

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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MUSIC

Women Composers - Part 2

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-10-26



Introduction

The period we are going to look at in part two is within what is referred to as the Baroque¹ period (1600-1750) in the history of music. This Baroque style followed the Renaissance period and was followed by the Classical period.

During the Baroque period we see the development of much of what is now familiar in music, including the idea of musical keys, opera, the concerto, the oratorio and the dance suite. Purely instrumental music began to flourish. 'Baroque' music is characterised by its elaborate and ornate style, although it was some 100 years later that the term began to be used. It is here that we begin to find the familiar names of composers such as *JS Bach* in Germany, *Vivaldi* in Italy and *Handel* in England, although *Handel* was a German by birth.

This article will bring to light the music of three very talented women who deserve far greater recognition.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baroque_music

Part 2: 1650 - 1750

Isabella Leonarda (born 1620 Novara Italy, died 1704)

Isabella Leonarda was born into an old and influential family in Novara². Her father held the title of count. At the age of 16 she entered the Ursuline³ convent (Collegio di Sant'Orsola) at Navara, where she eventually rose to the position of Mother Superior. Little is known about her early formative years, though due to the high social and economic status of her family, it is more than likely she received a musical education. It seems that one of her roles at the convent was as a music teacher (magistra musicae) where she would have had a role in teaching the other nuns to play and sing. It is quite likely that the nuns performed some of her works.

Isabella was one of the most prolific female composers in this period, producing around 200 compositions in her lifetime. Interestingly, it appears that she didn't start composing regularly until she had reached the age of 50, and it is from this time that she began publishing the music that we know her for today. Although her music was highly regarded in her home city, she was apparently little known in other parts of Italy.

Her musical output included vocal and instrumental music in the prevailing baroque style. Her 'Sonata Duodecima' (1693) is believed to be the first violin sonata composed by a woman. A sonata⁴ is, literally, a piece that is played as opposed to a cantata⁵, which is sung. A sonata could be played by a single instrument or a small group of instruments.



--- @youtube(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=clK2bv09rnl>)

²<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novara>

³<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ursulines>

⁴<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sonata>

⁵<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cantata>

There are a couple of things to note about the performance here. Firstly, I must say what a superb energetic performance this is. The purists out there might raise an eyebrow or two at the thought of a concert grand piano playing the keyboard part. Such an instrument didn't exist in Isabella Leonarda's time. It would most likely have been played on a harpsichord⁶, a much quieter instrument. The grand piano was invented in 1777, and the concert grand as we know it today by Steinway in 1884.

Even so, what a wonderful piece of music, the interplay between the instruments is delightful. You will see there are two wind instruments which were in very common use at this time. In English they are called recorders⁷) - in German 'blockflöte' and in Italian 'flauto dolce'. These parts are sometimes replaced by the familiar transverse flutes in modern performances.

Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre (Born 1665 Paris, died 1729)



⁶<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harpsichord>

⁷[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recorder_\(musical_instrument\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recorder_(musical_instrument))

Elizabeth Jaquet was born into a family of musicians and instrument makers. She was a child prodigy excelling on harpsichord and organ, and was taken into the king's court as a musician at the age of 15. In 1684 she married Marin de la Guerre, a Parisian harpsichordist, organist and music teacher.

Elisabeth's first published compositions were pieces for harpsichord and violin. In 1694 she premiered her opera 'Céphale et Procris', the first opera to have been composed by a woman in France.

She also wrote sacred and secular cantatas, with her vocal writing noted for its close attention to the meaning of the text, and its dramatic use of recitative⁸. Recitative is a style of vocal writing where the singing imitates the natural rhythm of the text.

Elizabeth frequently performed in public concerts and her talents were widely recognised in her own lifetime and thereafter. As a woman, her high status in the world of music was quite remarkable. The videos here demonstrate firstly a typical solo harpsichord sonata, and then a sonata for a group of instruments.

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6L1L_tL-Hs

--- @youtube(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXRb20XtYAU>)

It's worth noting that the harpsichords you see in these clips have two manuals⁹). You can hear the difference in tone between the upper and lower manuals. This effect was possible through the instrument having two sets of strings, controlled by the two different manuals. This allowed the performer to create contrasts between the different sections of the piece. The harpsichord sonata is titled 'Minuet' and is a dance in three-time. The minuet was the early forerunner of the modern waltz.

Elisabetta de Gambarini (Born 1731 London, died 1765)

Elisabetta de Gambarini was born in London to Italian parents. She could speak English, French, Italian and German. It is likely that she received her early musical education from her mother, who was a music teacher to the children of the aristocracy.

Her musical career spans the end of the Baroque period and the beginning of the Classical. As well as a composer of music for voice, keyboard, and violin, she was a talented mezzo-soprano singer, orchestral conductor and painter. She began her musical career singing in a number of Handel's operas and oratorios, including *Judas Maccabaeus*, *Samson*, and *Messiah*.

With her growing reputation she was able to perform in and promote her own benefit concerts, in which she sang and played her own compositions. While still in her teens in 1748, with the publication of her six sets of lessons for harpsichord, she became the first female composer in Britain to publish a collection of keyboard works.

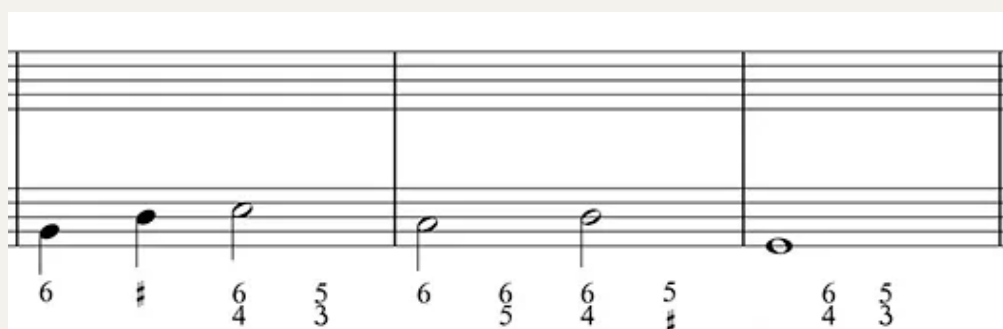
She is probably best known for the many beautiful and spirited songs that she wrote in Italian and English. The popularity of these songs was enhanced by virtue of their being able to be performed in a variety of ways, by voice, flute, violin, keyboard or combinations of these.

⁸<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recitative>

⁹[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manual_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manual_(music))



--- @youtube(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgvLOYw042k>)



In the example piece of music you will notice, on the left, a harpsichord and cello. This pair of instruments is playing what is termed the 'basso continuo' (through bass) part, and was typical for the Baroque period. This part provided the music with its harmonic structure, and would often have consisted of a single bass line (played by the cello) and a 'figured' bass line for the keyboard instrument. The keyboard player would use the figured bass numbers, which indicate the harmony, to improvise the accompaniment.

Elisabetta married in March 1764 and gave one concert in May of that year, but died at her home less than a year later. The cause is not known, but it is known that she had a daughter, and one possibility is that she died in, or as a result of childbirth. Sadly, this was all too common during this time. In addition, nothing is known of what happened to the child or Elisabetta's husband after her death.

In [part 3 of this series](#)¹⁰ we move on into the [Classical](#)¹¹ period, which was dominated by names like *Mozart*, *Haydn* and *Beethoven*.

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¹⁰<https://new.thehiddencircle.com/women-composers-part-3/>

¹¹[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_period_(music))