

A PASSION FOR COMPOSING

Sébastien Troester

The only real way to judge a piece of music is by listening to it: so the CDs in this *Portrait* contain a number of works which have never been heard before. Although music lovers with an interest in out-of-print scores may have been able to get hold of some of Marie Jaëll's piano music, her orchestral music has not been heard since its first performance. The first recordings of four major orchestral works add up to an unexpected study of a composer whose instrument of choice might not have been, as was commonly believed, the piano – on which the virtuoso excelled in her first period of activity from 1855 to 1870 – but that 'king of instruments', the orchestra.

These new discoveries include *La Légende des ours*, composed between 1877-1878, at the same time as a number of other highly diverse works, such as *Le Roi de Lahore* by Massenet (1877), *L'Étoile* by Chabrier (1877), Lalo's *Cello Concerto* (1877), *Samson and Dalila* by Saint-Saëns (1877), as well as his *Requiem op. 54* (1878), *Polyeucte* by Gounod (first version of 1878), and *Madame Favart* by Offenbach (1878). One has only to hear *La Légende des ours*, a suite of six avowedly humorous songs for soprano, to realise that the already mature young composer does not suffer by comparison. Indeed, she had every right to be proud of her experiments in orchestration, her sense of drama, her subtle instrumentation and at times truly Impressionist textures. Let us walk awhile in the footsteps of this highly talented, ambitious woman to learn more about her unique brand of genius.



A TRUE VOCATION

How insipid they are, these young women pianists who always play the same pieces by Liszt. But speak to me of La Jaëll! Here is an intelligent, witty woman: she produces her own works for the piano, which are just as bad as those by Liszt.

It is hard to know how to take this strange tribute paid by Johannes Brahms to 'La Jaëll' in a letter of 1888 to Richard Heuberger, when he compared her compositions ironically – or cruelly – to those by Liszt. Brahms was a longstanding friend of the virtuoso pianist, Alfred Jaëll, who first performed and promoted many of the German master's works; so he would have known Marie Trautmann, who became Marie Jaëll in 1866. But whether Brahms was really familiar with the Alsatian prodigy's music is another matter. Were her pieces so widely distributed, played in the salons, published, discussed and reviewed in her day that it was amusing to ridicule them by comparing them disparagingly to works composed by that obscure pianist, Franz Liszt? There may well be parallels, on a different scale, between Liszt and the woman who later became his confidante and secretary: Liszt's talents as a composer seem to have gone unrecognized, and were even derided, for many years, unlike his genius as a pianist and improviser, a performer whose keyboard feats won him standing ovations throughout Europe. Was Brahms, in this letter, espousing a similar prejudice against virtuosos impudent enough to aspire to the noble art of composition? Whatever the case, it is difficult not to find him guilty of the widely shared misogyny which Marie Jaëll, along with other creatively active women, would have had to endure to some extent or other.

Marie Jaëll's body of works, however, although not prolific, does shed some light on the interest her music might have aroused at the time she was writing it, as well as on the unusual artistic path taken by a young piano prodigy who decided, in her twenties, to turn her back on an established career as a renowned performer. These works also show glimpses of the complicated concerns and enquiries of a certain Romantic strain of French music in the second half of the 19th century, a period influenced equally by a strong Italian heritage, a fascination for German and Austro-Hungarian models and a quest for a unique French identity.

The many notebooks and work books that Marie Jaëll left behind, along with a voluminous correspondence, show an irrepressible need to create, a burning ambition to hone her craft and progress and even, later on, a certain tendency towards mysticism; in these personal writings, the repeated description of the throes of creation tend to be Promethean in tone. In 1878, she confided to her friend, Anna Sandherr:

Learning to compose is an abiding passion, I wake up with it in the morning, I go to sleep with it in the evening. I have such an elevated idea of my art that my only delight is to devote my life to it without hoping for anything else but to live through it and for it.

Elsewhere, to Gosswine von Berlepsch:

What strength, what richness, what abundance there is in me! I feel like an erupting volcano, and that is how it should be; because it is only like this that I can grow! At times, everything is peaceful, then I am again seized by agitation; and it is as if the storm and the lull were forming successive waves. Will I ever achieve stability, a sense of moderation? I must, or else my life will not be worthy of my mission.

In 1894, her last set of compositions still bears the stamp of this fiery nature obsessed by the question of the ascent of the soul, exemplifying as it does a quintessentially Jaëllian aspiration and inspiration. This collection of eighteen pieces for piano is inspired by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and divided into three sections, entitled *Ce qu'on entend dans l'Enfer*, *Ce qu'on entend dans le Purgatoire*, *Ce qu'on entend dans le Paradis* (*What is Heard in Hell, ... in Purgatory, ... in Paradise*).

From the early piano pieces for the salon to the chamber music and ambitious large-scale symphonic works, the twenty-four years that Marie Jaëll devoted exclusively to composition – from 1870 to 1894 – culminated in these final hieratic pieces; their single melodic motif picks up the famous first four notes of the Gregorian *Dies Irae*, a sort of radical conclusion – which was not understood by her contemporaries – to what has to be described as a feverish quest for meaning, beauty and light.



PIANO WORKS

Marie Jaëll's catalogue of completed works contains around sixty pieces, of which the majority were written for the piano. This is hardly surprising since, in common with many instrumentalists, she 'produce[d] her own works' to play in the salons and at concerts. These works span her years as a composer and were widely known due to the almost systematic publication of the sheet music, mainly by the famous Heugel publishing house in Paris, and also as a result of the many recitals given by the musician herself. Consequently, very few of the piano pieces remain unpublished today.

To give an idea of the diversity of piano works in this catalogue, we should first take a look at the genre and character pieces, such as the *Six Valses mélancoliques* and the *Six Valses mignonnes*, the *Douze Valses et Finale pour piano à quatre mains*, the preludes entitled *Six Esquisses romantiques*, and *Deux Méditations*. Each of these pieces creates a different mood which sets it apart from all the others, irrespective of any illustration or external description.

In the *Douze Valses et Finale*, for example, the emphasis is on depth of expression rather than on producing a formal, mechanical exercise, the three-beat rhythm alone allowing the composer to vary characters, colours and feelings. These waltzes range in mood from deep melancholy (Valse 10) to effervescent dances that deploy the full orchestral power of the piano (Valses 1, 3, 4, 7, 11 and the Finale), including gallant, dreamy *demi-caractère* pieces (such as Valses 2, 5, 6, 9, and 12), or a ballad with a distinctly oriental feel (8). These waltzes for four hands were performed by Saint-Saëns and Liszt shoulder to shoulder in 1876 in Weimar – a clear sign of the interest they aroused; Liszt was to send Marie Jaëll his 'sincere praise for this delightful gem', as he termed the *Douze Valses à quatre mains*. It should be noted – more about this later – that the importance Jaëll placed on expressivity is found everywhere in her work: for example in the slow movements of her three concertos, during which she always took the opportunity to use subtle colours, subdued tones and a gentle, dreamy nostalgia – traits which her music allowed her to explore even though they were poles apart from her fiery, volatile nature.

The second important facet of her piano output is found in the 'pastoral', romantic pieces, whose stated intention was to imitate or evoke

a familiar image, a landscape – either inner or natural – or an emotion: these include the four pieces forming the *Promenade matinale*, the *Voix du printemps* for four hands, and the unfinished *Harmonies imitatives*. This last piece in particular contains two different types of contemplation which connect and commingle: a simple evocation of the countryside, forest and fields – ‘Les Oiseaux chantent’, ‘Plainte du vent’, ‘L’Orage’ –; and an examination of the other type of nature, human nature, whose innermost feelings and contradictions are anatomised by Jaëll in pieces such as ‘Supplication’, ‘Rêvasserie’, ‘Dans le doute’...

The eighteen pieces for piano inspired by Dante (*Ce qu’on entend*) also share this complexity. The title of nearly every single piece conjures up a passion or state of mind felt only by human beings: as noted above, the composer makes the journey from darkness to light, moving from hell to paradise via purgatory, with stripped-back simplicity. All she takes with her on this journey is four notes which do not increase in number. Instead, the movement is in the infinitesimal variations, the inventive melodic development of the sparse material, and the sophisticated rhythmic and harmonic ideas. Although published in its entirety the year it was finished, this major work, which Jaëll rated highly, was greeted with indifference. This failure certainly had a bearing on her decision to give up composing once and for all. She was feeling misunderstood even before she had finished writing it, as can be seen by part of a letter sent to Saint-Saëns in August 1893:

What do you think would be the point of me sending you my manuscripts? They contain some very new ideas, if Liszt were still alive they would have given him enormous pleasure, he would have been happy to tell me: Keep going! I had thought you were like him!

It was during the same period that Satie was composing *Vexations*, a work consisting of eight hundred and forty repetitions of the same theme on the piano; it was performed for the first time in 1963 in New York at the instigation of John Cage, a great admirer. Perhaps it is now time to consider ranking *Ce qu’on entend* alongside other groundbreaking works, given that its radical musical ideas inevitably bring to mind discoveries made in the second half of the twentieth century by composers of so-called repetitive, minimalist music?

Last but not least are the piano pieces written for teaching purposes. These were composed towards the end of Marie Jaëll's composing life, when she was already teaching and researching into touch; this new, intense period of activity saw the publication of the three volumes of her method as well as ten other works of theory between 1894 and 1922. These pedagogical pieces, a world away from the conceptual severity of the Dante-inspired cycles, afford a Schumannian simplicity: this may only be a superficial contradiction, however, since these pieces could be seen to demonstrate a similar impulse to simplify and pare down the music. The two main works are two cycles of twelve pieces entitled *Les Beaux Jours* and *Les Jours pluvieux* dedicated to her pupils, the five Spalding brothers and sisters. Later, she included in the definitive version of her three-volume method, six very simple short pieces, which were to be published in 1930, along with one last work entitled *Sept Pièces faciles pour piano – Pour les enfants*.

In *Les Beaux Jours*, the poetic inspiration focuses on the main gist of the pieces: the crackling of sparks can be heard throughout the 'Incendie de broussailles' ('Brush Fire') in the staccato notes played by the right hand, right up until the final high chords conjuring up what are now roaring flames. In 'Murmures du ruisseau' ('River Murmurs'), the arpeggios rolling from one hand to the other mimic the turbulent waters. 'On rit' ('Laughing') clearly mimics the varied rhythms of laughter and merriment, while 'Le Pâtre et l'Écho' ('The Shepherd and the Echo') and 'Le Tocsin' ('The Signal') evoke the sound of a flute or distant oboe in the first instance, and an ostinato of bells in the second. The same simplicity can be found in *Les Jours pluvieux* which captures in turn all the nuanced differences between types of falling rain, from 'Quelques Gouttes de pluie' ('Several Drops of Rain') to 'Vent et Pluie' ('Wind and Rain'), as well as 'Petite Pluie fine' ('Drizzle'); and when 'L'Orage ne vient pas' ('The Storm Does Not Break'), the notes pulsating in the left hand, while speeding up and slowing down in the right hand, imitate a storm that never breaks, eventually fading away together. This is a highly successful exercise in subtlety and understated poetry.



CHAMBER MUSIC – SONGS

On examining Marie Jaëll's output, it is surprising to note that, from the very start, she was composing works as different as the *Six Petites pièces pour piano*, a minimalist *Impromptu* and a huge *Piano Sonata* dedicated 'to the illustrious master, Franz Liszt'. This is a constant feature of Jaëll's approach to musical writing: from her earliest lessons, she dedicated herself to mastering the classical forms, sonatas and concertos, cantatas and symphonic poems. Interestingly, in comparison, her composer husband, Alfred, confined himself to lighter, less demanding forms throughout his life: his list of works features countless brilliant virtuoso variations on opera arias, on the one hand, and a few dozen original romances or popular tunes arranged for the salon, on the other.

In 1875, at the age of twenty-nine, Marie Jaëll composed a *String Quartet in G minor*, imbued with the same serious, innovative spirit as her earlier large-scale *Piano Sonata*. It is worth mentioning that, in comparison, her teacher Saint-Saëns did not favour posterity with his first string quartet until he was fifty-four, and his second was not written for another nineteen years. In the following year, Jaëll herself adapted this string quartet to include a piano, replacing one of the two violins with a piano part. Unfortunately, it is highly unlikely that this *Piano Quartet* will ever be heard because, as with the majority of her output, the manuscripts that have survived are often complicated by crossings out, deletions and glued-on pieces of paper, which make it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to produce what might be a definitive musical text: one of the distinctive features of Jaëll's *modus operandi* was that she was given to furiously revising, rereading, correcting and rewriting her own works. This alarming tendency prompted the Alsatian General, Theodore Parmentier – a great friend and confidant, as well as a reviser, critic and proof-reader of her compositions – to advise his friend in no uncertain terms to publish her works as soon as possible, otherwise she would never stop altering them.

Other classical forms include another huge sonata, this time for the cello, which was composed in 1881, dedicated to the composer and critic, Ernest Reyer, and revised in 1886. According to her correspondence, this sonata was performed at least once by Marie Jaëll with the renowned cellist, David Popper. The piano accompaniment

for the *Violin Sonata*, which was dedicated to another famous concert performer, Teresa Milanollo, the wife of General Parmentier, appears to have been lost. There are also a couple of other delightful pieces – a *Fantaisie* and a *Romance* for violin and piano – which, although minor, were probably very popular in the salons.

Marie Jaëll devoted particular energy to composing songs for voice with piano accompaniment, using her own texts for inspiration, as well as poems by Jean de Richepin (*La Mer*), Victor Hugo (seven songs based on *Les Orientales*), Baudelaire, Gide, and Ronsard. In total, she wrote about twenty-five songs. As usual, the piano accompaniment was skilfully crafted to reflect the sentiments expressed by the voice as closely as possible. Keen to have her *Orientales* published by Heugel, she wrote to the publisher:

I have just finished a set of songs based on Victor Hugo's Orientales. This is far better than anything you know by me. When you see it, you are bound to realise that this is a work of lasting significance and one that will have quite an impact.

These songs were eventually published by Dupont and then sank into oblivion, despite the composer's prediction; however, they still sound fresh today, inspired as they probably were by a liberating yet tasteful exoticism. The subject of a song like *La Voile* gives it a very contemporary feel when heard today.

It is also interesting to note that almost all the poems Jaëll wrote to be set to music were, as far as we know, written first in German, which was her mother tongue and the language she associated with love and intimacy: her *Quatre Mélodies* published by Brandus (translation of the *Fünf Lieder*, published first by Schott), *La Légende des ours* initially entitled *Bärenlieder*, as well as the text of the cantata *Au tombeau d'un enfant défunt*, a homage to one of Saint-Saëns' sons (*Am Grabe eines Kindes*), and the text of the symphonic poem *Ossiane (Götterlieder)*. The French version was therefore always written afterwards. This again raises questions about Jaëll's position with regard to German and French influences, questions this article will attempt to answer at the end.

Although it is not known whether a piano version preceded the orchestral version, the six songs which form *La Légende des ours*, subtitled 'Chants humoristiques pour voix de soprano et accompagnement

d'orchestre' ('Humorous songs for soprano with orchestral accompaniment'), occupy a special place in her catalogue. The note from Saint-Saëns to his pupil in a letter dated 1879, the year the song cycle was first performed, gives food for thought:

If you want to use an orchestra for your lieder, go right ahead, the lied with orchestra is a social necessity; if such a thing existed, people wouldn't keep singing opera arias at concerts, where they often make a sorry impression.

Florent Schmitt made a similar remark in 1913, indicating a recurrent problem:

And what do they make this soloist sing? Eternal opera fragments by Gluck, Mozart, Wagner, or the Archangel's air from the Redemption which, you must admit, we are getting to know very well indeed?

So Jaëll did go right ahead, choosing to respond to this issue by writing songs with an orchestral accompaniment. Her subject, one of her own devising, was strange to say the least: the trials and tribulations, loves and death of a gentleman bear and lady bear. It should be borne in mind that there are many examples of songs with orchestral accompaniment written by a number of 19th-century French composers, from Gounod to Dubois, including Berlioz, Massenet and Saint-Saëns himself, who left behind an immense body of work which is today completely unknown – with the result that concert programmes continue to feature the same eternal opera arias that we really are getting to know very well indeed.

La Légende des ours is an innovative, atypical work. It marks a complete change of direction from the *Piano Concerto no 1 in D minor* of 1877, with its classical, at times almost overwrought, style of orchestration. In this work, the groups of instruments are independent of each other, certain elements are added or subtracted from one bar to the next, so that nothing is slavishly repeated, and no effect or technique sounds overworked. The piece bears the hallmark of a skilled composer who is playing the orchestra like an instrument: the inventive, experimental treatment of the different combinations and timbres shows a meticulous eye for detail. Consequently, the three-note motif mimicking the gait of the bear, as well as the other motifs repeated

throughout the work, are eclipsed by the overwhelming emphasis on orchestral colour: episodes such as the quarrel, the comical bear dance or the love scene reveal a keen ear at work in the use of individual instruments, both together and on their own.

At the start of the fifth song ('Union Malheureuse' or 'Unhappy Marriage'), the strings and woodwind enter alone or in pairs, slowly answering each other. The burgeoning melody is unexpectedly repeated and enriched by the bass clarinet, ushering in the whole orchestra, which suddenly swells: the quarrel between the two bears follows, each section of the orchestra adds its individual weight to the others as the surges of music ebb and flow, culminating in a huge dissonant *tutti*. The listener is left with the impression that these *Bears* have a great deal more in common with Debussy's *La Mer* than Massenet's *Roi de Lahore*.



CONCERTANTE MUSIC – CHOIR AND ORCHESTRA

When it comes to Marie Jaëll's works with orchestra, it would be hard not to focus on the two piano concertos, which are exciting for several reasons. Firstly, as noted above, these were works written by the composer for herself. This was a win-win situation for her, as she was giving herself a piece of music perfectly suited to her tastes and needs, and allowing an audience fond of pianistic feats to experience her idiosyncratic style of virtuosity. Furthermore, because of her personal fame, these two concertos, in addition to the *Cello Concerto*, are the orchestral works which were performed in concert most frequently; the three other works – the cantata, the symphonic poem and the songs with orchestral accompaniment – received at best a complete or partial first performance, or worst were never performed at all.

All the characteristic features of her short composing career can be found in the piano concertos. They obviously contain elements of her classical foundation, although these were not treated with undue deference: for example, the *Concerto no 1 in D minor* of 1877 begins curiously with a short-lived fugue theme; the slow beginning of the first movement and the cantabile string passages in the adagio are also reminiscent of Mendelssohn's *Concerto no 2 in D minor*; there are shades

of Beethoven too in the melodic six-note unit that Jaëll employs as the first theme, or in the lofty grandiloquence of the orchestral writing; the last movement, on the other hand, reminded journalists of the period of Schumann and Rubinstein. In 1879, *Le Ménestrel* described a performance of this concerto accordingly:

The prelude [from the symphonic poem Götterlieder or Ossiane] and the adagio of the Concerto in D minor have achieved a great, and well-deserved, success. – The last movement is a true feat of gymnastics and velocity; it seems that the composer wanted to fill it with every imaginable difficulty. It is, undoubtedly, a delightful piece for connoisseurs of this genre; the audience was riveted to the spot! – As always, the Cologne Orchestra worked wonders; how tired those poor musicians must have been!

Interestingly, the musical press of 1877 agreed on one point in particular: ‘Her *Concerto in D minor* is much more of a symphony than a work for piano with orchestra. The virtuoso has stepped aside in favour of the symphonist’ (*Le Ménestrel*); ‘The *Concerto in D minor* is very symphonic; the piano often takes a subordinate role to the orchestra’ (*Revue et Gazette musicale*). Does the hint of surprise in these unanimous opinions indicate a shifting balance of relationships in the concerto genre, for which Jaëll, among others, might have paved the way?

The *Concerto no 2 in C minor* continues this process of exploration: the traditional division into movements has been abandoned in favour of a continuous piece of music in four sections. By choosing not to structure the music in line with the classical form, the composer was ensuring that the momentum continued uninterrupted, thereby favouring the complexity of the writing; this had the knock-on effect of commanding the audience’s unbroken attention for the full twenty-five minutes, without allowing them the opportunity to applaud or react in any other way.

Although the reception from critics and the public proved less than enthusiastic, Liszt expressed his wholehearted admiration for this work. Before the concerto’s first performance on 18 April 1884 at the Société Nationale de Musique, he wrote to her, saying:

When will we hear your superb Concerto, which you must perform in Paris? [...] I will listen to and hear in my head and heart the famous Ossianic

Concerto. [A word play on *Ossiane*, the symphonic poem composed by Marie Jaëll. Liszt always called her ‘Ossiana’, as can be seen from their correspondence.]

On 27 April 1884, in a similar vein:

It is not surprising, my dear Ossiana, that your superb Concerto was not understood on its first hearing. People will change their minds, as well they should. To my great regret, I was unable to find room for the Concerto in the over-full programme of the next Tonkünstlerversammlung from 23 to 24 May in Weimar. [...] This time the gentle sex will not put in an appearance; so much the worse for the sterner sex.

And on 2 May 1884:

Do not fail to bring to the Hofgärtnerei the score and parts of your Concerto, a brilliant masterpiece.

And, finally, *Le Ménestrel* of the 1st February 1885 published this, after a new performance conducted by Benjamin Godard:

[Marie Jaëll] is a powerful, passionate and poetic artist; one might only wish that she displayed a little more feminism [sic]. Her Concerto in C minor is a masterpiece, and she performed it superbly.

It is tempting to compare this concerto with *Les Djinns* by César Franck, a symphonic poem for piano and orchestra which was composed in the same year, but did not receive its first performance until 1884. Even though Marie Jaëll did not intend this work to be programmatic or illustrative, it has an oriental feel in many respects, beginning with her use of non-Western modes; visual and auditory impressions abound, as for example in her highly elaborate evocations of birdsong; lastly, Franck took his subject from Victor Hugo’s *Les Orientales*, and this collection of poems was also a source of inspiration for Marie Jaëll several years later.

The *Cello Concerto in F major* (1882) was also highly successful, since its dedicatee, the famous cellist, Jules Delsart, worked hard to promote it. The Belgian cellist, Adolphe Fischer, another renowned performer

and the dedicatee of Lalo's *Cello Concerto*, seems to have asked Jaëll for permission to perform the work at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Unlike certain other concertos in which the soloist tends to get swallowed up by the orchestral texturing (Dvorak's masterpiece, for example, composed in 1896), the subtle scoring of Jaëll's *Cello Concerto* shows a close attention to the material and a light touch which brings out the melodic line of the cello. It might also be worth noting that these two concertos – by Dvorak and Jaëll – share a surprisingly similarity (particularly in their respective first movements) in that they both have a resolutely 'American' inspiration: Marie Jaëll's sister was the first wife of Conrad Diehl, a German doctor later elected mayor of the city of Buffalo. The Alsatian composer was very fond of her American nieces and nephews, whom she made her legatees after her death. After a spirited *Allegro moderato* which transports the listener into the midst of vast unexplored spaces, the composer hits a particularly rich vein of inspiration in the slow movement, a delicate *Andantino sostenuto* in the strings, alternating *pizzicati* and bowed notes each time the melody recurs; the short central section of the movement, with its unusual 9/16 time signature – a sort of triple beat within what is already a triple beat – emphasises the poignant push and pull of the expressive musical writing, and greatly enhances the impact of the floating cello line. The impassioned tarantella-style finale concludes this extremely condensed work, barely fifteen minutes long, which is attractive for its simplicity, energy and brilliance. The restricted instrumental forces invite the cello to take centre stage in the musical discourse, surrounding and arraying the soloist with carefully-worked colours and textures.

The other two large works with orchestra still to be described here form a striking contrast in scale. The symphonic poem for soprano and mixed choir entitled *Ossiane* is pervaded by a mythological spirit which calls for huge forces, and there is no doubt that Jaëll is firmly situated in the Wagnerian and Straussian tradition: the brass section, for example, comprises four horns, three trumpets, four trombones, four saxhorns and a tuba. The work takes its subject from Irish epics and Celtic mythology, narrating the initiatory ascent of a poetess called Ossiane to the usually unattainable summits inhabited by Beles, the god of Harmony. Ossiane's voice is embodied by the solo soprano, that of the god by the orchestra. Marie Jaëll performs a strange reversal of roles in which the bard Ossian – whose apocryphal

writings were compiled and published by James MacPherson in the late 18th century – is changed from narrator to protagonist, and from man to woman. The poet, an ancient writer, becomes an adventurer who attempts to ascend to heaven in the same way as the poet Dante attempted to descend into hell. When part of the work was first performed in 1879, *Le Ménestrel* concluded:

We will immediately say, therefore, that if M^{me} Jaëll wanted to prove that she is no stranger to the infinite possibilities of the art of orchestration, she has fully succeeded. Her combinations of timbres sometimes produce effects that are as felicitous as they are unexpected and her tutti are energetically handled. She obviously belongs to the Wagnerian school in her manner of working; like the master of that school, she does not give enough prominence to the melody, which she sacrifices to interminable modulations.

What a contrast with the orchestral writing of the *Piano Concerto no 1*, also composed in 1877!

Last but not least, the cantata for solo contralto, choir, organ and orchestra entitled *Am Grabe eines Kindes*, or *Au tombeau d'un enfant*, was written in 1879 as a tribute to the tragic death of one of Camille Saint-Saëns' sons, and given its first performance in Antwerp in 1880. It is made up of three large choral sections ('La Tombe', the 'Chœur des Esprits de la Terre', and the 'Chœur des Anges') interspersed with two interludes for solo contralto, organ and small orchestra. It is again worth pointing out that the huge forces required for this work call to mind the orchestral scoring of Richard Strauss's *Tod und Verklärung*, written ten years later; the surviving manuscript choral parts suggest that the piece called for 120 to 130 singers.



THE JAËLLIAN SYNTHESIS

A career woman and artist who had earned her place in a male-dominated world, Marie Jaëll strove to gain recognition from her peers and become, in a manner of speaking, the Frenchest of French composers. She actively opted for France after Alsace-Lorraine was annexed and chose to study under Camille Saint-Saëns, a true national treas-

ure. In 1879, she was the first woman to be admitted to the Société Nationale des Compositeurs de Musique; her works were frequently performed at concerts organised by the Société Nationale de Musique.

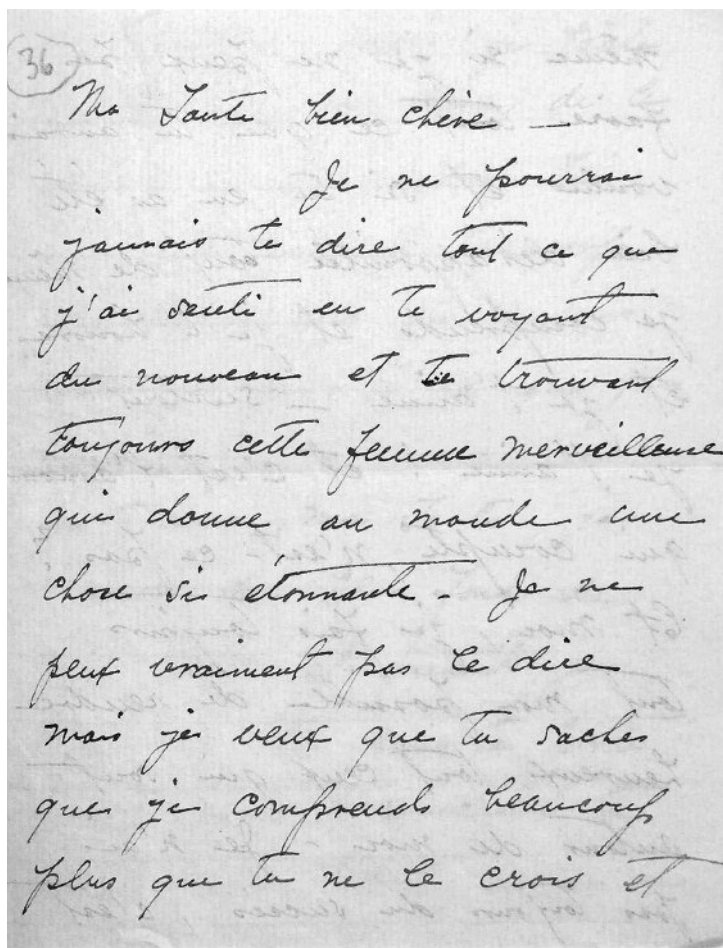
But how should her sometimes enigmatic musical output be categorised? Was she a typically French composer? A composer of German inspiration? Although Marie Jaëll protested throughout her life against a Wagnerism she was reluctant to acknowledge, it should be remembered, nevertheless, that her early piano training was dominated by the German and Austrian repertory, which left its indelible stamp on her work; later, her extensive acquaintance with Liszt's works, as well as the series of sensational concerts during which she performed not only the complete Beethoven sonatas, but also Chopin's complete piano music, only strengthened the impression that this woman, in her heart and soul, looked to Germany, and beyond.

However, in the midst of this unresolvable conflict of loyalties, she attempted to go her own way and we can identify several hallmarks of her idiosyncratic approach: her emphasis on colourful, imagistic writing and an exploration of the natural and inner worlds; her fusion of all the instruments together – soloists or not – so that their complex individual lines work together to create a unique discourse, a single orchestral voice; her realization of a type of minimalism in which the initial material is not varied, developed and enriched in the classical style, but remains unembellished to the end. Focusing on an unexpected instrument, the orchestra, she produced groundbreaking work, becoming a pioneer on her own terms. She invented a free art of orchestration in which the material was governed, shaped and crafted entirely by the poetic aim. In her thesis on the composer, Marie-Hélène Cautain transcribed this astonishing remark from her notebooks of 1916:

I was particularly gifted at orchestration. In [Ce qu'on entend dans] l'Enfer, there is orchestration, it is not written for the piano. It is architectural. The dissociation, the individuality of the fingers and their relationship to each other, that is also orchestration.

Marie Jaëll was creating a type of intellectual synthesis that regarded orchestration as a global, unifying idea, a type of 'architecture' in which every element required individual attention, a detailed approach to

its conception and structuring within the whole. Did this pave the way for the triumph of the quintessentially French orchestral style, as exemplified by Fauré, Debussy and Ravel? This CD-book now allows us to discuss the case on its merits.



Letter from Clara Montillon-Diehl to Marie Jaëll. (MLI Collection)

Lettre de Clara Montillon-Diehl à Marie Jaëll. (Collection MLI)