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*Pauline Viardot-Garcia*

❖ BY LISA HANSEN

# A Musical Portrait *Cécile Chaminade*

When Cécile Louise Stéphanie Chaminade reached the pinnacle of her fame as a composer in the early 1900s, she scaled heights few woman had ever reached. Her 1908 tour of the United States was hailed in a *Washington Post* article entitled: "Mme. Chaminade, Greatest Woman Composer, Who Is Now Visiting America, Tells Of Her Dreams."

Chaminade was feted by kings, queens, and heads of governments. Among her many honors, she received the Diamond Jubilee Medal in England from Queen Victoria, the Chefekat from the Sultan of Constantinople, and France's highest award, the Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

In the United States as many as two hundred Chaminade Clubs sprang up, yet she died in relative obscurity in 1944. Less than forty years later an article appeared in her hometown magazine, *Le Vesinet*, entitled "Who was Cécile Chaminade?"

Today few musicians, professional or amateur, could answer that question. Upon reopening the pages into the life of one of the most fascinating women in the annals of music history, one cannot help but recall these lines from the poem "Ozymandias," by Percy Bysshe Shelley:

> *And on the pedestal these words appear:*
> "My name is Ozymandias, the king of kings:
> Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!"
> Nothing besides remains. Round the decay
> Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
> *The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

Cécile Chaminade was born on August 8, 1857, in Paris, although she listed her birth year as 1861. Her family was upper-middle class and her father,

PHOTOS FROM THE MAUD POWELL ARCHIVE

*Chaminade was a savvy businesswoman who sensed momentous changes awaiting women. She believed "There is no sex in art. Genius is an independent quality."*

Hippolyte, was the Paris branch manager of a British insurance firm. Both parents were amateur musicians — her father, a violinist, and her mother, a pianist, who taught Chaminade the piano.

Before she was three, little Cécile was found in her bed singing the *Andante* of one of Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin that her parents were fond of playing. She wrote her first composition when she was seven and as a child was introduced to many important musical figures in her parents' country home at Le Vesinet.

"One evening," she recalled, "I was called to the drawing room and introduced to a stout, swarthy gentleman who made me play all the compositions I knew. My childish compositions amused him very much, and he submitted me to such a musical examination.... When I had finished, the gentleman said to my father, 'She undoubtedly has the gift. Give her all the opportunity for coming to the front, and she cannot fail, but, above all, do not bore her.'"

The gentleman was Georges Bizet.

Besides Bizet, Chaminade was encouraged by the composer Benjamin Godard while tutored privately by Felix Le Couppey in piano, Martin Marsick in violin and Augustin Savard in theory. Although Le Couppey recommended that she study at the Paris Conservatoire, the idea ran contrary to her father's sense of female decorum. At sixteen, Chaminade began to work seriously, composing a trio, opus 11, and training herself by "writing whole scores over again" — producing her own versions of Gounod's **Faust** and Meyerbeer's **Les Huguenots**. At the same time she continued her general education — on which her father insisted.

In 1875, Chaminade attended the disastrous premiere of Bizet's **Carmen**. This experience may have affected her own opera career, for in 1882, she directed and mounted a private version of her opéra-comique, **La Sévillane**, which was never staged, perhaps because of the dread instilled in her by the **Carmem** debacle.

In 1880, at age eighteen, Chaminade presented her first recital, at the Salle Erard, devoted solely to her compositions. The programming became the model for future concerts on tour. "Ambroise Thomas [composer] was among the audience," she remembered. "When he had heard some of my works, he said aloud: 'It is not a woman who composed these, it's a man!'"

The 1880s ushered in a period of creativity and expansion into larger forms, including her first work for piano and orchestra, **Concertstück**; her first symphony, **Les Amazones**; and her first ballet, **Callirhoë**. A piano arrangement of the **Scarf Dance** from this ballet reportedly sold over a million copies.

In 1886 Chaminade's younger sister, Louise Henriette, became engaged to the pianist and composer Moritz Moszkowski, completing, as Chaminade wrote, "the circle of musicians who were on intimate terms at our home." However their father Hippolyte could not abide her marriage to both a German and a Jew and broke off all ties with Louise.

*"There is no sex in art. Genius is an independent quality."*

Hippolyte's unexpected death the following year created severe financial pressures, causing Chaminade to shift her artistic direction away from composing in the larger forms toward the more commercially viable piano solos and songs. She was also spurred into a career as a concert pianist.

Chaminade considered the piano "the first of instruments." "It is the one which forms the ear best, it is the most complete instrument; it is also the only one that can be a reduction of the orchestra," she observed during an interview that appeared in *The Strand Musical Magazine*.

In the early 1890s, Chaminade became internationally known as a pianist and composer. She toured the Continent and from 1892, appearing annually in England, where she was received at Windsor Castle by Queen Victoria. She was in demand for performances of her **Concertstück** with orchestra and recitals of her piano pieces and songs. Audiences encountered a brunette, although..."not very dark; her eyes are very large, round and brown, with that absent-minded look in them so peculiar to artists; her hair...she wears short and

curled; her underlip is rather large and protruding, and her chin very short. She is of medium height and good build; her hands, however, are very delicate-looking things, and when she plays you wonder where the strength comes from...."

In the following decade Chaminade's popularity spread to the United States, where numerous Chaminade clubs formed, and leading publications including *Ladies' Home Journal* and *The Etude* featured her. Twice, she was commissioned to compose piano works for publication in the *Ladies' Home Journal*: February 1906, **New Debutante Waltz**; November 1908, **Rosemary: A Pastel**.

*"Her songs were performed by opera singers Lillian Nordica, Emma Calvé, and Nellie Melba with Chaminade at the piano."*

The French composer was especially famous for her songs — settings of romantic poetry to lyric themes gracefully supported by fluent, tasteful, finely blended harmonies. Her songs were performed by opera singers Lillian Nordica, Emma Calvé, and Nellie Melba with Chaminade at the piano.

"How do I compose?" she once responded to an interviewer. "Sometimes travelling, sometimes at the piano, often at my table, but never in the morning. I must gradually warm to my work. I prelude for ten days or a fortnight, and when the ideas come I set to work. I cannot work to order, but only by fits and starts." (*The Strand Musical Magazine*)

"When I complete a work I am reluctant to have it published immediately, preferring to keep it hidden in a drawer...until I come across it again and find that I have confidence in it," she observed in another conversation. "If...it continues to please me I send it to the publisher."

To her family's surprise, on August 29, 1901, Chaminade married Louis Mathieu Carbonel, a music publisher from Marseilles who was twenty years her senior. Prior to the marriage she insisted on an agreement which stipulated that each person reside in his or her former home, (she at Le Vesinet, near Paris, and he in Marseilles), and although he could visit her periodically and accompany her on tours, there would be no sexual relations.

A year after Carbonel's death in 1907, Chaminade mused that "marriage must adapt itself to one's career...usually it ruins the woman's art.... A woman should choose one or the other. When a woman of talent marries a man who appreciates that side of her, such a marriage may be ideally happy for both."

In the fall of 1908, Chaminade embarked on a highly successful United States tour that began and ended in New York's Carnegie Hall. Chaminade was greeted with a luncheon at the French Embassy, and received the next day at the White House by President and Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt. To honor the French composer, the American violinist Maud Powell announced that her Trio would perform Chaminade's piano trios during their 1908-09 United States tour.

During the tour Chaminade was asked to speak about contemporary composers and while she praised Camille Saint-Saëns, she was less glowing about Debussy: "Debussy, of course, depends very heavily on his orchestra for his effects, and his music is to my ears, well, ...insincere."

*"...marriage must adapt itself to one's career... usually it ruins a woman's art."*

Chaminade's failure to embrace the rising waves of Impressionism which ultimately revolutionized the course of music history, washing away the genteel tide of "La Belle Epoque," ultimately doomed her own compositions. Her professional decline was mirrored by a series of personal disasters beginning in 1912 with the death of her mother, who had been her lifelong companion. Chaminade, who had previously embraced mysticism, attended seances to summon her mother's spirit.

During the mid-1920s Chaminade moved to Monte Carlo where she was diagnosed with severe decalcification of her left foot. Two years later, the composer's foot was amputated, but Chaminade, at 72, her spirit indomitable, refused a wheelchair and became an invalid. At that time, in 1928, her last composition was published.

For her 80th birthday in 1939 Chaminade received several thousand letters written at the urging of *The Etude* magazine. Yet she wrote to an American friend of her isolation: "I see that you haven't been forgetting you musical friends. Not to be forgotten...is the supreme consolation for an artist...."

Chaminade's life was ultimately a paradox. Although her music was praised for its "feminine" charm and grace, she herself stepped far outside the feminine role dictated by her era in her career, her unique marriage, and her role as savvy businesswoman. With her prescient sense of the momentous changes awaiting women, she reflected in *The Washington Post*, "There is no sex in art. Genius is an independent quality. The woman of the future, with her broader outlook, her greater opportunities, will go far...in creative work of every description."

Chaminade died on April 13, 1944, at the age of 86. Ironically, given the multitude of solo piano works and songs she wrote, the piece most known today is the **Concertino for Flute**, which is known to virtually all flutists. *Time Magazine* reported her death, ironically ridiculing the art of the world's once most famous woman composer:

In Monte Carlo last week death came to the most famous woman composer who ever lived.... [S]he died in comparative obscurity. The era that her fragile, saccharine little piano pieces... represented had long since closed. Hers had been the age of rubber plants, stereoscopic views, and parlor trances....

Shelley's *Ozymandias* suggests that one never knows how the sands of time will shift. As they shifted for Georges Bizet, burying the critics who pilloried **Carmen**, perhaps the sands will shift once again for Cécile Chaminade in the not too distant future.

Cécile Chaminade was a successful pianist and composer who was honored for her work by kings and queens yet she died in obscurity in 1944.

*Resources on Cécile Chaminade*

**Select Bibliography**


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Citron, Marcia J. *Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988. (narrative with comprehensive bibliography, discography and list of works).

"Exit Chaminade." *Time Magazine* (1 May 1944): 54.

"Holmès-Chaminade," *Famous Composers* series, (n.d., circa 1898- 1900).

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Jerrould, John. "Piano Music of Cécile Chaminade." *The American Music Teacher* (January 1988).

Stephens, Ward. "Cécile Chaminade." *The Etude* (June 1899): 184-85.

*Women & Music, A History*, Edited by Karin Pendle. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991: 126-129.


**Music in Print**

Cécile Chaminade wrote over 400 works: about 200 for piano, about 130 for voice and piano, as well as 2 piano trios, an opera, a ballet, a dramatic symphony, and other works. Very few are in print today, though many music library collections include Chaminade's previously published works. Currently in print (partial listing):

*Concertino, Op. 107, for flute and orchestra*

*Cécile Chaminade, Selected Compositions for Piano*, published by Kalmus, Belwin Mills Publishing Corp. K09219

**Select Discography**

**Piano Works:**

P. Jacobs, piano (Hyperion CDA 66584)

*Cécile Chaminade: Music for Piano*, Enid Katahn, piano (Gasparo Records #GSCD-247)

*Cécile Chaminade: Piano Works*, Eric Parkin, piano (Chandos CHAN 8888)

*Concertstück for Piano and Orchestra*, Rosario Marciano, piano; Vienna CO, Kurt Rapf, conductor (Vox/Turnabout TV 34754, LP)

*Woman's Work, Works by Famous Women Composers, Caprice Espagnole* by Chaminade; M. May, piano (Gemini Hall Records, RAP 1010, LP)

**Piano, Violin and Cello:** *Trio No. 1 in G Minor, Op. 11*

*Chamber Works by Women Composers*, The Macalester Trio (Vox Box 2-CDX 5029)

**Flute and Piano:** *Concertino, Op. 107,* A.G. and M. Duchenim, flute and piano (Musica Viva MVCD-1025)

*Laurel Zucker, Virtuoso Flutist*, R. Sutherland, piano (Cantilena 660012)

**Flute and Orchestra:** *Concertino, Op. 107*

*La Flûte Enchantée*, S. Milan; R. Hickox, City of London Sinfonia (Chandos CHAN 8840)

K.B. Sebon; U. Lajovic, Berlin RSO (Koch Treasure #3-1613-2)

M. Wiesler; P. Auguin, Helsingborg SO (Bis CD-529)

**Orchestra:** *Autumn*, Michael Guttman, violin, José Serebrier,

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, ASV Quicksilva, The Four Seasons Series, CD QS 6115

**Violin and Piano:** *Romanza appassionata, Op. 31, Sérénade espagnole*

A. Steinhardt; V. Eskin, Northeastern (Classical Arts), NR 222-C

**Voice and Piano:** *Rosemonde, Chanson Brétonne, L'Été*

*Women at an Exposition* (music composed by women and performed at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago), S. Mentzer, mezzo-soprano; S.J. Langton, soprano; K. Schmidt, piano (Koch International Classics #3-7240-2H1)

**Discography of Lisa Hansen**

*Concierto Pastoral* — for flute and orchestra, L. Hansen, flute, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (EMI Classics, CZS 7674352)

*Suite de Ballet* — works for flute and piano, L. Hansen, flute; Allison Brewster, piano (Musical Heritage Society 312029 M)

*Fantasia para un gentilhombre* — transcribed for flute & orchestra, L. Hansen, flute; State of Mexico Symphony (EMI - to be released)