

# MARIE JAËLL

*The Magic Touch,  
Piano Music by Mind Training*



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Viewed with a century's hindsight, Marie Jaëll's accomplishments seem extraordinary. She was a pioneer in piano pedagogy and a path-setter in musical aesthetics. Her phrase "touch the piano" — in the sense she gave it — is now part of piano folklore. Pianist Charles Rosen claimed that "what interested him most of all in the experience of playing the piano was the relation of the physical act of playing to those aspects of music generally considered more intellectual, spiritual and emotional;"<sup>137</sup> this is a faithful echo of her view of playing the piano. Yet hers is an unfamiliar name in the history of piano music; it would seem that her achievements were shortchanged by time.

The nineteenth century was hard on women. Its bourgeois culture preferred to see them as charming ornaments, to be seen but not heard. It decreed that they embodied the mundane, and stick to their knitting. However, "the more we know about what women have achieved in the past, the more reason we have to wonder why their achievements have been so frequently forgotten in the present."<sup>138</sup>

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137. Winter R., "Piano Man," *The New York Review of Books*, October 23, 2003

It is true, she was a Romantic, and Romanticism “marked the return of the repressed.” Still, it was elitist and ambiguous in its attitude towards women, and in the main it excluded them from public life. Fortunately, it also created an intellectual space for them, even if it kept them out of the institutions of higher learning.<sup>139</sup>

The world of music was still less receptive to women. As Rosen observes, “the few women composers, whose work remained almost completely repressed during the time, were harshly excluded from history.”<sup>140</sup> Most critics writing about Marie Jaëll’s music showered her with left-handed compliments, speaking of the manliness of her compositions.

Marie Jaëll was not born to high culture, and she had no positive role model to emulate. She found her own bearings and followed a path of her own. Her achievements stemmed in large part from her moral stamina. She trusted her impulses; she possessed exceptional gifts of insight and understanding. Her senses never dulled or dimmed by the constant familiarity with her beloved instrument, she invented a fresh approach to piano pedagogy and pursued it with unflagging energy.

In an unassuming way, she personally experienced the great scientific revolution that was overtaking Europe during her lifetime. She was convinced that her art was at the same time a science. She had a true scientific calling and all her work is founded on mutually self-sustaining theory and experimentation. Lacking today’s techniques, borrowed from computer science, she turned to thought experiments as an investigative tool. Then, relying heavily on the intuitions of her own penetrating mind, she managed to isolate the variables in order to simulate piano sounds and trace the causes of minute differentiations.

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138. Redusen, JE. *Sexual Politics in Comte and Durkheim: Feminism, History and the French Sociological Tradition*, Signs Autumn 2001 : 229-264

139. Rosenblum, Nancy L. *Another Liberalism*, Harvard University Press 1987 p.2

140. Rosen, C. *The Romantic Generation*, Harpers Collins Publishers p XI

Unsurprisingly, Marie Jaëll's aesthetics echo the views of mathematicians on their chosen subject. For example, Hermann Weyl argues that the task of mathematics is to grasp continuity, given by intention, in the flow of time and motion as a totality of discrete stages. To him, mathematics is an attempt to understand the natural continuum in terms of the discrete which is its very opposite. Marie Jaëll sought to concatenate discrete musical sounds into continuous and rhythmic patterns. Indeed, both music and mathematics are about seeing relationships from two opposite viewpoints.

In spirit, Marie Jaëll was close to quantum physicists, who may talk like mystics, and speak of conflating space and time, or declare that lines and dots (or waves and particles, in their jargon) can be perceived to be the same. Heisenberg, the founder of quantum physics, observes, "When we speak of the picture of nature in the exact science of our age, we do not mean a picture of nature so much as a picture of our relationship with nature."<sup>141</sup> But "neither biology nor quantum theory dictates the nature of the relational realm."<sup>142</sup> Marie Jaëll, as an artist, started from the relational realm and to understand it turned to science.

The union between art and science that Marie Jaëll realized in her life would be the envy of C.P. Snow, a British scientist turned novelist. He regretted that science and art were two cultures that did not understand and trust each other. Marie Jaëll succeeded in turning to science to get a better grasp of her art.

In a century whose leitmotif was rationality, she developed a clear philosophy of music to back up her teaching. Indeed, in pedagogy, she was abreast, if not ahead, of her times. At its core she put consciousness. A philosopher notes, "Future generations will wonder why it took us so long in the twentieth century to see the centrality of consciousness in the understanding of our very existence as human beings."<sup>143</sup> She sensed the ontological affinity of

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141. Heisenberg, W., *La Nature dans la Physique Contemporaine*, Gallimard, 1962, p.33.

142. Hoffman, D.D. *Visual Intelligence*, p. 199

consciousness and sound, and noted that both sound and conscious states require time for their existence, without requiring its extension. In her view, the consciousness finds in sound an image of itself. Out of that intuition evolved her conviction that consciousness must play a central role in piano teaching. She relentlessly defended the idea that what distinguishes great piano playing is not the technique *per se* but the sheer intelligence of the interpretation.

Her phrase, “directed movement,” sums up her vision of music — indeed, of all art. Such an idea was trendy for the epoch; the idea of movement, as a component of works of art, began to ferment in other artists’ minds during the period from 1910 to 1920.<sup>144</sup>

In her view, touch depends on movement as vision depends on light. “Sound is the medium for the transport of directed movement that is music,” she would say.

In the last few decades, knowledge of the human brain and its cognitive function has made spectacular progress. *Nature* magazine made the claim in 2002 that “Neuro-scientists are starting to discover how our brains process music.”<sup>145</sup> They find that the emotional response to music is processed in a set of structures distributed widely through the brain. They also add that making music requires well-honed motor skills and relies on a high level of integration between auditory inputs and muscle control. Attempts are being made to reach a better understanding of music’s role in human existence. But, in spite of all the experts’ efforts, it is likely that music will always remain an enigma to neurobiologists.

Marie Jaëll was faithful to the European tradition in Western music that emphasizes a relaxed approach for the realization of musical sound. In particular, she always adopted a rather flexible attitude with regard to the actual pitch content of a composition. She was convinced that every performance of piano music was a

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143. Searle

144. Gabo

145. *Nature*, March 7, 2002 p.12-14

creation and as such was unique. The written text springs to life in the tactile, aural, visual, intellectual, and above all, emotional experience of the pianist.

She followed closely the late nineteenth century psychology, which took note of the analogy between color and music. Already, string players were highly conscious that the tactility of color could be matched by the tactility of sound. Unfortunately, this is on direction where her research could have gone farther.

In many ways Marie Jaëll resembles Maria Montessori, the first woman to qualify as a doctor (in 1896) from an Italian university. She also advocated a systematic education of the senses. Both women pioneered pedagogical methods that insisted on teaching children spatial awareness through the touch.

Another pedagogue close in spirit to Marie Jaëll was Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist, who likened children to little scientists. Both realized that scientists and children are similar since both avidly try to make sense of the world. By unraveling the deep links between aural art and the brain, Marie Jaëll showed that a major function of art is to enlarge the brain's capacity to seek knowledge about the world. Her analysis of the unconscious was motivated by her ambition to bring into the open the hidden capacities that had been accumulating for millennia in the human brain.

Marie Jaëll believed that "art teaches us not only to see and hear, but also to be. It makes us what we are." An artist is neither a historian nor a prophet. He is a simple explorer of existence. His art is the expression of his personal vision that has a cosmic reach. Music in particular moves us in the depth of our being and enriches our emotional experience. Its power lies in the way it works upon our feelings rather than in the way it works upon our thoughts. And, its resources are limitless. "It is a vast river, and one may dip into its waters at any point and come out refreshed."

Marie Jaëll's approach to music showed that industrial capitalism, flourishing on a large scale during her lifetime, could not obliterate the human desire to escape the confines of the ego. She

was not concerned with music's tendency to promote coherence within social groups; she saw in music a gift from God — a sense of eternity, and with it an idea of the fulfillment of our desire for peace and harmony.

To Marie Jaëll, music was a mystery. And when we face a mystery, we can only stare in wonder and bewilderment, not knowing what explanations would even look like. We can only glimpse that it is the deepest act of man's creativity to make contact with the universe and the divine. Through vigilant attention to the sensual world and through fidelity to the spirit, we can hope to reach some understanding of music's power and beauty. Her aesthetics grew out of a deeply religious classical and humanist view of art.

For all the bafflement with which Marie Jaëll's results were received, her words are now remembered; and pianists are learning to hear them and value them. Her passion for her art led her to probe the relationship between the inner and outer worlds that constitute human life and culture. At the sanctified core of music, Marie Jaëll found a beam of light to guide mankind from the outer world to the inner realm of divine mystery.