

Notes – Aphrodite's Muse March 8, 2008

By Adriana Rättsch-Rivera

Clara Wieck Schumann (1819-1896) studied piano with her musician father Friedrich Wieck from the age of five, and gave her first formal piano concert at the Gewandhaus in Leipzig at the age of eleven. She was named Royal and Imperial Virtuosa in Vienna in 1838, when she was 19. As a performing artist she was considered of the same caliber as Liszt, Thalberg, and Rubinstein. Her compositions, considered of the new Romantic school by her contemporaries, exemplify her superb craft as a creator of new expressive music and show solid knowledge of advanced theory and chromatic harmony. In her set of choral pieces *Drei Gemischte Chöre* (1848) she shows her mastery of four-part counterpoint. In *Abendfeier in Venedig*, a religious text, she achieves high intensity and introspection, makes use of word painting in the end at "sel'gen Geister hernieder" (blessed spirits descend) on a very low F, and in *Vorwärts*, "Himmel" (heavens) going up to a high A in the soprano part. In *Gondoliera* she creates the feeling of a moving boat with the compound meter of 9/8 and always tries to convey the dramatic impact of the words in music.

Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel (1805-1847) received her earliest piano instruction from her mother Lea. She continued with Ludwig Berger and in 1816 with Marie Bigot in Paris. She also studied composition and theory with C. F. Zelter. As a musician, Fanny is mostly known as Fanny Mendelssohn because of her musical association with her very talented brother Felix. Her family's values prevented Fanny from publishing or performing in public, but this fact did not hinder her from creating a vast amount of beautiful lieder, choral works, instrumental and piano pieces (about 500 works altogether). She conducted concerts at Sunday gatherings called salons in Berlin that might have been as lively and of great musical quality as the Schubertiades in Vienna. Fanny's style of composition was rooted in her love of J. S. Bach, Handel, and Mozart and shows great knowledge of balanced classical forms, harmony, and sophisticated counterpoint that make her music truly exceptional. Her choral compositions exemplify the German love of nature poetry and sophisticated art and folksong. Her *Gartenlieder* and *Nachtreigen* evoke the joy of choral singing in its highest expressions.

Lili Boulanger (1893-1918) was an extraordinary French composer. Both her father and grandfather were professors at the Paris Conservatoire and her mother was of Russian nobility. Lili's tragic and short, yet highly successful and prolific, life was beset by an illness she acquired in childhood. She left a living legacy because she was able to create the most imaginative and elegant music despite her health problems. In 1913 she was the first woman ever to win the prestigious Prix de Rome for her choral cantata *Faust et Helene*. The Prix de Rome, perhaps the music parallel of the Nobel Prize for literature, has been and still is the dream of many composers, and was won before her by such distinguished composers as Bizet, Gounod, Debussy, Barber, her father Ernest Boulanger, and by her composition teacher Paul Vidal. For a woman, at the dawn of the twentieth century, this prize opened doors unimaginable, a fact that makes her too-early death a tragedy beyond compare. One of her masterpieces for chorus, *Renouveau*, is a tribute to spring that evokes in the listener and performer an aural feast of an impressionistic painting gallery in music. We can almost smell the flowers, feel the breeze, and embrace the renewal of life with awe. *Soir Sur La Plaine*, also impressionistic in character, gives us a glimpse of her genius of her mastery because she achieves such variety of sound without becoming repetitious. In her *Hymne de Soleil* we can imagine the Russian sentiment of Mussorgsky's Gate of Kiev in the piano part combined with the elegant French impressionistic voices that soar above, always true to the meaning of the text that glorifies the sun.

Emma Lou Diemer (b.1927) is an American composer from Kansas. She was a child prodigy and had written piano concertos by the time she was thirteen. She went on to study with some of the most famous composition teachers of our time: Paul Hindemith, Howard Hanson, and Roger Sessions, to name a few. During her life, she has had many prestigious professorships at major American universities. Her compositions range from avant-garde, twelve-tone, and free tonality to neo-classicism and neo-romantic, exploring every possible avenue to find her own individual style. Her *Three Madrigals* (1960) employed a secular vocal form that was the counterpart of sacred motets and had its origin in the Renaissance. By using an old form with modern tonality, she combines the old with the new, a technique that has found favor with many composers past and present. While her rhythm is more traditional in these pieces, following the text of Shakespeare, her tonal language is free of key signatures. The vocal part fluctuates between minor and major seconds and thirds, leaving room to explore the outermost qualities of tonality, but never dissatisfy in the end when she returns to a feeling of home key.

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