

Gender History and Life History of European Women Musicians in the 19th Century: A Study on Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn and Cecile Chaminade

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Abstract:

The research investigates the professional struggles faced by three distinguished female musicians of 19th-century Europe: Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and Cecile Chaminade. The research references biographies, correspondences, and other historical records to shed light on the social limitations that hindered their professional development. Even though all three musicians were historically recorded as talented pianists and composers, the popular patriarchal ideologies regarding women's education, vocation, and domestic roles stopped them from advancing further in their profession. Even for these famous musicians, these beliefs and mindsets constrained them to their families. Their lives serve as a representation of the average European women's lives at the time and provide further insight into the difficulties and general social conventions those women lived under. The research demonstrates how even the famous musicians Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Chaminade were oppressed and limited by the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Gender history; female musicians; Fanny Mendelssohn; Clara Schumann; Cecile Chaminade.

1. Introduction

Gender disparities prevail in the world of classical music, in which the fame of female musicians is less than that of male musicians. While many people can easily name a handful of male composers, female composers rarely receive the same level of attention or discussion, demonstrating a prominent imbalance between the two genders. To shed more light on this phenomenon, this research focuses on female composers from 19th-century Europe and reveals the social conventions of that time.

Women's rights and autonomy in 19th-century Europe were severely limited. As children, women were viewed as the legal property of their fathers or male relatives under the patriarchal systems determining family structures. Fathers were seen as the heads of families (Hauch 2020) and had the authority to make important decisions for their daughters, such as whom the daughter would get married to, while in the meantime, the daughters – and even the mothers – could only have little say in the choices.

Growing up, women's education at the time was restricted to mostly domestic skills, as their primary responsibilities and roles were housewives and child-bearers. They were only allowed access to fundamental knowledge of language and mathematics and generally prohibited from other interests and hobbies (such as reading, social skills,

or the arts) because they would distract women from their familial duties. A desire to read was viewed as inappropriate (Hallmark 2014). In other words, even though women were granted some education, it was primarily aimed at perfecting women for their upcoming domestic roles (Sztuka 2023). European women only started receiving a wider range of education in the late 19th century.

Women continued to face significant constraints as they approached marriage. After a woman gets married, she then becomes the property of her husband. Not only were women expected to devote their time to the well-being of their households and play the "fixed roles of housewives and bearers and nurturer of children" (Hallmark 2014), but they were also "not even allowed to have an identity document, leave the place of residence designated by [their] husband, or keep the income [they] earned" (Sztuka 2023). These limitations caused women to face more challenges in their pursuit of professional achievements, explaining why men are historically more accomplished in many fields, including music.

Several studies have delved into the live histories of individual female musicians from 19th-century Europe to gain insight into the social constraints they faced (Tangorra 2009). This research aims to take a further step by adopting a multidimensional approach to analyze the lives of three separate female musicians: Fanny Mendelssohn

(1805 - 1847), Clara Schumann (1819 - 1896), and Cecile Chaminade (1857 - 1944). The research looks into the lives of each musician, analyzing how their professional achievements and limitations reflect the mainstream ideologies of their time. The research provides a biography for each musician, explaining their birth families, educational and musical backgrounds and upbringings, their marriage and familial relationships, and the paths to their professional development. The research then unpacks their life stories and relates them to the historical context they lived under. The research shows how these three musicians stood out in their field even during the patriarchal 19th century Europe but were still vocationally hindered in their paths to even greater accomplishments.

2. Locating the three women in the 19th century

The research aims to examine the difficulties and prejudice that women during 19th-century Europe faced, and how these challenges can be reflected in the three musician's life. To this end, the research draws on the concept of gender – the relationship between the sexes concerning the societal point of view (Scott 1986) – and gender history – in which both males' and females' roles in history are observed (Meyerowitz 2008). The research also references the idea from Mary Holmes's book *Gender and Everyday Life* that suggests a difference in the everyday lives of women and men (Holmes 2008). In the case of this research, the everyday lives of the three musicians are examined and collated with those of their male relatives or equivalents to highlight the differences they encountered due to their genders.

The research looks into the life stories of Fanny Mendelssohn, Clara Schumann, and Cecile Chaminade to carry out a comprehensive investigation. Some researchers have already examined these musicians individually, yet this research aims to compare the similarities and differences between them for deeper analysis. All three musicians lived during 19th century Europe – a period when the arts and European culture flourished and grew – and were recorded to be extremely talented pianists and composers. Yet at the same time, their life stories reflect different aspects of the patriarchal society, providing more multidimensional perspectives and making this research holistic. To this end, the research first carries out and presents a brief exploration of the backgrounds of these three musicians.

Fanny Mendelssohn was born in Hamburg, Germany in 1805. She is the oldest child of banker Abraham and his wife Lea Mendelssohn and the sister of Felix Mendelssohn, the well-renowned composer of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Fanny's parents were cultivated people;

hence growing up, she and Felix received well education – much more than the average child received at the time – in multiple disciplines, which included the keyboard and composing, as stated by Dr. Angela R. Mace. Fanny and Felix studied with the same teachers and were both regarded as extremely talented musicians. At the age of around 12 years old, Fanny was already composing and performing in concerts. Felix even stated, as indicated by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, that Fanny was a better pianist than he was.

Granted Fanny's talent, the society in which she lived did not encourage women's professional development, including music, and required them to stay within domestic spheres and care for the family. Performing music was viewed as a profession only for women of lower classes, not something that a woman of high class like Fanny was supposed to pursue, and further education in composing was something limited to men, according to a biography on Fanny by the Library of Congress. These changes led to her eventual disparities with her brother, since as a man, Felix was allowed to perform pieces and publish compositions in public. As Felix's works and talents became more famous, Fanny's were quickly shadowed.

Based on the Library of Congress, as a performer, Fanny was limited to only performing in smaller-scaled weekly domestic concerts – sometimes referred to as “salons.” She would have the doors to her house open for visitors to come listen as she would perform chamber music alone or with a few fellow musicians.

As a composer, Fanny did not publish much of her works under her name. According to Dr. Mace, although her husband, Prussian painter Wilhelm Hensel, encouraged her to publish and share her compositions, Abraham and Felix, her two closest male relatives, did not like the idea. Perhaps due to the pressure of wanting to make her family proud and the social constraints at the time, Fanny had a self-deprecating personality and was unconfident about her music. She did not want to publish her works under her name and ended up publishing a few compositions under Felix's name. It was not until much later in her life that Fanny finally started publishing under her name. However, because of the late action and the shadow of her already-famous brother, Fanny's works remained unknown for a very long time.

Born in 1819, Clara Schumann (nee Wieck) was an extremely virtuosic pianist and composer. Her father, Friedrich Wieck, was a successful businessman and music teacher, while her mother, Marianne Tromlitz, was a singer. Clara's husband is the distinguished composer and pianist Robert Schumann. Clara began to study the piano at a very young age and was known as a “child prodigy” (Tangorra 2009) for her talent. Even though women

during Clara's time were generally excluded from education, and only introduced to music to become better wives, Friedrich decided that Clara was gifted enough and could achieve great things in this career. Under Friedrich's intense training, Clara took classes for "...score reading and instrumentation, violin lessons, counterpoint and singing," and credited a great portion of her eventual success to her father (Moynihan 2020).

Although Clara also engaged in composing, her works are less well-known for a few reasons. For one instance, she wrote fewer pieces because of the social conventions she lived under during that time. Women during Clara's period were generally limited to domestic chores and being wives and mothers, and hence discouraged from pursuing higher professional advancements. As Stephen Rodgers states, "as a woman, [Clara] faced more impediments to a career as a composer than did her male contemporaries," (2023) highlighting the further difficulties Clara encountered. For another instance, like Fanny, Clara was unconfident about her pieces, a mindset that could be explained by Clara's relationships with her father and husband. Clara admired but feared her at the same time (Moynihan 2020). Her uncertainty about her creations, thus, could be explained by a desire not to disappoint Friedrich, who is also her teacher. Meanwhile, Robert, who was nine years older than Clara and economically and socially more stable than her, was a more successful figure from her perspective. In Nancy B. Reich's *Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Women*, Clara was said to have believed the idea that her husband was the dominant figure in their marriage, a popular mindset during her time (2013). Her reverence towards her husband, then, could explain her self-deprecating view towards her compositions.

Clara remained a professional concert pianist for many years, unlike many women at the time, because it was her way of supporting the family. Her tours became extremely important later after Robert fell ill and passed away, leaving Clara to raise their seven children alone. Clara was eventually recognized as one of the most successful and had one of the longest careers among all 19th-century European pianists (Stefaniak 2019).

Cecile Chaminade was a French pianist and composer who lived from 1857 to 1944. She was born to Stephanie Courtin – a pianist and singer – and Pierre Hippolyte – a member of the Navy who also played the violin. Like Fanny and Clara, Cecile started studying music at a young age, her mom being her first teacher. Her talents were recognized by her neighbor Georges Bizet, the composer of the opera *Carmen*, and she was also invited to study systematically at the Paris Conservatoire (Zhuang 2020).

However, due to the social conventions at that time, Pierre refused the suggestion, believing it was inappropriate for Cecile to receive an education or pursue music as a profession. Luckily, Cecile was still able to continue studying music by taking private lessons with Felix Le Couppey, a faculty at the conservatoire, who praised her highly (Zhuang 2020).

Cecile made her concert debut at 18 years old, and unlike Fanny or Clara, became quite well known as a musician whilst she was still alive (Judd 2007). Cecile wrote close to 400 compositions during her lifetime and her concerts were well received in countries such as England and the US. The English liked her concerts so much that Cecile was invited to perform there annually, and around 1900, she inspired societies devoted to her (called "Chaminade Clubs") to form in the US (Zhuang 2020).

Nonetheless, Cecile's professional development was still challenged largely due to her gender. As stated by the professor of flute at Rice University Leone Buyse, even though the public did not shadow Cecile under another related male musician, her works were still criticized through a "...biased and gendered lens," where her delicate pieces would be commented "too feminine," while her other pieces were "too masculine". Reports and articles about her often spent a large portion talking about her personal life and appearance, showing how people focused on other aspects of Cecile instead of her occupation (McCanny 1999).

Noteworthy, according to newspaper reviewer Edward Baxter Perry, Cecile was also criticized in Germany for two main reasons: One, they did not believe that Cecile, a woman, could excel in a profession that had traditionally been male-dominated, and two, they were unhappy with the fact that Cecile was still unmarried (McCanny 1999). Cecile did eventually get married. Louis-Mathieu Carbonel was a music publisher who was 20 years older than she was. It is widely believed, though, that Cecile married Carbonel out of convenience, as they shared a somewhat platonic relationship, in which Cecile refused to be intimate with Carbonel (McCanny 1999). Cecile never remarried after Carbonel's death, and it was later revealed by Cecile's niece that Cecile did not want to engage in romantic relationships out of the fear of "[being] subject to male authority and [wanting] to preserve her professional independence," (Judd 2007) which highlights Cecile's ahead-of-time ideologies and her ambition towards higher musical achievements. Even though Cecile and her works were quite well known while she was active, her fame diminished as World War I began and as her health started to decline. She passed away in 1944.

3. Gender History: Making the women's life stories visible

Existing research about the three musicians is used and cited to form the basis of their life history investigation. For Fanny Mendelssohn, the research uses an interview between Dr. Angela R. Mace and researchers Tracey Crystal Miller and Nathan Bishop from Mason Gross School of the Arts. In the interview, Dr. Mace goes through the life of Fanny Mendelssohn – her family, her education and performances, her marriage – and sheds light on the various reasons for Fanny's lack of fame, describing her life as an adult, career as a musician, and relationship with her family members.

For Clara Schumann, the research references Gina Tangorra's "Clara Schumann: A Woman of Her Time" which focuses on Clara Schumann's marriage with Robert Schumann and discusses the gender disparities reflected in that marriage. It challenges the idea of Clara being "ahead of her time" and proposes that she was also subject to the social conventions at the time. Similarly, in "Clara Schumann: A Composer's Wife as Composer" by Eugene Gates, Clara's marriage with Robert is talked through, and the article additionally points out how her married life contrasts her life before marriage, underscoring the limitations that she faced, aligning with the topic of this research.

For Cecile Chaminade, the research draws from – although a dissertation meant to decipher the performance aspects of Cecile Chaminade's works – Yuan Zhuang's *A Performance Guide to Cécile Chaminade's Concertstück for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 40*, which provides valuable insight into the life of Cecile, discussing her family, her music education background, and her musical profession. This dissertation is referenced along with the biography portion of the thesis *Cecile Chaminade: A Composer at Work* by Karen Jee-Hae McCann. Not only does McCann also describe Cecile's life in detail, but also poses some of the obstacles Cecile faced during her life due to her gender, such as limitations in education and stereotypical criticism later.

As listed, numerous studies on these musicians have already been conducted. However, a comparison between their lives allows one to gain further insight and draw connections between their lives and the greater historical context.

Having lived during the same epoch and continent, these three composers shared similar life stories regarding their upbringing, access to education, and marriage. The similarities drawn from their lives reveal the general social convention of 19th-century Europe at a large scale and demonstrate how most women would have been chal-

lenged by these hindrances.

During their early lives, all three musicians were subject to arduous practice sessions and rigorous music classes. They all were then eventually regarded as gifted and virtuosic, gaining fame as teenagers for their professional performances. However, soon, they started facing impediments from the prevailing mindsets at the time, when it was standard that females did not receive high levels of education. For instance, granted her talent and recognition by Bizet, Cecile's father refused to let Cecile study systematically at the Paris Conservatoire because the action of a woman studying in an institute or school was considered inappropriate at the time. Likewise, Fanny's education also faced a stop when her grandfather forbade her to pursue music as a profession because performing publicly was considered not suited for a woman of high class like Fanny. Fanny's experience is further contrasted by that of Felix's. While Fanny was forced to withdraw from more advanced musical studies and opportunities, Felix was free to perform and publish his works to greater audiences. Their different lives, even though they come from the same family, show how at the time not only were women's opportunities limited, but there was also a great inequality between what women and men could do.

While deciphering the lives of these three musicians, it is important to note the Industrial Revolution as an important piece of historical context. The Industrial Revolution spanned from the late 18th century to the early 19th century, leading to drastic changes in technologies, manufacturing processes, and social structures (Montagna 1981). Although originating in Britain, the Industrial Revolution also spread to Germany and France (Ladenburg 2008) – where Fanny, Clara, and Cecile lived. The technological advancements brought by the Industrial Revolution permitted more food and higher efficiency in working organizations (Montagna 1981). The middle class was born then. The middle class was a new social ranking in which people were earning more income but also enjoying more free time, allowing them to gain access to music enjoyment and education, which used to be exclusive only to the wealthiest class (Kerr 2004).

This change in societal structure was critical for the three musicians, as they came from families in the middle to high classes. The Industrial Revolution meant that their families were making more money and becoming financially able to introduce them to music at a young age. Without the advancements brought forth by the Industrial Revolution, it is plausible that these three musicians would never have begun to play the piano or compose, as their families would still be struggling with the basic survival necessities and could not afford to have their daughters engage in music. Additionally, the technolog-

ical advancements during the revolution allowed for the improvement in the quality of instruments: Strings, winds, percussion, and the keyboard (Montagu 2018). Not only did this development aid the three musicians in their future profession as both a performer and composer, but it also meant that music was gaining more popularity and audience from the general population, benefiting their careers. In summary, the industrial revolution and the birth of the middle class contributed to the relative success of these three women to a great extent.

However, even though these three musicians were comparatively lucky to have had access to music, it is still visible, through their lives, how women were oppressed even then. For instance, these three musicians had the opportunity to study music (and the basics of some other fields) because of the financial privileges that their class had, and hence were able to consider music as a possible profession. For women who did not enjoy these conditions, however, they would not have had access to education, much less the arts. Hence, music and many other vocations would not have applied to them because of their lack of knowledge in the area, meaning these women faced even fewer choices when it came to their occupations.

In the meantime, though, women in the higher classes, even though they were musically educated, were still discouraged from pursuing music as a profession due to the rationale that performing for other people is inappropriate for a lady of high class, such as Fanny.

Hence, through these two comparisons, it appears as if even if women faced different conditions in their different classes, their lives were still unanimously constrained.

Another instance is their common field of profession – music. Although music at that time was still largely male-dominant (as shown by the lives of these three women), it has already shown itself to be relatively lenient as women were still allowed to engage in music to a certain extent. Still, as the research's current findings suggest, women in music faced more challenges than their male counterparts. So, what about the women who found interest in other stereotypically "masculine" fields? It is plausible to deduce that the oppression and hindrances faced by the women who worked in professions related to STEM, sports, and politics were only harsher.

These simultaneous similarities demonstrate how even though these three women were exceptionally lucky to have received further education, they were still subordinate to the popular beliefs that limited women's access at the time to a certain extent. It would be easy to deduce how the rest of the women – those who were not as lucky – would not have received such a level of education and were more single-purposedly raised only to become wives and mothers.

Comparisons can also be made from the marriages of these three women, where all three marriages reflect how at the time, women's professions were traditionally halted as they approached marriage. Clara's marriage is a typical example of women becoming constrained to domestic spheres after marriage. Not only was she occupied with domestic duties and raising their eight children after marrying Robert Schumann, but since Robert was a musician who "needed absolute quiet when composing" and since men were viewed as the heads of the families, Clara naturally had to sacrifice her own time to not distract him from his creation. Robert was aware of the situation, as he admits in their marriage diary that "[Clara] cannot work at [her work] regularly." However, his diary entry also reveals how this thought is eventually overthrown by the fossilized patriarchal ideas of the time because he goes on to argue that "Clara herself knows that her main occupation is as a mother and [he believes] she is happy in the circumstances," showing how the idea of women sacrificing their professions to support their husbands was prevalent and normal under that culture. Fanny and Cecile's marriages are different. Although Fanny's husband Wilhelm Hensel was in general quite supportive of her, her marriage still reflected the society to some extent. Hensel encouraged Fanny to continue with her music, but before that, Fanny decided to discontinue her musical profession, demonstrating how women's mindsets were fixed to believe they could only be housewives. Similarly, even though Chaminade's husband did not explicitly or openly discourage his wife's professional development, Chaminade's attitude and fear towards marriage still demonstrate how it was the norm for women's vocational advancements to be impeded by marriage.

Lastly, although these women are usually associated with men differently, they were all to some extent affected by these relationships. Fanny is most often associated with Felix – her brother, Clara is associated with Robert – her husband, and Cecile, although usually not linked to any men nowadays, was also largely impacted by her father. Drawing from their lives, all three women faced significant obstacles from these men: Felix discouraged Fanny from publishing her work, Robert limited Clara's time for composing, and Cecile's father turned down Cecile's opportunity to get access to better education. These three men were also the closest men a woman at the time could have: father, brother, husband. Thus, these three women's separate relationships with these men demonstrated how during 19th century Europe, a woman's life could be greatly affected by the authority their male relatives had over them.

4. Conclusion

The findings and comparisons drawn from the lives of Fanny, Clara, and Cecile suggest how even though these three musicians have shown themselves to be rather successful, gaining fame and recognition for their talent and works, they were still subject to the prejudice implemented by the dominant patriarchal ideologies during their time. The analysis of their stories provides insight into the possible challenges that other women in the same culture faced during that time and serves as a model for probable future research into the lives of females in other fields.

Due to the patriarchal history that most areas of studies underwent, it is probable or almost inevitable that numerous women who had made great contributions find their records to be invisible, or the Matilda Effect in science when women's achievements are regularly overlooked (Knobloch-Westerwick et al. 2013). For example, the game Monopoly is known to be the creation of Charles Darrow, when it was Elizabeth Magie who designed it first; the cure for leprosy was attributed to Arthur Dean and Richard Wrenshall, and the original discoverer Alice Ball was not recognized until 50 years later; and Walter Keane, who took credit for a series of artwork, threatened to kill his wife Margaret Kaene if she ever revealed that she was the real painter behind the works.

Without the exploration into the lives of these women, their accomplishments and importance may remain invisible for hundreds of years to come. This research, hence, calls attention to their lives, their importance, and their gender.

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