

Cécile Louise Stéphanie Chaminade (1857-1944)

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Cécile Chaminade was born in Paris into a wealthy bourgeois family. From an early age she showed great musical talent. The guests of the family salon were the most eminent musicians of the time, such as Georges Bizet, Ambroise Thomas, Gilles Massenet, Charles Gounod, Camille Saint-Saëns and Emmanuel Chabrier, admiring the talent of the "child prodigy". However, in the nineteenth century, there was a very skeptical approach to the professional work of women, including artistic creativity understood in professional categories.

Woman's work, however gratifying it may be for herself, amounted to class degradation. Cécile Chaminade's father, who did not allow her to enter the conservatory, was of a similar opinion. Thanks to the intervention of G. Bizet, he agreed only to private music lessons, and so, the distinguished professors of the Paris university began to come to the Chaminade's home. Cécile took piano lessons with Felix Le Couppey, harmony with Augustin Savard, and composition with Benjamin Godard.

The whole social cream of Paris knew about the talent of the maiden who played music together with the greatest professionals of the time. There was even a bizarre situation when, at the last minute, the program of the concert in the Salle Playel was changed in order to allow the young composer and pianist to make her public debut during the absence of her father. It was a great success, which was covered in the press. In 1878 Le Couppey organised a concert entirely devoted to the compositions of Cécile Chaminade and so her career began. Other significant works from this period were the trio in G major, Op.11, the orchestral suite, Op.20, the comic opera 'La Sévillane', Op.10, the trio, Op.34, and the dramatic symphony 'Les Amazones', Op.26, for solo voices, chorus and orchestra.

Another major composition was the ballet 'Callirhoë' op.37, premiered in Marseille on 16.06.1888. It has lived to see over two hundred productions, including at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Her piece 'Concertstück' Op.40 for piano and orchestra was similarly successful. Cécile Chaminade then embarked on a concert tour of France, Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands. On 28.07.1887, the composer's father died. One may venture to say that with his death, Cécile lost her 'warrior's vein', as from this point on she abandoned large orchestral forms and concentrated her work almost entirely on piano pieces, chamber music and songs. The glorious exception is the 'Concertino' for flute and orchestra op.107 from 1902. The glorious exception is the 'Concertino' for flute and orchestra op.107 from 1902. At the same time, her international career as a pianist developed greatly. Since the death of her father, it was on her shoulders to maintain her mother and all the family estates (villa in Vésinet, flat in rue de Rome in Paris and others). Her concert tours ran throughout Europe, all the way to Turkey. She achieved enormous success in the United States and Canada. Her 1907 and 1908 tours included 25 concerts in the major concert halls of the USA. She was also President Roosevelt's guest at the White House.

Clubs of her admirers sprang up both in Europe and in the USA. During her concert tours, she played recitals composed exclusively of her own works, which she published almost immediately in the respective country, thus achieving unprecedented publishing success. For many years, she was considered the best 'selling' female composer of all time. In the United States to this day, Cécile Chaminade's compositions are part of the pedagogical programme in music schools. She lived her life alone, declaring: 'My love is music - I am its devotee, I am its Vestal'.

She wanted neither a secretary nor an impresario. After painful experiences with her father's prohibitions, living in the patriarchal society of the time, she did not want to allow anyone to ever come between her and music again. Over time, she relaxed her stance somewhat by allowing the possibility of marriage, subject, however, to conditions. In 1901, at the age of 44, she decided to enter into a platonic marriage with Louis Carbonnel, more than 20 years older than her, a publisher from Marseille, divorced and without assets, who died in 1907. It is likely that the social status of married women at the time was so strong that even by choice, single women eventually succumbed to the pressures of their environment, resentful of 'old maidens'. In Chaminade's case, the period of marriage to a suffering, slowly dying elderly gentleman influenced a distinct aesthetic change in her composition.

For us Poles, it is particularly interesting to note that Cécile's sister Henriette married Maurycy Moszkowski, a composer and pianist of Polish origin. In 1912, Cécile Chaminade's mother, who had hitherto been a faithful companion on her concert tours, died. This loss entailed a long period of mourning and suffering. Chaminade broke her contracts and stopped performing. It was only after a year that she returned to performing, frequently visiting London, where Queen Victoria regularly invited her to perform at Windsor Castle. Between 1901 and 1914 she made a number of recordings, recorded on reels on the Piano-Welt system. In 1913, she became the first female composer to be decorated with the French Legion of Honour. During the First World War, she worked in a frontline field hospital. While helping the wounded, she suffered a minor accident and broke her leg. In the whirlwind of work, she underestimated her own ailment and, unfortunately, her leg developed gangrene and had to be amputated. The horrors of war, which she had witnessed in hospital, left such a mark on this sensitive and recently orphaned artist that she not only abandoned her career as a pianist, but also went on an extremely draconian, strictly vegetarian diet, which further weakened her body. After the war, she withdrew from public life. Initially returning to her estate in Vésinet, she soon moved to the south of France, near Toulon, and finally settled in Monte-Carlo. With her experience, and her fortune, she actively supported young, budding composers of both sexes. The outbreak of the Second World War did not dampen her peace of mind. She died in Monte-Carlo on 13.04.1944. Her remains now rest in the Cemetery de Passy in Paris.

With her attitude to life, her talent and her successes she contributed, among other women, to the creation of a new category: the generally respected successful woman. After the death of her father, it was she who supported the family and her income reached dizzying sums. She seemed to combine two different, but perfectly coexisting personalities: the romantic artist and composer and the person who efficiently manages her career like a business. This is a model that is still required of us artists today, in the 21st century. All the more reason why this figure should be of interest to us.

Unlike the other works, Cécile Chaminade's songs are not given an opus number. They only have a title, the author of the text and, invariably, a dedication. This is presumably the idea of the Enoch publishing company, with which Cécile Chaminade, after the death of her father and faced with having to pay for her mother's upkeep, signed a contract to supply 12 new songs a year on a regular basis. The various sources today do not agree on their exact number. Figures ranging from 125 to 'about 150' are quoted. Such inaccuracies are probably due to the silence that fell around the composer after her death. It was not until more than 40 years later, in 1988, that the American musicologist Marcia J. Citron was tempted to compile a catalogue of the French composer's works. Cécile Chaminade's songs were much appreciated and enjoyed by her contemporaries and singers such as Emma Albani, Adelina Patti, Nelly Melba and John Mc Cormack.

Chaminade's style is clean, melodic, devoid of academicism, with a variety of inspirations. The sophisticated harmony often surprises with unexpected turns, contains a certain amount of chromaticism, but always serves to emphasise the character of the statement. The composer also does not shy away from stylisation (e.g. archaisation), but avoids borrowings. The piano part is treated equally to the melody of the solo voice. The text always plays a very important role. Chaminade drew on the work of many contemporary poets, favouring basically no one. She bought the rights to the poetic items she found most interesting.