

PLAYING IT SOFTLY

Women in Music in France²⁰⁷

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Situated at the crossroads between northern and southern Europe, France is a divided country. Its law has been influenced by Latin tradition and its development has been characterised by pioneering advances followed by cautious reticence.

In the 1997 legislative elections it was especially important that the role of women in public institutions became part of the political debates. Women were always strangely absent from electoral competition and even more so from decision-making roles at the heart of the country's authoritative sphere. None of the parties had yet demonstrated the will to allocate a significant role to women in political life.

The fact that equality is embedded in the French constitution but not in our mentality is clearly an intrinsic contradiction. These contradictions are equally apparent in the field of music: despite a strong presence in nearly all musical genres, women frequently find the pathway to career development barred by a strong male tradition.

This article will first examine the history of the rights of female musicians in France and then consider certain variations on the current situation of women in the world of music.

1. First Movement: Piano, Pianissimo

The link between women and music can be traced back to ancient times: the Greeks, and later, the Romans worshipped Muse, the Goddess of music, daughter of Jupiter and Mnemosyne. Paradoxically, amongst us mortals, it is the men who make the music, to the extent that the word muse has come to mean, in modern parlance, a woman who is the source of inspiration for an artist. Today, female musicians have a much lower profile than the Goddess Muse.

The Caged Nightingale

The social status of women is so constructed that their relationship with music can totally alter their image, or as people used to say, their "reputation".

Music was a part of the education of young, well-to-do girls, who, up until about the nineteenth century, were taught to read and write, along with embroidery, drawing and music. It is

²⁰⁷ This text was originally produced in French.

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important to realise, however, that for women, music consisted of performing and singing. Female composers were unheard of. After all, as Molière once said, "there's no need to overload their minds".

However, the musical education of young children was frequently entrusted to women. If they played an instrument themselves, praise was heaped upon them on account of their "gift", their "ear for music", the quality of their playing. It was accepted that women gave music lessons in their own home or in the home of the pupil. The music lesson became a classical subject for artists.

Women's love affair with music continued on its merry way down the years based on the principle, "a secret life is a happy life". Women were accomplished musicians respected by all, just so long as they hid their light under a bushel. As soon as they crossed the threshold into public performance, they were regarded, at best, as lost women of dubious reputation, and at worst, they were excommunicated, as was the fate of all the comédiennes, female musicians and other theatrical artistes in sixteenth and seventeenth-century France.

Little by little, women began to gain a foothold in the world of music, albeit with some reluctance, whether as pupils at the conservatoires of music, or as columnists at the turn of the century commentating on the achievements of the Paris conservatoire: "However graceful the player, the cello is not as feminine an instrument as the harp".²⁰⁹ Such stereotypes are not easily dispelled even these days; witness the same kind of remarks frequently trotted out at the sight of a female drummer.

The Weaker Sex?

In a society where supremacy is defined by physical strength, the powerful tend to jealously guard the greatest treasures and refuse to allow anyone else access to them.

The significant role of the Catholic religion in the formation of French society must be taken into account in our discussions. Since the time of Clovis, Catholicism has been the official religion, and as such a source of secular as well as spiritual power. Its celebrants, at all levels of the hierarchy headed by the Pope, are exclusively male. This religion offered society a choice between two visions of the feminine condition: the woman weak in body and mind, or the evil female, daughter of Eve and the Devil's disciple, either way, totally untrustworthy and requiring careful supervision... after all, one never knows! It is against this background that in eighteenth-century Normandy, a woman's lot if life was as follows: "she must obey her husband in many things, most things and almost everything"²¹⁰.

This edifying maxim succinctly encapsulates the fate of woman according to French law, up until the middle of the twentieth century.

In reality, the existence and fame of a few striking female celebrities such as George Sand and later Marie Curie had (unfortunately) no positive effect on women's circumstances as evidenced by their lack of legal status; a married woman could do almost nothing independently on account of her weakness. "Le Journal de D emoiselles" (*Young Ladies Journal*) of 15 May

²⁰⁹ Le Journal des D emoiselles, 1st September 1900, p.337, penned by Marie Levasseur.

²¹⁰ Quoted by Ney Bensadon in "Les droits de la femme des origines   nos jours" (*The development of the rights of women up to the present day*), PUF, coll. Que Sais-Je (*What do I know ?*) Paris, 1994, p.32.

1900²¹¹ unequivocally states the role reserved for women: "to bring up men, and not to struggle with them. If we seek excessive intellectual advancement, our downfall shall be resounding".

Women passed from the controlling hands of a father to those of a husband, only considered legally capable if they were alone, in other words, single (frowned upon), or a widow (more respectable but also unpredictable).

One of the most notable advantages in French law was the 1944 decision taken by General De Gaulle to grant women the right to vote. The 1946 constitution recognised equal rights for men and women. In 1965 (!), the dowry system disappeared and freedom granted to women to dispose of their own goods. Up until 1970, the husband was still the sole head of the household according to law. Previously, a married woman was not able to perform a single act of a legal nature apart from her last will and testament.

From the end of the nineteenth century up to the present day, women would gradually win legal independence, thereby opening up the possibility of having a musical career even if her husband was not engaged in one himself. Originally, the only career a woman could, in effect, aspire to was that of her husband, and even then, only with his express approval. Furthermore, the husband had sole control of all the couple's property, in accordance with the provisions of article 1421 of the Civil Code (repealed in 1965): "The husband alone shall administer household possessions. He may sell them, give them away or mortgage them without the agreement of his wife". Under such circumstances, a married woman could neither trade nor work independently for an employer.

The two world wars were to turn society's norms on their head, as women took on the vital economic roles of the men who had departed for the front.

Step by step, they won ground, first in the battle to have a different profession from their husbands, next to freely choose their own profession provided that the husband made no formal objection, and finally in their quest for complete professional freedom. Parallel to these gains, they acquired the right to control and dispose of their own possessions. They also became able to open their own bank account and participate in the management of jointly owned goods.

Their administrative and financial independence now won, they were able to begin to target careers in music, especially since the church, for its part, had abandoned the practice of excommunicating them. There remained no more legal obstacles in place to prevent them from becoming orchestra conductor or player, theatre director or drummer.

The current rise in the number of divorces and the corresponding increase in one-parent families has led to women frequently become the head of the family in every sense of the phrase, taking decisions alone most of the time, being the sole breadwinner, running a business, etc.

The situation of women in the field of musical activity has also seen an appreciable improvement over the course of time. The major battles have been won, at least from a formal point of view.

One of the last bastions has also just been overcome: the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra,

²¹¹ Paris, p 199 a piece by C. De Lamiraudie.

which had stubbornly refused to allow female musicians to join, gave in very recently, but only against concerted pressure from American feminists who had threatened to picket the orchestra.

What was it that the upstanding members of the orchestra feared so much? Quite simply, that women would be continually pregnant and unable to play when in that condition. Can we assume then that the orchestra has perfected new and more efficient methods of contraception to be implemented if the quality of women's playing fails to improve sufficiently?

As for the Berlin Philharmonic, it gave way to the inevitable several years ago upon the appeal of Herbert von Karajan.

2. Second Movement: Allegro ma non troppo

Women must now take control of the occupied territories. If the truth were to be told, we must acknowledge that few musical activities are out of bounds for women, however it is quite common to find them conspicuously absent from certain professions.

We have no illusions about being able to provide a definitive explanation for this phenomenon. First we shall try to demonstrate how women keep out of certain categories of work for their own reasons, and secondly, by way of contrast, consider those lines of work that remain male fields.

The Valkyries are Exhausted

In the economic world, women hold few positions of real power, and this situation is reflected in the world of music.

Women are almost entirely absent from conducting roles in French operas and orchestras. Two notable exceptions should be mentioned: Danielle Ory, director of the Metz opera, and Mireille Laroche, working director of a small opera production company: la Péniche opera, sparingly subsidised by the Ministry of Culture.

The French television journalist Eve Ruggieri, who specialises in musical broadcasts and, in particular, operas, should be regarded as a special case. After all, the organisers, in all probability, think that her fronting of these events guarantees them media coverage.

Since classical music carries with it such heavy, traditional baggage, we felt it worthwhile to cast an eye over the modern music scene. Could it be that techno's inner sanctum is a place of refuge for women rejected by its more highbrow relation? Is the younger generation ready to kick out all the old clichés?

The truth is that popular music producers are almost exclusively men. There are hardly any women managers, no women running venues; the scene on the ground is no better than in the "high brow" classical field. We must conclude that while music soothes the savage breast, the effect is only skin-deep.

In the absence of any objective data on the causes of this phenomenon, we can only offer a few speculative theories. It appears that women shy away from power, as it exists in French society. This is equally as apparent in the political domain as it is in the business world. The

struggles that punctuate the rise to power are a turn-off for women. They are ill at ease with a system that is the product of an essentially male society. They have their own way of doing things, and their points of reference do not coincide.

There is an increasing volume of documentary evidence to suggest, and we draw this conclusion with some regret, that there are distinctly separate female and male views of our social operation. For women, it appears that the quest for power *per se* is of no interest to them, competition not being their speciality. Instead they tend to focus on producing results.

In the France of today, directing an opera theatre or conducting a great orchestra is unquestionably a political post. A female applicant must therefore embrace the rules of the power game that she so despises. Consequently, so JP Brossman²¹², the director of the Lyon National Opera informs us, not only are there almost no women in charge of an opera either in France or elsewhere in the world, but he is not aware of any woman with a desire to take on such a role. This is particularly significant.

In other positions, the absence of women is more or less understandable. While administrative roles are willingly offered, technical posts, on the other hand, frequently remain out of reach. There are plenty of female administrators, bookkeepers, production staff or public relations managers. Rarely, do we find female stage managers or directors, technical directors or technicians, with the exception of light and sound technicians.

In the field of performance, the role of women is a distinguished one. Despite the image of the female singer being forever associated with Castafiore⁵ in the minds of the French public, it is no less true that the diva is a woman who totally eclipses her male counterparts. Heroine of nineteenth century grand opera, the coloratura soprano reigns unchallenged in music-lovers' fantasies. The high F in the aria of the Queen of the Night in "The Magic Flute" remains the ultimate in triumphant femininity.

But Mozart's finest moments should not allow us to forget the role that the libretto of the same Magic Flute allots to the woman. Let us have no illusions here: the admiration of the masses and the inspiration of composers will never mask the basic truth that the songstress is limited to expressing strictly masculine emotions.

Female performance remains quite fundamental to the opera and nineteenth century opera in particular, because it embodies a masculine ideal. To put it bluntly, the fact that women are so prevalent on stage results from men's desire to see their fantasies lived out before them.

It is also troubling to note that even though women occupy a large proportion of performing parts in singing just as in music, they are conspicuous by their absence from soloist roles, and when it comes to orchestra conductors and composition, they quite simply vanish without trace! One Claire Gibault leading an orchestra, or composer Michèle Reverdy are simply exceptions that prove the rule of our musical landscape.

In reality, this is not so surprising. Leading an orchestra is a position of great authority. Musicians are not easy to handle and in France especially, their corporatist spirit makes for a feisty, tightly knit group. The leader has to impose himself, and the slightest sign of weakness could prove fatal to him. Femininity is worse than a sign of weakness: it becomes a flaw susceptible

²¹² Currently chief administrator of the Opéra National de Lyon and director of the Châtelet Theatre in Paris starting from the coming season.

to manipulation. The previous point about women's distaste for power struggles applies equally here. There is a telling statistic in support of this observation: the winners of the famous Besançon orchestra conductor competition, which has spawned most notably Seiji Osawa and Michel Plasson. From 1951 to 1993, 57 first prizes have been awarded, 53 of them to men and 4 to women (one French, one Japanese, one Chinese and one Italian), but none of these 4 has yet carved out a successful career.

In the eyes of the French legal system, composition remains a manly activity. In French intellectual property law, a work of art is characterised by the fact that it bears the mark of its author's personality. The concept of "creative force", that phrase so beloved of commentators, is a clear sign of the way that creativity is implicitly thought of as the expression of intellectual and/or physical power. While the following quotation from Dr Samuel Johnson²¹³ may seem grotesque today, it is no less symptomatic of the perception of creativity so deeply embedded in the collective psyche: "A woman writing music is a bit like a dog walking on its hind legs. They're not good at it, but one is surprised to see them doing it".

Castor and Pollux

Absent from directors' roles, women are equally scarce in technical areas. While there are a few who have managed to succeed as stage managers, props women and even lighting technicians, there are, however, few examples of female stagehands.

The traditional explanation for this phenomenon is a tempting one, and does provide the beginnings of an explanation. Basically, before the advent of electrical and electronic machinery, technical activities required a significant degree of physical force. That's why women didn't work as stagehands, nor for that matter as sailors in the navy or market porters.

This argument holds some water if one takes into account the handling and assembly of certain elements of a set. After all, such items can easily weigh around sixty kilos, and sometimes considerably more. The dimensions of some of these items also has to be thrown into the equation, since they are generally at least eight metres in height.

It is not difficult to understand why women have often first entered the profession via the props department, since these components are markedly less bulky and heavy, then via the electrical and sound departments, which also require less strength.

While they may have breached the wall of the fortress, they are a long way from gaining control. Women are still a minority in all the stage professions. However, their male colleagues are frequently heard praising their professionalism, and technological progress means that it is only a matter of time before the full range of technical roles is within their grasp.

Female technicians rarely complain about their male colleagues, and generally receive appropriate treatment within their working environment. However, when questioned, they reveal that the stagehands with whom they work so closely do make embarrassing comments. So it seems that while men recognise women's right to work in theatre and concede that they are as professionally competent as the men, they still almost always resent them for resembling men!

²¹³ Quoted by Evelyne Pieller in "Music Maestra", page 13, Editions Plume, Paris 1992.

Lack of femininity is the main criticism directed at women in technical roles. This is, by and large, a valid criticism if one restricts it to appearances. The style of dress and vocabulary do not differ at all from male practice in such matters, but both are most often accounted for by the nature of the work. The stage is a hazardous environment, where the wearing of tennis shoes or safety boots and trousers is a standard safety measure. It's not hard to imagine the resultant furore if a female electrical technician were to arrive to work on stage in a "feminine" outfit. Never mind the fact that technicians do most of their work at height! A technical director would, quite justifiably, send a female technician home to change if she turned up for work dressed in an excessively feminine manner. This argument is an unsophisticated smoke-screen deployed by a strictly masculine environment in the hope of masking the excessive unease brought about by what it sees as a female invasion.

It is well known that the confines of exclusive environments are not easily breached, and male groups are without doubt the most resistant to change. Just consider football teams, or the army. The arrival of women within them alters their behaviour in a manner that is too significant not to be considered a disruption. Such male strongholds are particularly susceptible to feeling threatened.

Going beyond this initial reaction, it is understandable that a demonstration of female ability in a field normally reserved for men (technical fields in general) causes the latter to question their own identity. It must not be forgotten that the male generally obtains his sense of identity via a negative process, namely, by contrasting himself with the female identity based primarily on motherhood. By a symmetrical effect, any development of the social role of women leads to a reappraisal of the social function of men.

ORGANISING GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN FRANCE

Summary of a speech made by Monique Dental during the ERICarts session, Women, Equality and Cultural Policies at the UNESCO Intergovernmental conference, "The Power of Culture", April 1998, Stockholm, Sweden.

For Monique Dental, Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité, *France*, mainstreaming is when you take gender into consideration in all public policies in order to achieve equality between men and women. The risk of mainstreaming, however, is that women will be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, especially if this political strategy replaces affirmative action measures. Dental is in favour of a dual approach incorporating both strategies which are needed to allow for empowerment and women's will for empowerment (to give women the capacity to exercise power of decision making).

Since 1997, the French government has employed the concept of mainstreaming and nominated a Déléguée Interministérielle in the Prime Minister's Office whose objective is to apply this concept in all ministries of the French Government including the cabinet. In addition, an office responsible for women's rights has been set up in the Ministry of Employment and Solidarity, including an office to undertake research. They work in co-operation with, among others, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Égalité Professionnelle, the Conseil Supérieur de l'Information Sexuelle and the Observatoire de la Parité entre les Femmes et les Hommes.

Despite policy and institutional activities undertaken by the French government, only 11% of the French Assemblée Nationale are women, ranking it among the last in comparison with other countries in the EU and only 41st in comparison to other "democratic parliaments" worldwide.

In her speech, Dental raised the issue that mainstreaming can not be implemented if there are no gendered statistics showing the position of women. "When we talk about equality, we must ensure that men and women have the same degree of visibility which begins with the collection of gendered statistics to demonstrate the contribution of both sexes to society. Several international organisations have already called for the collection of such statistics." Since 1995, the French government has put into place a permanent mechanism to collect gendered statistics on the status of women in public and social life. Every four years the French government publishes "Femmes en chiffres" with INSEE. Long term research priorities for the French government include: equality in professional life, in political life and in education including examination of text books, training of teachers and language feminisation of titles and professions. Women in the arts and media have yet to make their priority list.

Education about women and their achievements and the quality of their work, along with the political will to guide and support these changes is imperative according to Dental. For example, despite 20 years of equality policy action in France, which is quite advanced in comparison to other countries, there remains a 30% discrepancy in the salaries earned between men and women in France. This shows how legislative measures are limited in the short term, but the change of attitudes which they introduce contribute to a longer term evolution of mentalities.