

MARIE JAËLL

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A leading pianist in her day, Marie Jaëll (1846-1925) achieved lasting fame for the written works which formed the teaching method preserved for posterity by her students as the ‘Marie Jaëll Method’. She is now being rediscovered as a composer, and rightly so. These three distinct facets of Jaëll’s artistic nature correspond to three key phases in her life and demonstrate her exceptional well-roundedness. The all-too commonly held view of her as an impulsive, international virtuoso, a volatile Parisian composer who struggled to make a name for herself and, finally, a woman who ended her days as a recluse in her detached house in Passy, surrounded by her scholarly works and living close to a few select students, makes it all too easy to overlook the phenomenal energy she poured into a life lived with passion. She did, in fact, carve out an intense career for herself, working hard to understand, interpret and accept the prevailing conditions of her time. Although born in Alsace, she opted, somewhat paradoxically, for French nationality, keen to make up for France’s humiliating defeat at Sedan.

In view of the above, the well-worn cliché of Jaëll as a manly woman bandied about by the critics of her day – nobody thought twice about calling her Lisztian – as well as the fact that she was married to a pianist described as ‘feminine’ due to his delicate touch when playing Frédéric Chopin, oversimplifies how difficult it might have been for her to assert her independence and individuality. All too often she is regarded as an ambitious pianist who wavered in her relationship to composing, which was another way of exploring the available opportunities during her era. It is now time to review the case, muddied by suspicion towards virtuoso performers and scepticism about women’s

abilities, by focusing on Marie Jaëll's compositions, as was done at the end of the century with Franz Liszt, her great model.

In fact, it was after hearing Liszt play in Rome in 1868, when the pianist himself was still regarded as a champion of other composers' music, that Marie Jaëll gained a new perspective on what she had hitherto only sensed. This revelation, which she set down in writing in 1906, should be quoted here because it explains everything. The shock she experienced, while not directly comparable to Liszt's epiphany on hearing Paganini (which made him revise his technique), was more reminiscent of Liszt's surprise and excitement on hearing the first performance of Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, which led to his famous piano transcription. This is what Marie Jaëll wrote:

When I first heard Liszt in Rome, in 1868, all my powers of hearing seemed to be transformed as soon as he began to play: this completely unexpected transformation struck me more than the playing itself.

(The Rhythms of the Gaze and the Dissociation of the Fingers, quoted from in more detail later)

A woman of such passionate sensibility was bound to be fascinated by the Hungarian musician. Marie embraced every aspect of his personality, even tolerating the great man's shortcomings when she worked on completing the final edition of his third *Mephisto Waltz* in 1883, in Weimar. Liszt had a wide circle of admirers of both sexes whom Marie was keen to avoid as much as possible, declaring herself 'disgusted to see such vile creatures and such vile things' (unpublished letter, Fonds Jaëll, Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, MRS Jaëll 322, 244).

Consequently, beneath the apparent continuity of Jaëll's passion for music, there were numerous underlying opportunities for sudden changes in direction, tests of strength, different responses and imaginative leaps, which led this workaholic to adopt some extreme, obsessive, yet original attitudes. It is worth identifying a few of the key influences in this atypical career path.



THIS EXPLAINS THAT

Born on 17 August 1846 in a small Alsatian village – Steinseltz – to an influential family, Marie Trautmann – who won first prize at the Paris Conservatory at sixteen – was twenty when she married the virtuoso Austrian pianist, Alfred Jaëll (1832-1882), a man fourteen years her senior. From their base in Paris, Alfred and Marie then pursued a dual career in Europe as performers of the music of new composers, particularly those from the German school such as, in Marie’s case, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms and Beethoven. She was widowed at the age of thirty-six and died forty-three years later, on 4 February 1925 in Passy, leaving some hundred scores and numerous scientific works devoted to the study of the relationship between the movements of the hand and signals from the brain. These writings and her teaching methods, which have lived on through her students, form the basis of what is now known as the Jaëll Method, still taught today in various parts of the world.

Punctuated by the historical events of the late nineteenth century, Jaëll’s artistic life took its cue from the ideology of the national reconstruction programme carried out by the Third Republic. After the liberal eclecticism of the Second Empire, the hesitant, revanchist early stages of the Third Republic soon led, due to the repayment of the war debt, to the total reinstatement of the French nation in the ranks of the leading world powers. French superiority became even more marked after the end of World War One, evidenced particularly, in the domain of the arts, by the flourishing Art Deco style in Paris (particularly at the Exhibition of 1925). Marie Jaëll died in the midst of this new age of advancement.

On the threshold of a glittering future in 1866, at a time when Romanticism still held sway, Marie Jaëll lived through Symbolism, witnessed Debussyism, remained true to the French Celticism invented by her friend Édouard Schuré with her opera *Runéa* (1878) and her symphonic poem *Ossiane* (1879), embraced Saint-Saëns’ code of aesthetics, then buried herself in scholarly research in the late 1890s. Initially with the help of Charles Féré, then alone, she published works with avant-garde titles such as: *La Musique et la Psychophysiologie* (1896) (*Music and Psychophysiology*), *Les Rythmes du regard et la Dissociation des doigts* (1901) (*The Rhythms of the Gaze and the Dissociation of the Fingers*),

La Résonance du toucher et la Topographie des pulpes (1912) (*The Resonance of Touch and the Topography of the Fingertips*).

With a career as a performer mapped out for her, her studies with pianists from the German school (Franz Hamma from Stuttgart, then Moscheles, and finally Henri Herz in Paris for a short time) meant that she transcended the conflicting demands of her era. Although the piano was central to Jaëll's public life, she did not regard it as an end in itself. Music was her life, which meant the piano was not merely an instrument but also, by its very nature, a medium of self-expression. Her singular relationship with the piano was defined by the paradox that the piano is a vehicle for music, allowing the pianist's hands to be a vehicle for the creative intelligence. The unique and indissoluble relationship between object and subject represented by the piano caused Jaëll to reappraise the instrument continually in terms of her art, raising all kinds of questions which caused the pianist to subject her expressive gestural processes to the test of science. The piano could not therefore satisfy her symphonic, concertante or melodic needs fully, hence the composition of lieder, songs, concertos, a symphonic poem and an opera, as well as the piano pieces.

Jaëll's devotion to the larger world of music over and above her passion for the piano gave her a unique knowledge of the performers, creators and scholars in Parisian circles. Among these notable figures were César Franck, then professor of organ at the Conservatoire and head organist at Sainte-Clotilde; Camille Saint-Saëns, who was not only a virtuoso pianist but also a composer and founder of various musical societies; Édouard Schuré, a mystic poet and the author of literary studies devoted to the operas of Richard Wagner, among others; and Charles Féré, a physiological doctor, working in a field similar to what is now called the neurosciences. These names highlight the ambivalences and dualities erected between science and art, between the interpretation of texts and the creative act, as well as between the real and the imaginary: modern forms of transcendence which people of the period approached with a secular, Republican and analytical attitude. In fact, this is one of the forms that the assimilation of the complex legacy handed down by an outdated Romanticism might have taken. In 1837, Hector Berlioz had written, in an article entitled 'De la musique en general' (*Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris*, 10 September 1837): 'Music is both a sentiment and a science.' But he had left it to the

poetic imagination to resolve the matter. These issues led to a questioning of the role of spirituality, which was also bitterly debated and challenged. It was no longer found in religion, which was strongly opposed by the Republic; on the one hand, it resided in art, while, on the other, its superstitious rituals were challenged by science. Symbolism was one of the solutions found to this crisis of sensibility, as was the naturalist movement and, more generally, the scientific position adopted by the freethinkers.

Faced with such fundamental questions, Marie Jaëll's life was, to some extent, similar to that of a woman in a religious order. She followed the type of career path characteristic of exceptional people who not only form strong bonds of friendship with the leading figures of the time but also enjoy the type of peopled solitude which is only really sustained by 'the quest of the absolute'. Honoré de Balzac used that phrase for the title of his novel devoted to the study of the psychological make-up of a scholar who descends into insanity, although the French writer preferred *Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu* (*The Unknown Masterpiece*) to describe the artistic quest, dogged equally by madness. The latter story foregrounds the idea of incomprehension, the damage caused by the quest for perfection. This may have influenced the underlying notion of Jaëll's personality: a remarkable woman but one who was maddening, perhaps even mad, and left to languish on the side-lines.

It is possible, in fact, that she had a predilection for the sensibility of the German masters as a result of her roots and initial training – a sympathy she was constrained to deny by the defeat of France in 1870, since she chose to be French. Such conflicts of loyalty, which were of course imposed by belief, but also by the pressures of history, might have been hard to endure without involving awkward mental contortions and deep-seated identity issues. Consequently it was almost inevitable that Marie Jaëll should find herself in the midst of a world and a period undergoing radical change, while living in a city which afforded some incredible opportunities. She chose to seize some of the most exciting chances thrown her way by life and the people she met, viewing them as challenges to pursue excellence and the irresistible attraction of perfection.

These complex nationalist dilemmas were the same as those that tormented the young Debussy, who was particularly opposed to the

syntheses produced by Camille Saint-Saëns and the superiority of the solutions offered by the ‘music of the future’. Marie Jaëll is to be found as part of the generation between these two great composers. Her destiny was to belong to a heritage that was forced to change by the vicissitudes of history. It may therefore be possible to view Marie’s three successive careers as a post-Romantic response to these numerous constraints and one which reflected fin-de-siècle frustrations and grievances.



CRITICAL TEXTS

Marie Jaëll’s name has gone down in history largely due to the lasting fame of her ‘Method’. Her sensational virtuosity also impressed the critics of her day. While it was fitting for a woman to be a pianist, though, a woman composer raised eyebrows. However, from 1871 onwards, Marie enthusiastically devoted herself to composition. The critical response to the symphonic poem *Ossiane*, part of which was performed in 1879 at the Érard Hall, included these revealing lines by the critic, Ernest Reyer, whose remarks, full of embarrassed enthusiasm, quite accurately summed up the enigma presented by this musical figure:

Madame Jaëll who, having won all the laurels as a virtuoso that a woman virtuoso can win, now aspires to the title of composer. [...] She is a woman, that much is true; but it is impossible to tell her sex from her music. Such transports! Such daring stylistic effects and such virility! [...] I will not wait to know the work in full to declare that the composer of Ossiane has an exceptional musical temperament, surprising gifts and first-class qualities. No woman has ever demonstrated such power, such energy, such determination.

(Journal des débats, 26 May 1879)

Only the second wave of Romanticism combined with the era of Scientism and influenced by the national crisis could give rise to similar characteristics, which even so were hard to acknowledge. Saint-Saëns, a close friend of Marie’s, whose portrait may have made its way into the character of Ascanio in the opera of the same name which he was composing at the time, eventually (after some stormy exchanges) suggested that she give up composition.

And what should be made of the analysis of Marie's personality put forward by Angèle Berthe Venem – whose pseudonym was Jacques Vincent – after hearing her play at an evening performance, also attended by Édouard Schuré?:

Then Marie Jaëll seized – that is the word – the huge Érard Hall. Not a beautiful or pretty face, but one that is original, determined, even imperious. Her supple hands, with long, flexible fingers, resting on the keys, gained possession of them with the passionate violence of an ardent, unbridled and immoderate nature. In fact, her extraordinary virtuosity was as uneven as her somewhat barbaric character; admirable sometimes, sometimes disordered, unmindful of an imposed method, even capable of wrong notes, striving for forceful effects: a string-breaker, some called her.

(*Un Salon parisien d'avant-guerre*, 1929, p. 99)

Extremely headstrong, fiercely hard-line and probably somewhat wild by nature, Marie Jaëll stood out for her uneven yet inspired originality, even when it came to her passion for the view she perpetuated of Liszt's art.

The last word should go to Camille Saint-Saëns, always so discerning in his remarks, when he realised her new vocation for composing:

Madame Marie Jaëll no longer wants anyone to speak of her talent as a pianist, she disdains the virtuosity of which she has become weary and has set her sights only on exalted composition. Her first attempts have been tumultuous, excessive, not unlike the bursting forth of a devastating torrent but, since then, that extremely gifted nature has grown calm; she improves every day in her art; she does not lose sight of her objective and she will attain it.

A Monsieur M. MARSICK

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The score of Marie Jaëll's *Romance pour violon*.
(Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire, Strasbourg)

Édition de la *Romance pour violon* de Marie Jaëll.
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