift from the period of the Second New England School into Modernism. As McCabe demonstrates throughout the work, while Lang and Beach broke boundaries, Mabel Wheeler Daniels bridged the gap into the world of professional composing in a way that was either unattractive or inaccessible to women even ten years her senior.

This new text by McCabe highlights not only the important history and achievements of the too often neglected composer, but also explores the remarkable growth that Daniels experienced throughout her long life and career. The book thoughtfully utilizes an intersectional framework to consider the opportunities, expectations, and social constructs that worked to the benefit and detriment of Daniels and her life pursuit: to be a professional composer. McCabe guides readers through the composer's personal history, as well as through the stylistic changes that appeared in her music throughout the decades from traditional harmonies to her later works which incorporate influences of the music by Debussy and Lili Boulanger.

Though Daniels carefully curated her papers prior to her death, ensuring in many ways the protection of personal thoughts, letters, and documents from reaching the public eye, McCabe considers the life and work of the composer through her social status, economic means, and the documents that are available through the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. McCabe respects Daniels' wishes while also using the information available to demonstrate the obstacles overcome, challenges met, and ways in which Daniels worked expertly throughout her career to build upon past successes to have her work receive the praise and performances that were due.

Broken into distinct segments, McCabe explores the work of Daniels from her first serious compositions as a student writing operettas at Radcliffe College, to an in-depth analysis of her *The Song of Jael*, in which the composer explored modern techniques that distinctly separate her work from that of the other Boston women composers of the time. Readers are invited to consider the ways in which gender, class, race, and education impacted Daniels throughout her lifetime, and how she worked to understand the professional world of music making to ensure her own success. One example of this is the way in which Daniels carefully chose to compose works for women's voices to attract performances from the women's clubs and choruses that thrived in New England at the time. Though she may have doubted her abilities at the beginning of her education, her goal to become a successful and respected composer was always clear. Daniels was thoughtful and deliberate, making connections that invited new opportunities for performances throughout her long and celebrated career.

McCabe's work also specifically highlights the ways in which Daniels was working in a particularly difficult time, bridging the gap between home music making and the new inventions that forever changed the way music was heard in households. The tradition of home music making changed swiftly in her lifetime from piano playing in the parlor to turning on the radio – from active participation in the creation of music to being just a passive listener. The frustrations and grief that

came with such a dramatic change also led Daniels to consider new opportunities for her compositions that didn't need to fit the amateur performer.

Throughout the book readers are challenged to consider the ways in which Daniels skillfully sought to remove the inherent limitations she faced throughout her lifetime. This tenacity and determination was evident in the story she first retold through her memoir, *An American Girl in Munich*:

Each [student] was called on to play a number of bars written in four different clefs, the old soprano, the tenor, the alto, and the bass – Stavenhagen selecting a new chorale every time. It was not till the end of the hour that he called my name. Just as I took my seat before the keyboard, feeling instantly nervous and fearing lest my fingers tremble visibly, I heard one of the men smother a laugh. That settled it! I was bound to do or die, and with a calmness quite unnatural I played the bars set before me without a mistake.

As the first woman permitted to take score reading courses at the Munich Conservatory, Daniels worked to continue the work of her predecessors by leading the way for future women to encounter more opportunities than obstacles. However, instead of forging a path towards a brilliant new future for women composers, even after decades of inclusion in Boston, as time marched into the mid 20th century opportunities for women composers in fact did not flourish.

It is notable that the performance of Daniels' "Deep Forest," op. 34, No. 1 in the mid 1930's was the last work by a woman composer to be performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra for nearly another 50 years. Though Boston was a haven for Daniels and her peers in the beginning of the 20th century, neither the arts scene in Boston nor the arts scene in the wider world was yet ready to fully embrace the work of women in the same way that they accepted, performed, and promoted the work of men. McCabe considers the reasons why this is the case, and how Daniels' continued to shape the future of music by providing scholarships to women studying music at Radcliffe, creating composition competitions, and being a mentor and role model as the head of music at Simmons College.

McCabe's text not only brings well deserved attention to one of America's finest – and most neglected – composers, but also raises important questions about how to position these figures in history. *Mabel Wheeler Daniels: An American in Transition* proves to be not just an excellent biography and analysis of compositional style, but a case study in how to position figures such as Daniels in the context of a rapidly changing world. Daniels' success as a composer is not just in the awards, accomplishments, and performances she achieved, but in recognizing the intersections of race, gender, space, and time that set the stage for such accomplishments. As McCabe mentions in the text, Daniels works are rarely performed today, which is a travesty when considering her role in the development of American music. As we work to a more inclusive and representative canon, may her works receive not only the performances they deserve, but recognition for the talent, skill, and development of the composer, herself.

Sarah Baer

In Review



The first of these works offered by the Škampa Quartet on Czech Radio (Radioservis) CRO618-2 (2012), three string quartets by Czechoslovak composers whose private lives and composing careers were intimately linked, is a two-movement quartet (1925) by **Václav Kaprál**, the father of Vítězlava Kaprálová. It is a piece of music that is both beautiful and unexpected, and my initial impression was of how Viennese Kaprál's late-romantic idiom can sound. The first movement is psychologically probing, and individualistically experimental rather than the product of any modern school. The second movement is a contrasting trio which includes a rare example of another composer developing the ideas of Leoš Janáček (Kaprál's teacher); with reference to Janáček's first quartet "The Kreutzer Sonata" (all three quartets on this disc contain a variation or arrangement of another composer's theme). Kaprál's quartet has at least this in common with Kaprálová's work; it is always welcome to the ear, and once heard a few times its phrases stick in the memory!

Vítězlava Kaprálová's three-movement quartet (1935–36) begins, as her father's does, with two bold, climbing statements of uncertain tonality; the folkish first theme is followed by a kaleidoscopic interlude in which the movement's themes are foreshadowed in overlaid and juxtaposed fragments. The second, *cantabile* theme, is sadder and slower – and familiar; it resembles, in its rhythm and shape, the later, more upbeat *Písnička* theme, which was first heard (with a hoydenish thump which one could hear as a comic protest at any notion of gender roles in music if one were listening for such a thing in Kaprálová's work) in the piano composition *Pís-*

nička (1936), then appears in the wryly jubilant song "Velikonoce" (Easter) (1937) – and which supplied one of Martinů's favourite pet names for Kaprálová. In "Easter," the *Písnička* phrase will accompany the words "it is a sad little song", and the sad cast of the proto-*Písnička* theme in the quartet suggests that the "Easter" text, by Fráňa Šrámek (1877–1952), may already be what Kaprálová had in mind. This proto-*Písnička* theme will also be quoted, once, in the first movement of Kaprálová's Concertino for violin, clarinet and orchestra (1939), where it is followed by a melody from *Suita Rustica*. (The generation of melody from speech rhythms, after Janáček, gives us a third mode of composition after the abstract and the programmatic – textually inspired works which can only be fully deciphered by linguists.) Also at this point, we hear a short rhythmic counter-melody in a lower register that will later appear in *Elegie* (1939), Kaprálová's final work for violin and piano. I liked this melody in *Elegie*, and it is welcome in a different context; it reminds me, in its decisive riff-like shape and function, of the short repeated cello phrase in the first movement of Václav Kaprál's quartet. There is also a development of an idea from Maurice Ravel's string quartet (1903), and a short fugal passage that breaks down once the fourth voice enters, an example of Kaprálová's wit and self-awareness, and her skill at representing herself naturally in musical language, as well as her appreciation of older musical forms. A slowly climbing solo cello line begins the second movement, and is followed by a wilting phrase from *January* for voice and quintet, Kaprálová's previous work; these phrases also foreshadowing in their shape and mood those of the 2nd movement of the Piano Concerto in D minor (1937). The proto-*Písnička* theme recurs as a strong presence in the lyrical mid-section of this movement. The joyful 3rd movement is in a form Kaprálová favoured and did some of her most popular work in; it is a theme and variations, the theme stated as an eccentric and lively dance in triple time. A lyrical variation (Kaprálová's usual melodic gift tending more to the aphoristic than the lyrical) reminds us of the earlier *Legenda* for violin and piano, and perhaps the influence of Janáček's violin sonata. Thus, there are several themes and concepts in this quartet that have featured in, or will feature in, other works by Kaprálová, which is an unusual finding in the work of this inventive composer, and makes the quartet a rare guide to her creative processes. For a more complete musical guide to the quartet, the reader is referred to the detailed analysis by Marta Blalock in volume VIII, issue 1 (Spring 2010) of this journal.

Writing for a string quartet can be seen as an exercise in deploying limited resources, and each of the three composers has approached this differently. Kaprál has deployed the quartet like a chamber orchestra, with the cello often providing strong chordal accompaniments and the instruments doubling up at times. Kaprálová seeks the piquant close harmonies, inspired by Stravinsky and early jazz, that are characteristic of her music when it handles folkish themes – the cello is often busily occupied in a higher register.

In the last of these three works (1938) **Bohuslav Martinů**, with four quartets and a career as a violinist behind him, assumes a classical separation and harmonious balance between his instruments a priori, even though his 5th quartet is a superficially severe work. Though a response to a love affair, it contains only a few seconds of musical eroticism, a feverish "Julietta" cadence appearing early in the 1st movement. Instead, we seem to have an account of the physiological toll of love and separation – an affair of racing heartbeats, floor pacing, nervous tension, restless nights, and loss of appetite (the 5th quartet's assumption of austerity in the face of passion is worth comparing to that of another nocturnal, anxious work of passion, Alfredo Casella's *A Notte Alta*, op. 30 from 1917). The second movement presents us with a slow search for solace, resolving finally with an upward climb on the violin to a beautiful arrangement of Kaprálová's *Písnička* theme, as it ap-

pears in the 1936 piano work of that name and the song “Easter,” written in March 1937, only a month before Martinů’s first meeting with Kaprálová. This *Písnička* resolution, once known, would also fit at other points in the 2nd movement, suggesting the movement’s harmonic structure is designed around it. The 3rd movement is an agitated scherzo in which obsessive string rhythms are sometimes almost silenced across a wide dynamic range; the final movement begins with an ominous upward slide of thirds, introducing a return of the *Písnička*-seeking mood of the 2nd movement. Martinů again evokes Kaprálová through the harmonies of her most characteristic music, before combining them with the first neo-baroque, and characteristic of Martinů, themes we have heard, as if the composer is close to finding himself again – before the angry and anxious rhythms return, before a final, satisfying resolution.

This recording by the Škampa Quartet, funded in part by the Kapralova Society, is the first recording of a complete score of Kaprálová’s quartet, and the first to present the Kaprál, Kaprálová and Martinů quartets together; a strong alternative reading of the latter two works was previously made by the Kapralova Quartet (2006) and Kaprálová’s quartet was first recorded by the Janáček Quartet in 1998.

George Henderson



Frauenstimmen (Women’s Voices). Kaprálová: Ritornel for violoncello and piano; N. Boulanger: *Trois pièces pour violoncelle et piano*; L. Boulanger: *Trois morceaux pour piano*; Bosmans: Sonata for cello and piano; Mendelssohn Hensel: *Das Jahr* for

piano; and Haensler: *Ni dónde ni cómo* for cello and piano. Anna Fortova, violoncello, Kathrin Schmidlin, piano. Claves Records CD 50-3029 (2020).

This Claves recording by the female Swiss–Czech duo Schmidlin–Fortova features works by both historical and contemporary women composers, some well known, others less so. Mendelssohn Hensel and the Boulanger sisters have been household names for more than four decades, while Dutch composer Bosmans and Czech composer Kaprálová have become much better known in the last two. The only name that is not readily recognizable is that of Swiss contemporary composer Stephanie Haensler.

The album opens with Ritornel for violoncello and piano, op. 25, from 1940, by Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940). This is a powerful work of concentrated expression and almost unimaginable energy, considering that Kaprálová composed the piece when she was already gravely ill. She died three weeks after finishing this piece, in a Montpellier hospital in southern France, during the first months of the Second World War. She was only twenty-five.

The Ritornel is followed by Nadia Boulanger’s (1887–1979) *Trois pièces* for violoncello and piano and Lili Boulanger’s (1893–1918) *Trois morceaux* for piano. Both sets of pieces were composed at about the same time (1915 and 1914). Lili’s lyrical *Trois morceaux* are full of wonderful musical ideas; she was the more talented of the two sisters, as humbly acknowledged by the six-year older Nadia herself. Nadia made her own footprint in the history of music, however, as one of the most influential (and uncompromising) teachers of composition; almost all major American composers of the twentieth century studied with her. Like Kaprálová, Lili Boulanger died at twenty-five, an already accomplished composer whose works revealed a mature musical style well before her untimely death.

Henriëtte Bosmans’s (1895–1952) four-movement sonata for violoncello and piano (1919) is the most substantial work on the disc. Bosmans was the daughter of a pianist mother and a cellist father who died only months following Henriëtte’s birth; his absence in her youth may have been the reason why violoncello played such an important role in Bosmans’s earlier creative period. Her Sonata in A Minor, still rooted in a romantic idiom, is both a tender and impassioned work, and its emotional appeal is enhanced by the duo’s sensitive performance.

Bosmans’s Sonata is followed by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel’s (1805–1847) *Das Jahr*, twelve „charakterstücke“ for piano, from 1841, conceived as a sort of musical diary capturing various moods of the year’s twelve months. One can only regret that the performers decided to record only four of the twelve programmatic pieces (May, July, September, and November), for *Das Jahr* stands out as the only cycle among Hensel’s many fine piano works, and was then unique in the history of piano literature, predating Tchaikovsky’s *The Seasons* by thirty-four years.¹

Stephanie Haensler (1986), the only contemporary composer represented on the disc, studied composition with Isabel Mundry in Zürich. Her *Ni dónde, ni cómo* for violoncello and piano, from 2020, is based on a text of a Chilean women’s artists’ collective, advocating for the end of violence against women. It was commissioned by the duo to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of women’s suffrage in Switzerland in 2021.

All works on the disc receive committed readings from the Fortova–Schmidlin duo. Their finely attuned interplay is especially notable in Kaprálová’s Ritornel. The liner notes are by Walter Labhart who has been interested in Kaprálová’s music since early 1990s and is still following its public reception. With its handsome slim cover and generous color photographs, the CD is a great addition to one’s collection. Claves Records can be congratulated on a project well done!

Karla Hartl

¹ Gates, “Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel,” *KS Journal* 5, no. 2 (2007): 12.

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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