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# Cecile Chaminade

French composer and pianist

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*Cecile Chaminade. The photograph on the left by H.S. Mendelssohn.*

Cecile Loise Stephanie Chaminade was born in Paris on Aug 8, 1857 and was the third of four surviving children. She received her initial musical training from her mother who was a pianist and singer. A friend of the family, George Bizet advised her parents to give her a sound musical education. Since her father refused to let her study at the Paris Conservatoire, saying it did not fit the decorum of young women of her class, she studied privately from members of the faculty: Felix Le Couppey (piano), Antoine Marmontel, M G A Savard (counterpoint, harmony and fugue) and Benjamin Goddard (composition). She made her debut as a pianist at the age of 18. But her true *entree* into composition came with a recital in 1978 devoted to her own works. It took place at the family's house in Le Vesinet, a village west of Paris. Widely viewed and well received, the program served as a model for the typical Chaminade recital some twenty years

later: repertoire consisting entirely of her works, a mixture of piano solos and vocal songs, and Chaminade at the piano. She wrote composed over 350 pieces in almost every musical form and enjoyed amazing popularity during her lifetime. In 1901 Chaminade married Louis-Mathieu Carbonel, a music publisher from Marseilles more than twenty years her elder. In what may have been a platonic arrangement. He died seven years later and she never remarried. Her niece later wrote that Cecile avoided romantic relationships in general because she did not want to be subject to male authority and wanted to preserve her professional independence. While her compositional activity subsided because of World War I and deteriorating health, she made several musical recordings between 1901-1914 that were mostly piano rolls. Chaminade received many prestigious awards, culminating in the admission to the Legion d'Honneur in 1913 - the first time it was granted to a female composer. However, the award was belated and ironic since her music had largely been ignored in France for the previous 20 years. In her later years, her niece Antoinette Lorel, tended to her and attempted to promote Chaminade's music after her death in 1944. Lorel wrote a posthumous biography of Chaminade but it was never published.

### Major compositions

Chaminade began to compose in earnest in the early 1880s. Her major works included the first piano trio op.11 (1880) and *Suite d'orchestre* op. 20 (1881). She created an *opera comique*, *La Sevillane*, which had a private performance on February 23 1882. Other works included the *ballet symphonique Callirhoe* op 37, performed at Marseilles on 16 March 1888 and *Les amazones*, her only symphony which had aspects reminiscent of Wagner. Arguably her greatest artistic triumph was the popular *Concertstuck* op 40 for piano and orchestra which premiered at Antwerp on 18 April 1888. It would boast a number of performances and take on a life of its own. It was presented in Paris and in Marseille and throughout Europe and the United States. Chaminade also performed the *Concertstuck* in a two-piano version in London, making it possible to perform the piece if an orchestra were not available. In her later years, Chaminade composed mainly smaller pieces, with the one exception being her *Concertino*, Op. 107 for flute and orchestra of 1902 which she wrote on commission from the Conservatoire. The piece demands great technical skill and has remained a staple of the flute repertoire.

After 1890 Chaminade composed mainly character pieces and melodies, mainly due to financial, aesthetic and discriminatory reasons. Her father died in 1887, rendering it a necessity for Chaminade to make a living from publishing her music. She moved away from the music in the

large forms, such as symphony, opera and concerto, to more popular character pieces which suited the majority of her female fan base. This music became very popular, especially in England and the United States, and she helped to promote sales through extensive concert tours. She became a regular visitor of Queen Victoria in England, and she visited Chaminade clubs in 12 different cities in a very financially successful tour of the US in 1908. These Chaminade clubs sprouted during the heyday of women's clubs and by 1904 there were more than 100 clubs listed in the magazine *L'Echo Musical*. Chaminade's French nationality was a great attraction - adding to her exotic appeal, and her music was very well packaged. The cover was usually quite elaborate and sometimes included Chaminade's picture. For Smith, the amateur is "seduced" by the picturesque covers. The piece is "neo-Chopin, a nocturne but easier to play, full of repeated bars, thus offering him a quicker chance to get through". Chaminade composed almost 200 piano works, most of them character pieces (eg. *Scarf Dance*, 1888) and more than 125 *melodies* (e.g her signature piece *L'anneau d'argent* 1891); these two forms were the basis for her popularity.

Her music is tuneful and accessible, with easy to remember melodies, mild chromatic passages, and clear textures. It is described as emphasizing wit and color and is typically French. Her music is often inspired by dance. The *melodies* are very appropriate for voice and are expressively and poetically well-suited to the *salon* - or recital hall - the likely sites for such work. While these sweet and charming pieces gave her immense popularity, they were also criticized for being too feminine. Her works that emphasize thematic development, such as the *Concertstuck*, were considered too virile or masculine and hence unsuited to the womanly nature of the composer. Chaminade was a very prolific composer and he enjoyed great success around 1900 but gradually fell into oblivion. Some of the reasons for this were that her reputation rested on her piano pieces and songs, which were relegated to the category of salon music and thereby trivialized. Now however, heightened respect for French music and serious exploration of female composers brings renewed interest into her music.

## Bibliography

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