French Women and the Age of Enlightenment

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Mademoiselle Diderot . . . is one of the finest harpsichord-players in Paris, and, for a lady, possessed of an uncommon portion of knowledge in modulation.

Mad. Brillon . . . is one of the greatest lady-players on the harpsichord in Europe. This lady not only plays the most difficult pieces with great precision, taste, and feeling, but is an excellent sight’s-woman; of which I was convinced by her manner of executing some of my own music . . . She likewise composes . . . She plays on several instruments . . . she likewise draws well and engraves, and is a most accomplished and agreeable woman.¹

Eighteenth-century French music reflects the cultural expectations of highly sophisticated and aristocratic tastes; while the dominating genre is opera, others, both sacred and secular, include motets, mass settings, cantatas, trio and solo sonatas, suites, symphonies concertantes, ballets, and chansons. The period differs from our own in that audiences did not listen to music for the purpose of rehearing standard works; on the contrary, there was a continual hunger for new music, one that could be satisfied since Paris, in particular, had cultural prestige and patrons of financial strength. Surviving pictorial evidence alone gives rich documentation of lavish and extravagant productions throughout Europe, whether large-scale for royalty and, later, the public or small-scale for the salon. Sources such as account books and diaries provide further evidence: “The costs of the wax candles used for lighting the opera house [at Mannheim] for a single performance came to over £ 40, and the expense of mounting a new production approached £ 4,000.”²

And a few years later we find out that:

The new salle du Palais-Royal, three times the size of the old . . . held an audience of two thousand five hundred and had a staff of two hundred and seventy-eight, only five of whom were administrators. There were
eighteen solo singers and a chorus of forty, nineteen solo dancers and a
corps de ballet of seventy-two and an orchestra of sixty-eight as well as
choral and ballet masters, accompanists, and a large staff, from
designers to stage hands, of thirty-nine.3

It is difficult to generalize further about a musical scene that
includes Marin Marais' Le Tableau de l'opération de la taille (1717) for
narrator, viol da gamba, and harpsichord; Salomon's opera Médée et
Jason (1713); the now vanished keyboard improvisations of Elisabeth-
Claude Jacquet de La Guerre (c. 1720); the cantatas of Clérambault (c.
1720); Rameau's Traité de l'harmonie (1722); Couperin's Pièces de clavecin (c.
1725); Rousseau's Le Devin du village (1752); the Symphonies concertantes of
Gossec (c. 1760); Gluck's Alceste (1767); and Grétry's Richard Coeur de
Lion (1782).4

A musical (and political) entrepreneur, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-
1687), made himself indispensable to Louis XIV. With Louis' support,
he came to represent the epitome of French musical taste and, until the
mid-eighteenth century, to influence musical styles and genres. As
was later the case with Beethoven, Lully's influence vastly exceeded
his lifetime, and, like Beethoven's, Lully's successors suffered in
comparison with the master. His works were used to support one of
the extremes in the eighteenth-century feuds over the esthetic and
nationalistic directions of French opera.5 It was Lully who founded
"one of the first schools for the professional woman performer . . . in
France. . . . He persuaded Louis XIV to allow girls to dance in the ballets
he was composing. . . . The demand for trained singers to take part in
opera and oratorios promoted musicians to found special schools for
girls.66

Roles of women in the eighteenth-century French musical world
were governed by the following various, major, and interrelated
factors: attitudes towards musicians vis-à-vis the social/class struc-
tures; societal trends that influenced changes in musical genres;
variations in the venues of musical performance; and the decorum
concerning which instrument could properly be played by which sex.

Twentieth-century views about earlier musicians (both female and
male) tend to be based on nineteenth-century perceptions of the
musician as exalted artist-creator-virtuoso-god. The overwhelming
prestige of composers, solo performers, and conductors is a romantic
esthetic; the image of a wizard, wand in hand, conjuring up lush
orchestral sounds, would have seemed ludicrous to Mozart or Haydn.7
Nor could they have imagined a Liszt transforming psychic energy
into music. Eighteenth-century composers wrote to fulfill commis-
sions and to make money, and performers employed by a court "jobbed
it"— often in livery. The musician was seen not as godly creator but as
servant or artisan (admittedly, often an upper-class servant), as
someone who was often expected to improvise at sight (a skill expected of performers) or to create a new cantata to satisfy a princely whim.

The employment of female instrumentalists in court orchestras was negligible; rather, women musicians were hired by such institutions as the Académie and the Opéra for both solo and ensemble roles as singers and dancers. In the case of singers, a natural and pleasing voice and a talent for the stage were often admission enough to the opera chorus. If the singer were female and attractive, she might find herself in a solo role. Although the training of singers and dancers was more rigorous in the earlier part of the century, resulting in a higher standard of performance, attitudes towards performers tended to remain the same throughout the century. By 1750, professional singers and dancers were not necessarily trained, and the deterioration of performance standards becomes clear when we remember that the Académie “allowed singers to bequeath their roles to their heirs.”

Professional musicians were no more or less gifted than their amateur counterparts, but they were paid for their services; amateur musicians enjoyed the pleasures of the art without enduring its hardships or social stigma.

The chasms that existed between classes of female musicians (particularly in the earlier part of the century) arose largely from the performance medium chosen, the amateur–professional dichotomy, and ideas concerning public versus private musical consumption. Women musicians who were not opera singers or dancers tended to be daughters of established and prominent musical figures and received their musical education at home—or in some cases, in convents. Such training consisted of performance on an instrument and occasionally instruction in music theory and composition.

For fashionable women, instruction in lute, singing, harp, and harpsichord (later pianoforte) was a social necessity; ladies of quality were expected to entertain at domestic evening entertainments. Lack of talent was apparently not a deterrent. In 1783, Abt Vogler reports:

> Of feminine amateurs who play the keyboard exceedingly well there is an untold number in Paris. There are not a few ladies who can compete with any keyboard professor in playing of a difficult sonata, perhaps even a sonata of his own composition. Scarcely a city in Europe could count so many fair dilettantes who know how to shade their tones so beautifully, so sensitively (they have the temperament for this), with such tender appeal, breathing pleasure, and with such naive deportment.

With more than a little irony, Ancelet writes:

> A timid young lady allows herself to be coaxed for a long time to sing: she is induced to proceed to the harpsichord. After many curtsies, she
proclaims that she has a cold, and finally sings by heart the lesson composed by her teacher. By dint of hastening the tempo, the little song comes to an end and the curtseys begin again.¹⁰

And a little later in the century, it was believed that “every fine young lady, whether or not she has talent, must learn to play the piano or sing . . . it is the fashion.”¹¹

But a social grace for one class was quite different from professional training for another. The quotes that open this essay are worth recalling here, and the following passages amplify them:

Francis, the second of the three [Couperin] brothers . . . had a daughter named Louisa, who sang and played on the harpsichord with admirable grace and skill, and who, notwithstanding her sex, was in the number of the king’s musicians, and in that capacity received an annual pension or salary.¹²

. . . The younger Francis [Couperin] died in 1733 . . . , leaving two daughters equally celebrated for their performance on that which appears to have been the favorite instrument of the family; the one a nun in the abbey of Maubuisson; the other is the successor of her father in charge of the harpsichord in the king’s chamber, an employment which, except in this instance, was never known to have been conferred on any but men.¹³

Such women as the Couperin daughters achieved significant artistic successes, but their contributions are vastly outnumbered (literally, in terms of volume) by other female music-making activities. Some evidence exists of women writing large-scale sacred works in the early eighteenth century, but the operatic extravaganzas of the same period were mainly the province of male composers.¹⁴ The genres expected of women composers were keyboard suites and solo songs—small-scale works for private audiences. Mid- to late-eighteenth-century tastes for less elaborate modes of opera resulted in some works in this genre by women composers, but the increasing emphasis throughout the century on shorter, secular works matched society’s expectations of women as composers of more “frivolous” music. It is true that patronesses of the arts are visible in, for example, the La Pouplinière circle, but women impresarios did not exist. Mounting large-scale productions depended on money, power, business acumen, and public visibility—domains of men.

Partly because of fuller evidence, women composers and performers appear to be more active in the latter half of the century. Together with increasing secularity went a stronger emphasis on solo virtuosi; and solo and ensemble music found venues not only in the traditional academies and salons but also in the entirely new phenomenon of the concerts spirituels (founded 1725), the first French example of what was
to be a burgeoning platform for musicians, the subscription concert. The *Journal de Paris*, 341, announces a concert spirituel au château des Tuileries for December 8, 1789. The program includes:

[A] Haydn symphony, after which Mlle Rousselois will sing a scene of Cambini . . . [a] Haydn symphony, after which Mlle Rousselois will sing a scene of Méhul—Mlle Candeille will perform a concerto of her own composition on the forte piano, with horn and flute accompaniment performed by Messrs. le Brun and Devienne.

Sex roles determined the instruments women played, and the reasons were not specific to the eighteenth century but were historical. Harpsichords and harps, for example, had been decorated with images of women from the early Renaissance onward, and a symbolic connection between object and player continued in the eighteenth century, both in furniture design and in musical decorum (harp columns were decorated with “Grecian” female heads and surmounted by caryatids). Brass and percussion instruments were closed areas to women—again, for historical reasons: the instruments were scarcely off the battlefield. Nor was it considered flattering to a woman’s beauty for her face to be reddened and distorted, lips and cheeks compressed, from playing the oboe, chalumeau, or bassoon—and more breath pressure was needed to sound these instruments than for their present-day equivalents.¹⁵

Contrary to such potential abandonments of decorum, keyboard instruments, flutes (the flautist’s smile), harp, lute, and even voice displayed the female form to full advantage and allowed women to display grace and elegance. All of these factors must be kept in mind when evaluating the roles of women in eighteenth-century French music. It is too easy, from the perspective of the 1980s, to jump to facile conclusions from inadequate evidence; even our knowledge of the barest biographical data is commonly too skimpy for many safe inferences to be drawn.

A preliminary investigation of women active in music from 1715 until the Revolution shows an interesting distribution of women by profession:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singers</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancers</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keyboard players</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Court musicians</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harpists</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violinists</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composers</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publishers</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although every effort has been made to determine the major musical category, some women do appear in more than one. It is immediately apparent from such a classification that the primary function of women musicians was re-creative. Women as performers overwhelmingly dominate the other categories, although in the late part of the century more women appear in music as business and more begin to write—either music or methods. The numbers are somewhat misleading in that they disguise the potential overlap of professions; some singers also danced and vice versa. The relatively minor roles of some women singers would have demanded a certain amount of flexibility; a singer in the chorus may well have been a member of the opera corps de ballet, and, unfortunately, too often the filles de l'Opéra were also filles de joie.

For the most part, however, the overlap here tends to be the result of singers past their vocal prime entering another branch of their profession: teaching, publishing, or composing. The careers of some singers were rather fleeting (three to ten years); and while marriage and/or pregnancy may have intervened in a professional career, Emile Campardon cites other reasons for dismissal or early retirement: seduction, prostitution, scandalous affairs, and theft.

Dual and sometimes multiple instrumental facility was expected of performers. In our age of specialization, when proficiency on one instrument is the norm, it seems alien to accept performers equally adept on several; but even today organists are traditionally harpsichordists as well, since the keyboard techniques are similar. In the eighteenth century, harpists also played harpsichord (later pianoforte), since the age made little distinction between techniques on a horizontal plane (keyboard) and those on a vertical plane (harp). Among harpists, Mme de Genlis is infamous for proposing a five-finger technique that is totally unsuited to their instrument.

Controversy raged throughout the century on the attributes of Italian versus French vocal techniques (Italy had on its side the facts that it had founded the first vocal schools and that its language is conducive to expressive vocal production). According to contemporary sources, France produced great singers, such as Mlle Fel: "She debuted at the opera theater in 1733. For twenty-five years she delighted the public." Rousseau added, "it takes a Fel or a Jélyotte to sing French music, but any voice is good in Italian music, because the beauties of Italian singing are in the music itself, whereas those of French singing, if there are any, are all in the art of the singer."

Burney, however, seems less enthusiastic about French singers. While he disapproves of Italy's "artificial" voices (by which he means castrati) and compliments the "natural" females voices in the conservatories of Venice, he is harsh in his condemnation of French singers.
I arrived at Lyons on my way home... where, in visiting the theatre, I was more disgusted than ever, at hearing French music, after the exquisite performances to which I had been accustomed in Italy. Eugénie, a pretty comedy, preceded Silvain, an opera by M. Grétry: there were many pretty passages in the music, but so ill sung, with so false an expression, such screaming, forcing, and trilling, as quite made me sick.21

On a performance by Mlle Delambre, Burney remarked that she "screamed out Exaudi Deus with all the power of lungs she could muster."22

Higher on the social ladder than chorus singers—and indeed higher than many of the solo singers—were court musicians and instrumental performers, who found a platform in the concert spirituel; a number of them emigrated to England before and during the Revolution. Mme Krumpholtz, wife of Jean-Baptiste Krumpholtz, the harp composer and inventor, was the century's most brilliant harpist; renowned in France, she continued impressing audiences in London during the Haydn years.23 There were other contenders for the title: "Madame Delaval struck out with her 'flying fingers,' such effects from the harp, as confirming all the poets insist on of the antients [sic] performance on that noble and sublime instrument."24

If the harp was one of the predominantly "female" and important instruments in the second half of the century (largely due to the improvements made in its mechanism after 1760), the harpsichord was the primary vehicle for women in the first half. Here, a number of important female performers emerges. Loesser reports that "made-moiselle Guyot [d. 1728], the daughter of a barrister of the Supreme Court, 'combined delicacy and brilliance of touch with perfect science of composition at the harpsicord' and 'performed all the most difficult music on the spur of the moment.'"25

The female members of the Couperin family were important enough to yield entries in some of the encyclopedias of their century and of the next. However, it is Elisabeth-Claude Jacquet de La Guerre (c. 1668-1729) who emerges as the première solo virtuosa of the eighteenth century. Although even she has not been fully researched, the scholarship devoted to her exceeds that on any other woman in her field.26 She is spoken of as an artist as early as 1725 (in Walther's Lexikon), and again in 1776, by Hawkins, who gives details of her capabilities.

She... was... instructed in the practice of the harpsichord and the art of composition by her father. She was a very fine performer, and would sing and accompany herself with so rich and exquisite a flow of harmony as captivated all that heard her. She was also an excellent composer, and, in short, possessed such a degree of skill, as well in the science as the
practice of music, that but few of her sex have equalled her. An opera of her composition, entitled Céphale et Procris, was represented in the Royal Academy of Paris in the year 1694, and is extant in print.27

Edith Borroff’s fine entry in The New Grove is an excellent summary of Jacquet de La Guerre’s career.28

The century’s increasing emphasis on secularity—and its concomitant genres—saw a rise both in the number of solo performers and in the amount of music published for specific instruments, including a sudden outpouring of method books. The women who printed, engraved, or published music are related to these trends; it is interesting to note the surprising number of women, many of whom were in business with their husbands. Others appear in documents as widows continuing the family business. By 1770, one could buy not merely violin and keyboard method books but also instructions for the bagpipe and hurdy-gurdy—the latter useful for posturing in an imagined pastoral world.29

The teach-yourself-at-home craze caught on swiftly; and, from about 1770 to 1820, women musicians in particular exploited its benefits. No longer was it necessary to make a living merely from concert appearances and teaching; it became possible to cash in on a performer’s “hit” by publishing an arrangement of it, and the same monetary advantage became available by implying in a method that the amateur could become as skilled and famous as the author. False advertising is no new invention; numerous eighteenth-century methods feature persuasive title pages that promise to instruct easily, tastefully, and quickly. Mme de Genlis’ Nouvelle méthode pour apprendre à jouer de la harpe (Paris, 1811) makes the outrageous claim that one can learn to play the instrument “in less than six months of lessons”!

Although we are beginning to redress the balance, history has not dealt kindly with women musicians, and even recent twentieth-century histories of music, at best, make only passing references to them (popular musicians of this century are, of course, an exception). Historians have always filtered their subjects; and music historians, like their allies in literature, art, and architecture may be largely forgiven for not dealing with a specifically feminist aspect of its subject. If one compares the “forgotten” male composers of the eighteenth century in France with those women whose work is not being revived, it becomes clear that the sex of the composer is not necessarily the consideration in the filtering system, but rather the tastes, fashions, esthetics, and new prejudices of a given era. (A Parisian in 1760, hearing the name Bach, would not have thought of J. S., but rather of C. P. E. or, even more likely, of J. C.) Research into women in music in the eighteenth century is still largely embryonic;
although the musical pantheon, like those in other arts, seems established, many Frenchwomen are worthy of being dėtėrrėëse to see whether some of the old marble might begin to crack.

NOTES

7. Various methods of direction were common in the eighteenth century, depending on the genre and the size of ensemble. In small groups, the harpsichordist gave the necessary cues; and in larger productions—which required a time-beater to keep everyone together—instruments of direction included a heavy stick pounded on the floor and rolled-up white paper flourished in the air.
10. Ibid., p. 313.
13. Ibid., p. 781.
Rameau," *Recherches* 11 (1971); the whole volume is devoted to the subject. *Recherches* is an annual Parisian publication devoted to "La Vie musicale en France sous les rois Bourbons." Its regular section, "Chroniques," is worth checking; in vol. 15 (1975) is James Anthony's "A Checklist of Research in Progress," an excellent compilation covering books, monographs, dissertations in progress, and editions of music (pp. 262-266). *Recherches* is strong on archival studies; a recent example is Anne Chastel, "Étude sur la vie musicale à Paris à travers la presse pendant le règne de Louis XVI," 16 (1976):37-70. Pages 62-70 comprise a "list [which includes women] of editors, merchants or musicians who sell music."

15. It is a frequent exhortation in eighteenth-century courtesy writings that, while smiling is correct and acceptable, laughing is to be avoided since it makes the potentially divine human countenance look simian; Jonathan Swift is reliably reported to have laughed only twice in his life. For this information I am indebted to Dr. W. John Rempel, Department of English, University of Manitoba.


17. The stigma attached to opera singers, dancers, and actresses was strong indeed. See The *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980, s.v. "Laguerre, Marie-Joséphine." Her "early death was apparently the result of loose living."

18. Campardon, p. vi. Working with unedited documents from the National Archives, Campardon lists brief biographical data, dates of debuts, retirements, principal events, theatrical careers, and contemporary opinions of singers and dancers associated with the Academy.


22. Ibid., p. 25.


29. Lang, p. 732, gives evidence of a parallel shift from publications exclusively for professional musicians to those intended for amateurs: [in Germany] “composers, who formerly addressed themselves exclusively to princes and archbishops, now turned to Kenner und Liebhaber . . . there was even a periodical, appearing in 1769, entitled ‘Der Musikalische Dilettante,’ devoted to their service.” For a recent article on harp methods see my “Méthodes de Harpe: An Introduction to Eighteenth-Century Tutors,” The American Harp Journal 8 (Winter 1981).