

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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MUSIC

Women Composers - Part 3

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-11-03



Introduction

Part Three of our journey takes us into the period between about 1750 and the early part of the 1800s; the so-called 'Classical'¹ era. It is dominated by the familiar names of *Mozart*, *Haydn* and *Beethoven*; and the city of *Vienna*, which became the hub of the music world.

This period in music saw the development of the symphony², with Haydn being 'The Father of the Symphony'; and the piano concerto³, with Mozart being the key figure in its early development. The piano, being the new and more versatile instrument, took over from the harpsichord as the keyboard instrument of choice.

During this time there were some extraordinarily talented women composers whose music was largely forgotten after their death. It is encouraging that in the 20th century we are beginning to discover this music and give it the credit it deserves.

¹[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_(music))

²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony>

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_concerto

Part 3: 1750 - 1820

Marianna Martines (Born Vienna 1744, Died Vienna 1812)

Marianna's father, who was of Spanish origin, was a friend and associate of [Haydn](#)⁴ and Mozart. Haydn, at that time poor and unknown, taught her to play the harpsichord and encouraged her to take singing lessons. Living in the same house as the Martinez family was [Pietro Metastasio](#)⁵, the court poet and opera [librettist](#)⁶. Recognising Marianna's talents, Metastasio ensured that she received a superior education.

Not only did she excel at singing and playing the harpsichord, she also showed a talent for composition. Even while still in her teens she had started to compose large scale church works. In 1761 she had one of her masses performed at the court chapel. In 1765, when [Joseph II](#)⁷ came to the throne, he reintroduced an old rule banning women from speaking or singing in church. This, however, didn't stop Marianna from composing and her fame continued to spread.

Unlike many musicians at that time, Marianna didn't seek the patronage of the church or nobility to fund her music-making. She never married, and simply created music for her own pleasure while she also cared for her mentor, Metastasio. On Metastasio's death, Marianna inherited a large sum of money, which she used to open a singing school in her home.

After her death, throughout the next century, Marianna's music and importance in the cultural life of Vienna in its golden age was largely forgotten. However, today we see a revival of interest in her music, much of which has been published and recorded since the 1990s.

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Haydn

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietro_Metastasio

⁶<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Libretto>

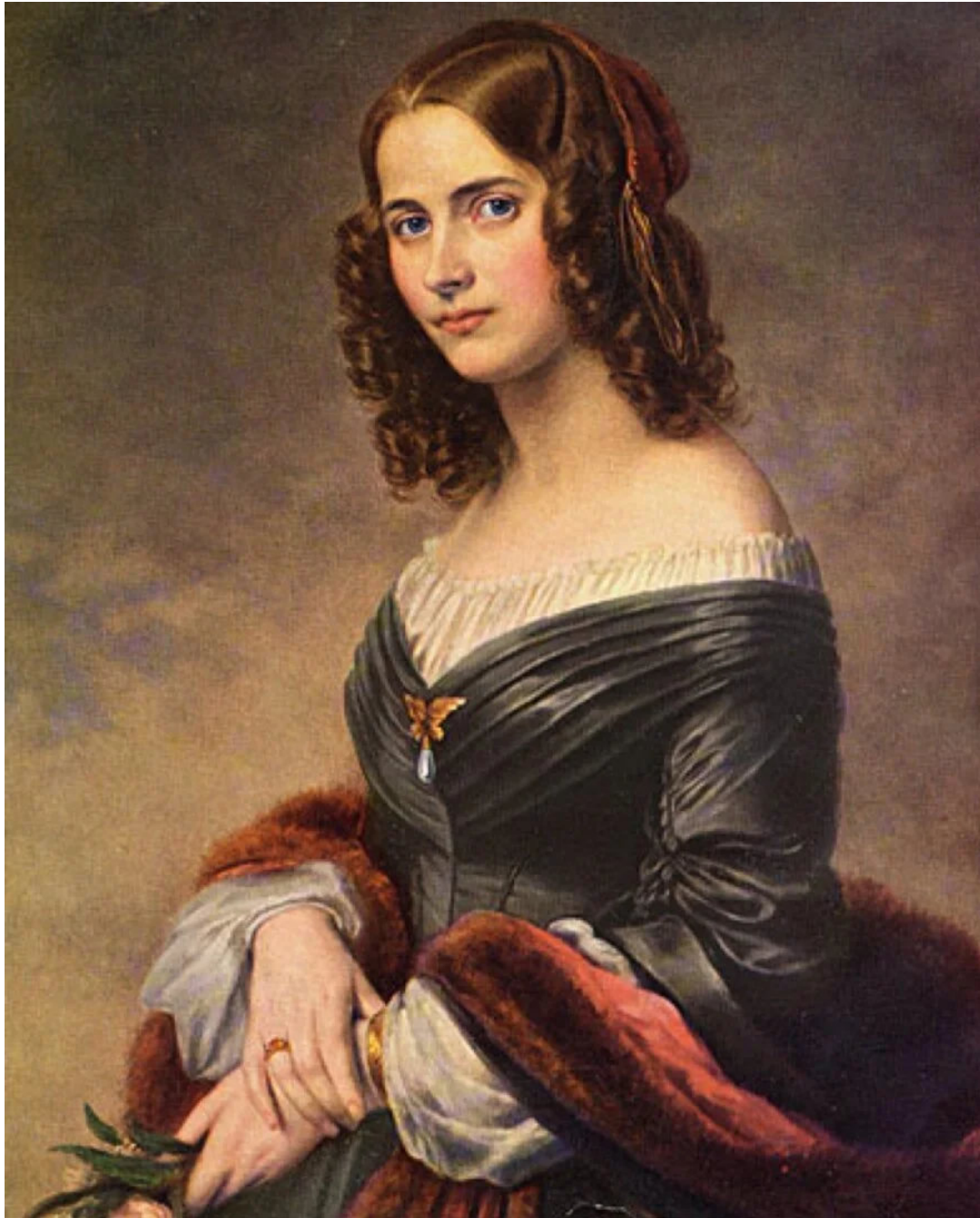
⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_II,_Holy_Roman_Emperor



Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tr-r35XkZF8>

The video clip is a live performance - including audience members walking in front of the camera - of the first movement of her *Piano Concerto in A minor*. Notice that the orchestra is conducted by the soloist. This was common practice at this time. Also, if you listen carefully you will hear some wrong notes played by the horns.

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (Born Hamburg 1805, Died Berlin 1847)



Fanny Mendelssohn, born in 1805, spans the late Classical era and the early Romantic. She was born into an upper class family and was the elder sister of the composer Felix Mendelssohn⁸. Both children received the same music education, with Felix readily admitting that Fanny was the better pianist. Fanny and her brother remained very close throughout their lives, with Felix often asking her advice on his latest composition.

Fanny was also a gifted composer. No less gifted than her brother. But at the age of 14, her father told her that composition wasn't a career for women, reflecting the societal norms of the time. However, this didn't stop her from composing, resulting in her completing over 400 pieces of music, including over 125 pieces for piano, and more than 250 'lieder'. A 'lied'⁹ is a so-called 'art song', where the composer sets poetry to music. These were very popular at the time.

⁸https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Mendelssohn

⁹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lied>

¹⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilhelm_Hensel

Fanny married artist Wilhelm Hensel¹⁰ in 1829 after a long courtship. It is thanks to his and her brother's continued support for her music that she continued to compose, and her music was preserved, albeit mostly in manuscript form.

Fanny died at the age of 41 from the complications following a stroke. Her brother Felix died just six months later from the same cause. Fanny lived her adult life having to balance her desire to play and compose with having to be a wife and mother as society expected at that time.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMYEAazREgE>

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fao0-otebeU>

The two short video clips here present two wonderful examples of her writing for piano and voice. Something she excelled at. The first is a delightful saltarello¹¹ (a dance) for solo piano, and the second a beautiful art song (lied) with the title 'Swan Song'.

Maria Theresia von Paradis (Born Vienna 1759 - Died Vienna 1824)

Maria Theresia was born in Vienna, the daughter to Joseph Anton von Paradis, who was a councillor in the court of the Empress Maria Theresa¹², after whom she was named. By the age of three she had lost her sight completely, an impairment that did not prevent her from having a successful career as a singer, pianist and composer.

It was evident at an early age that Maria Theresia was an exceptionally talented pianist and singer. At the age of 14 she performed an organ concerto written by Antonio Salieri¹³, and from the age of 16 performed regularly in Vienna as a singer and pianist. In 1783 she began a European tour that encompassed a number of German cities, including a visit to the Mozarts in Salzburg, and arriving in Paris in 1784.

While in Paris she performed piano concertos by Haydn and Mozart. In the case of Mozart it isn't clear which concerto it was, but it is known that one she did perform had been written specifically for her by Mozart. Her tour took her to London in England and back to Vienna in 1786 via Hamburg, Berlin and Prague. Everywhere she visited, she delighted audiences with the precision and fluency of her playing.

During the time she was touring she began composing music for solo piano as well as songs. From 1789 she began to devote even more time to composition, writing five operas and three cantatas¹⁴. Later in life she concentrated more on teaching, and set up her own school in Vienna where she taught singing, piano and music theory to young blind girls. Maria Theresia's greatest non-musical achievement was to help establish, in Paris in 1785, the first school for the blind.

¹¹<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saltarello>

¹²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maria_Theresa

¹³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Salieri

¹⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantata>



Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hC8cTiQ8R4o>

The piece included here is a short song (lied) which presents a wonderful example of Maria Theresa's gift of writing so expressively in this genre.

THE FAMOUS FAKE.

If you search for the music of Maria Theresa von Paradis, you will find countless versions of 'her most famous piece' - *The Sicilienne in Eb for Violin and Piano*. A sicilienne is slow and lilting with a flowing accompaniment. You may even recognise this charming melody.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1egii6SWNVM>

However, research has shown that this piece is not by Maria Theresia von Paradis, but rather, it is a 20th century hoax by violinist Samuel Dushkin¹⁵. He claimed in the 1920s to have discovered the manuscript of this 'lost work'. Musical opinion is that Dushkin composed this piece himself, and it seems quite likely that he in turn had based it on a violin sonata by Carl Maria von Weber¹⁶. Listen to this violin sonata by von Weber and decide for yourself. This is the second movement of *Sonata Number One in F* from his *Opus 10*.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HC9RJd75Xsg>

Incidentally, *The Sicilienne* was played on the cello at the wedding of *Prince Harry* and *Meghan Markle*, and incorrectly attributed to Maria Theresia von Paradis. This false attribution continues unabated, as any internet search will demonstrate.

In part four we will move on into the Romantic Era¹⁷, which will take us through the 1800s to the year 1900. The following articles¹⁸ will take us towards the modern era and the present day.

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¹⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Dushkin

¹⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carl_Maria_von_Weber

¹⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romantic_music

¹⁸<https://thehiddencircle.com/women-composers-part-4/>