

## MARIE JAËLL THROUGH THE EYES OF HER CORRESPONDENTS

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Marie Jaëll was not only a pianist whose name is attached to a teaching method but also a great virtuoso whose fame spread beyond France, and one of the few female composer members of the Société des Compositeurs de Musique de Paris. For herself she asserted the identity of 'French-Alsatian'.

Today, her name elicits little in the way of response, even in the musical world. So as to make a suitable acquaintance with her, let us explore Marie Jaëll's correspondence, which is held today in archives deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg. Taken as a whole, this correspondence covers a period reaching from 1866 through to the final years of Jaëll's life, around 1925. How can one fail to gain a sense of attraction for our subject when there are all these letters, exchanged with such varying correspondents as the pianist Eugen d'Albert, the meteorologist Alfred Angot, the novelist Gosswine von Berlepsch, the physiologist Charles Féré (with whom Jaëll worked on scientific matters), the singer Louise Ott, the general Théodore Parmentier, the author and scholar Maurice Pottecher, the poetess Catherine Pozzi, Jaëll's friend Anna Sandherr, Albert Schweitzer, and many others. A whole world, embracing music and fashionable society, opens up before us. Here, there is only limited space to do it all justice and voice will be given only to those of Marie Jaëll's correspondents who sometimes present her in unexpected guises.

In Jaëll's lifetime, the habit of writing letters was as customary as telephoning is today: put quite simply, there was a vast exchange

between Marie, her family, her friends and acquaintances! Whilst the majority of the letters represent ones received, some involve a two-way communication. Certain of them have been the subject of studies or have appeared in published form, especially those involving known figures such as Franz Liszt, Camille Saint-Saëns and Édouard Schuré. A considerable number of Marie's letters as sent by her to pupils have been preserved. In particular, they deal with her pianistic researches and contain informally delivered but detailed instructions. Sometimes they are accompanied by diagrammatic representations – almost in the form of technical notes – and these diagrams complement those found in the *Cahiers de travail* in which Marie recorded her discoveries. Constant factors in the pianist's way of existence include meticulousness, perseverance and determination in her work, firmly rooted in an unshakable faith and a confidence in herself. In some cases with particular individuals, only a few letters – or indeed a single one – exist; elsewhere, dozens of surviving sheets of paper are reflections of the intensity of shared relationships. In addition, there is the correspondence involving Marie's family: both the Kieners – first cousins on her father's side – and her elder sister, Caroline Trautmann (1840-1888).



#### STRONG FAMILY TIES

Brought up in a farming family in the north of Alsace, Marie Trautmann did not permit fame and success to make her forsake her background. This is something demonstrated in her letters: she always remained very much attached to her aunt on her father's side, Madeleine Rempp, as well as to her cousin Madeleine Rempp (who, on marriage, added the name Kiener to hers). The children of the latter Madeleine were the recipients of much affection from Marie, with their first names frequently appearing in her letters – Léon, Marie, Fritz, Alice, André, Hélène. She regarded these second cousins as nephews and nieces, and they addressed her as 'Aunt!' Marie Kiener (1872-1941), also a pupil, is treated as her adopted daughter; she signs her letters to Marie with 'Your daughter', and Marie in turn, replies with 'Maman'. From Alsace, Marie Kiener makes this reply to Marie Jaëll:

*My dear,  
 your description of Bicêtre [a Parisian hospital] gave me so much pleasure –  
 so many memories surging up, but only happy ones. How happy I was  
 when I went there. I can see the journey there once more... the hospice, the  
 labora-tory, the chronometer – ah, how it is all coming alive before my eyes  
 – most especially the face of your friend [Charles Féré]. [...] With all my love,  
 Your daughter.  
 (Marie Kiener, no date)*

Marie Jaëll had one brother called George; a farmer, he spent all his life in Steinseltz. No correspondence between the two remains today – most probably an indication of a difficult relationship existing between them. Family tradition holds that it gave George much pleasure with those famous people whom his sister had invited, to shake them about when he was transporting them from Wissembourg to Steinseltz in a horse-drawn cart!

Particular attention is elicited by another group of letters: those exchanged by Marie with her sister Caroline, who had emigrated to Buffalo (New York State), following the latter's marriage to George Diehl, in 1869. Overriding characteristics here are the complicity and mutual trust between the two sisters:

*Do forgive me for yesterday's letter which was clearly written by someone quite  
 panic-stricken, and join your soul in prayer with mine in order to secure the  
 recovery of George [her son who was ill]... the doctors say that he is in no dan-  
 ger, but my faith rests in God alone, and I want your strong soul united with  
 mine. [...] Take me in your arms, my sister, and hold me against your heart.  
 (Caroline, February 27, 1888)*

A similar notion of human relations, of shared philosophical concerns, and the authenticity of their relationship, brought them together:

*I am warning you that little by little you will find me to be a highly demanding  
 correspondent. You must understand, my sister, that above all I very much want  
 to nourish the ideal kindness, since that is where you think my own calling lies...  
 (Caroline, March 31, 1886)*

However, Caroline was to die, aged 48, on returning by boat from a visit to Alsace and before she arrived back in New York. Marie Jaëll spoke of this to Madeleine Kiener:

*Finally, I have received some news. Rather as I had assumed, Caroline was not able to endure her seasickness, and she died, very close to New York.*

(Marie, 1888)

Caroline had three children, Marie's 'American nephew and nieces': Clara, Charlotte and George. Marie regarded them as the children which she herself did not have. Clara – who was an organist – expressed a genuine adoration for her:

*My dear aunt,*

*I must thank you deeply for having sent me your book. I haven't yet had the time to study it, but it looks as though it will be really interesting. Both Papa and George are saying that it is not [about] music but [about] physiology. They have only looked at hands and bones. Yesterday evening I dreamt that you came here to visit us, and I was so happy that I cried, but, alas, when I awoke you were not here at all. It was something too good to be true – as one says in English – to have you here.*

(Clara, no date)

How many invitations Clara was to send Marie in vain! Yet, for all her awe for and pride in her aunt, Clara spread the word about her pedagogical work:

*Everyone is happy that I am giving these conferences, since these days it is being realised how important a musical education is which goes beyond solely playing an instrument or singing. That's the way things have been, above all here in America over all these years...*

(Clara, no date)

It was Clara who would travel to Paris to see that remarkable aunt of hers, and she provides us with one of the few sketches of Marie Jaëll other than those of her as a concert pianist or teacher:

*I could never be able to tell you everything that I felt when I saw you again, and finding you still as that wonderful woman who provides the world with something so amazing. I cannot truly say it, but I want you to know that I understand more than you might think [...] especially, that I love you! And isn't it love which really matters? [...] I love you, my aunt [...] and when I caught sight of you at your door, when we were going down your stairs, there below, with that so sweet smile of yours, I was barely able to tear myself away [...] – you have been so good for me, and I can also appreciate all that it has cost you in the midst of your so vast and concentrated work – I do appreciate all this, my aunt, and I love you even more...*

(Clara, no date)

It should be added here that Clara was writing in French, the language that Caroline had passed on to her children: most definitely the language of the heart.



#### ‘MARIE JAËLL FROM ALSACE’

A music critic wrote after having been at Marie’s Paris concert of April 27, 1863:

*It is known that her training derives from different directions and the least formal of it is definitely not the lesser part of it, since M<sup>lle</sup> Trautmann was awarded the first prize at the Conservatoire [Paris].*

(*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, May 17, 1863)

Marie Jaëll often cited the double culture which she inherited from her musical training in both Germany and in France as representing a dilemma for her; she clearly regarded it as being far from a luxury. In a paradoxical way, it weighed heavily on her, most likely because before everything else she was ‘Alsacienne’, divided between two cultures – even in musical matters. This was something which she clearly identified when she wrote to Anna Sandherr:

*How well you know me, my dear friend. The artistic benefit that I gained in Germany used to provide me with too much mental anguish and I cannot*

*put myself on display there. Besides, if I am strong-minded, the force has to be borne within me, and as far as it can be, this needs to emerge from within oneself.*

(Marie, August 25, 1880)

... or to Fritz Kiener:

*I find it difficult to relate to you what takes place inside me when I hear Alsace being spoken about. I feel myself turning into our ancestors and I become emotional. Your article has stirred me as though the sun of our region was part of my very being. The intensity of these feelings of profound identity is awakened in me like a subterranean force which stirs others.*

(Marie, no date)

Liszt himself was aware of these convictions of Marie when he was writing to her from Budapest:

*Many thanks for your *Lieder*. If you were not so very Alsatian-French, I would ask you to send me personally the score of your Concerto, and of others of your works to Weimar.*

(Liszt, February 10, 1880)

It even seems that she was searching to express her sense of belonging to Alsace when she composed; according to Théodore Parmentier, this had caused her husband some amusement:

*Your disappointment over the themes of your idylls has really made me smile... Don't trouble yourself about so little, and do pardon your husband. No matter what we might end up doing, the aube [daybreak] and the nuits d'été [summer nights] and the orages [thunderstorms] and even the chants villageois [village songs] will always sound very similar, whether in Prussia or in Alsace. If you introduce your subjective Alsatian note into this, it will be understood only by a few people, and it will be even more difficult if there is nothing in the title which offers a hint of your intent. My suggestion would be to be bold and call your little pieces, *Idylles alsaciennes*.*

(Parmentier, June 30, 1880)

Perhaps this refers to the initial sketches for the *Voix du printemps*, two of the pieces of which were called *L'Orage* and *Idylle*, and which were first performed in Paris on March 6, 1886?

Such an attachment for where she was born had a painful impact on the course of Marie's life: the bright prospects for the Jaëll couple were quite definitely wrecked by Germany's annexation of Alsace in 1870. Marie indicated the depth of her distress in a letter sent to Marie Kiener during the First World War:

*Before this present war there was that other one which I experienced with a crazy impetuosity, back in [18]70. It completely changed my life. It was for that reason alone that I came to Paris, for which previously I had no liking because it was too frivolous [...]. I have never told you that in '70, when the war was breaking out, M. Jaëll should have been taking over from Moscheles at the Conservatorium in Leipzig. It was the leading teaching post in Germany for the piano, and at the same time he was to have become director of the music journal founded in Leipzig by Schumann – another superb job to have. The contracts were prepared, it was even being indicated that should he die, an honorific burial for him would be paid for by the city! Of course, I said that if we were victorious it wouldn't matter to me to live among them but that at our first defeat I would leave. That's the reason why the signatures were not completed even before the defeat came.*

(Marie, no date)

Nostalgia for a bygone era did not prevent her from taking responsibility for her convictions, even at the cost of confrontations with her best friends; remaining true to oneself and never abandoning one's convictions are representative of an essential attitude which even friendship cannot call into question. Exemplifying this is a reply which Parmentier made to her:

*Why, my dear friend, are you saying that I was making opposition the other evening? Opposition to whom? To what? – perhaps to you who invited me to that performance?... Never mind, then. But it is your fault, for you did not let me get a glimpse of the true aim of the meeting, which was to jettison the musicians of a certain school and to transform the Société Nationale de Musique Française into a simple faction [...] but I am convinced that France is still not rich enough in worthwhile musicians such that one can go about creating groups*

*and forming divisions within the French school – if the entire lifeblood is not appealed to, then the Société cannot be alive.*

(Parmentier, May 26, 1881)

Carrying on in the same impassioned style over more than ten pages, Parmentier develops all the possible arguments in order to justify his opposition to the introduction of works written by foreign composers in the programmes of the Société Nationale, as had been put forward during the meeting of June 16, 1881. He even went as far as warning Marie against those musicians whom she considered as her friends:

*You provide them with your lifeblood [...] but if you belong to this school in theory, you are less than you think you are in practice. Your latest works, your Trio [...], your Fantaisie, our pretty little romance, your Idylles, all this is not music for unsuspecting brave hearts. Additionally, you have only been accepted as part of the coterie because you can rely on friends there; but I am certain that you will find them to be... a little bit backward.*

(Parmentier, May 26, 1881)

It is a shame not to be able to read Marie's reply to this letter – all the same, we can most likely imagine that it was both vigorous and unambiguous! Moreover, it is easier to understand why the composer sometimes felt herself misunderstood:

*Today I am going to play my Fantaisie for piano and violin with M<sup>me</sup> Parmentier [the violinist Teresa Milanollo] at the Société Nationale. Don't you want to be among the two or three people who understand what I compose? If you only knew how I withdraw into myself each time when I encounter so many deaf ears. Yet it isn't their fault if they are deaf: I recently played my Cello Sonata with Popper. The first words that he spoke to me were: Sie haben aber keine französische Ader in sich [you are not a true-born Frenchwoman]. I am well aware of that; for that reason also, I know what it is to suffer.*

(Marie to Sandherr, April 27, 1881)

Cultural conundrums, musical dilemmas: the composer was seized by the temptation to withdraw into herself, perhaps indications of the onset of her sense of isolation in the final years of her life.





## AN ARTISTIC CALLING

Between 1877 and 1882, at the time when Alfred Jaëll – who died on February 27, 1882 – was becoming increasingly ill, Marie clung desperately to composition. She suffered a profound crisis of confidence. She sought advice from a friend from Alsace, the philosopher Édouard Schuré (1841-1929), who replied to her:

*By now, I have a thorough understanding of you. You are an artist and nothing but an artist. You possess a great originality, a remarkable intelligence and an iron will. With that one can go far, and you will go far. You are still lacking in logic and balance, but with your ambition and your determination you will gain these in time.*

(Schuré, March 4, 1879)

In 1883, at the time when she was composing her *Piano Concerto no 2* and *Sphinx*, she recovered her equilibrium:

*Finally, I am giving myself up to my art; it occupies all my thinking, all my ambition, I feel that I have recovered and I will no longer lose myself. You don't have this spark without becoming worthy of being an artist. I am worthy of it, God desires that I prove it.*

(Marie to Sandherr, July 15, 1883)

Back in 1871, Liszt had recognized the originality in her compositions:

*... they abound in new and bold ideas which I dare not criticize, but I will be able to evaluate them even better when I have the pleasure of hearing them performed by their brave, ambitious and subtle composer.*

(Liszt, July 18, 1871)

Some years later, Parmentier was to admire Marie Jaëll's strength of character in being able to avoid being stifled by the Master:

*I congratulate you on not allowing yourself to become disheartened by Liszt's judgement about you, and of preserving – despite your confidence in him and your respect for his talent – a completely independent mind, so as to assess his verdict. [...] In the meantime, follow your own path, it is unarguable that*

*you possess one, which is indeed your own; you have the originality, the creative energy – often irrepressible – and there is no doubt that you are making progress.*

(Parmentier, August 26, 1880)



## THE ENTHUSIASM FOR RESEARCH

'I study relentlessly'; this was one of Marie Jaëll's favourite expressions. She never stopped, simultaneously managing many activities:

*I work, I work and I am doing wonderfully... although this shouldn't be declared too openly. You know that I am not the same Marie who you have loved before, the composer of four-handed waltzes, who used to play the piano, who used to sew, who used to talk – I am a new person, brand new, who only composes and is absorbed in herself. Many things arise from such absorption, the result being that I am completely different... Someday or other, to watch me, you will have to plunge yourself into vast books, your head, ears and fingers all going to an awful lot of trouble...*

(Marie to Sandherr, November 26, 1877)

Ten years later, in 1887, the tone is the same:

*I work a lot... it is an artist's joy. My method will not be long in appearing, I will need to finish it soon.*

(Marie to Sandherr)

Marie set her standards so high that in 1888, the work had still yet to appear:

*Soon you will see that I am going to be writing so much that you will be begging for mercy... I really want to say 'compose' as I always have my pen in my hand. [...] Very shortly, Heugel will be publishing Prisme, a collection of Valses mignonnes and another of Valses mélancoliques. As to the method, I will be restarting it since I am never completely satisfied by it.*

(Marie to Sandherr, September 1888)

### Parmentier became intrigued:

*... and I congratulate you on having finished your method which has absorbed you so much and which is going to allow you time to get involved in other work. I am curious of seeing this method which cannot but be full of new and original insights...*

(Parmentier, November 5, 1888)

*Le Toucher* was only to appear in 1899. Even for Marie Jaëll – about whom Liszt had stated that she was possessed of ‘a philosophical brain and the fingers of an artist’ – it was no simple matter to put forward a teaching method unlike any other, one based upon physiology and whose declared aim was to turn each pupil into a true artist!

Marie’s pupils were constantly entreated to take part in her experiments such as by measuring their reaction times at the keyboard. Less well-known is that she took a close interest in piano manufacture, the instruments themselves forming a subject for research:

*I am leaving tomorrow for Vienna, for I am only able to carry out my programme there. I will be trying out pianos about whose receptiveness when the keyboard is struck I am unaware. It might be the case that they are resistant to my system since their mechanisms might not be sufficiently sophisticated; if that is the case, I will not play at all. [...] But I cannot prevent myself from telling you how radiant I feel about the results that I have gained from the Pleyel and Érard instruments. I have every reason to hope that the other pianos will similarly obey my commands.*

(Marie, October 1883)

### Elsewhere, she wrote regarding a Bechstein piano:

*... for it cannot provide what it does not possess. Therefore, I must completely modify my style of striking the keyboard and my playing; this does not come from the fingers, but from the head. As a result, I am spending long hours [...] playing Bechsteins in my head...*

(Marie to Sandherr, November 11, 1885)

The point is that it is the artist and not the instrument which makes music come alive! The hands are only the reflections of what is going

on inside the head: the creative intellectual curiosity of Marie was ceaselessly on the alert.



These exchanges of letters have allowed us to cast some furtive glances into a very different world to our own, indeed into another world. As when taking a walk with friends, let us allow the writings here of these correspondents, family and friends to provide us with challenges in response to our reading. With them, every now and then, the veil lifts, permitting us to catch a glimpse of the passionate, sensitive and sometimes even quirky character of our musician. Don't we ourselves identify with her contemporary Parmentier in these lines, nonetheless:

*I am trying to make you out, or at least I am not unduly trying, since I know that you wouldn't care to have the sphinx which dwells inside you to be capable of being explained. [...] Yet something nevertheless remains unchanging in you, the fundamental core even of your character, which provides you with such an original and distinctive individuality.*

(Parmentier, August 22, 1879)



Letter-card of August 7, 1920 from Marie Kiener to Marie Jaëll. (MLI Collection)

Carte de Marie Kiener pour Marie Jaëll du 7 août 1920. (Collection MLI)