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Midterm paper

Cécile Chaminade

“This is not a woman who composes,” French composer and writer Ambroise Thomas once said of Cécile Chaminade, “but a composer who is a woman.” Chaminade, a composer and pianist born in 1857, was a talented young artist born to a family of amateur musicians in suburban Paris. She displayed great aptitude for music from childhood, but was prevented from joining the Paris Conservatoire by her father, who felt that the proper role of a middle class girl was that of wife or mother. However, because her family hosted a musical salon in their home, Cécile was exposed to great composers such as Thomas, Gounod, Massenet, Saint-Saëns, and Chabrier. A lucky acquaintance with Georges Bizet, the famed composer of *Carmen*, kept her father’s wishes from taking too strong a hold. He encouraged young Cécile to study privately with important musicians of the time, learning piano from Félix le Couppey, harmony from Augustin Savard, and composition from Benjamin Godard. Bizet, endearingly calling the young prodigy his “little Mozart,” ensured that Cécile’s education was as good as any at the Conservatoire.

After her father’s death, her career as a concert pianist boomed, and she performed regularly in England, supported greatly by Queen Victoria. She composed copiously, writing about 400 works over her lifetime. Her works are diverse,

including an opera, a ballet, a piano concerto, and hundreds of pieces for piano or voice, the latter primarily in French. Following her husband's death, she toured through Europe and America, and though she never remarried, she had the misfortune of falling in love with a flautist, for whom she composed a flute concertino. Her work earned her the Légion d'Honneur in 1913, the first given to a female composer. She died in 1944 at the age of 86, leaving behind a long career of compositions and concerts.

The music of Cécile Chaminade is notable for its lyrical style, archetypical of her time. Indeed, it is often criticized as being too homogeneous and unimaginative. This may be traced back to her lack of formal training. Though Bizet made sure that Cécile trained under the best teachers, Cécile was never able to experience a classroom setting, where she might interact with other students to exchange ideas. She also learned from a very small number of teachers, preventing her from creating her own style from a wide and varied base. Such a background would necessarily constrict her compositional style.

Her music is also frequently criticized for being too simple. Their lack of technical demand is reflective of the audience for which she wrote. Her greatest supporters were women, mostly those without much formal training, and her works were primarily *salon* pieces, easy music that might be picked up with little practice. Her emphasis on straight-forward melodies and her placement of enjoyment above skill accurately served the purposes to which she catered. Similarly, many of the texts

to which she set music were of “dubious literary quality,” meant not to be examined for virtue but merely to entertain. The exotic titles that her pieces were given and the attractive packaging in which her works were sold added to the appeal they held for less advanced audiences, and these too were criticized for their lack of high seriousness. Indeed, her music was often simply a pleasant alternative to the otherwise-heavy music popular in her day, and was frequently separated from the category of classical music and placed in that of popular music.

Though her composition and performance set her apart, she was constantly insecure about her own talents, perhaps because of the societal atmosphere in which she worked. Few women were so prolific or so famous, and this may have forced Cécile to question whether this was due to a natural deficiency in women. Surely her father’s assertion that women were meant to be wives and mothers fed into this mentality. She ultimately concludes, however, “Life has been hard on women.... 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.” Nonetheless, her base of admirers was sizeable. Mostly female, her fans had created one hundred Chaminade clubs by 1904, and well over a hundred more would follow. Even before she began touring the world, her fame spread before her, particularly to America. She served as a female role model at a time when women’s rights were being lobbied for more enthusiastically than ever. Her ability both to serve as a member of high society

and to perform and publish compositions on a grand scale helped women everywhere understand the attainability of both a professional and social life.

Cécile Chaminade was one of the most published female composers of her time, though she established herself not simply as a female composer, but simply as a composer. Her works were prolific and varied in type, and though they have been criticized for a quality of sameness, they are consistently charming. She has been criticized equally for failing to demand rigorous expertise and talent of those performing most of her works, but she served her purpose—to entertain—with exquisite grace. Her stance as a woman who could both write for the salons and attend the salons at which such works might be casually performed turned her into a female role model with none of the harsh, unfeminine nature of most feminists. The accolades she earned were well deserved. Despite the restraints placed upon her by society and by her father, she attained a stature that many, who are given greater privileges and a better chance, never do.

References

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