

Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944): the context of her music

Cécile Chaminade and her music have garnered some attention in the past twenty years. During her life, she was extremely popular throughout Europe and the United States, and she was frequently recognized for her music and civic work. Most remarkably, Chaminade is one of the most published among female composers. She published over four hundred compositions. Of her 171 opus numbers, all but two are for solo piano, include piano, or are the composer's transcriptions for piano. Traditionally, women during her time had to be content performing, because publishing was seen as improper for women. Thus, Chaminade was successful despite societal conventions and pressures. Notably, her works were even included in numerous method books that were otherwise dominated by male composers.

In studying any composer, one must consider their educational opportunities, social trends of their time, and the influence of family and friends. Chaminade should be honored for her accomplishments and not overly criticized because she was not innovative in her compositions. She was, however, innovative in being a well-published female composer, and her devoted fans even began Music Clubs in her honor. Neither her music nor her fans should be downgraded simply because her music was popular and pleasurable. In listening to Chaminade's music, one must realize that she wrote for the entertainment of women who spent their days as homemakers. Thus her music filled a void and served a different purpose than the classical music of her day. After examining available source material, I will examine her music and popularity, and propose the context needed to fully appreciate her music.

SOURCE MATERIAL

Antoinette Lorel, Chaminade's niece, wrote a biography of Cécile's life called *Viatique* (1948). Her source material includes diaries of both mother and daughter which have since been destroyed, as well as family documents (Citron 1988, 5). For this reason, her biography is probably the most accurate, but it has never been published and remains in typescript.

Norman Demuth's book *French Piano Music* (1959) includes a three-page section, "The Interlude," about Chaminade's salon music; he calls her "nearly a genius in that she knew how to write for pianists of moderate ability" (Demuth, 91). James Briscoe includes a short biography in his *Historical Anthology of Music by Women* (1987) and a reprint of the middle movement of the piano sonata.

In 1980, Gerard Condé wrote a biographical record jacket for a performance of Chaminade's works. Though his information contains some inaccuracies, he was the first to base his research on the family's documents (Citron 1988, 26).

Marcia Citron's book *Cécile Chaminade: a Bio-Bibliography* (1988) is probably the most comprehensive book on the composer/pianist; it contains a short biography, a list of works and performances, a discography, and an extensive annotated bibliography. The bibliography, which makes up the largest portion of the book, includes numerous newspaper articles about Chaminade, such as reviews, interviews, and obituaries. During her lifetime, Chaminade was frequently written about in newspapers and magazines. She gave interviews to *The Étude* and *The Ladies Home Journal*. There are also numerous reviews of her performances in newspapers. Citron compiles all this information for the reader.

The Chaminade family allowed Citron access to personal documents, including the biography written by Chaminade's niece, Antoinette Lorel. In her review of Citron's

book, Kay Norton describes it as “essential to the Chaminade scholar,” and she praises Citron’s cultural viewpoints, archival research, and organization of the material (1991, 761).

Citron has written elsewhere about Chaminade, including a section in *Women and Music: A History* (1991). Citron analyzes the piano sonata’s first movement in her book *Gender and the Musical Canon* (1993). *The Norton Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* (1995) has three pages devoted to Chaminade in which Citron has consulted new sources.

Cécile Tardif’s *Portrait de Cécile Chaminade* (1993) is the most detailed biography. Though this Montreal writer’s style is not scholarly (many sentences end with question marks and exclamation points), she debunks many Chaminade biographical “myths.” For example, while most sources claim that Chaminade’s ancestor was Reverend Father Chaminade, founder of the Marianite Order in the United States and of Chaminade’s College, Tardif reports that an American researcher of the Marianite Order, H. G. Kramer, discovered that these two Chaminade families were not blood kin, although they did live near each other at one time (Tardif 1993, 22).

Unfortunately, Tardif scarcely mentions the music, though there is a list of works in the back. In Citron’s review of the book, she commends Tardif’s thorough archival research, but criticizes her for “ignoring the rich research into women and music that has taken place since the early 1980s” (1994, 609). Citron especially expresses disdain for her romantic portrayal of Chaminade’s life and for her failure to cite sources, but she commends the interesting pictures and a chart documenting important musical events and how these correspond with Chaminade’s life (608).

Richard Langham Smith is an author of numerous articles and books on French music, especially the music of Claude Debussy. He wrote an article for *The Musical Times* in 1994 titled “Sister of Perpetual Indulgence.” Written to mark the fiftieth anniversary of her death, it is a “biting” commentary on her music and popularity. In *The American Music Teacher*, John Jerrold wrote an article titled *Piano Music of Cécile Chaminade*. Besides discussing her piano music, he discusses her relegation to salon music, some negative comments by her male contemporaries, and Kalmus’ recent choice in republishing some solo piano pieces.

COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

Cécile Chaminade was one of the few female composers to make a living from publishing her music. In fact, Citron calls her “one of the most published women composers” (1991, 128). Most women musicians at that time had to be satisfied with performing careers, owing to family and societal pressures. Cécile’s family was very supportive and protective of her creative talent. They were obviously offended when she entered a platonic marriage late in life, and they disapproved of her unfavorable contract with Enoch Publishing in 1920.

With the death of her father in 1887, Chaminade’s compositional activity became a necessity. This may explain her move away from absolute music, such as the sonata, to more popular character pieces. She must have recognized that the majority of her fan base would consist of females who have only intermediate or basic music training, and/or a lack of practice time. Thus, her character pieces are technically geared to these levels. Of course, her études require a more skilled hand.

Her use of titles such as *Romances sans Paroles*, *Arabesque*, *Tristesse*, and *Expansion* was obviously for mass appeal. Chaminade frequently used exotic titles, like *Orientale*, *Sérénade*, and *Les Sylvains*. These may have attracted people desiring an escape from the humdrum of everyday life.

Chaminade had an exquisite gift for composing melodies. They are somehow familiar and very memorable. For this reason, I can understand her music’s popularity. After you have heard and practiced a Chaminade piece, its melody follows you like a pleasant friend.

The concert circuit at that time would have been filled with heavy, serious music, such as Brahms, Beethoven, Schumann, and Fauré. To attend a Chaminade concert would have been quite a contrast. Like her music, the evening would have been light-hearted and fun. In a way, it would have been more French in its relaxed atmosphere. Maybe Richard Smith was correct in calling her “the sister of perpetual indulgence” (1994, 740). This “indulgence” could be her biggest draw. She seems to have found an untapped market that classical music was not satisfying.

Evidence for this is also seen in her extreme popularity in the United States. Chaminade Clubs sprouted during the heyday of women’s clubs. By 1904, there were one hundred Chaminade clubs listed in the magazine *L’Echo Musical* but Chaminade changed this number to two hundred on her own copy. Some Clubs were organized as late as 1940. Perhaps more fascinating is that her popularity in the United States had already transcended lofty heights before she set foot on American soil. Her French nationality was probably a great attraction as well, adding to her exotic appeal. The admiration went even beyond her music: one club sent Chaminade a copy of a program in which they had made an acronym with her name:

C=Concentrated and Concerted Effort
H=Harmony of Spirit and Work
A=Artistic Ideals
M=Musical Merit Maintained
I=Inspiration
N=Notes
A=Ardor and Aspiration
D=Devotion to Duty
E=Earnest Endeavor

(Citron 1988, 15).

Chaminade’s music was also well packaged. The cover was usually quite elaborate and sometimes included Chaminade’s picture. *Pas des Amphores* has a preface that includes an explanation of the dance and biographical information on Cécile. In the back of some editions, there was even a quiz intended for young pianists.

THE CONTEXT OF HER MUSIC

In reading sources on Chaminade, I have been surprised to read disparaging remarks about her popularity and her musical style. For example, Norman Demuth wrote a three page chapter entitled “The Interlude,” in which he negatively classified her works as salon music (90). Chaminade’s audience must be considered when hearing her music. She wrote almost exclusively for a female fan base; this audience was her “bread and butter.” Her music obviously spoke to women in a special way. Marcia Citron states that to “truly evaluate Chaminade we must gain a firmer understanding of the sociology of the domestic sphere: its activities, conventions, and value systems” (1991, 129). Chaminade was aware of the difficulties facing women, saying:

I do not believe that the few women who have achieved greatness in creative work are the exception, but I think that life has been hard on women; it has not given them opportunity; it has not made them convincing...Woman has not been considered a working force in the world and the work that her sex and conditions impose upon her has not been so adjusted as to give her a little fuller scope for the development of her best self. She has been handicapped, and only the few, through force of circumstances or inherent strength, have been able to get the better of that handicap.

Probably, her father, directly and indirectly, had the largest effect on Chaminade’s life. At first, he denied her the possibility of any music study, saying that

women should be “wives and mothers” (Condé 1980, 1). Even Chaminade’s mother could not convince him otherwise. Her father was finally persuaded by Bizet to allow her to study. Her father’s death in 1887, led to Chaminade becoming the composer we know today. Due to her father’s mismanagement of funds and the division of his estate, Chaminade became the breadwinner for herself and her aging mother.

Her educational opportunities were limited to two courses and both were taught privately. The importance of the classroom dynamic was recently upheld in a United States Supreme Court Case. The University of Michigan wanted ethnic diversity in the classroom because it improves learning. The court ruled the university could gain this educational advantage, but it had to be more evenhanded in its process. Chaminade was not allowed the feedback or the group dynamic in her education. Could this explain the lack of stylistic changes within her works?

Richard Langham Smith berates her for her lack of stylistic change while failing to comment on her limited education in music. He does mention that her composition teacher, Benjamin Godard, also suffered from an inability to change his style with the times. Since Chaminade had so few teachers, why should we be surprised she followed so closely in Godard’s footsteps? Marcia Citron states that her lack of stylistic changes may be due to a “personal conservatism.” Smith also fails to note her triumph over her time in being one of the most published female composers.

For Smith, the amateur is “seduced” by the picturesque covers. The piece within is “neo-Chopin, a nocturne but easier to play, full of repeated bars, thus offering him a quicker chance to get through.” It does not make sense to criticize Chaminade for suiting her audience. Admittedly, some of her music is well suited for intermediate pianists, but why does this fact bring about disdain? Why is knowing and writing for your audience seen so negatively? He also mistakenly calls *Les Amazones* her “closest approach to opera,” not considering her early opéra comique, *La Sevillane*.

Throughout her compositional career, Chaminade expressed some insecurity in her own abilities. When she completed a piece, she would put it away in a drawer for a few weeks. Upon bringing it out again, if it still gave her pleasure and she felt good about it, she would then send it on to the publisher. Remember, also, that she turned to composition for a living.

She not only was well published but she did so while remaining a feminine role model. This is evident in the women’s clubs that bore her name. They found her admirable as a composer, musician, and person. Chaminade’s music filled a void possibly not satisfied by classical music. It spoke to the feminine in women. Also, it is difficult enough to be challenging but not requiring a dedication of months or even a year to learn. The ability to learn a piece in a shorter period of time could have appealed to women busy maintaining a household. Recent studies have shown women are multi-taskers, often thinking about many things and doing many things at one time. Chaminade’s music could have been a comforting escape from these duties.

Happily, recent years have heralded more recordings of her piano music. These recordings attest to public interest in hearing Chaminade’s music performed. Peter Jacobs recorded three volumes of Chaminade’s music in 1992, 1994, and 1996. Eric Parken recorded Cécile Chaminade: *Piano Music in 1991*. Enid Katahn of Vanderbilt University recorded Cécile Chaminade: *Music for Piano* (1994). The recording includes the concert études, Op. 35. Most recently (1999), Chaminade’s music appeared on *Stephen Hough’s New Piano Album*. Stephen Hough is probably best known for playing shorter character pieces, thus Chaminade’s music suits him well.

CONCLUSION

Comparing Chaminade’s work to her male contemporaries is like comparing a Schubert song to an Indian drumming song. The idea that one can be more valuable than the other is ludicrous. Both have value and must be appreciated within their cultural

context. Though the men and women of our society live together, our experiences are unique due to our gender. This would have been especially true in Chaminade's era. Chaminade's audience was feminine. She understood and spoke their musical language. To denigrate her music is to belittle Chaminade's fans.

Cécile Chaminade achieved popularity with audiences as a pianist and as a composer of accessible, attractive, melodic, and sometimes exotic music. While some of her music demands great technical skill--mastering the Concertino for Flute and Orchestra remains a goal of every flute player--most of her piano works are music she wrote for performance at home, often by amateur pianists, and they are well suited for this purpose. Though seldom innovative in their formal design, motivic elaboration, thematic development, or harmonic language, these pieces demonstrate her undeniable and characteristically French gift for melodic writing, depiction of character (*L'Ondine*), and evocation of mood (*humoristique*) or season (*Automne*). Audiences and performers appreciated the melodic virtue of her music, with its occasional passages of technical virtuosity and frequent repetition of sections. She won a loyal and enthusiastic following and received awards, civic honors, and other public recognition for her musical achievements. While her works for solo piano may be considered minor repertory, they brought enjoyment to countless pianists and listeners during her lifetime and they continue to do so today.

WORKS CITED

- Briscoe, James. 1987. *Historical Anthology of Music by Women*.
Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Citron, Marcia. 1988. *Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography*. Connecticut:
Greenwood Press, Inc.
- . 1991. European Composers and Musicians, 1880-1918. In *Women and Music:
A History*, edited by Karin Pendle. Bloomington and
Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- . 1993. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Cambridge, University Press.
- . 1994. Review of *Portrait de Cécile Chaminade*, by Cécile Tardif.
Music Library Association Notes 51, no. 1-2: 608-9.
- Condé, Gerard. 1980. Liner notes on *Cécile Chaminade's Piano Music*,
Danielle Laval. EMI Pathé Marconi, PM 371.
- Demuth, Norman. 1959. *French Piano Music. A Survey with Notes on its
Performance*. London: Museum Press Ltd.
- Jerrould, John. 1988. Piano Music of Cécile Chaminade. *The American Music
Teacher* (January): 22-23, 46.
- Loirel, Antoinette. 1948. Viatique. Typescript. Quoted in Marcia Citron,
Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc.,
1988).
- Norton, Kay. 1991. Review of *Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography*, by
Marcia Citron. *Music Library Association Notes*, 2d ser., 47, no. 3-4:
760-2.
- Smith, Richard Langham. 1994. Sister of Perpetual Indulgence. *The
Musical Times* 135, no. 1822 (December): 740-4.
- Tardif, Cécile. 1993. *Portrait de Cécile Chaminade*. Montreal: Louise
Courteau.