

Thesis of a DLA Dissertation

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## **FEMALE PIANISTS**

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## I. Precedents of the research

At the beginning of the 21st century – ideally – we do not make a distinction between male and female pianists. That has not always been the case, for a long time women could show their musical talent only on the keyboard instruments in the drawing rooms of the aristocracy. „The harpsichord, spinnet, lute and the base viol are the most agreeable instruments to the Ladies” – wrote John Essex 1722 in his etiquette book for young ladies. The fact that women wanting to play music relatively early attained the right to use keyboard instruments does not mean that we find male and female pianists in equal numbers on the concert stages.

(Here I do not wish to go into details about fluctuating numbers depending on the age of the artists or the instruments, these topics are also covered in the dissertation.)

The concept of the „female pianist” is discussed in several studies according to various methods. Especially many representatives of the „New Musicology” trend dealt with the differences and similarities between feminine and masculin music making and composing. (Gender studies.) I have to highlight here the study of Susan McClary: *Feminine Endings* (1991), in which she deals with the masculin and feminine motives of certain musical compositions, with the hidden sexual content of the pieces and in some compositions with the female-male dialogue. In her writing one can strongly feel the feminist approach.

Another study, Tia DeNora: *Music into action: performing genders on the Viennese concert stage, 1790-1810* (2002), which examines the development of gender representation among the artists on the Viennese concert stages in the given period. According to her research, before the piano pieces of Beethoven became part of the repertoire the number of male and female artists was almost the same, but with the appearance of pieces declared masculin female pianists became disadvantaged in her opinion.

I could go into further details in some more studies (Arthur Loesser: *Men, Women and Pianos, A social History*, Mary Burgan: *Victorian Studies - Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1986)), but neither these nor the above listed ones deal with the question I am primarily interested in, namely what induces the fact that – even though they are just as much in the possession of all physical, mental and musical abilities like their male colleagues, nevertheless – there are still significantly fewer female pianists on stage in the 20th and 21st century.

## II. Sources

During my research I tried to study as many original documents as possible. The National Széchényi Library was a great help in this, I could get hold of several handwritten letters from Clara Schumann, Ferenc Liszt and Annie Fischer.

I could also browse through several Hungarian music journals and magazines from the 1800's and 1900's. They turned out to be great sources for example for the documentation of Clara Schumann's concerts, but I also found until now to me unknown critics about Annie Fischer.

The appendix of this dissertation contains some of these original documents.

Reports of fellow-artists can literally conjure the personality of an artist, giving first-hand description about his character and habits. That was the case with Zoltán Kocsis and Péter Mura, whom I asked to talk about Annie Fischer to me, as they were both in regular personal and professional relationship with her. I thank them for agreeing to the interview and helping me to make the chapter „Annie Fischer” even more precise.

In addition to these sources of course I also studied the relevant literature in Hungary and abroad on the subject, which I will list below.

#### Primary sources:

Bartha, Dénes – Révész, Dorrit: *Joseph Haydn élete dokumentumokban*. Európa könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2008

*Fischer Annie*. Klasszikus és Jazz kiadó, Budapest, szerkesztette: Batta András, Gádor Ágnes, H. Magyar Kornél, Molnár Szabolcs, Székely György, Retkes Attila, Tóth Anna

*Great Pianists on Piano Playing*. James Francis Cooke, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York

*The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Edited by: Stanley Sadie

Hankiss, János: *Liszt Ferenc válogatott írásai*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1959.

Samuel, Claude: *Clara S. Egy szenvedély rejtelvei*. Európa könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2009.

Somfai, László: *Haydn zongoraszonátái*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1979.

Somfai, László: *Joseph Haydn élete képekben és dokumentumokban*. Zeneműkiadó, Budapest, 1977.

Walker, Alan: *Liszt Ferenc utolsó napjai. Növendéke, Lina Schmalhausen kiadatlan naplója alapján*. Park Könyvkiadó, Budapest, 2007.

Walker, Alan: *Liszt Ferenc 1. A virtuóz évek. 1811-1847*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest

Walker, Alan: *Liszt Ferenc 2. A weimari évek. 1848-1861*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest

Walker, Alan: *Liszt Ferenc 3. Az utolsó évek. 1861-1886*, Zeneműkiadó, Budapest

Williams, John-Paul: *A Zongora*, Vince Kiadó, 2003.

### Secondary sources:

Elder, Dean: *Pianists at play, Interviews, Master Lessons, and Technical Regimes*. Kahn and Averill, London

Hartling, Peter: *Schumann árnyéka*. Európa könyvkiadó, Budapest, 1998.

Jemnitz, Sándor: *Schumann. A zeneszerző élete leveleiben*. Zeneműkiadó, 1958.

*Muzsika*, 1988. április, 31. évfolyam, 4. szám

*Muzsika*, 1993. december, 36. évfolyam, 12. szám

*Muzsika*, 2009. június, 52. évfolyam, 6. szám

Siepmann, Jeremy: *The Piano. The Complete illustrated guide to the world's most popular music instrument*. 1996.

Beside the above listed works I also did some research on the internet.

### III. Method

While writing the thesis I considered it absolutely necessary to give a short introduction about the social background of the appearance of the first female keyboard players, as well as about the development of the instrument. The era of Haydn was already rich in excellent female musicians and it would be a mistake to ignore their activity. That I could not dedicate them a separate chapter is due to the lack of accessible, sufficiently detailed historic documents. But I covered the addressees of the dedications of the „Damensonaten”, since nothing proves better the presence of female keyboarders in musician society than the compositions dedicated to them.

In music history fortunately we can find a number of superb and recognised female pianists, among them also some who remained till the end of their lives on concert stage. So I could not intend to be exhaustive, when I put the list of artists to be examined together. But I tried to grab such examples for more detailed analysis whose life-work significantly influenced the image of female pianists.

That's why I included in my thesis Clara Schumann, in addition to her concert career I also touched upon her teacher's work and her students, Sophie Menter, about whom her teacher, Ferenc Liszt said: „she is my only legitimate daughter in piano music”, Annie Fischer, „The” Hungarian female pianist, the dominant figure of an epoche, and Martha Argerich, whose career has been continuously rising since the 1950's.

## IV. Results

As a female pianist of the second generation I had the opportunity to experience the difficulties of this profession in my childhood, with my pianist mother, as well as in my own professional life, with my two children. Exactly these difficulties made me examine closer how my famous predecessors managed to combine career and family life, if at all.

Attention on studies made on female musicians and musical compositions was especially focused from the end of the 20th century, from the appearance of „New Musicology“, but these studies are based on other aspects, they start mainly with the compositions and reach through their „male and female“ aspects the artists.

In my thesis I attempted through analysing the personal character of the artists, the circumstances of their childhood, education, personal and private life to answer the questions, what conditions are necessary for a female pianist to have a long term career.

According to my knowledge my dissertation is a groundbreaking work in that regard.