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MARIE JAËLL TRAUTMANN

*"...He who is able to solve the mystery of Music will
find the key to the entire Universe."*

Pythagoras

*" ... To create harmony within ourselves through the
knowledge of truth: this is the task of humanity."*

Marie Jaëll

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In 1846, Marie Trautmann, the future Marie Jaëll, was born in Steinseltz, a small village in Alsace.

Her father was mayor of the village and Marie was brought up by her mother. Drawn to music, Marie persuaded her father to buy her a piano. Her progress was so swift that her mother decided to take her daughter's musical education and career into her own hands.

At the age of seven, Marie took lessons in Stuttgart with the best teacher of the time, Franz Hamma.

By the age of 10, she was already in Paris with Henri Herz.

At the age of 16, she won the First Prize for piano at the Paris Conservatory.

She then embarked on a brilliant European career and, supported by her mother's inexhaustible energy, performed in all the major cities of Europe.

One should bear in mind that this was a musically very rich period, and the growing number of keyboard virtuosos made careers difficult to break into. However, Marie quickly surpassed her reputation as a child prodigy by becoming a confirmed artist. Her every concert was favourably reviewed by the musical press.

At the age of 20, Marie married Alfred Jaëll, a world-famous pianist and close friend of Brahms, Schumann, Liszt, and Anton Rubinstein, whose works he performed in his concerts. With her reputation firmly established, Marie was now among the musical elite of Europe. The couple travelled all over Europe, from concert to concert, from triumph to triumph - the real life of an artist.

In 1882 Alfred died and Marie found herself alone. She was 35 years old.

Though a renowned pianist, Marie Jaëll is, however, less well known as a composer, even though she collaborated with illustrious masters, such as Camille Saint-Saëns and César Franck. She became one of the first women to be admitted to the Society of Music Composers, an extremely rare occurrence at that time given the prevalently sexist attitudes of the period.

These are well illustrated by the following quotations from a contemporary article in "La Gazette musicale de Paris":

"...Filling the 'Erard' concert hall has become the privilege of truly great concerts; and Mrs. Jaëll's certainly was indubitably such a one.

...But much of the interest generated by this concert was focused on Mrs. Marie Jaëll's early career as a composer.

...Her compositional technique is quite remarkable, and far superior to what one is entitled to expect from a woman".

Liszt once said to Marie Jaëll: " ... put a man's name on your music and it would be played on every piano. »

Marie Jaëll accomplished several feats that were unheard of at the time: she was the first in the world to perform all of Beethoven's sonatas in concert, as well as the complete works of Schumann and Liszt. But it was not performances which would make their mark on history, nor her compositions, which are nevertheless very varied and stamped with the strong personality of their creator.

It was through her scientific research into musical aesthetics, based on the discoveries of psychophysiology, that Marie Jaëll made history.

At the height of her success, Marie Jaëll renounced both public performance and composition. All her time, powerful intellect and inexhaustible energy were henceforth devoted exclusively to research.

What was Marie Jaëll looking for?

She began by looking for solutions to problems of piano technique and eventually she made discoveries that lead us to the deepest mysteries of music.

Here is an excerpt from a letter to her friend Gosswine von Berlepsch:

"...I must go beyond instinct and reach knowledge. »

No mean ambition. And yet, she succeeded.

Marie Jaëll had the rare privilege of living two lives: one, in the 19th century, as an international artist crisscrossing the world with ever-increasing success, and the other, in the 20th century, as a scientific researcher spending the rest of her life finding answers to questions that had always plagued her.

The end of the 19th and especially the beginning of the 20th century, rich in scientific discoveries and upheavals, left their mark on Marie Jaëll. If she had started her work 20 years earlier, the result would not have been the same: she would not have benefited from the advancement of psychology and physiology.

Supported by figures like Doctor Charles Fétré, a doctor at L'Hôpital de Bicêtre, well-known for his work in neurophysiology, Marie Jaëll devoted herself to researching the psychophysiology of pianists and the art of touch, in order to enable everyone, as she herself says, to "craft beauty".

Charles Fétré was very interested in the hand. Under his guidance, Marie Jaëll became a true scientist. Her first book "La musique et la psychophysiologie" came out in 1896. It was followed by other books whose titles reflect their content: "The Mechanism of Touch: the study of the piano through the experimental analysis of tactile sensitivity", "Intelligence and Rhythm in Artistic Movement", "A new state of consciousness: the colouring of tactile sensations", "The Hand and Musical Thought", to name but a few. In total, Marie Jaëll published a dozen books that have revolutionised the art of the playing the piano, as well as thirty notebooks and her diary.

Deeply affected by the death of Charles Fétré in 1907, Marie Jaëll continued her research and worked tirelessly, but shut herself away in her secret laboratory. She was completely absorbed by her work and thought little about how to make it known.

It is interesting to note that among the few pupils who were able to tolerate her stormy temper was a certain Albert Schweitzer, theologian, organist, founder of the hospital at Lambaréné and future Nobel Peace Prize winner. Albert Schweitzer later wrote in his memoirs: "...I owe so much to this great woman! »

In 1914, at the age of 68, Marie Jaëll enrolled at the Sorbonne for physics, botany, mathematics and other classes: "*I draw from everywhere in which I see relationships appearing that allow me to define the wholeness of things.* »

Towards the end of her life, Marie Jaëll realised that she had done nothing to disseminate her work.

She wrote before her death:

"I don't know how to make known and propagate the new forces that I am so happy to have brought to light. The idea that I have to leave this world without being sure that everything I have found will be embodied in future generations is a very frightening one..."

I wanted to work for others. I need my music to live on in your minds and in your fingers. »

Marie Jaëll died in 1925 at the age of 78.

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It is impossible to analyse, even briefly, the work of Marie Jaëll in the context of a short article. I will only try to present the essence of her thinking and teaching.

Marie Jaëll's work goes far beyond a simple piano method.

I suppose that at the beginning she asked herself some rather concrete questions: why can't pianists play the way they want to? What prevents them from realising their ideas?

To answer these questions, Marie Jaëll began to observe the motor functions of pianists, because pianists, like most musicians, express themselves with their fingers and hands.

One of the countless tests she conducted in Charles Fétré's laboratories showed the deterioration of pianists' motor functions. Marie Jaëll took 3 groups of individuals: pianists, ordinary people and people with motor problems.

By the speed of their reactions, ordinary people were the norm, behind them were the people with motor problems and at the end of the pack were our poor pianists. This proves that in pianists the motor, intellectual and psychic functions are in complete disharmony.

This is the result of traditional teaching methods which involve learning mechanically the different elements of piano technique: scales, arpeggios, double notes, octaves, etc. From a very young age, students are forced to undergo hours, months and years of repetitive training, without any musical awareness.

The major error of teaching these 'standard' musical figures, without their being set in the context of any actual music, is that each composer will use them in quite different ways to express different things.

In reality, "technical problems" do not exist. The real problem of these traditional methods is that of the pupils' understanding, or rather of their failure to understand the musical thought of the specific work, quite apart from the dislocation of their cerebral and motor activities which the traditional methods entail.

To put it simply: instead of working for years to teach our hands and body all the possible and impossible combinations of elements of piano technique taken out of any musical context, it is only in studying real pieces of music that we will learn to perfectly master our motor techniques.

Is it really as simple as that? Of course not.

It's obvious that our mental functions are influenced by our bodily activity. But Marie Jaëll's method seeks to reverse this process: here our mental functions are to determine our physical activity. The resulting perfect mastery of our hands and fingers allows us to concentrate on the deeper meaning of a musical work without being disturbed by technical problems.

Marie Jaëll has chosen a new path for learning the piano: the path of awareness:

« ... I can only conceive of the perfection of the phenomena of consciousness in man as the consequence of an organic and functional perfection which man must acquire through mental effort. »

For Marie Jaëll, man is perfectible, but only at the price of great effort. She wanted to pass on to others the knowledge she had acquired and to enable them to improve. It is therefore a true path of improvement that she has created. A long and intense path to self-knowledge, to an awareness of one's potential, and also of one's physical and intellectual limits, in order to better surpass them.

« ... I address myself to those who are capable of making an effort," said Marie Jaëll.

Whoever embark on this path must be capable of making a considerable effort, but they must also have courage, because by working on their perception of music, they will inevitably change their perception of the world around them and emerge completely transformed.

"...We never go down low enough to see what we are, we never go up high enough to see what we should be... if we want to live, we have to be born of ourselves," writes Marie Jaëll in her diary.

Here is an excerpt from a letter from André Siegfried of the Académie française:

"...Marie Jaëll will remain one of those forerunners that mankind throws into the vanguard and then sometimes takes centuries to catch up with.

...In philosophical field, through her research on the laws of aesthetics, she certainly ranks among the great initiators; her friend Schuré could have said: among the "Great Initiates". »

And now the letter that Édouard Schuré wrote to Marie Jaëll. This letter is part of a correspondence which is in the Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg :

Paris, February 14, 1907:

"Dear friend,

Thank you for sending us your book on "Rhythms of Perception and Dissociation of the Fingers".

...You have established the most subtle correlations between tactile, auditory and visual perceptions. This is undoubtedly quite difficult for the bulk of readers, but extremely suggestive for those who like to reflect on the substance of things and very particularly for those who are accustomed, like me, to the methods of esoteric thinking and concentrated meditation.

...They all tend to confirm the marvelous Unity of human consciousness. Only this number is not a dead number, like that of our mathematicians <...>, but a living number, fluid and multiple, infinitely varied. One, to infinity.

*Cordial and heartfelt congratulations from your dedicated,
Ed.Schuré "*

"...I can teach everyone to achieve beauty through the piano." Marie Jaëll highlights "through the piano." Of the many paths to self-improvement, she added her own, through the mediation of a musical instrument.

The aim of teaching is not simply to learn to play the piano well (although one naturally achieves this), but to achieve Beauty through the piano.

Translated by Anthony Gledhill

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