

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

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MUSIC

Women Composers - Part 4

BY ELIZABETH MOONLIGHT — 2024-11-10



Introduction

As we move into the 1800s we enter what is known in music history as the Romantic era¹. The previous Classical era was distinguished by its notions of form and structure. *Beethoven* was born into this period but pushed its boundaries further than *Mozart* or *Haydn* ever did. His need for expression caused him to create larger and more expansive and expressive works, which paved the way for this new era. This era also gave rise to some of the most talented and important women composers. Apart from Fanny Mendelssohn (see part 3²) and Clara Schumann (see below) who shared the name of a famous brother or husband, most of these women sank into relative obscurity after their death.

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

²<https://new.thehiddencircle.com/women-composers-part-3/>

Part 4: 1820 - 1900

Louise Farrenc (Born Paris 1804 - Died Paris 1875)



Louise Farrenc was born into an artistic family. Both her father and sister were sculptors. She received piano lessons from an early age, when it soon became apparent that she was extremely talented and had the ability to become a professional pianist. When it became clear that she was also showing talent as a composer she was sent, at the age of 15, to study composition at the Paris Conservatoire³. At that time women were not allowed to study composition in the traditional classes. To overcome this restriction she was given private lessons.

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservatoire_de_Paris

While at the conservatoire she met and married Aristide Farrenc⁴, a fellow student 10 years her senior. Following her marriage, Louise interrupted her studies to tour France, giving concerts with her husband. On their return, Louise continued her studies and together she and her husband opened a publishing house, Éditions Farrenc, which became one of France's leading publishers.

After completing her studies, Louise embarked on a career as a concert pianist, during which time she gained considerable fame. Such was her fame that she was appointed to the position Professor of Piano at the conservatoire, a very prestigious position, where she remained for thirty years. Despite her talent as an educator and pianist, for nearly 10 years Louise was paid less than her male counterparts. Following her continued demands and the very successful performance in 1849 of her composition *Nonet in E flat Major*, she was awarded equal pay. In addition to her teaching and performing career she also wrote an influential book, a collection of pianoforte music, detailing performance styles and practises through the previous 200 years.

Louise Farrenc wrote music in all genres except opera. This included three symphonies and two overtures. The vast majority of her compositions, particularly the early ones, were for piano. These compositions received high praise. She also wrote much chamber music.

Chamber music is on a smaller scale than, for example, a symphony, and involves a smaller group of instruments, most commonly with just one player per part. The music was designed to be performed in a small room rather than a church or concert hall. Probably the best known example is the string quartet, which comprises two violins, a viola and a cello.

Louise wrote trios, quartets, quintets, a sextet, and the famous *Nonet in E flat* (for 5 wind instruments, string trio and bass) mentioned earlier. The reasons why she never wrote an opera, despite her apparent interest in doing so, have never been clear. Like many women composers, after her death her music became largely forgotten. We are fortunate today to see renewed interest in women composers, resulting in the rediscovery and the subsequent performance and recording of many of her works.

Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ2y76H_kOc

--- @youtube(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRNkE1nZZ4M>)

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristide_Farrenc

Clara Schumann Wieck (Born Leipzig 1819 - Died Frankfurt 1896)



There is one word that, for me, describes Clara Schumann. That word is 'inspirational'. Clara was born into a musical family. Her mother, Mariane, was a pianist and talented singer, and her father, [Friedrich Wieck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Wieck)⁵, was a dealer in musical instruments and a highly regarded piano teacher. Her father was a very strict and authoritarian man, who had decided that Clara was going to be a concert pianist.

From a very young age, Clara was subjected to a strict regime, spending hours every day practising, and was frequently on the road with her father giving concerts. She made her concert debut at the age of nine. Her home life at that time was made more difficult when her mother and father divorced following an affair she had with one of her husband's friends. Five year old Clara remained with her father, while her mother moved away to Berlin.

At the age of 14 Clara started writing a piano concerto, which she performed at the age of 16. Around this time her future husband, the composer [Robert Schumann](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Schumann)⁶, became a piano pupil of Clara's father. The two fell in love and Robert proposed marriage. Clara's father strongly opposed this and did everything he could to prevent the marriage. Eventually, after a number of legal battles, Clara and Robert married just before Clara's 21st birthday.

Clara became famous as a brilliant and talented concert pianist, playing to sellout audiences around Europe and premiered Robert's piano concerto. With his support she continued to tour as a concert pianist and composed numerous piano sonatas and songs. Throughout her marriage, Clara was the main income earner as well as having the family and household duties. She had eight children with Robert, one of whom died in infancy. Robert's mental health gradually deteriorated, with him suffering more and more frequent bouts of deep depression, finally resulting in

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friedrich_Wieck

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Schumann

his attempted suicide and voluntary admission into a mental hospital. He remained there for two years, during which time Clara was not allowed to visit him until he was near to death. He died there two days later in 1856.

After her husband's death Clara was solely responsible for the upkeep of her family. She continued to give piano concerts, touring extensively throughout Germany. In 1878 she accepted an appointment as piano teacher in the new Konservatorium in Frankfurt⁷ after they agreed to her demands, one of which was for four months vacation each year. While there her fame attracted many students from Germany and abroad, including Britain and The United States. In addition to her teaching and performing work, she was also a respected music critic.

Tragedy struck Clara again with the death of her eldest son following mental illness similar to Robert's. Four of her children died during her lifetime, with two of those leaving their children in her care. Throughout all this, she continued to provide for her family through her performing and teaching.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SNY2psmNi0>

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

With the inspirational story of Clara Schumann we move into the 1900s and a time when music changed dramatically. We move into the modern era, in which, by the year 1952 you could almost say that it disappeared completely for about four and a half minutes. More about that in the next episode, plus a trip across the Atlantic.

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⁷https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoch_Conservatory