

Acknowledgments

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Quest



Elisabeth Remy Johnson, harp



The Music

Over the past few years, I've made a concerted effort to include more works by women in my performances. It has always seemed to me that these works must be out there, and now, with today's digital tools, they're so much easier to find. I feel a true thrill when I hear a new piece by a contemporary composer. When I rediscover an older one, particularly one entirely new to me, it's a joyful confirmation that this music has been there all along. The day after I finished recording this album, I pulled out my 30-year-old volume of *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Cécile Chaminade has a short entry, with a quote of "praise" once received: "This is not a woman composer, but a composer-woman!" Clara Wieck Schumann has no entry of her own. She is literally a parenthetical statement in her husband Robert Schumann's entry: "(She was also herself a by no means insignificant composer – chiefly of piano music and songs.)". Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel and Mel Bonis receive no mention at all. Today we have the tools to move in the direction of correcting the gender imbalance in "standard" repertoire.

The album title is drawn from the composition, *Quest* by Niloufar Nourbakhsh, whose inspiration for her piece perfectly fit the mission of this recording. Clara Schumann and Mel Bonis each struggled with making composition their life's work, especially given the limits of 19th century societal roles. Amy Beach threw herself into composition when her path to performing was blocked. It's truly inspiring to witness an historical thread of artists traversing adversity and going on to create beautiful art. In that spirit of discovery and joy, here are biographical details, comments in the composers' own words, and recommendations for further reading.

From today's perspective, some of the stories of the composers born in the 19th century range from mystifying to enraging. I believe their families did not operate from an overt intent to oppress, but instead were contemplating societal norms, and trying to chart the path of least resistance for their daughters, sisters, and wives. Luckily for us, each of these women defied the limits and defined their own paths. It also bears mentioning that, for the most part, each had substantial financial resources at their disposal. There is still so much to discover, and, since

2020 I have been working to expand this segment of harp repertoire by finding and arranging works by women in my project, *The Even-ing Standard*.

Quest ** (2013)



Niloufar Nourbakhsh (b. 1992) is an Iranian-American composer and pianist, and founding member and co-artistic director of the Iranian Female Composers Association. "I wrote *Quest* right after coming back to school from the Atlantic Music Festival. It was the first time I went to a festival as a composer and so I experienced challenges and frustrations, mainly navigating the music world through a composer lens as opposed to a pianist lens. *Quest* was my effort to remain an honest composer while trying to challenge myself intellectually, incorporate dissonances, and grapple with the difficult question I was facing at the time: Do I really want to embark on this quest of being a composer, or not?"

Aubade * (1911)



Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944) was a French composer, highly successful in her time, though not without early struggles. Her father would not allow her to attend the Paris Conservatory, though fortunately he did allow her private instruction from Conservatory faculty. Once established, her reputation grew rapidly. Inspired by her work, hundreds of "Chaminade Clubs" – musical societies formed by women - proliferated in England and the U.S. She was less celebrated in France, though she was the first female composer to receive the Légion d'Honneur.

Aubade was originally part of Chaminade's "Album des Enfants" for young pianists. She later expanded it to this version, a lovely and elegantly simple depiction of sunrise.

A Hermit Thrush at Morn* (1921)



Amy Beach's (1867-1944) astonishing musical talents were apparent from early childhood. At age four, she was composing waltzes, and was so emotionally affected by the sounds of nature, when it rained, she begged her mother to wipe the “tears” off the windowpanes. Her parents, however, were very cautious. They limited her practice time and rejected the managers who attempted to enroll her. She had perfect pitch and precocious skill at the piano, and became well-known as an

exceptional piano prodigy, with a gift for composition. Her musical destiny was shaped by her marriage at age 18 to a prominent Boston physician. Though he found it unseemly for her to perform for compensation, or formally study composition, he did admire her gift for writing music. He encouraged her to study on her own, and convinced her she was ready to compose a Mass, a monumental undertaking for a self-taught 19-year old.

A *Hermit Thrush at Morn* was shaped by the bird songs Beach heard in New Hampshire. In a music publication, she wrote charmingly of a “most voluble thrush” she heard one summer morning: “I took the songs down at the bird’s dictation, and oh, how hard I worked! Even the most expert stenographer would have had difficulty keeping up with him! I took them exactly, even as to key...and rewrote and corrected as he sang them over and over. Then I played them back to him and he would answer.”

Cinq Morceaux* (1894-1927)



Mel Bonis (1858-1937) wrote music for piano, organ, chamber ensemble, chorus, and orchestra. When she was a girl, she came to the attention of César Franck, who convinced her hesitant parents to permit her to attend the Paris Conservatory, where she was praised as one of its most brilliant pupils. However, when she fell in love with another student, her parents promptly removed her from the school, this being a step too far. They found a husband for her – a kind, wealthy widower twice her age, who already had five sons. She dutifully married him and they had three children together.

Over time, Mel reconnected with her Conservatory circle, threw herself back into composition, and essentially lived two lives – one as Madame Domange, wife and mother, and one as Mel Bonis, brilliant composer.

These five pieces are arranged from the original piano works, and represent the broad scope of her compositional life: *Près du ruisseau* (1894), *Berceuse* (1895), *Mélanie* (1898), *Desdémone* (1913), and, one of her last works, *Cloches lointaines* (1927).

Mélanie* (1846)



Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847) and her brother Felix were exceptionally talented children, but their father made a calculated decision about their paths, writing to Fanny: “Music will perhaps become his profession, whilst for *you* it can and must only be an ornament, never the root of your being and doing.” Still, she put on highly acclaimed concerts in her home which included her own work. Her standards and goals were very high: “If only I could have as many rehearsals as I

wanted! I really believe I have talent for working out pieces and making the interpretation clear to people.” Her mother remarked that Fanny was “truly a rare phenomenon among women.” Her mother and her husband encouraged her to publish her works, however her most-beloved brother Felix felt it was simply inappropriate for a woman to be a professional musician. His wife’s letters suggest he was influenced by feelings of professional jealousy. Fanny finally published at 40, even without Felix’s approval. Her works were widely praised and she felt at the height of her powers, writing in her diary in 1846: “I feel as if newly born.” She died of a stroke the following year.

Mélanie, originally for piano, is like a song floating on a breeze, unspeakably beautiful and transient.

*Romanze** (1853)



Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) was an extraordinarily gifted pianist, achieving international fame at a very young age. She gave concerts across Europe, and included her own compositions and improvisations on her programs. Clara was muse and confidante for her husband Robert, and their musical exchange was deep and meaningful. After marriage, Clara continued to give solo concert tours, but when she was home, her own music took a back seat to her husband's. With eight children, Clara probably wasn't in an environment to fully pursue composition, particularly since she maintained the utmost standards of artistry in her performing career. Still, she composed a catalogue of brilliant works, though wrote virtually nothing after Robert's early death. She supported their children with razor-sharp business acumen, continuing concert tours, establishing professorships, and publishing authorized editions of Robert's compositions. She was universally extolled for her unparalleled playing, with one critic writing that "her performances have the stamp of a divine summons."

Romanze opens with a lyrical, almost haunting melody, before transitioning into a highly chromatic middle section, which must have highlighted Clara Schumann's left hand dexterity to wonderful effect.

*D'un vieux jardin** (1914)



Lili Boulanger's (1893-1918) family was well-connected throughout the Parisian music world. Her father received the Prix de Rome for composition in 1835 and was a professor at the Paris Conservatory, and her sister Nadia would become a key teacher and mentor to scores of European and American composers through most of the 20th century. The Prix de Rome was opened to women in 1903, and Lili watched as her older sister attempted and failed to win the prize three times. Lili was determined to win the prize and reclaim it for the family, which she did in 1913. Throughout her life, Lili suffered from a debilitating intestinal illness. When she was well, a good night out on the town

might end at breakfast time; when she was ill, she could be incapacitated for months at a time. The same contrast existed within her music career. She would advocate for herself assertively with her pen, campaigning bluntly for lesser accolades in order to strongly position herself for the Prix de Rome. Yet, when she was on the podium during the competition's conducting stage, she was a study in demure reserve.

Boulanger wrote *D'un vieux jardin* during her Villa Medici residency, awarded to recipients of the Prix de Rome. The piece explores chromaticism punctuated by emphatic outbursts. It is intriguing to imagine how her style would have developed, with such an innovative and confident style at 21.

*Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies** (traditional)

I have loved the folk song *Come All Ye Fair and Tender Ladies* since I sang it with the Radcliffe Choral Society at Harvard University. It tells a sad, sweet story of unrequited love, and the melody is unforgettably beautiful. The lyrics tell of the singer's wish to be a little swallow so she could be with her true love, who is now courting someone else.

John Riley from "Every Lover is a Warrior" (2006)



Kati Agócs (b. 1975) is an American-Canadian-Hungarian composer, who has earned numerous prestigious awards. She composed *John Riley* as part of a cycle for solo harp, *Every Lover is a Warrior*, transforming the Appalachian tune to create a Bluegrass piece for harp. "The song tells of a soldier, John Riley, who returns home after eight years at war and tests the faithfulness of his girlfriend. He finds her in her garden and, seeing that she does not recognize him after so much time, presents himself as a stranger and asks her to marry him. She says no, she is waiting for her John Riley, who has been away at war, but to whom she will remain true. He asks, but what if he has died in battle? What if he has found someone else? What if he was lost at sea? And with each question she remains steadfast. Finally, he reveals his identity and says 'weep no more, my own true love, I am your long-lost John Riley,' and they go off into the sunset."

Pavan (2016)



British composer and violist **Sally Beamish's** (b. 1956) catalogue ranges from solo and chamber works, to orchestral concerti, to ballets. Among many honors, she was appointed Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2020. *Pavan* was originally created as an orchestral work for David Bintley's ballet production of Shakespeare's "The Tempest". In the foreword, Ms. Beamish writes: "[*Pavan*] appears in the ballet as a solo for the Goddess Iris. She represents air and sky, birdsong,

zephyrs, and gentle rain."

Skye (2017)



Freya Waley-Cohen (b. 1989) is a British-American composer living in London. She is regularly commissioned for international ensembles, and is the Associate Composer for Wigmore Hall. "*Skye* is inspired by folk-harp music of Scotland and particularly the Isle of Skye, a place where I spent many summers and Hogmanays (Scottish New Year celebrations) during my childhood. It's a place full of folklore – and I spent a lot of time there hearing stories about the famous fairy flag and the dungeons at Dunvegan Castle, the ceremonial horns, the fairy pools and much more."

Spindrift (2008)



Johanna Selleck (b. 1959) is a composer and flutist based in Australia, where she is an honorary fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her works frequently reflect our connection to the environment.

"The title refers to the spray blown from cresting waves in the ocean. Spindrift occurs when the force of the wind lifts the ocean out of itself and carries it along with it. Eyes of sailors in love can be said to have 'spindrift' in them, otherwise known as 'the white goddess' – Leukothea.

Leukothea came to the aid of Odysseus, saving him from drowning by wrapping him in the safety of her magic veil."

When I perform *Spindrift*, my mind is full of images of my favorite bit of ocean, Cape Cod Bay – small, lapping waves as the tide comes in, the crash of wind-driven waves against the jetty, the water when it's pure blue and flat-calm, or when it's a battle of grey and white, or when it's so still that the softly undulating sea grass can be seen underwater.

* Arranged by Elisabeth Remy Johnson; ** Arranged by Elisabeth Remy Johnson and Niloufar Nourbakhsh

Suggested Reading

Women Composers of Classical Music, Mary McVicker
(McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011)

Amy Beach: A Passionate Victorian, Adrienne Fried Block
(Oxford University Press, 1998)

Mel Bonis: Femme et "Compositeur", Christine Géliot
(L'Harmattan, 2017)

Sounds and Sweet Airs, The Forgotten Women of Classical Music, Anna Beer
(Oneworld Publications, 2016)

Clara Schumann: The Artist and the Woman, Nancy B. Reich
(Cornell University Press, 1985)

Special thanks to each of the composers, who gave generously of their time via video call and email. Thanks also to Christine Géliot who has been so supportive of my desire to transcribe and record works by her great-grandmother, Mel Bonis. And to Elaine, who jumped right in when this idea was just a tiny seedling, and said yes every time I asked to add another piece. This project has been a joy, start to finish.

—Elisabeth Remy Johnson

The Performer

Elisabeth Remy Johnson is acclaimed by critics and audiences for her “complete mastery of the harp and its secrets” (*The Boston Globe*). She has been the principal harpist of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra since 1995, with whom she has performed concertos by Debussy, Handel, Mozart, and Ginastera. She is principal harpist with the Grand Teton Music Festival, and has been the invited guest principal with the Boston, Houston, and Milwaukee symphonies.

In addition to her orchestral work, Ms. Remy Johnson performs solo and chamber music recitals across North America and throughout the world. She is a frequent collaborator with her ASO colleagues, cellist Danny Laufer and flutist Christina Smith in the Aster Trio, and has performed with the Atlanta Chamber Players, the Carolina Chamber Music Festival, the Amelia Island Chamber Music Festival, the Emory Chamber Music Society, and is a frequent guest at the Meeting House Chamber Music Festival on Cape Cod, MA.

Ms. Remy Johnson has performed at the American Harp Society National Conventions numerous times, is a regular soloist at the International Harp Festival in Rio de Janeiro, and was the featured artist of the Mid-Atlantic Harp Festival.

Her discography includes *A Christmas Collection* (2015) and *Whirlwind* (ACA Digital Recording, 2000), and she recorded *Encantamiento* (ACA Digital Recording, 2008) with ASO principal flutist Christina Smith. Ms. Remy Johnson has performed on dozens of recordings with the ASO, and was featured on Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, conducted by Robert Shaw (Telarc).

In 2018, Elisabeth Remy Johnson founded The Merian Ensemble, which performs and commissions works by women. The first Merian Ensemble commission, by Clarice Assad, was premiered in 2021. In 2020, Ms. Remy Johnson launched *The Evening Standard*, a project transcribing and promoting pieces by women to help establish gender-balanced solo harp repertoire.

Dedicated to education, Ms. Remy Johnson was co-founder and artistic director of the Urban Youth Harp Ensemble, and created a workshop series for UYHE alumni. In addition to her private studio, she teaches at Emory University, Kennesaw State University, and Georgia

State University, and teaches fellows of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Talent Development Program.

Ms. Remy Johnson is the recipient of Atlanta's Channel Eleven Community Service Award, the TBS Pathfinder's Award, and the Atlanta Business Chronicle's "Up & Comers Award." Winner of first-place prizes in competitions of the American Harp Society and the American String Teachers Association, she is also an awardee of the National YoungArts Foundation competition. Ms. Remy Johnson graduated from Harvard University, Phi Beta Kappa, majoring in Music and French. Her principal teachers were Ann Hobson Pilot and Alice Chalifoux.

