



A WOMAN'S PLACE?

A NEW INITIATIVE AIMS TO CORRECT THE ABSENCE OF FEMALE COMPOSERS FROM THE CLASSICAL REPERTOIRE. KEVIN WHITLOCK FINDS OUT MORE

Why aren't women composers better represented in the repertoire? It's an interesting question, and an important one to ask. Given that half the human population is female, one might expect orchestras and ensembles to be performing more of their work. Works by contemporary and 20th century women composers are performed more often – though arguably not as much as they should be – but aside from a few outliers such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and Clara Wieck-Schumann (1819-1896), female composers before the 1950s were uncommon, but by no means non-existent. But they are pretty much invisible, and that's part of the problem.

Musique Est Une Femme is a new initiative aiming to address this historical injustice. It uses YouTube to spread the word about female composers, and to introduce music lovers to undiscovered treasures. Very much a collaborative project, it encourages submissions from music lovers.

"The lack of women in the standard music histories is not due to their absence," says Anna Ciborowska

(pictured, above), a Polish-born, Brussels-resident pianist and cultural activist, who started the initiative. "In spite of this unfavourable climate there were women who surpassed or rather had been trying hard to surpass all the obstacles which stood against their artistic accomplishment. The first preserved compositions written by women in Europe date from the ninth century. The list of composing women is longer than you might expect. However, their works never circulated enough and fell, unfairly, into obscurity.

"We have united passionate artists and cultural organisers from Belgium, Greece, Latvia and Poland to enhance the legacy of European women composers. We're presenting their music at concerts but also on a dedicated YouTube channel, *Composed by Women*. We've invited broad audiences (with a focus on the younger generations) to the conversation via a short video competition and we're working to place female composers in the public consciousness."

Visit the 'Composed By Women' YouTube channel (<https://bit.ly/3KMw8mo>) to discover great music

and great female composers. For more on *Musique Est Une Femme*, go to <https://bit.ly/3r1R54O>. I spoke to Anna to find out more about this exciting initiative, and the thinking behind it.

IAM: THIS IS AN INTERESTING PROJECT BECAUSE, AS YOU SAY, YOU NEED AN INCREDIBLY DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF MUSIC TO FIND WOMEN COMPOSERS FROM BEFORE THE 20TH CENTURY...

AC: We purposely decided to concentrate on music composed earlier, with the first half of 20th century as our cut-off point. I don't want to say that it's easy now for women composers, but it's certainly much easier than it was in the past. The situation with female composers is more complicated because they had to face being ignored. They were often told that they should not be doing this work. There is a quote by Clara Schumann: 'I once believed that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose – there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one? It is tragic [that a composer of her merits] was not valued or encouraged.'

Felix Mendelssohn's sister Fanny (Cécile), wrote music, and musicologists have discovered some of her pieces were printed under the name of Felix Mendelssohn. The same in the case of Clara Schumann. Her husband took some of her miniatures and introduced them as his work, because it was not socially acceptable for women to compose. Women very often couldn't become professional musicians because of social reasons. They were forbidden to perform or to compose publicly, often by their husbands, families and by society in general. They were welcome in saloons to entertain their family and friends, but when it came to their work being performed publicly,



Above: Clara Wieck-Schumann

that was absolutely not encouraged. The idea of a woman earning money was not encouraged. The Polish composer-pianist Maria Szymanowska, whose pieces I've recorded, was told by her husband: 'Sorry, you cannot perform publicly'. So she decided to divorce – scandalous in the 19th century – took her children with her and toured Europe giving concerts. But that was unusual.

IAM: I SUPPOSE IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR A WOMAN TO HAVE HER COMPOSITIONS PERFORMED BY MEN...

AC: Yes, to a degree, but the other problem was that it was impossible for them to compose for orchestras, because it wouldn't be performed and symphonic works just didn't get commissioned. So most of the work by these women is for solo

SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE MUSIQUE EST UNE FEMME INCLUDE:

18.04.2021 – A concert with the music of Italian female composers from the 17th century: Barbara Strozzi, Maddalena Casulana, Francesca Cachini and Isabella Leonarda, performed by Lieselot De Wilde (soprano) with the Hathor Consort in Handelsbeurs Concert Hall in Ghent
10.08.2021 – The music of Maria Szymanowska (1789-1831) by the pianist

Anna Ciborowska as part of the Molyvos International Music Festival in Greece
5.09.2021 – A concert in the Cēsis Concert Hall in Latvia featured Danae Dörken (piano), performing the compositions of Clara Schumann and Käthe Volkart-Schlager; plus the music of 17th century Italian female composers Strozzi, Casulana, Cachini, and Leonarda, performed by

Lieselot De Wilde and the Hathor Consort
1.10.2021 – The world online premiere of the Vespers (Op. VIII) by Isabella Leonarda (1620-1704) performed by The Choir and Orchestra of La Chapelle Musicale de la Cathédrale de Novara in Italy (conducted by Paolo Monticelli).
More viewing at the Composed by Women channel on YouTube.

instruments or small chamber ensembles.

IAM: IT'S STRANGE - WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHERE MORE MUSIC IS AVAILABLE IN MORE WAYS THAN EVER. BUT IT'S STILL QUITE DIFFICULT TO FIND PERFORMANCES OF WORKS BY WOMEN BEFORE THE SECOND WORLD WAR.

AC: This is one of the reasons we started *Musique Est Une Femme*. To enable more music by women to be heard by more people. We are fortunate today because we have powerful tools, like the internet and YouTube, to spread the message. We start slowly, and then...

IAM: WITH CLASSICAL MUSIC, IT'S MUCH MORE RISKY TO PUT ON SOMETHING BY A COMPOSER THAT HARDLY ANYONE KNOWS. PROMOTERS HAVE TO SELL TICKETS, AND THAT LEADS TO A RISK-AVERSE CULTURE. THE CLASSICAL WORLD IS QUITE CONSERVATIVE IN MANY WAYS, RELYING ON BIG HITTERS LIKE BEETHOVEN, MAHLER OR BRAHMS...

AC: I think it's a bit different in different countries. For example, in Belgium people are more open to new works; in Poland maybe not so much. But

this is very much an international thing. We have partners and supporters in so many countries.

IAM: HOW ARE YOU CHOOSING YOUR COMPOSERS?

AC: Our partners have their favourites, artists they are passionate about, but thanks to the video competition, we had some very inspiring submissions about composers who I didn't know – for example Mme Podolski. We have discovered more and more names. So this is something we will promote more on the YouTube channel. Thanks to the competition, we had feedback from many countries who are not even involved as partners. This is an idea that has caught people's imagination, I think.

IAM: SO THIS PROJECT COULD CARRY ON FOR A VERY LONG TIME.

AC: Yes! We really believe it will. Also the concerts when activities are finished. We believe that this YouTube channel will stay dynamic, with new submissions regularly; and we are open for feedback from people from the sector, from artists who have great recordings. One thing that has caught the imagination is that many of the stories are compelling, like Maria Szymanowska's. They were outstanding personalities who had to struggle to establish their artistic identity. The submitted films about them are inspiring. Some participants focused on a chosen female composer. We received wonderful videos about Tekla Bądarzewska, Amy Beach, Hildegard Von Bingen, Rebecca Clarke, Mme Poldovsky, Otilie Suková... Some focused on one composition which impressed them, some took a broader context to show the position of female composers in earlier centuries. Others concentrated on identifying stereotypes about composing capacities of women in a deeper, broader manner and put them under a question mark.

IAM: WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE ACHIEVED, AND WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACHIEVE MORE OF?

AC: Hard to say, but I think we have engaged significantly more people with the topic. People have hopefully started to ask themselves the questions: Why is this music not performed? Is this music worth listening to? And it is. People have started searching for some names and for music that connects. It's great music. I think interest will grow and grow – there is just so much great music to discover.

PARTNERS IN THE MUSIQUE EST UNE FEMME INITIATIVE INCLUDE:

Foundation TAK

(www.fundacjatak.pl), an artist-run organisation which fosters the importance of music in modern society and explores the bridge-building capacity of music, which also commissions new compositions, organises concert tours and music competitions. Many of its projects involve young people;

The Handelsbeurs (www.handelsbeurs.be), a music venue in Ghent, Belgium that builds bridges between music genres for a broad and diverse audience and which plays a unique role in the Flemish music landscape. Presenting more

than 100 concerts annually; **The Molyvos International Music Festival** www.molyvosfestival.com, a Greek festival for the north Aegean region; and **the Cēsis Concert Hall** www.cesukonzertzale.lv, a cultural centre in the Vidzeme region of Latvia which hosts more than 100 events a year, attracting tens of thousands of visitors.

Musique Est Une Femme is co-founded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland, and the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia.