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## Compositrice dans l'ombre: Mel Bonis et ses Femmes de légende

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Compositrice dans l'ombre: Mel Bonis et ses *Femmes de légende*



Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Arts and the The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
Yi Ai

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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*Dedication*

*To the fearless women*



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To my parents.

To music, which keeps me alive.



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## Preface

One spring day in 2022, as my study abroad in Paris was coming to a close, I was scouring the Philharmonie de Paris website for concerts and music events to attend. That was when I stumbled upon a conference entitled “Portraits de Compositrices, du XIIe siècle à nos jours” (“Portraits of Female Composers, from the 12th Century to our days”). It prompted me to start listing the names of the female composers I knew of in my head, but I could only come up with four names: Lily and Nadia Boulanger, Clara Schumann, and Fanny Mendelssohn. I was struck by the realization that out of the countless composers' names that I knew, only four were women, and I struggled to recall the pieces they had composed. What's more, I couldn't help but notice that whenever their names come up, they are almost always tied with labels that highlight their gender, such as “woman composer” or “female composer.” In contrast, when we refer to famous composers like Beethoven, Mozart, Schubert, Chopin and others, no one would specify that they are “male composers.” Such use of gender disparity reveals the marginalization of women in classical music, and the need for greater recognition and inclusion of female composers in the field.

On account of the wish to recognize more women composers, I attended the conference, and unsurprisingly, only a few elderly couples were there, eager to learn more about music history. Over the next hour, I was introduced to the names and the faces of talented women composers who were forgotten by the public, including Juliette Toutain, Cécile Chaminade, Germaine Tailleferre, Ethel Smyth, and others. As recordings of their music were played, I was immediately intrigued by a piano piece by

one composer called Mel Bonis. It sounded reminiscent of Debussy's works, but with a more mournful, sentimental and mysterious tone. I then realized that listening to her music by making comparisons with a male composer was somehow inappropriate, and quickly dispelled any inclination to do so. Later I learned that although Mel Bonis and Debussy were classmates at The Paris Conservatoire, Bonis had expressed her disagreement with Debussy's music in her personal writing collection "Souvenirs et Réflexions." At the conference, I wrote down "Femmes de légende"---the name of the piece that I heard and decided to explore more about this seemingly melancholic and mysterious composer who was forgotten by the audience.

Before introducing this composer, it is worthy examining the question: Why are there no known great female composers in history? The answer to this question can not be reduced to any single factor. To provide a thorough investigation of this issue, this introduction will consider three important aspects: philosophical theories that have shaped gender roles and opportunities in the arts, female education in conservatories during the 19th century, and the obstacles encountered by female composers seeking recognition in the classical music canon.

### **Philosophical Theories and Perspectives**

The question can be approached by first examining the philosophical perspectives that have historically shaped the different roles and social status of men and women. Starting from the period of enlightenment, one significant perspective

suggests that inherent intellectual differences exist between genders, which has led to the disparity in opportunities for women in the field of art creation. This view is exemplified by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the precursor to the Age of Enlightenment, Romantic movement and the French Revolution, is a representative of this view. He believed that a fundamental distinction exists between the minds of men and women and stated in Book V of *Emile* (1762):

*All the faculties common to both sexes are not equally shared between them, but taken as a whole they are fairly divided...Women have more wit, man more genius; woman observes, man reasons* (Rousseau 1762).

In Rousseau's *Letter to d'Alembert*, he made his assessment on women and art:

*Women, in general, do not like any art, know nothing about any, and have no genius...They can acquire science, erudition, talents, and everything which is acquired by dint of hard work. But that celestial flame which warms and sets fire to soul, that genius which consumes and devours, that burning eloquence, those sublime transports which carry their raptures to the depths of hearts, will always lack in the writings of women; their works are all cold and pretty as they are; they may contain as much wit as you please, never a soul; they are a hundred times more sensible than passionate* (Rousseau 1758).

Upon comparing these two quotes, it becomes clear that Rousseau believed that possessing "genius" was an indispensable quality for creating art, while women were only capable of "wit", the ability to amuse, rather than possessing the actual intellect to create art. Rousseau argued that women were too sensitive and emotional to transform

their thoughts into genuine creativity. On the other hand, men were able to produce art due to their capacity for reasoning, which allowed them to create what women could not. Marcia J. Citron, in *Gender and Musical Canon*, pointed out that the Romantic notions of the composer as genius have privileged and deified composers, distancing them from the trivialities of daily existence. Apparently, these Romantic notions were heavily influenced by Rousseau's conception of "genius" and "wit", categorizing "genius" as a rare and sublime quality exclusive to men, while "wit" is a more mundane attribute associated with women. This reinforced the patriarchal structure of professional composers in the 19th century.

It is based on this fundamental distinction between men and women's minds that Rousseau followed his claim on the purpose of women's education:

*A women's education must therefore be planned in relation to man. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of a woman for all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young (Rousseau 1762).*

Rousseau's views on women's education were largely shaped by the social norms and expectations of his time. During his era, women were largely relegated to domestic roles and were expected to prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities over their personal growth and intellectual pursuits. Consequently, education for women was considered solely for the purpose of preparing them for a good marriage and to develop

their domestic responsibilities, in order to support their husbands in their pursuits outside of the home.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant proposed his judgment of men and women based on a similar distinctive nature of men and women in his *Critique of Judgement*:

*All the other merits of a woman should unite solely to enhance the character of the beautiful, which is the proper reference point; and on the other hand, among the masculine qualities the sublime clearly stands out as the criterion of his kind. All judgements of the two sexes must refer to these criteria...all education and instruction must have these before its eyes. And all efforts to advance the moral perfection of the one or the other—unless one wants to disguise the charming distinction that nature has chosen to make between the two sorts of human being* (Kant 1790).

According to Kant, beauty is a property of objects that are perceived by the senses. Therefore, the concept of a “beautiful woman” not only acknowledges the potential of women as a source of inspiration and captivation, but also indicates a reduction of women to passive objects to be observed and evaluated based on the subjective preferences of individual perceivers. On the other hand, men are suited to embody the concept of “sublime”, which is associated with strength, dominance, and reason.

Furthermore, Kant doubted whether women were capable of the kind of abstract reasoning involved in public, legal-political, or scholarly reasoning. Instead, he believed that the wisdom of women lies in the kind of caring and affectionate sphere (Varden

2015). In other words, Kant regarded women as naturally suitable and belonging to taking charge of domestic life. This leads to his view, as noted by scholar Henry Gates, that “the only reason for educating a girl was to prepare her for the type of life she would be expected to lead both biologically and socially” (Gates 2). Similarly, in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant expressed his doubt about the existence of a truly scholarly woman:

*As for the scholarly woman, she uses her books in the same way as her watch, for example, which she carries so that people will see that she has one, though it is usually not running or not set by the sun (Kant 1798).*

Thus both Rousseau and Kant’s perspectives confined women’s nature and education, thereby justifying the exclusion of women from participating in social professions and reinforcing men’s dominant positions in society.

In Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, the German philosopher made a more extreme claim regarding female creativity, in addition to confirming what he perceived as women’s weak reasoning power, made a more extreme claim on the incapability of female creativity:

*Neither for music, nor poetry, nor the plastic arts do they possess any real feeling or receptivity...Nor can one expect anything else from women if one considers that the most eminent heads of the entire sex have proved incapable of a truly great, genuine and original achievement in art, or indeed creating anything at all of lasting value...the reason being precisely that they lack all objectivity of*

*mind...Women, taken as a whole, are and remain thorough and incurable philistines* (Schopenhauer 1818).

Marcia J. Citron pointed out in her *Gender and The Musical Canon* that patriarchal society has used the concept of creativity to silence women. By valuing the activity of the mind over the body, society has associated the act of “creation” with men and relegated women to the role of “procreation”. This division has further perpetuated the idea that culture is superior and associated with men, while nature is inferior and associated with women. This theory is supported by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsch's remark which stressed the need for men to express their creativity through medium backed up on this theory: “In so doing, he creates relatively lasting, eternal, transcendent objects, while the woman creates only perishables—human beings” (Citron 2000). The binary oppositions of “mind” versus “body” and “culture” versus “nature” have shaped the marginalization of women's creative contributions in the various fields, including music.

George Upton, a music critic, proposed an early gender music theory in his influential book *Woman in Music* (1880). He first agreed that woman is emotional by nature, thus it would be difficult to confine her emotions within music limits as opposed to men:

*Man controls his emotions, and can give an outward expression of them. In woman they are the dominating element, and so long as they are dominant she absorbs music* (Upton 1880).



He went on to argue that women lack persistence and are incapable of enduring the malicious oppositions that are unavoidable in the lives of the great composers:

*...the inability of woman to endure the discouragements of the composer, and to battle with the prejudice and indifference, and sometimes with the malicious opposition, of the world, that obstruct his progress. The lives of the great composers, with scarcely an exception, were spent in constant struggle, and saddened with discouragements, disappointments, and pinching of poverty, the jealousies of rivals, or the contemptuous indifference of contemporaries (Upton 1880).*

Upton's analysis fails to recognize a significant fact: the difficulties that women had to overcome in pursuing careers as composers were far greater than men. While male composers may have struggled with issues such as negative criticism, poverty and disappointment, they did not have to confront societal biases and expectations regarding their identity as professional composers. In contrast, women composers from the 19th to the 20th century were often faced with prejudiced beliefs that they lacked the necessary creativity and intelligence to become professional composers. Women composers were discouraged and discriminated against even before they had a chance to prove themselves. In some cases, these biases were so extreme that women composing was viewed as unethical. Composer Priscilla Mclean (1942-), for example, has recounted instances where radical ideologies opposed women's participation in the field of composition:

*I was brought up to believe that all composers were men, and that women, to work at all, should take a temporary “service” position, such as nursing or teaching, until they inevitably got married and had children. Then they were to quit and take care of the home. Even hiring a babysitter... while the mother composed was considered “unnatural” and perhaps immoral! (Citron 2000)*

Even though Mclean is a contemporary American composer, her description confirms a long-standing idea that is observed across history and geographical regions. Women composers have historically faced the challenge of identity conflict between societal expectations and their personal aspirations, making it difficult for them to establish themselves in a field dominated by men. Even if women were allowed to compose, they faced significant distractions in their composing process and career development, particularly during the crucial period of establishing themselves in the field. The expectation to take on primary caregiver roles for children often hindered their progress, leading to a perception of them as amateurs and a lack of serious consideration of their works. By contrast, male composers were and still are not burdened with the same societal expectations and gendered roles as father and husbands, nor did they face condemnation for pursuing careers as composers. More importantly, women have lacked equal access to musical education and resources compared to men, which will be further explored in the subsequent sections of this project.

While admitting that woman’s emotional nature does enable her to be more sensitive and immediate in perceiving music and better at imagination than man, Upton

concluded that women have never written any great music because composing is not suited to women's nature:

*...she has not succeeded when she has had the opportunity...Woman reaches results mainly by intuitions. Her susceptibility to impressions, and her finely-tempered organization, enable her to feel and perceive, where man has to reach results by the slow processes of reason...If music were only an object of the perceptions, if it simply addressed itself to the senses, if it were but an art composed of ravishing melody, of passionate outbursts...dreamy sensations without any determinate ideas, woman possibly would have grasped it long ago...but music is all this and more...It is not only an art, but an exact science, and, in its highest form, mercilessly logical and unrelentingly mathematical...The mere possession of the practical imagination and the capacity to receive music in its fullest emotional power will not lead one to the highest achievements in musical art. With these subjective qualities must be combined the mastery of the theoretical intricacies, the logical sequences, and the mathematical problems, which are the foundation principles of music. In this direction woman, except in very rare instances, has never achieved great results. Her grandest performances have been in the regions of romance, of intuition, of poetical feeling and expression (Neuls-Bates 1996, 209-210).*

As a result of biased philosophical and gendered theories, women who had a desire to compose music were often discouraged, prohibited and directed towards other more traditionally feminine roles in life. *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a book examining

female writers in Victorian literature, observed that these women were confined in their writing to make their female characters embody either the “angel” or the “monster”. This binary portrayal of women was seen as the only acceptable way to represent female characters. (As what will be seen later, Mel Bonis as an art creator herself was constantly facing this conflict between her domestic role and her artistic passion, which resembles an epitome of this kind of opposition between “angel” and “monster” from a conventional patriarchal perspective). As Citron highlights in her remark, constraints on feminine creativity in Romanticism had a similar impact: “female characters who dared flout convention and transgress male limits of their sphere of creativity often ended up mad, confined, or dead” (Citron 2000, 44). Women who dared to create, to write and compose were regarded as rebels. Even well-known composers from the 19th century, such as Clara Schumann and Fanny Hensel, privately expressed anxieties and concerns about their desire to compose, highlighting the obstacles and societal expectations that hindered their artistic pursuits<sup>1</sup>.

### **19th century women at the Paris conservatory**

In the late 19th century, women’s status improved as they began to cast off the lingering effects of the setbacks on women’s rights. The growing industrialization of society led to social reforms aimed at addressing labor force issues, which mainly focused on men. During this period, women became increasingly aware of the disparities between themselves and men, leading to a powerful wave of feminism across Europe. Meanwhile, the growing bourgeois classes started to engage in types of

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<sup>1</sup> See Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.

artistic activities that were previously reserved for the aristocracy. As a result, places like concert halls, opera houses and music schools became accessible to a wider public. Bourgeois women actively participated in amateur musical activities as a means to assure their class status.

Despite gaining access to music activities, it is worth noting that the label “amateur” did restrict women’s level of involvement in the music world. It indicates that they were rarely encouraged or allowed to delve into it or to become professionals. However, this harsh reality would not completely prevent those who had a fervent passion and real talent in music. Instead, it urged on generations of female musicians to display their musical competence and to strive for better conditions in pursuing a professional music career. Some well-known names of female musicians and composers such as Clara Schumann in Germany, Pauline Viardot, Louise Farrenc, Cécile Chaminade in France and Maria Szymanowska in Poland appeared in public concerts and were published. But most of them came from professional musician families. In addition, they also had to manage the traditional women roles of wives and mothers as well as their own professional career.

In response to the ideals of the French Revolution, the Paris Conservatory was founded in 1795 to ensure the independence of French music. Although women were thought to be among the first group of admitted students, it was not until the later years that women were allowed to be in the same class with men. Before that, women and men received separate instructions, which means that women were not permitted to be in those more advanced classes that were exclusively for men, specifically

compositional and harmony classes. Initially, women's admission to the conservatory level music education was partly due to the demands of trained female voices in operatic canon (David 2015). In 1841, the conservatory opened harmony and accompaniment classes for women. Ten years later, the regulation removed the mention "pour les hommes" (for men) in the description of composition classes. The so-called "written" harmony class remains the only discipline exclusively for men in the music writing curriculum. In 1878, during Mel Bonis's time at the Conservatory, the revision of the regulation put an end to this particularity and placed men and women on an equal footing, even though women were still not authorized to be presented in the Prix de Rome Competition (Thégarid 2020). [The first woman composer to participate in Prix de Rome was Juliette Toutain in 1903 (Fauser 1998)]. In addition, women composers still faced other obstacles in the music industry after they left the Conservatory, which will be discussed in the next section of this introduction.

Whether the parents allowed their daughters to enter the Conservatory was another problem. For example, the French composer Cécile Chaminade (1857-1944), who was raised in a musical family, was recommended to study music at the Paris Conservatory after an assessment by Félix Le Couppey, a professor of the conservatory. However, Chaminade's father forbade it because he believed that it was improper for her daughter to receive formal music education. Instead, he allowed Chaminade to study the piano, the violin and the composition privately with teachers from the Conservatory. Thus although the Paris Conservatory claimed to accept women students, there were probably very few female students that were officially registered.

Considering the conventional social norms and influencing philosophical perspectives introduced in the previous part, more of them received instructions privately or informally like Cécile Chaminade.

Apart from the familial and society restrictions, the admission process to the Paris Conservatory was known for its strictness and competitiveness in order to assure the quality of education. The regulation set a maximum number of spots for each class. This provision, founded by Luigi Cherubini in 1822, aimed at reforming the school “by first pruning useless students who show no promise and reducing their number to a reasonable amount”, was initially applied to the overcrowded piano and violin classes, before being extended to other disciplines. Furthermore, admission juries met each year to assign the few available spots to applicants. The entry of a new student into a class was subject to the departure of a previously admitted student. The small number of available spots ensured that the conservatory only recruited the most talented and promising future musicians.<sup>2</sup>

The selective admission process means that women had even fewer chances of studying at the Paris Conservatory. Considering that women playing music were regarded as amateurs, few parents and teachers would be willing to train their daughters and young women professionally to prepare for the entry exams. As a result, women were less competitive compared to men in the entry assessment. Only the few that were most talented and fortunate enough to receive a certain amount of pre-conservatory education had a chance to be admitted to the Paris Conservatory.

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<sup>2</sup> My translation of Marie Duchêne-Thégarid, “Sur les bancs du Conservatoire”, *Mel Bonis (1858-1937): parcours d’une compositrice de la Belle époque*

Therefore, lots of women who desired to study music or composition were excluded from professionalism at the very beginning.

Access to composition classes was even more restricted, as learning “written” harmony was only available for students enrolled in composition classes. The conservatory also forbade students from enrolling in both harmony and composition class simultaneously. Moreover, aspiring composition students were required to obtain a harmony prize as proof of their high-level technical expertise. In 1878, an additional rule was implemented, stating that no student could enroll in both the solfege and harmony classes at the same time. This made the composition class exclusively available to the most advanced students who were experts in solfege and harmony theories.<sup>3</sup>

Since the keyboard instrument and the organ belonged to the composition curriculum by virtue of the practice of improvisation, a new class “piano accompaniment class”, was added in 1878. Only students who were admitted to compete for written harmony had access to this class, regardless of gender. This requirement made the level of the class even higher than the harmony class. The content of this class included “accompaniment of figured bass, given song, full score and sight transposition”. During the same year, the conservatoire officially announced six harmony classes in two categories: two “written harmony classes for men” and four “harmony and practical

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<sup>3</sup> My translation and summary of Marie Duchêne-Thégarid, “Sur les bancs du Conservatoire”, *Mel Bonis (1858-1937): parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle époque*.



accompaniment classes” that accepted an equal number of male and female students.

This means that women were reserved two harmony classes.<sup>4</sup>

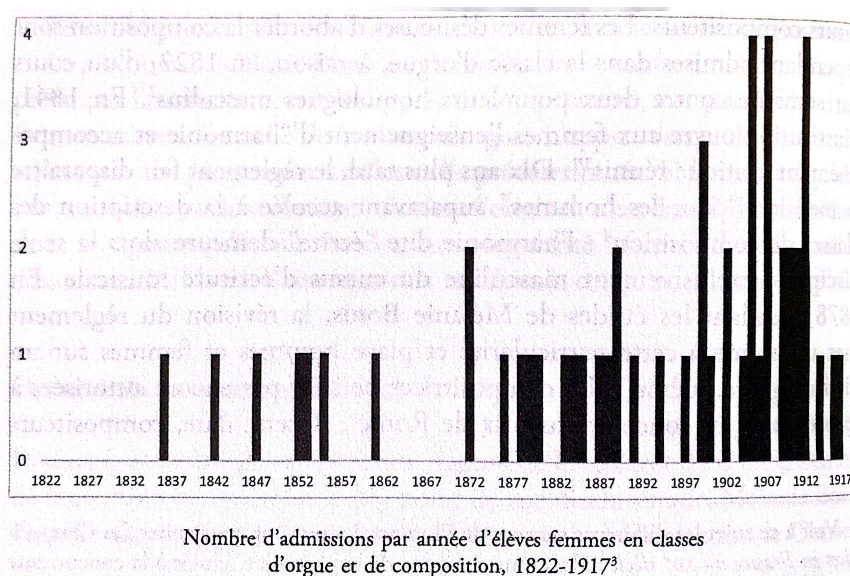


Figure 1. Number of female students admitted in the organ and composition classes each year, 1822-1917. Étienne Jardin, *Mel Bonis: Parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle Époque*, 2020.

From the graph above, it can be observed that from 1837 to 1867, only one female student was occasionally admitted each year to the organ and composition classes in the conservatory. Starting from 1873, the number of female students began to stabilize and gradually increased over the next three decades. However, it is worth noting that the number of female students did not exceed four through the whole century even until 1917, which indicates the rarity of women students in advanced classes at the Paris Conservatory during the late 19th century. According to Duchêne-Thégarid, among the 711 musicians that were admitted to the organ and

<sup>4</sup> My translation and summary of Marie Duchêne-Thégarid, “Sur les bancs du Conservatoire”, *Mel Bonis (1858-1937): parcours d'une compositrice de la Belle époque*.

composition class in the Paris Conservatoire between 1822 and 1906, only 59 were women.

The first female student enrolled in the organ class was Athalie Legrain in 1824. However, it wasn't until the early 1860s that the first female student joined the composition class [The composition class was established since the foundation of the Conservatoire in 1795 (Ronxin 1995)]. Charlotte Jacques, who had been studying at the Conservatoire since 1852, became a student in Aimé Leborne's composition class. In the 1870s, more women were admitted to the organ and composition class. By 1895, there was at least one female student in the classes every year. The situation continued to improve rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century. Therefore, Mel Bonis, who entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1876, was among the pioneers of her era.

Mel Bonis entered the Paris Conservatoire at 19, which was relatively late compared to her peers. Young women typically entered around the age of 14, and more than half of them started their competition for a spot in the Conservatoire between 9 and 13. This precocity could be explained by the nature of the courses that the young female musicians took in the Conservatoire. Around half of the future "compositrices" began their study with the learning of solfege and the choice of combining it with an instrument. Although the female musicians typically entered the Conservatoire at a very young age, their courses of study were designed to last an average of 10 years, which means that they would remain enrolled until they were around 20 years old.

Another restriction is the age limit imposed by the Conservatoire. Mel Bonis was among the group of 18 women composition students that entered the Conservatoire

around the same time. Due to their older age, they were enrolled immediately in the harmony, organ or the composition class, which reveals their intention in learning and occupying a professional position that was a majority of men. These 18 “compositrices” took a relatively short period of compositional classes, with an average of 5 years. Some of the older ones did not have time to prove themselves because the Conservatoire stipulated that after the age of 22, students were admitted only if they were judged advanced enough to complete their studies two years or gifted with exceptional abilities. This restriction concerned 4 of the 18 “compositrices”. In addition, 7 of them were excluded due to insufficient progress and had to resign before completing their curriculum. Mel Bonis, along with the other five students, also resigned from the institution before completing their studies for personal reasons (Jardin 2020). This highlights the level of rigor expected from the institution, as the internal regulations also stipulated the exclusion of any student deemed to have made insufficient progress, regardless of gender. However, it is important to note that as the criteria for judging the progress of students were not clearly defined and could be very subjective, the possibility of prejudice and discrimination in the exclusion of students based on gender should not be overlooked. This may have operated similarly to the biases that female composers faced in society.

## **Late Romanticism and the Challenge of Women's Presence in the Traditional Musical Canon**

This section will offer a brief background on the mainstream musical style during Mel Bonis's time and analyze the typical obstacles that hindered women composers from having a flourishing career in the music compositional field after their education.

### **The Belle Époque**

As Leon Botstein mentioned in one of his concert notes in 1997, French music in the late nineteenth century can be categorized into three sectors. One was associated with Jules Massenet, who taught composition at the Conservatoire de Paris from 1878 to 1896 and was influential for his opera including *Manon* (1884) and *Werther* (1892). He was generally considered conventional and unadventurous during his time, and his works were representations of traditionally well-crafted music. Another group of composers who were heavily influenced by German traditions of instrumental composition, particularly by Beethoven and, more significantly, by Richard Wagner. Wagner's music, with its grand structures, complex textures, and rich harmonies and orchestration had a lasting impact on the aesthetics of numerous French composers, including César Franck, Camille Saint-Saëns, Georges Bizet and others. Wagner's influence also extended beyond the realm of music to writers such as Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine. A French magazine named *The Revue Wagnérienne* was established in 1884 by the Wagner enthusiasts Édouard

Dujardin, Téodor de Wyzewa and Houston Stewart Chamberlain to explore Wagner's music in relation to the symbolism movement.

In response to France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) and the excessive popularity of foreign works in France, the Société National de Musique (SNM) was founded in 1871 by a group of French musicians aiming at promoting French music and nationalism. The members of this organization included those that were influenced by Wagnerian music, such as Camille Saint-Saëns (who initiated SNM), Gabriel Fauré, César Franck, Ernest Guiraud, Jules Massenet and many others. The society became popular immediately and attracted more members later. Between 1880 and 1900, the SNM hosted several important premieres of French music. Among them were works of Fauré, Vincent d'Indy, Ernest Chausson and Cécile Chaminade, to name a few. Claude Debussy also sent his works to the SNM frequently, for exemple *Les Ariette oubliées* (1889), *le Quatuor à cordes* (1893), and the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un Faune* (1894).

The SNM no doubt contributed to the rise of French chamber and symphonic repertoires during the Belle Epoque. The works performed in its premieres became popular with the profession and the general public, therefore witnessing and developing a diverse and unique French style instrumental music. Moreover, it contributed to the evolution of the French musical milieu by encouraging musicians to take control of their own destinies and to affirm French nationalism by supporting individual musicians during the late/post romanticism period. Although the SNM was considered conservative after d'Indy was appointed the secretary in 1885, it led to the founding of a rival organization, the Société Musicale Indépendante (SMI), in 1910 by Maurice Ravel.

The SNM had its indispensable impact in exploring and defending the exploration of French musical creation.

## Women and the Musical Canon

This section will briefly introduce the challenges that are discussed in *Gender and The Musical Canon* by Marcia J. Citron, which offered a comprehensive view of the difficult situations that women composers faced in the 19th century within the patriarchal music canon. As what is already presented in the Introduction, the biased social and philosophical perspectives on female's domestic role and defective creativity led to an authorship anxiety that was common among women, thus limiting the appearance of great female composers. Women composers faced ongoing conflict between their self-identity and the roles imposed upon them by patriarchal societal norms. This struggle was compounded by a number of deciding factors that were deemed critical in evaluating a work within the musical canon. These factors include the difficulties associated with publication and performance, which also manifested the notion of public ties with men and private ties with women. In addition, women faced obstacles in gaining successful careers due to intermittence or late-starts, as well as gendered musical forms and criteria. These factors should all be taken into account when considering the difficulties that were presented in women composers' careers.

Before each individual factor is presented in the following pages, it is important to understand the nature of the canon. "Canons embody the value systems of a dominant cultural group that is creating or perpetuating the repertoire, although it may be

encoding values from some larger, more powerful group. Thus canons arise in a multi-cultural society of disparate power structures, where canons themselves provide a 'means' by which culture validates social power" (Citron 2000). Canons reflect the ideologies of a dominant cultural group, specifically white men from the middle and upper class for most of history. Citron also suggests that the process of serialized affirmation and perpetuation of ideologies of the privileged group indicates that canons tend to resist change. The powerfulness and the stability of an establishing canon diminishes the diversity and the value of the works from a marginalized group.

Publication has been the principal means of circulation in Western music, therefore considered as a commonly desired goal of the professional composers. Yet women had much fewer pieces published than men in the history of music because they were not expected to publish. Publication means to be exposed to the public, whereas women were anticipated in the private spaces. Citron pointed out three main reasons why publication has been so important and desired by the composers. First of all, publication enabled the piece of music to become accessible to a greater number of people than simple manuscript distribution. Moreover, it has been "closely tied to other elements of canonic process, including public performance, reviews, and historical retention" (Citron 2000, 109). "A published piece of music is a document, a physical object. It can be held, referred to, analyzed, and reproduced visually in an exact form" (109). In addition, publication offers the potential for permanence and for broad recognition, which means that the unpublished works were left out in the historical evaluation that were dependent on physical material sources. It is important to

acknowledge the role of publishers in reinforcing the academy's concept of canon as well. Publishers tended to prioritize works that had the potential to generate profits, which often aligned with the established canon and the preference of the academy. Publication means exposure to the public. For a woman, even if her works were allowed to be published, publication has the potential to expose her self-identity crisis. She might be considered as a lesser woman in this domain of men, therefore less confident about herself. The fear and the concern of taking over a contradictory space that implicates permanence might be uncomfortable for women in the 19th century. Under the influence of the patriarchal ideologies, women were more used to being the "outsiders" rather than being exposed in a centered position as a composer. However, many composers (e.g. Felix Mendelssohn's letter to her sister), aligned with the musical canon, considered publishing to be a crucial achievement that differentiate being a professional and merely creating works. Thus publication, as one necessary step to gain recognition, was one of the main challenges that hinder success for women composers.

Similarly, women in the 19th century faced significant barriers in having their works performed in public spaces such as concert halls due to the societal belief that women's public exposure was inappropriate. While public performance spaces were reserved for professionals, women composers, who were supposed to remain in their private world, were limited to presenting their works in small venues such as salons. The salon became a prominent way for women to exhibit their musical talent in the nineteenth century Paris. "Many salons exuded a feminine tone, arguably a general





## programmation des concerts

### Lundi 20 février

#### 12 h 45 CNSMDP - Espace Interdisciplinaire Maurice-Fleuret

*En différé sur France-Musique*

PIANO : LES ÉLÈVES CÉLÈBRES DU CONSERVATOIRE

Claude Debussy : *Images* (livre I)

Maurice Ravel : *Gaspard de la nuit*

Isaac Albeniz : *Iberia* (extraits)

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#### 13 h 45 CNSMDP - Salle d'orgue

*En direct sur France-Musique*

LES VENTS AU CONSERVATOIRE : UNE TRADITION RÉVOLUTIONNAIRE

Anton Reicha : *Quintette à vent* op. 88 n° 2

François Devienne : *Sonate n° 1* pour clarinette et piano

Joseph-François Garnier : *Quintette* pour hautbois concertant et quatuor à cordes

Xavier Darasse : *Antagonisme IV* pour quintette de cuivres

#### 20 h 30 CNSMDP - Salle d'orgue

DU CONCOURS AU CONCERT

Claude Debussy : *1<sup>re</sup> Rapsodie* pour clarinette et piano

Gabriel Fauré : *Thème et variations* op. 73 pour piano

Olivier Messiaen : *Thème et variations* pour violon et piano

Gabriel Fauré : *Impromptu* pour harpe

Gabriel Fauré : *Petite pièce* pour violon et piano

André Jolivet : *Le Chant de Linos* pour flûte et piano

### Mardi 21 février

#### 12 h 45 CNSMDP - Espace Interdisciplinaire Maurice-Fleuret

LA SONATE ROMANTIQUE POUR PIANO D'ADAM A MARMONTEL

*En différé sur France-Musique*

Louis Adam : *sonate* op. 8 n° 2

Antonin Marmontel : *sonate* op. 8

Antonin Marmontel : *sonate* op. 13

#### 13 h 45 CNSMDP - Salle d'orgue

*En direct sur France-Musique*

LES CORDES DU CONSERVATOIRE

Louis Dupont : *Nocturne* op. 70 n° 3 (3<sup>e</sup> livre)

Juan Crisostomo Arriaga : *Quatuor à cordes* n° 3

Gabriel Fauré : *Trio avec piano*

#### 20 h 30 Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique

CONCERT PRIVÉ MÉCÉNAT MUSICAL SOCIÉTÉ GÉNÉRALE

Gabriel Fauré : *Hymne à Apollon* op. 63 bis pour mezzo, flûte et deux clarinettes

César Franck : *Sonate en la majeur* pour violon et piano

Claude Debussy : *Chansons de Bilitis* (poèmes de Pierre Louÿs pour récitante, deux flûtes, deux harpes et célesta)

Maurice Ravel : *Quatuor en Fa*

Gabriel Fauré : *La bonne Chanson* (version pour mezzo, quintette à cordes et piano)

### Mercredi 22 février

#### 12 h 45 CNSMDP - Espace Interdisciplinaire Maurice-Fleuret

*En différé sur France-Musique*

UN RETOUR AUX ANCIENS : LA SUITE FRANÇAISE

Jules Massenet : *Rigaudon*

Jules Massenet : *Sarabande espagnole*

Victor-Alphonse Duvernoy : *deuxième fantaisie élégante*

Louis-Albert Bourgault-Ducoudray : *Gavotte*

Joseph-Louis Diemer : *Pièce en forme de menuet*

Maurice Emmanuel : *Sonatine n° 5*

Vincent D'Indy : *Sarabande*

Paul Dukas : *Thème et variations*

#### 20 h 30 Conservatoire National Supérieur d'Art Dramatique

UN CONCERT D'ÉPOQUE (8 DÉCEMBRE 1857)

Jules Cohen : *Aubade* pour flûte, hautbois, clarinette, basson, trompette, cornet, deux cors, trombone, violoncelle, contrebasse et harpe

Giuseppe Verdi : extrait d'*Ernani*

Sigismond Thalberg : *Duo sur des motifs de Norma* pour deux pianos

Giacomo Meyerbeer : extrait de *Robert le diable*

Delphin Alard : *Fantaisie sur la muette de Portici* pour violon et piano

Luigi Venzano : *Valse*

M<sup>me</sup> Emile de Girardin : *Lady Tartufe* (acte IV, sc. 9)

Giacomo Rossini : extrait du *Barbier de Séville*

Giacomo Meyerbeer : extrait des *Huguenots*

### Jeudi 23 février

#### 12 h 45 CNSMDP - Espace Interdisciplinaire Maurice-Fleuret

*En direct sur France-Musique*

LE PIANO EXOTIQUE

Hector Berlioz : *La fuite en Égypte* pour 2 pianos

Félicien David : *Brise d'Orient*

Antonin Marmontel : *Nuits d'Asie*

Darius Milhaud : *Saudades do Brazil* (extraits)

Joseph-Louis Diemer : *Deux orientales*

Camille Saint-Saëns : *Suite algérienne* op. 60 (transcription de Fauré) pour 4 mains

Figure 4. Concert Programs at the Paris Conservatory in the 19th century (Hondré 1995).

During this period, even if women composers' works were published and performed, they were often reviewed through the lens of "feminine music", which emerged from the patriarchal ideology of the 19th century. Critics developed gendered music aesthetics that were based on traits associated with femininity and masculinity. An article titled "A Corollary to the Question: Sexual Aesthetics in Music Criticism" featured in the anthology of *Women in Music* summarized this prevalent view:

*Feminine music, which women were expected to cultivate exclusively, was by definition graceful and delicate, full of melody, and restricted to the smaller forms of songs and piano music. Masculine music, by contrast, was powerful in effect and intellectually rigorous in harmony, counterpoint, and other structural logic. Symphonies, operas, and similarly large-scaled works lay in the realm of masculine music, and as women in increasing numbers came to write in large forms they were decried as venturing beyond their proper sphere* (Neuls-Bates 1996).

The sonata form, one of the most important musical forms since the mid-18th century, has been associated with societal notions of masculinity and femininity as well. The German composer and music theorist, Adolph Bernhard Marx (1795-1866), was the first to propose a gendered metaphor in the sonata form. Later musicologists, such as Hugo Riemann (Germany, 1849-1919) and Vincent D'Indy (French, 1851-1931), were influenced by Marx's theories and regarded gender coding in sonata form seriously. They concluded that the first theme, dominant and characteristic, represents the masculine principle, while the second theme lyrical, gentle and dependent on the first

theme, represents the feminine principle. D'Indy, in his analysis of the subordinate position of the second theme, provided even more detailed illustrations reflecting the natural and social laws that controlled women in all aspects (complete quotation to be found on Citron p136): "It is as if, after the active battle of the development, the being (*l'être*) of gentleness and weakness has to submit, whether by violence or by persuasion, to the conquest of the being of force and power" (136). Once again, it is important to acknowledge that these gendered music theories were inseparable from their contemporary social context. However, they also illustrate how the gender biases were deeply embedded in society, spanning across sociological, philosophical and musical perspectives.

The gender aesthetics in music put women composers in a dilemma. Their music tended to be criticized in both ways: either too "feminine" or merely an imitation of male composers. As a result, many women composers chose to publish or perform their own works using a pseudonym. Yet it was still uncomfortable for women composers themselves to either identify with male colleagues or to stand out with their female identity. To answer the question of whether there is a women's style, Citron observed that it is extremely difficult to discern whether a work is composed by a woman or a man by style because many other factors including socialization, subject position, and ideology all had an impact on gender identification. Moreover, the compositional technique and the chords are not inherently gendered either.

Nevertheless, Citron suggested that a gendered style adapted to cultural factors is plausible. Within this condition, she mentioned that the tendencies of women's

compositions include: emphasizing extensive development of a limited amount of material, compositional flexibility, a fascination with process as opposed to an adherence to set structures or techniques, and a lyricism characterized by long lines and connectedness, highlighting communication over abstraction, substance over innovation.

### **Life of Mel Bonis**

Mélanie Bonis, known as Mel Bonis, was born on January 21, 1858, into a traditional Catholic bourgeois family in Paris. In comparison to most women of her time, Bonis was privileged to have received professional musical education at the Paris Conservatory, which was considered a necessary prerequisite for becoming a professional composer during that era. She was also fortunate to have a wealthy husband who, despite having little in common with her, ensured that they were free from financial constraints. In addition, Bonis had friends who supported her compositions throughout her life, including her cooperation partner and lover Amédée Hettich. Despite their relationship having its ups and downs, he encouraged and provided her with the support she needed to continue composing. During Bonis's lifetime, she composed over 300 pieces, covering a wide range of genres, from chamber music, choral music, piano solo and four hands, organ pieces, and mélodies to larger works for orchestra. Her performed pieces include Piano and String Quartet in B-flat minor, the piano volume Femmes de légende, The Suite in the Form of Valses, Suite en trio for flute, violin and piano, the Flute Sonata, and many others during and after her lifetime. However, like

most of the other marginalized female composers, Mel Bonis remains relatively unknown to the public today.

### **Childhood and the Paris Conservatory**

Growing up in a traditional Catholic bourgeois family, Bonis was raised with strict expectations regarding her religious education. From a very young age, she was taught to think and act in accordance with the norms of Catholic morality. As a result, Bonis developed a close connection with her religion, which continued to play an essential role throughout her life. The influence of Catholicism is reflected in her passion for music, particularly her interest in the organ, and in her devout attitude towards art in general. In her personal reflections, which were later published by her daughter Jeanne Brochot as an autobiographical book called “Souvenirs et réflexions”, Bonis described music as a divine way of approaching God and an elusive beauty inspired by religion. The book also contains childhood anecdotes that reveal the young Bonis’s insight about the world around her. At the age of 6, Bonis was already experiencing the isolation and despair that comes from feeling unable to share one’s own suffering with others. She was undoubtedly a clever and sensitive child who had a habit of deep thinking, but also displayed the mischievous nature typical of children.

Although nobody in the Bonis family had musical training or had an interest in music, they owned a piano as a symbol of their wealth and social status, as was common among bourgeois families at the time. This gave Bonis the opportunity to explore music on her own. She quickly developed an interest in the piano and began

playing songs she learned at school, as well as improvising her own music to perform for family and friends. Her musical talent was eventually discovered by Mr. Maury, a cornet professor at the Paris Conservatory who was also a friend of the family. When Bonis turned 18, Maury introduced her to his colleague César Franck. Aligning with the prevalent bourgeois belief at the time, Bonis's parents expected their daughter's musical education to be a valuable asset for her future marriage prospects. Therefore, they agreed to enroll her in the Paris Conservatory.

In 1876, at the age of 18, Mel Bonis was accepted into the harmony and piano accompaniment classes and became one of the first four students (the other three were Eugène Piffaretti, Paul-Marie Jeannin and Claude Debussy) of Ernest Guiraud, who had just been appointed the professor of composition. At the same time, she continued to take private piano and composition classes (cours d'écriture) with a professor called Frumence. In 1877, Bonis won first place in Guiraud's harmony and accompaniment class. Later in 1878, she joined Auguste Bazille's piano accompaniment class, César Frank's organ class meanwhile continued in Guiraud's harmony class. Her classmates at this time included those who became famous composers later, such as Claude Debussy, Gabriel Pierné and Ernest Chausson.

The application of the pedagogies in the classes remain unknown today due to insufficient documents. But inferring from the records of the conservatory competitions and the comments of the professors, Bonis was a

CLASSES DES ÉLÈVES FEMMES.				
PROFESSEURS.				
I. Guiraud (1878-1880). — Ch. Lempereur (1880-1891). — Chapuis (1891-19...).				
II. Duvernoy (II.) (1878-1880). — Barthe (1881-1898). — S. Roussau (1898-19...).				
RÉCOMPENSES DÉCERNÉES AUX CONCOURS ANNUELS.				
PREMIERS PRIX.	SECONDS PRIX.	1 <sup>re</sup> ACCESSITS.	2 <sup>e</sup> ACCESSITS.	
1879. Sorbier.	Bonis.	#	Christie.	Lefrançois.
1880. Bonis.	Christie.	Lefrançois.	#	#
1881. Christie.	Lefrançois.	Vernant.	Baudouin.	#
1882. Lange.	Vernant.	#	Gauthier.	#

Figure 5. Record showing Bonis gaining the first prize in Guiraud's class in 1880. (Gallica, 1863).

talented and studious student with a lively personality. Her musical abilities were recognized early on, as she received the second prize in harmony in 1879, followed by the first prize in harmony in June 1880, the only one awarded that year among the five classes. Ernest Guiraud, who held Bonis in high esteem, then advanced her to the compositional class and intended to present her for the Prix de Rome the following year. The compositional class presumably taught counterpoint (The study of counterpoint is based on progressive exercises, including successive study of five genres: counterpoint from two to eight voices, double choir, double counterpoint, and the study of imitations and canons), fugue and composition techniques (Jardin 2020, 149). Later in 1878, instrumentation was added into the class content. Guiraud lauded Bonis for her excellent musical “taste” and “charming musical organization.” In one of his letters, we found that Guiraud was fond of his student and formed an intimate relationship with Bonis:

*...Comme je serais embarrassé d'avoir un jour à vous gronder comme professeur si vous n'étiez pas de celles auxquelles on n'a jamais que des éloges à faire! Encore merci. Je vous envoie tous mes vœux pour une bonne et heureuse année; ayez vos deux premiers prix aussi beaux que tout le monde y compte, et croyez, chère Mademoiselle, à la vive affection de votre tout dévoué professeur et ami, Ernest Guiraud (Géliot 2009, 35).*

Théodore Dubois, the harmony professor, commended Bonis for her exceptional harmonic instinct:



*Faites une belle basse, bien écrite, simple et intéressante, sans rien tourmenter ni tortiller, et un joli chant, élégant, gracieux, aimable. Suivez bien votre instinct harmonique, il est bon. Ne perdez pas dans des recherches inutiles cet avantage que vous avez* (Jardin 2020, 145).

(Make a beautiful bass, well-written, simple and interesting, without twisting or torturing anything, and a beautiful melody, elegant, gracious, amiable. Follow your harmonic instinct well, it is good. Do not lose this advantage that you have in unnecessary research.)

Despite the compliments Bonis received, her professors also recognized her difficulties with performance anxiety. Bonis participated in the piano accompaniment competition in 1880 and 1881, but failed to receive any prizes. In one comment, her professor Auguste Bazille noted: “Très douée. Bonne musicienne. Jolie harmonie. Lit bien l’orchestre. Malheureusement a trop peur” (Gélot 2009, 34). This “fright” was mentioned twice, highlighting the extent of her anxiety that hindered her from showing her talent. Bonis was not able to overcome the stage fright that “paralyzes” her, which perhaps explains why her talent as an accompanist was not officially recognized by a prize from the Conservatory. Soon she was forced to resign from the institution, depriving her of the opportunity to conquer her fears or compete for a prize.

ACCOMPAGNEMENT AU PIANO. — LAURÉATS.					549
ÉLÈVES FEMMES.					
PREMIERS PRIX.	SECONDS PRIX.	1 <sup>er</sup> ACCESSITS.	2 <sup>e</sup> ACCESSITS.		
1879. Serhier.	Bonis.	Vacher-Gros.	#	#	
1880. #	Christien.	Lefrançois.	#	#	
1881. Lefrançois.	#	Prat.	#	Lange.	
1882. Guistrange.	Christien.	Lange.	Prat.	#	Verusut.
1883. Gauthier.	#	#	#	Jager.	

Figure 6. Record showing Bonis won the second prize in piano accompaniment competition in 1879. (Gallica, 1863).

As Bonis entered the Conservatory at a relatively late age and was forced to withdraw in 1881, her shortened curriculum did not allow her to complete the full

program. Due to her short stay in the composition class, Bonis did not have the opportunity to begin studying orchestration, though she managed to learn some rudiments from her classmates during her spare time. Demanding towards herself and aware of not having received a complete education, Bonis completed her studies in orchestration with Charles Koechlin late in 1908 and 1909. Nevertheless, Bonis's rapid progress during her five years in the Conservatory was recognized by her professors. She finished learning counterpoint in a few months and moved on to composition of fugues, which she achieved with satisfying results. Her composition assignments, including "Romance sans Parole" (it was associated with the first piece "*Impromptu*" that Bonis published in 1881) and "morceau de piano" for the "examen semestriel" in 1881, received affirmation from her professors.

	Harmonie et accompagnement femmes (Ernest Guiraud)	Accompagnement au piano (Auguste Bazille)	Composition musicale (Ernest Guiraud)
Décembre 1876	Admission dans la classe (décision du directeur)		
Janvier 1877	Examen semestriel		
Juin 1877	Examen semestriel		
Janvier 1878	Examen semestriel		
Juin 1878	Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (1 <sup>er</sup> accessit)		
Octobre 1878	Changement de dénomination : harmonie femmes	Admission dans la classe	
Janvier 1879	Examen semestriel	Examen semestriel	
Juin 1879	Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (2 <sup>nd</sup> prix)	Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (2 <sup>nd</sup> prix)	
Janvier 1880	Examen semestriel	Examen semestriel	
Juin 1880	Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (1 <sup>er</sup> prix)	Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (non récompensée)	
Décembre 1880			Admission dans la classe
Janvier 1881		Examen semestriel	Examen semestriel
Juin 1881		Examen semestriel ; admise à concourir pour les prix (non récompensée)	Examen semestriel

Reconstitution du cursus de Mélanie Bonis<sup>1</sup>

Figure 7. Reconstitution of Mélanie Bonis's curriculum (Jardin 2020, 133).

## A Predestined Romanticism and its Musical Inspiration

At the Paris Conservatory, Mel Bonis met an important man in her life: Amédée Landély Hettich, a vocal student and a poet who later became a musical critic and journalist for *L'Art Musical*, as well as a vocal professor at the Paris Conservatory. Bonis most likely came to the singing class to play piano accompaniment, giving the two a chance to work together and get to know each other. They started their collaboration at this time, and their partnership lasted several decades—even after they each got married. They worked together not only on performing but also on improvising and composing some short pieces. Hettich was undoubtedly the first and most persistent supporter of Bonis as a composer throughout her life. In her collection of reflections, Bonis admitted that her desire to compose was somehow related to Hettich: “Je cherchais à le séduire par la musique” (I tried to seduce him by music). With Hettich’s help, Bonis restarted composing and published more pieces in the later stage of her life.

The year 1881 marked the birth of the name “Mel Bonis” and her entry into the world of professional composition. Bonis chose to publish under this pseudonym presumably because she had heard that a woman’s works would never be taken seriously. “Mel Bonis”, a name without any obvious gender connotation, indicated Bonis’s sincere desire to be seen as a professional composer. She began to write her own music and collaborate more frequently with Hettich under this new name. The deep emotions between them were transformed into a constant source of inspiration for their music. Bonis often composed mélodies based on Hettich’s poems, for example

“Villanelle” (1884) and “Sur la plage”(1884), are among their early collaborations.

Hettich wrote in *L’Art Musical* (October 12, 1877) as a testament to his budding emotion:

*Soudain, les accords d’un piano montèrent à moi. C’était un prélude lent, triste, comme l’écho d’une plainte. Une voix répondit à cet écho, une voix de femme. Cette voix n’avait d’autre puissance que son expression, d’autre expression que sa mélancolie...Jusqu’à présent, personne ne m’avait dit que la musique était un langage; jamais personne n’avait parlé ce langage devant moi...La voix chantait toujours. Je n’aurais pu déterminer les causes de mon émotion; cependant, j’étais ému. Il y avait dans mon âme je ne sais quels frémissements nouveaux. Mon imagination trahissait les ardeurs dont je n’étais plus maître: la musique me faisait homme. Dès ce jour, je me passionnais pour elle* (Géliot 2009, 39).

(Suddenly, the chords of a piano rose up to me. It was a slow, sad prelude, like the echo of a lament. A voice responded to this echo, a woman's voice. This voice had no other power than its expression, no other expression than its melancholy...Until now, no one had told me that music was a language; no one had ever spoken this language in front of me...The voice kept singing. I could not determine the causes of my emotion; however, I was moved. There were in my soul certain new tremors. My imagination betrayed the passions of which I was no longer master: music made me a man. From that day on, I was passionate about her.)

This excerpt not only provides a glimpse of Bonis’s charisma as a female musician, as seen from a male perspective in the conservatory, but also reveals her melancholic and sentimental nature (also seen in the “Souvenirs et Réflexions”) that was displayed through her music, thereby establishing a unique tone of her compositions.

### **A Forced Marriage, *Mme Domange***

However, for a woman pursuing a career in music, especially in music, in the late 19th century, societal and familial restrictions were a constant source of frustration, as previously discussed in this essay. For Mel Bonis, she faced direct opposition from her own family: Her parents refused to accept music as a viable career choice and immediately opposed her marriage to Hettich. To prevent Bonis from pursuing a career in composition and the possibility of being united with Hettich, they forced her to quit the conservatory. Her chances of being presented to the Prix de Rome were thus failed, and her access to music became restricted. Despite this, Bonis's desire to compose and her passion for music persisted, although she did not resume composing until she became a mother of her two children many years later.

Bonis was thrown into despair as she faced a dilemma that would torment her for the rest of her life. On one hand, she had her beloved family and their moral values, and on the other hand, she was torn by her love for a forbidden desire. As a devout Catholic, Bonis had been brought up to believe that it was God's will for her to obey her parents. In 1883, her parents arranged a marriage for her with a man named Albert Domange, who was twenty-two years her senior, widowed twice, and already a father of five sons. Despite her reluctance, her parents were satisfied with the match as Mr. Domange was a successful businessman. Bonis had no choice but to marry him and became Madame Domange.

Even though Mr. Albert shared no spiritual ideals or musical interest with Bonis, she still managed to fulfill her duties as Madame Domange and devoted herself to the

new family. She traveled with her husband and held salons at their home to assist his business. She developed and maintained a good relationship with Mr. Domange's children. She gave birth to three children: Pierre, Jeanne and Edouard. Meanwhile, Bonis managed to stay connected to the music world by reading journals such as "*L'Art Musical*", attending concerts, and staying in touch with her musician friends at the Conservatory, including her best friend Jeanne Monchablon. She also wrote several melodies and songs (e.g. "Étoiles", "Viens") for her children, but none of them could be considered serious compositions. Unfortunately, Bonis's family circle showed no interest in her music, but they did not prevent her from composing either. At the time, Bonis needed encouragement to pursue her passion.

### **A Return to Composition**

As mentioned previously, Hettich played a crucial role in Mel Bonis's return to composing. Years after her marriage, they reconnected in the musical world, and Hettich consistently encouraged her to compose, introducing her to her future publisher Alphonse Leduc. They resumed their collaboration, with Bonis playing piano accompaniment for Hettich's students in singing classes and composing music based on his poems. One particular poem, "Elève-toi, mon âme"(1894), expressed the passionate emotions between the two. Collaborations during this period include "Noël pastoral" (1892), "Le Ruisseau" (1894), "Prière de Noël"(1899), "L'Oiseau bleu"(1907), and many others.

However, Bonis realized that there was no way to avoid rekindling their emotional connection once they started collaborating again, which put her once more in the

struggle between her feelings and her religious morality. Despite her efforts to resist Hettich's advances for years, she eventually gave in to temptation and secretly gave birth to their child, Madeleine, in Switzerland in 1899. Unfortunately, due to the societal norms of the time, Bonis was unable to legally recognize Madeleine as her child, which was a source of great shame for her throughout her life. Following this difficult period, Bonis suffered from depression and turned to prayers and confessions as a way of coping with her emotions and constant feelings of guilt. She also used music composition as a means of self-expression and to channel her emotions.

Bonis began to put all her effort into composition and devoted herself to promoting her works. Her first piano quartet in B flat major, which took her five years to complete (1900-1905), was a particular pride for her and received praise from Camille Saint-Saëns, as recalled by Bonis's descendants the impression of Saint-Saëns after a concert:

*Après le concert privé, en descendant les marches de l'escalier, le grand musicien remercia Jean Gounod de lui avoir fait faire la connaissance de Madame Mel Bonis et ajouta d'un ton de surprise extrême: "Je n'aurais jamais cru qu'une femme fût capable d'écrire cela. Elle connaît toutes les roueries du métier (Géliot 2009, 182).*

(After the concert, while descending the stairs, the great musician thanked Jean Gounod for introducing him to Madame Mel Bonis and added in a tone of extreme surprise: "I never would have believed that a woman could write this. She knew all the tricks of the profession.)

During this period (1900-1914), Bonis was highly productive, not only focusing on composing piano pieces such as “Carillon mystique”, “Barcarolle-étude” and “Ballade”, but also writing religious music, chamber music, and pieces for organ and chorus. Most of the piano works in her set “Femmes de légende”, which will be analyzed later in this project, were also composed during this time (1897-1913). In the same year that



Figure 7. Diploma of active member of the SCM: Mel Bonis (Bruzan mediabase).

Madelaine was born, Bonis joined “Société des Compositeurs” (SCM), an organization founded in 1862 by the pianist Charles Deliou that focused on instrumental music compositions. One of the objectives of the SCM was to promote the works of member composers who faced difficulties with recognition and

professionalization. Over the fifty years of the SCM

operation, there were roughly 400 members, including 26 female composers such as Juliette Toutain and Alice Sauvrezis. More famous composers, such as Camille Saint-Saëns, César Franck, and Jules Massenet, were also members (Schnapper, n.d.). Bonis was an active member from 1899 to 1911 and won the SCM’s composition competition twice. In 1910, she became secretary of the SCM, which was a remarkable achievement for a female musician at the time. Her job included working with famous musicians in Paris including Camille Saint-Saëns and Gabriel Fauré. Although Bonis avoided meeting Hettich privately during this time and only contacted him for news of their daughter, they still met at the publishing house. Hettich supported Bonis



throughout the entire period, from composing to the performance of her works.

According to records from the Mel Bonis Association, there were 59 public concerts held during Bonis's lifetime that featured her works (Association Mel Bonis, n.d.). The majority of these concerts took place in Paris between 1900 and 1914 at venues such as Salle Pleyel, Grand Palais, and Théâtre du Châtelet.

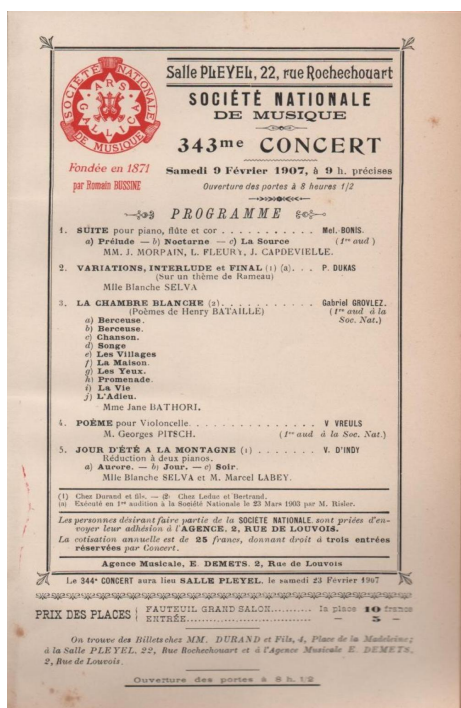


Figure 8. Concert at Salle Pleyel. February 9, 1907. Association Mel Bonis. <https://www.mel-bonis.com/EN/Photos/>



Figure 9. Concerts Colonne. January 30, 1910. Association Mel Bonis. <https://www.mel-bonis.com/EN/Photos/>

## Decline during and after the War

The onset of World War I marked a decline in Bonis's energy for composition. Her two sons, Pierre and Edouard, left for war and were later captured and imprisoned. Additionally, the foster parents of Madeleine passed away, which added her concerns about the changes in her family. She had no choice but to introduce Madeleine as a war

orphan to the family without revealing the truth about her birth. While worrying about her two sons day and night, she not only prayed for them more frequently, but also made efforts to care for war orphans and victims. In 1918, her husband, Albert Domange passed away, but the return of her son Edouard was a great relief for her. The war had a profound impact on the entire family, and Bonis displayed signs of depression. Consequently, she shifted her focus more towards her family rather than composition. She organized family regular reunions named “Petits Samedis” at Sarcelles or Étretat to bring the extended family members closer together. The reunion unfortunately resulted in a romance between Edouard and Madeleine. It was only when the two children wanted to get married that Bonis was compelled to reveal the truth to Madeleine, that she was her illegitimate child with Hettich. The revelation was emotionally overwhelming for both Madeleine and Bonis, yet the secret still had to be kept from the rest of the family.

In 1922, after recovering from the misfortunes of the war and the changes of her family, Bonis began composing again, although at a much slower pace. She focused more on organ and choral music in her later years. She reconnected with her editor Max Eschig to promote her works. Her pedagogical collection “Album pour les tout-petits” was a successful seller. Despite being 64 years old, Bonis remained enthusiastic about what was happening in the musical milieu. The start of the 20th century witnessed a decline in romantic music and the emergence of various genres such as neoclassical, minimalism and serialism. Bonis was well aware of these transformations and concerned about these new genres as a degeneration of music (see her comments on

page 46). Although Bonis was not in very good health at the time, she still managed to attend concerts and met with her musician friends regularly. Therefore, she was also aware of the changes and the exotic musical influences prevailing at the time. Her later works, for example “Boston Valse” and the scherzo of the second quartet, showed the influence of jazz and ragtime. However, as Bonis decided that the materialistic music that was favored by the contemporary audience was a violation against the beauty and the virtue of music, her compositional style mostly remained relatively traditional, which was considered outdated and made it difficult to get her compositions published.

In 1931, Bonis settled at Sarcelles due to her poor health conditions. Her family visited her often, including Madeleine, who despite the devastation brought by Bonis’s confession, remained in an even closer relationship with her mother. Bonis stayed in bed most of the time, but would compose for her grandchildren Huguette and Yvette and support their musical education.

On March 18, 1937, Bonis reunited with her beloved God in peace.

### Three Composition Periods of Mel Bonis

Period	Main Genre	Major Publisher	Works
1892-1900	Musique “de charme”/entertaining music: songs, melodies	Alphonse Leduc	“Le Ruisseau”; “Noël pastoral”; “Phoebée” etc.
1900-1914	Musique “savante”/professional classical music for the concert halls	Eugène Demets	“Suite flûte, violon, piano”; “Premier quatuor en si bémol” etc.
1922-1937	Musique “spirituelle”/spiritual and religious music; music for children; pedagogical music	Max Eschig	“Scènes enfantines”; “Cathédrale blessée” etc.

(Gélot 2009, 129).

## Bonis on Music

To better comprehend and analyze Bonis's specific works, it is essential to explore the connections between Mel Bonis's sensibility, personal distress and her sincere approach towards music. As a woman whose desires and emotions were yielded to her religious beliefs and an arranged marriage, Bonis suffered greatly from the conflict between her true self and the societal expectations placed upon her. When tormented by the temptation of forbidden love, the guilt of having an extramarital relationship and an illegitimate daughter and the need to deceive her family, she endured an immense misery and distress:

*Je suis l'inévitable, la grande amie que l'on reconnaît et redoute, l'ombre de toute humaine félicité, la cendre embrasée de toute flamme. Je suis sur la croix tachée de sang, dans l'âcre volupté du sacrifice. On me trouve partout où se leurre l'illusion issue du mensonge, comme aussi dans les nuages enveloppant les cimes glorieuses que la débilité de l'homme ne saurait atteindre. Je me penche sur les berceaux, je fleuris les tombes; j'effeuille les vaines ivresses, mais je sème dans les ruines. **Je suis la Douleur**, fille inséparable du puissant, magnifique, implacable amour (Géliot 2009, 120).*

(I am the inevitable, the great friend whom one recognizes and fears, the shadow of all human happiness, the smoldering ashes of every flame. I am on the blood-stained cross, in the acrid pleasure of sacrifice. I am found everywhere where the illusion born of lies is deceived, as well as the clouds enveloping the glorious crown that the weakness of man cannot reach. I lean over the cradles, I bloom among the tombs; I pluck the vain intoxication, but I sow in the ruins. I am Pain itself, the girl inseparable of powerful, magnificent, and implacable love.)

Bonis was also insightful on the subordinate position of women in relationships:

*Une jolie femme n'a pas besoin d'être intelligente, disent ces messieurs. En effet, pour ce que vous en faites, il suffit d'être pourvue de grâce et de passivité.*

*Seulement, pauvre créature, passé trente ans, vous serez mise au rebut (au vingtième siècle, ça pourrait bien aller jusqu'à quarante) (120).*

(A pretty woman doesn't need to be intelligent, say these gentlemen. Indeed, for what you use her for, it is enough to be endowed with grace and passivity. Only, poor creature, past thirty years old, you will be thrown away (in the 20th century, it could even go up to forty).)

The chapter called “La musique, les arts et les choses de l'esprit” in *Souvenirs et Réflexions* presents Bonis's perception on music in detail. For Bonis, music is a divine language that deeply resonates with her soul and her desires, and has the ability to convey the delicate sensations that cannot be fully expressed through words:

*Je voudrais décrire l'état de l'âme à la fois si angoissant, torturant et délicieux, où me plonge la musique-celle que j'aime-je devrais pouvoir le faire, j'ai tant éprouvé cette sensation aiguë jusqu'à la douleur, même tout enfant (je pourrais dire surtout étant enfant). C'était alors comme une agonie d'aspiration vers le bonheur, une tension de tout l'être sensible, cordial, vers une chose qui nous sourit et se dérobe à la fois (39 & 40).*

(I would like to describe the state of the soul that is at once so distressing, torturous, and delightful, into which music - the one I love - plunges me. I should be able to do so, as I have experienced this sharp sensation to the point of pain, even as a child (I could say especially as a child). It was then like an agony of aspiration towards happiness, a tension of the entire sensitive being, cordial, towards something that both smiles at us and eludes us at the same time.)

*La musique, ce langage divin, traduit toute beauté, toute vérité, toute ardeur.*

*L'objet de nos vœux éternels prend une forme; il nous tend les bras, et pourtant il*

*est loin, très loin et nous ne l'atteindrons pas. C'est comme le seuil d'un jardin de délices où tout est lumière et parfum, un lieu de repos où nous savons que nous ne rentrerons pas. Alors le cœur se serre, les yeux se voilent, et la prière jaillit, irrésistible élévation de Dieu, si près, si loin (40)!*

(Music, this divine language, expresses all beauty, all truth, all passion. The object of our eternal desires takes on a form; it reaches out to us, and yet it is far away, very far away, and we will not attain it. It is like the threshold of a garden of delights where everything is light and perfume, a place of rest where we know we will not return. Then the heart tightens, the eyes become misty, and the prayer bursts forth, an irresistible elevation to God, so close, so far away!)

This quote below, is specifically evident in showing what music means to Bonis:

*Je vis, mais ce n'est pas la vie totale. Je veux plus, je veux tout; je veux les âmes, je veux l'amour. La musique me parle de ce que je veux, elle ne me le donne pas. Elle avive mes désirs et me fait sentir l'inanité de tout ici-bas. Oh! Que les mots sont vides pour exprimer toutes ces choses!*

(I live, but it's not the full life. I want more, I want everything; I want souls, I want love. Music speaks to me of what I want, but doesn't give it to me. It intensifies my desires and makes me feel the futility of everything here on earth. Oh! How empty words are to express all of these things!)

Bonis's view on the divinity of music led her to believe that the beauty in music was bound by moral and objective truths, which allowed the listener to sense the soul. According to her, true composers interpret the mystery and create music that deeply resonates with the listeners. Therefore she was critical of new genres of music at the beginning of the twentieth century, including that of Debussy's, as she believed they either lacked soul or moral standards:

*En musique, l'harmonie correspond à la couleur en peinture, aux matériaux de construction en architecture. Un Debussy emploie les matériaux les plus précieux, des gemmes brillantes et pâles, mais ses constructions n'ont ni plan ni grandeur. C'est un délicieux illustrateur de petites choses courtes. Le musicien qui aura cette qualité de sensibilité avec de la grandeur d'âme, de l'ardeur et le génie de la composition sera très grand. Où est-il (Brochot 1974, chap.2)?*

(In music, harmony corresponds to color in painting, to building materials in architecture. Debussy employs the most precious materials, bright and pale gems, but his constructions have neither plan nor grandeur. He is a delightful illustrator of short little things. The musician who will have this quality of sensitivity with greatness of soul, ardor, and the genius of composition will be very great. Where is he?)

*A notre époque laïque, positiviste, féroce égoïste, la tendresse est bannie en musique mais on nous fera avaler des imitations de locomotive, de coups de pieds et des “Boléros” fumistes... Un simpliste critique musical déclare que le mot “règle” ne doit pas être prononcé, le “plaisir” de l'auditeur étant seul en question. Ce qui revient à dire qu'il n'y a pas de vérité objective. Introduisez ce nihilisme dans tous les domaines, en morale d'abord..., ce sera du joli (Géliot 2009, 204)!*

(In our secular, positivist, fiercely selfish era, tenderness is banned in music, but we are forced to swallow imitations of locomotives, kicks and the fake “Boléros”...A simplistic music critic declares that the word “rule” should not be mentioned, the “pleasure” of the listener is the only concern. This amounts to saying that there is no objective truth.)

### ***Femmes de légende***

Bonis was a composer who showed great passion and ambition in composing virtuosic piano works that were original or had either literal or poetic themes, and with bold forms. Her collection of *Femmes de Légende*, which comprises seven piano pieces, is a true reflection of this ambition. Inspired by prestigious women figures from mystical stories and famous works of fiction, Bonis gave each of her pieces a name associated with these women whose fates have become legendary. The seven women figures featured in *Femmes de légende* are “Phoebée” (1897) and “Omphale” (1910) from ancient Greek and Roman mythology, the biblical figure “Salomé” (date unknown), the arthurian legendary character “Viviane” (1909), “Desdemona” (1913) and “Ophélie” (date unknown) from Shakespeare’s *Othello* and *Hamlet*, and “Mélisande” (1898) from Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*. The seven pieces were initially published separately, later re-edited together in a collection and given the name “Femmes de légende” by Furore in 2004.

The debate between program music and absolute music was a prominent topic throughout the 19th century. Instrumental music that carries extra musical meaning based on literary ideas, legends, scenic descriptions or personal drama is categorized as program music. French composers such as Hector Berlioz with his *Symphonie Fantastique*, Claude Debussy and Camille Saint-Saëns were known for their programmatic works. On the other hand, absolute music is non-representational and is not explicitly about anything. Some of the French absolute music was represented by César Franck and Gabriel Fauré. Bonis’s *Femmes de légende* is programmatic and



symbolic since she gave the titles the names of legendary women figures, which implies themes in external relations to fictional ideas. The following sections of this project will examine the musical interpretations of “Mélisande”, “Viviane” and “Ophelia” in *Femmes de légende* (based on recordings by Maria Stembolskaya, 2010), exploring the possible connections between Mel Bonis’s personal experiences and the legendary figures that she chose to depict, through which we gain insight into how these connections might have shaped Bonis’s compositions.

### ***Mélisande***

Mel Bonis’s inspiration for *Mélisande* comes from the Belgian playwright and author Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas and Mélisande*. Although the play never achieved any great success until Claude Debussy’s opera *Pelléas and Mélisande* came out, it was popularly read and admired by literary elite and artists near the end of 19th century, when the symbolist movement was growing originally in France and across Europe. The play caught the interest of many contemporary composers, including Gabriel Fauré, Arnold Schoenberg, Jean Sibelius, and Mel Bonis too was one of them. Maeterlinck’s play premiered in 1893. She composed her piano piece *Mélisande* in 1898. With this being said, she was probably one of the first composers inspired by this play, apart from Fauré, who wrote incidental music for performances of the play in the same year as well.

However, unlike other composers whose music was based on the whole story, perhaps because of her female identity, Bonis allowed herself to focus uniquely on the

central female figure Mélisande. The tremendous overlap between Mélisande's fate and Bonis's real life story not only blurred the frontier between fiction and reality, but also hinted at an unbreakable truth: the lack of freedom for contemporary young women and the doomed fate for immoral relationships. Bonis must have sensed an intricate feeling and an extremely intense connection with Mélisande while seeing or reading the play, and it is almost impossible for us in the 21st century to experience the exact imposed limitations and inner mentality of a bourgeois woman over a hundred years ago.

Mélisande, an immature and innocent maiden, was not yet recovered from a previous trauma, was quickly forced to get married again with Golaud, who was a middle aged prince and had a son named Yniold with his previous wife. Bonis, at the age of 25, had an arranged marriage with Albert Domange, a rich businessman twenty-two years older than her and a widower with five children from his previous marriages. Both Mélisande and Bonis developed a forbidden secret love affair outside of their marriage. At the end of Maeterlinck's play, Mélisande dies after giving birth to an abnormally small girl whose father is unknown. In reality, Bonis had an adulterous child (a daughter, Madeleine) with her lover Hettich. It is almost impossible to regard this as merely a coincidence.

Considering that Maeterlinck's play is widely known for its symbolism, the fate of the characters represented the absolute interior truth that is more real than the illusory story. Maeterlinck may have had his inspiration from the medieval chivalric romance *Tristan and Isolde*, which illustrates similar themes of illicit love and its tragic consequences. Although the latter emphasizes the intense physical and emotional aspects of the relationship, Maeterlinck focused on the psychological and philosophical

side of the characters. By doing so he indicated a feasibility of employing stereotypical themes to resonate with his contemporary audience, such as Bonis.

The scholar Serena Keshvjee has written in her article *L'Art Inconscient: Imagining the Unconscious in Symbolist Art for the Théâtre d'Art*: "The goal of Maeterlinck's static theatre was to release the powerful forces of the unconscious mind...Maeterlinck's central pursuit throughout his literary career was to dislodge the senses of his readers and spectators by forcing them to pass from the rational mind into the irrational, unconscious mind." It is known that Mel Bonis was confused with her emotional feelings for Hettich and its consequent moral anguish. This emotional attachment resulted in an irrational extramarital relationship that went against the traditional moral conventions that Bonis, a conservative Christian, had long abided by. Married men who had an affair were forgiven, but for women they became ashamed and were never forgiven. She understood that developing a romantic relationship with Hettich would be immoral, and succeeded in resisting this irrational thought for years. However, in 1899, she finally ended this entanglement by giving birth to her child with Hettich. The detailed circumstances of the relationship development and what made Bonis change her mind are not known. What is known is that Bonis must have watched or read the play between 1893 (when the play premiered) and 1898 (when she composed *Mélisande*). Considering the striking overlap of Bonis's life experience and the story of *Mélisande*, and the fact that Bonis chose *Mélisande* as a protagonist of her piece, it can be surmised that Maeterlinck's play somehow affected Bonis, leading her to reexamine her feelings and her affair with Hettich. To what degree was Bonis influenced

by Maeterlinck's play? What was Bonis's interior reaction to the character Mélisande—a fictional version of herself? The only possible answers are to be traced in her music.

One is able to discover quickly that to represent Mélisande, Bonis's piece exhibits an intrinsic beauty of the character. The arpeggios that last almost throughout the whole piece (except in the ending Lento passage) produces a flowing quality associated with the water and the lightness of the character. As in the play, Mélisande often appears near the water or a fountain, especially in those important scenes: she was found by Golaud near a fountain; she lost her wedding ring in the fountain; and the multiple private meetings, including the last one, with Pélleas at the fountain. The piece is in a traditional minor key (B minor) which is associated with sorrowness. In the score, she marked "Andantino", "cédez", "a Tempo", "animato", "Stretto" and "Lento" to create frequent changes in the tempo. In addition, there is not a specific form or a music theme in the piece, which adds to the unpredictable and illusory atmosphere, just like Mélisande's character. At the beginning of the story when Mélisande was first discovered by the Golaud, she was amnesic due to a previous trauma and was scared by the presence of strangers. Similarly, Bonis's melody, with its inherent melancholy and softness, seems to emerge out of nowhere, and not knowing in which direction it should head next. The listeners become immediately intrigued by the mysteriousness and vulnerability of this figure.

The music does not showcase its intensity until measure 15, and later reaches a small climax at a B flat note in measure 19. This part reveals the innocent character of Mélisande by outlining a clear and repetitive melody in the right hand (as opposed to the

beginning where the left hand and the right hand are much more blended together) that finally resolves by reaching the B flat. The crescendo with the repetition of the melody parallels the sound of accelerating heartbeats, which suggest that Mélisande fell in love with Pélleas at first sight even though she was somehow unconscious of it. Though Maeterlinck did not directly depict Mélisande's first impression on Pelléas, her words concerning Pélleas's plan and her physical reaction had already betrayed her. Despite the fact that they have just been introduced to each other, Mélisande did not refuse Pélleas when he took her arm to go down a steep and dark path:

*Pélleas: Ce sont les autres phares...Entendez-vous la mer?...C'est le vent qui s'élève...Descendons par ici. Voulez-vous me donner la main?*

*Mélisande: Voyez, voyez; j'ai les mains pleines de feuillages...*

*Pélleas: Je vous soutiendrai par le bras, le chemin est escarpé et il y fait très sombre...Je pars peut-être demain...*

*Mélisande: Oh!...Pourquoi partez-vous?*

*(Ils sortent).* (Maeterlinck 1892, 18)

*[Pélleas: Those are the other lighthouses...Do you hear the sea?... The wind is rising. Let us go down this way. Give me your hand.*

*Mélisande: Look, look; my hands are full...*

*Pélleas: I will take your arm, the path is steep and it is very dark...I may be going away tomorrow...*

*Mélisande: Oh!...why are you going?*

*(They go out.)* (Winslow 2001, 35)

Compare this scene with when Golaud first found Mélisande in the forest:

*Mélisande: Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas!*

*Golaud: N'ayez pas peur...Je ne vous ferai pas... Oh! Vous êtes belle!*

*Mélisande: Ne me touchez pas! Ne me touchez pas, ou je me jette à l'eau!...*

*Golaud: Je ne vous touche pas...Voyez, je resterai ici, contre l'arbre. N'ayez pas peur. Quelqu'un vous a-t-il fait du mal? (Maeterlinck 1892, 8-9)*

*(Mélisande: Do not touch me. Do not touch me!*

*Golaud: Do not fear...I will not...oh, how beautiful you are!*

*Mélisande: Do not touch me! Do not touch me, or I will jump into the water!...*

*Golaud: I will not touch you, then...See, I will stay by this tree. Do not fear! Has any one harmed you?) (Winslow 2001, 21)*

Having just run away from a marriage, Mélisande was alert to the presence and body contact of men. However, this alertness never showed when she met Pélleas for the first time. The interaction between Mélisande and Pélleas seemed abnormally intimate. The portrayal of female characters as being driven by emotions is a common stereotype that has been perpetuated in literature. This stereotype often results in female characters' words and gestures being portrayed as manifestations of their interior world, which over controls their rationality. This ultimately reinforces the prejudice that women are driven by emotions (see page 7). However, Bonis offers a nuanced perspective on this stereotype by capturing exquisitely the intricate feminine sensibility that is possessed and resonant within herself as well, meanwhile elaborating on the internal reflection and the struggle caused by emotion and rationality that women undergo in disputing this characterization. This complexity is demonstrated in the changing mode in the subsequent music.

With the musical term “croisez” (which refers to an interwoven of different melodic lines or voices to create a rich texture) marked on the score, the music returns to a calmness followed by its enigmatic style with further complexity. This time the part

lasts longer with more expression of confusion and sorrow that may refer to Mélisande perplexed by the trapped life in the gloomy castle with her husband and her unconsciousness towards a forbidden emotion. As when she had a conversation with Golaud, she mentioned to him that she is ill, but she is uncertain of the exact cause of this unhappiness. Starting from measure 20 to measure 25, there is a dialogue between the left and the right hand. The left hand plays an ascending melody jumping from the bass clef to the Bb5 and Eb6 in treble clef, while the right hand descends in the parts that the left hand melody ascends, and maintains a sorrowful and implicit melody. The left hand seemed to question the impulse of feelings and the right hand seemed to symbolize self-restraint and its accompanied grief.



Figure 10. Measure 20-25. Bonis, Mel. *Mélisande*. Edited by Alphonse Leduc. Paris, 1925. IMSLP.

In this way, Bonis meticulously presents the physiological struggle that Mélisande, or rather herself, had to go through.

At measure 39, an innocent character appears again but with the use of a different material. This time the innocence develops to a childish and mischievous character which is indicated in the stretto passage. The use of stretto creates a sense of

excitement and intensity by accelerating the music. This passage suggests a strong association with the scene of Mélisande playing with her wedding ring when she was with Pélleas by a fountain. From measure 46 to measure 49, the repetition occurs three times, which seems to correspond to Mélisande playing with her ring three times while ignoring Pélleas's warning.



Figure 11. Repetition in measure 46-49, which is reminiscent of Mélisande playing her ring. Bonis, Mel. *Mélisande*. Edited by Alphonse Leduc. Paris, 1925. IMSLP.

The steep arpeggios from the highest B flat to the lowest C seem to vividly depict the ring falling into the water. “Mélisande, fearing, trembles over something stronger than herself. Necessity becomes one of the elements that help to form life and shape destiny”(Winslow 2001, “Introduction”). The falling of the ring hence becomes a necessity that shatters the facade of the seemingly peaceful marriage and clarifies the tragic fate of Mélisande. With the arpeggios descending to low register, the music signifies the grave moment of losing the ring.

The piece ends with a *lento* passage that is played with solemnity, introspection and peacefulness mixed with a sense of sadness, which differs from all of the previous characters. It is remarkable that Bonis placed this passage immediately after an



animated and mischievous passage to conclude this piece. It seems that Bonis decided that the falling of the ring is a crucial moment that implies the determination in Mélissande's attitude. The character seems to lose the ring carelessly under her innocent disguise, but considering that she played with the ring deliberately in front of Pélleas while the two were alone and ignored the concern of losing the ring, it seems that the character decided to follow her unconsciousness, letting her emotions overcontrol her reason. The ending of this piece could be interpreted as an illustration of how Mélissande, by yielding to the allure of her emotions, partially accepts the tragic fate that awaited her. Her vacillating mind was thus settled by the necessary accident. This could be viewed as Bonis's personal expression and celebration of pure love, which she may have yearned for but was unattainable in her own life.

Note how in Bonis's piece, the marginalized positions of male characters indicates Bonis's attitude towards Mélissande and this forbidden love affair. Mélissande, as portrayed by Bonis, embodies capricious beauty, yet her character is not reduced to a mere puppet of masculinity. Instead, she is only a victim of her uncontrollable fate after several failed attempts to resist it. This is evident in several scenes in the play. For instance, when Mélissande lied to Golaud about how she lost the ring, she was in direct disobedience of Pélleas's instruction to tell the truth. Another example is when she was alone with Pélleas in a cave, she demonstrated her reason and her independence: "Let me go, let me go! I prefer to walk alone..." (Winslow 2001, 54). Mélissande was well aware of the possibility of an immoral relationship being developed between herself and Pélleas. Her words demonstrate her independence, her resistance to the temptation

and her rational attempt to overcome the fate of falling in love with her husband's brother.

The structure of Bonis's *Mélisande* is noteworthy for its departure from the traditional feminine music theory, which often characterizes music composed by women as repetitive, lacking structure, and focusing on developing a single idea. Bonis's composition breaks away from these constructed stereotypes, featuring neither a conventional structure (such as ternary, strophic, or rondo form) nor a repetitive focus on a single idea. Instead, the piece showcases a rich harmonic progression and seamless transitions from one musical idea to another, presenting the uniqueness and unpredictableness of femininity. One can sense Bonis's delicate sensibility and her exceptional ability to transform her emotions and thoughts into music, breaking down the barriers of feminine music theories. The complexity and sophistication of her composition demonstrate her mastery of piano and her innovative approach to composing. Her rejection of a standard structure and unexpected progressions add to the depth and intrigue of the piece, elevating it above conventional expectations and showcasing the brilliance of her creativity.

## ***Viviane***

Viviane, known as the Lady of the Lake, is one of the fairies in Arthurian mythology. She is also known as Nimue, Ninianne, or Nivian in different versions of medieval literature associated with the legend of King Arthur. In the Lancelot-Grail cycle, a 13th century French Arthurian prose collection that tells chivalric romance stories, Viviane is the most prominent. She appears as a substitute mother and a protector of Lancelot. She is famous for her relationship with Merlin, who she uses for his magic secrets and knowledge. Viviane refuses to love Merlin back until he has taught her all his magic, after which she used her power to trap him in the forest. Eventually, this leads to Merlin's death or his indefinite sleep. To protect herself from men who may try to take her virginity, especially Merlin, who is known to do so with his female students, Viviane casts a spell on her body. Her action is portrayed as that of a Christian woman who refuses to be conquered by men. As the later part of the *Lancelot* suggests, Viviane is proud of the fact that Merlin never took her virginity, unlike his other female students such as Morgan.

Mel Bonis's *Viviane*, written and published in 1909, features an agile and vivacious character that distinguishes it from the more melancholic style found in other pieces in *Femmes de légende*. The piece follows a traditional ternary form (ABA), with two themes in part A and a contrasting lyrical, almost cadenza-like part B. Despite being in a minor key (E flat minor), *Viviane* has a witty and overall playful character in comparison to the other ones in the collection. The opening E flat major third chord and the syncopated rhythm immediately set the lively tone, while the sixteenth triplets

function as decorations to display the character's mischievous nature. Marked with "Assez vite" (quite fast), the piece begins with a lively tempo and places the accents on the second and third beat, which gives it a mazurka-like quality. Although the second theme is more lyrical, it conveys a sense of gracefulness rather than melancholy. It seems to add calmness among Viviane's playful nature, suggesting that she is not only mischievous but also capable of defending herself.

Entering at measure 74, part B of *Viviane* introduces a contrary lyrical and meditative quality that could be found in the other pieces in *Femmes de légende* as well. While Bonis portrays Viviane as a carefree and happy figure in part A, part B displays a more mysterious feature of the character. Marked with "A tempo" at multiple measures, the tempo generally slows down, allowing for imaginative and meditative space. The disappearance of the "mazurka theme" seems to suggest Viviane retreats and disappears into the forest from time to time. However, she makes sudden comebacks that alternate with the meditative parts, for example, at measure 93 and measure 136, with their witty and light character. The long, singing phrases that alternate with the appearance of Viviane seem to indicate Bonis's own reflection and her attempt to trace Viviane, or her younger self, in the forest. The repetition of the notes resembles Bonis' entangled and melancholic mental state, perhaps asking herself questions like: Can I find Viviane again? Could I live like Viviane? A short changing tone at measure 114 seems to imply Bonis's memory recalling herself once living happily like Viviane—when she studied at the Conservatory and thought she was in control of her own life. The recall of her happiness comes to a climax at around measure 121, but she

is quickly pulled back to reality with a more bittersweet questioning in the following measures. The character Vivane comes back at measure 136 with the lively theme in part A, but the dissonance in harmony suggests Bonis's concerns.

Figure 12 and Figure 13. Motif showing Viviane's vivacious character marked in parentheses; Repetition of melody lines marked in boxes. Bonis, Mel. *Viviane*. Edited by Alphonse Leduc. Paris, 1909. HathiTrust.

It seems that in Mel Bonis's imagination, Viviane is a joyful, innocent and lively fairy figure who is free from earthly concerns. This portrayal may differ from the Viviane that tricks and entraps Merlin, but Bonis chooses to focus on the pleasing aspect of the character when involved with a dangerous wizard like Merlin. Although Viviane is a stereotypical figure that attracts male figures because of her beauty and her virginity, she is not a victim of love or predatory masculinity but a powerful character who

exercises her free will and pursues what she wants while keeping everything in her control. In the end, Viviane attains the magic power that she longs for, and frees herself from Merlin's unwanted entanglement. As a woman who was once forced to marry a man and to quit composing, Viviane represents an ideal figure that stands in contrast to Mel Bonis's life. The character embodies the kind of liberty and autonomy that Bonis would never be able to attain, or reminds her relatively liberal and joyful life before her marriage, when she was free to compose and to meet with her friends at the conservatory. Thus Viviane is the utopian figure that allows her to envision her ideal and unattainable life, as is so strongly conveyed through the music.

### ***Ophélie***

Ophelia is a character in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. She is the daughter of Polonius, a nobleman in the court of the Danish king. Ophelia has an innocent personality and was very obedient to her father. She obeyed her father when he asked her to stop seeing Hamlet, and lied to Hamlet as well when her father told her to set up a meeting so that he and Claudius could spy on Hamlet. She is in love with Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, but their relationship becomes complicated when Hamlet's sanity is called into question. Ophelia is ultimately driven to extreme despair and madness after learning about the death of his father, and ends up drowning herself.

Ophelia is a representation of multiple stereotypes of women. She is portrayed as a dutiful daughter, a beloved beauty, a mad woman, and a drowned innocent. In the beginning of the play, Ophelia is represented as a reflection of her father and her

brother's ideals. They disregard her opinions and impose obedience upon her. Ophelia is instructed to stifle her desires and present herself as someone she is not—she is asked to respond to Hamlet in the manner of an indifferent and virtuous maiden. A parallel can be drawn between Ophelia's situation and Mel Bonis's life. Like Ophelia, Bonis was an obedient daughter who despite her personal desires, agreed to an arranged marriage. She was also a charming beauty among her male colleagues in the Paris Conservatory. Additionally, her extramarital affair, if revealed, would cause her much condemnation. Bonis also maintained the ideal and diligent image of Mme Domange...

It is fascinating to consider how Bonis's personal experiences may have shaped her musical depictions of Ophelia. Various aspects of the character could have resonated with Bonis herself: the initial portrayal of Ophelia as a dutiful daughter may have connected with Bonis's own upbringing and societal expectations during her time; the multiple factors that drove Ophelia's into a state of madness and her sense of loneliness may have echoed Bonis's struggles with depression. Bonis's decision to include Ophelia as one of the seven pieces in the collection suggests that she found the character to be a powerful symbol that represents the struggle a woman faces in conforming to societal expectations of femininity versus embracing her true self.

The whole piece displays a flowing and delicate quality that seems to symbolize Ophelia floating along the river that leads her to God. The opening seems to recall Gertrude (Hamlet's mother and Queen of Denmark)'s description of Ophelia's death in Act 4, Scene 7:

*There, on the pendant boughs her coronet weeds  
 Clamb'ring to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
 And mermaid-like, awhile they bore her up;  
 Which time she chanted snatches of old tunes,  
 As one incapable of her own distress,  
 Or like a creature native and endued unto  
 that element. But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death* (myShakespeare, n.d.).

The piece begins with a slow and mournful melody in the left hand, playing single notes in the low register of the piano. The right hand accompanies with lifting, hesitant and flowing arpeggios, evoking the image of a river's current. The use of dissonant harmonies creates a cold and somber atmosphere, which immediately reflects the tragic ending of Ophelia. Bonis also employs rubato right from the beginning and throughout the piece, to produce a sense of unease and uncertainty that echoes Ophelia's confusion and desperation.

As the music progresses, the melody gradually becomes complex, with frequent shifts in keys and tempo. The changes in tonality and the climax in the middle section seem to reflect Ophelia's psychological journey before her death. She becomes



increasingly agitated when she believes that her actions have led to Hamlet's madness and subsequently learns of Hamlet murdering her father. Her initial hopeful image of marrying Hamlet hopeful is gradually distorted into depression, loneliness, confusion, despair and eventually leads her into a corrupted state. Around 1'15", there is a moment of hopefulness when the melody seems to suggest Ophelia's desire to marry Hamlet. However, the hope quickly extinguishes as the music descends to the low register, reminiscent of Laertes and Polonius's whispers warning Ophelia not to trust Hamlet. The flowing arpeggios in the high register interwoven in this part seems to imply Ophelia's innocence, doubt, and questions: "*Do you doubt that? No more but so?*" (Her response to Laertes.) *I do not know, my lord, what I should think*" (Her response to Polonius.) (Bosak 1999, 20-23).

The notes then intensify with sudden dynamic changes, portraying Ophelia's increasing agitation as she realizes the consequences of her actions and Hamlet's behavior. By doing so Bonis vividly depicts the emotional instability that characterizes Ophelia's descent into madness. The phrases with relatively calm doubts and concerns are followed by this small climax. At times, the melody becomes fragmented and disjointed, with the left and right hands playing off each other, reflecting Ophelia's disorientation and already fragmented mental state.

At around 3'05", the music emerges from the low register and builds to another more intense climax, followed by a sudden stop and the return of the flowing, water-like character from the beginning of the piece. This section seems to depict the scene when Ophelia climbs frantically onto a willow tree and drops herself into the brook. The piece

ends with three E1 flat notes played with rests, which confounds the ending of the piece. The famous verses from Rimbaud's *Ophelia* (1870) are heard in the opening and the ending of the piece, adding a haunting quality to it:

*Sur l'onde calme et noire ou dorment les étoiles,*

*La blanche Ophélie flotte comme un grand lys*

*Flotte très lentement, couchée en ses longs voiles...* (Géliot 2009, 103).

(In the calm black water where the stars are sleeping

White Ophelia floats like a great lily;

Floats very slowly, lying in her long veils...)

Bonis's *Ophelia* is characterized for its unpredictable, dark and flowing quality.

Ophelia is depicted as an innocent and sensible character torn between her familial obligations and her love for Hamlet. While she blames herself for Hamlet's madness, she is also acutely aware of the expectations placed on her as a daughter and the pressure to conform to societal and familial norms. Her inner turmoil is evidently demonstrated in the music, as Bonis masterfully employs dissonant harmonies and capricious shifts in tempo and tonality to present Ophelia's complex emotional state. In many ways, Bonis may have related to Ophelia's struggle to assert her own independence and navigate complex relationships between her family and her desires, especially when pursuing her aspiration as a female composer. Bonis delicately captures the psychological pain and turmoil that Ophelia experiences through her music, and grapples with the conflicting emotions and societal pressures. *Ophelia* is in a way Bonis's expression of her own pain and internal struggle.

## Conclusion

Are we able to infer Bonis's gender by listening to *Femmes de légende*? We cannot come to a definitive conclusion without examining her entire body of work within a societal and musical context. Nevertheless, the musical characteristics present in *Femmes de légende* are indicative of Bonis's individual style and personality. The rich and unpredictable harmonic progression reflects her emotional struggles, while the dissonance and freedom in tempo exhibits Bonis's personal melancholy and sense of mystery. The delicate, often light and flowing phrases correspond with her sensible personality; the less obvious structures invite imagination and meditation. These are several notable characters of Bonis's *Femmes de légende* that can be attributed to her unique style as a composer.

As introduced on page 26 and 27 of this project, Citron proposes that women composers tend to emphasize extensive development of a limited amount of material, compositional flexibility, a fascination with process as opposed to an adherence to set structures or techniques, and a lyricism characterized by long lines and connectedness, highlighting communication over abstraction, substance over innovation. While some of these characteristics are present in Boni's music, such as the long lyrical phrases and the flexibility in structure, harmony and tempo, she also constantly introduces new materials instead of exploring within a limited amount. For example, in *Mélisande* and *Ophelia*, the audience constantly receives surprising new musical ideas. The rich harmonic progression proves Bonis's mastery of techniques and her academic achievements at the Paris Conservatory. Therefore, while Citron's proposition of

gendered musical characteristics has some general feasibility in application, it is important to consider each composer's individual style and the societal context in which they composed, as she already pointed out.

Through *Femmes de légende*, we are able to gain insight into how Bonis, as a woman composer in the late 19th century, dealt with the conflict between her professional identity as Mel Bonis and her societal role as Mme Domange. Her collection *Femmes de légende* is a reflection of her profound connection with these legendary female figures, through which she expresses her attitudes, desires and emotions. As she mentions in her personal writing, music speaks to her so that it enables her to convey what cannot be expressed to anyone else, or in any other way. Composing music was a means for her to alleviate her depression, to find and to express her true self.

Bonis possessed the qualifications required to become a professional composer in the late 19th century: a musical education from the Paris Conservatory, supportive friends and resources for publication. Her music gained some popularity through concert performances that received positive reviews from journalists and critics (see Jardin 2020, chapter "Réception"). However, as a woman from the bourgeoisie, Bonis could not avoid the objective distractions that hindered women from achieving a successful career as a composer. These distractions included starting at an older age, giving birth to several children, caring for a large family, and dealing with biased audiences. Women composers were marginalized at the time, and although their music was sometimes accepted, their names were mostly forgotten and were excluded from

textbooks and music history. The missing preservation of their scores further complicates the process of evaluating and rediscovering women compositions. Bonis's unpublished works were discovered by her descendants, but many scores are not yet widely available to the public (for instance, "Ophélie" from *Femmes de légende*). Moreover, the war had a negative impact on Bonis's career, as many of her works were not able to be performed, and she and her family were forced to leave Paris due to the danger, making it difficult for her to maintain connections in the music world. Last but not least, we must not forget that Bonis lived in a period where a multitude of talented composers emerged, especially in France. Among them, countless male and female composers were potentially forgotten or covered by the brilliance of Debussy and Ravel as well.

Subjectively, Bonis's reserved personality, lack of confidence, and reluctance to conform to innovative musical trends limited her success as a composer as well. This may have to do with the rigid Catholic education that she received, and the anxiety of authorship mentioned by Citron—women composers, who are used to being placed in a position of otherness, tend to avoid attention and being placed in a central position. This anxiety of authorship may also explain why sometimes Bonis's music is reminiscent of that of Debussy's, whereas her writings showed opposition to his music style. One reason could be that with Bonis, as a composer, it is hard to completely escape from the historical context or the mainstream influence. Another reason is that the anxiety of authorship propelled her to compromise unconsciously, and to avoid having her compositions stand out in their notably distinguishable style. Despite her personality and

thoughts on music, Bonis did not seem to aim at fame or financial success, which may have contributed to her relatively uniform compositional style that many perceived as lacking innovation or outdated during her later years. Additionally, most of Bonis's discovered works are piano and chamber compositions or other marginalized genres that are not that suitable for regular performance in concert halls. All of these objective and subjective factors resulted in a decline in her music's popularity and eventually placed her among the forgotten women composers.

It is heartening to see that today, more and more concerts are featuring works by women composers such as Amy Beach, Cécile Chaminade, Nadia Boulanger, and others. For example, in a recent concert that I attended at the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, Louise Farrenc's Symphony No.3 in G minor was integrated into the concert program alongside Brahms's Piano Concerto No.2. Introducing women's compositions by combining them with a more popular repertoire is an effective way to acquaint the audience with the works of women composers and raise awareness about their contributions to the history of music.

As for Mel Bonis, current research and publicity about her remain relatively limited within France and Europe. According to the Association Mel Bonis website, there will be more than twenty concerts featuring her works this year, with the majority taking place in France. Additionally, resources and information about Bonis are mostly available only in French, with hardly any books or articles about her in English. While there have been some conferences and exhibitions introducing Bonis in France in

recent years, these could be a starting point for further efforts to contribute to her recognition worldwide.

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