

From Behind the Shadows of Great Musical Figures: Marie Mennessier-Nodier: A composer in Nineteenth-Century Microhistory

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Abstract: *Within the history of music, the scholarship on the great female figures from across all time periods—most notably composers, performers, patrons, and teachers—continues to grow. In addition to these notable individuals, however, there were numerous anonymous women, most often associated with musical teaching or private performances in the European salons, who achieved a prominent place in their society. In this work, I propose to address this with an approach to the case of the lesser-known composer and poet Marie Mennessier-Nodier (1811–1893). Following a review of the place of women musicians in current academic research, I delve into the life and the legacy of Marie Mennessier-Nodier, as well as her place in the musical context in which she lived: nineteenth-century French Romanticism. Ultimately, the research on Marie Mennessier-Nodier allows us to reflect on the women who, despite their exclusion from the ‘great history’, were nevertheless important in shaping new generations of musicians and the artistic life of their context.*

Key-words: *Women in Music, Microhistory, Nineteenth-Century, Salonnières, Chansons.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, studies on women in music have experienced a necessary and deserved growth. They have fortunately begun to remedy the historiographical gap by reclaiming the names of many female composers, teachers, patrons, and performers. Some of those who enjoyed greater visibility in their own time, and who comprise the focus of numerous research investigations and performative recoveries of their legacy, are the German pianist and composer Clara Schumann (1819–1896), the Franco-Spanish singer and composer Pauline Viardot-García (1821–1910), and the Romanian composer Myriam Marbé (1931–1997), among others. Although these notable figures have attracted the lion’s share of scholarly attention, other women

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likewise exhibited intense musical activity, not as part of the elite, 'great' history, but rather that of microhistory. These women, about whom there is scarcely any information, dedicated themselves primarily to teaching and private performances, sometimes as part of a select sociocultural circle.

Without overlooking the renowned female instructors employed in prestigious music centres, such as Louise Farrenc (1804–1875) and Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979), who influenced the formal piano teaching of thousands of students, it is worth mentioning that some of the great composers received their formative musical notions from women, particularly their mothers. This was the case of Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847), Georges Bizet (1838–1875), and the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla (1876–1946). In the case of De Falla, his early maternal introduction to music was further complemented by the influence of his dry nurse, Ana "La morilla", who imbued his early childhood with popular culture through traditional songs and dances. Sometimes older sisters transmitted this passion for music, as in the case of Cuban pianist and composer Ernestina Lecuona (1882–1951), who first taught her brother, Ernesto Lecuona (1895–1963).

Beyond teaching, the truth is that there were many women who, often anonymous and mostly associated with entertainment, achieved a prominent place within their society for their musical contributions, even though their names are not necessarily known today. To this end, in this work I propose a case study on the composer and poet Marie Mennessier-Nodier (1811–1893), who became a prominent figure in the salons of Paris in the first half of the nineteenth century.

2. Objectives

This work has been designed to fulfil three objectives. Firstly, it explores the origins of gender studies in Musicology, and employs the seminal works of this area as the foundation for a broader look at the 'state of the art'. The second objective is to delve deeper into the life and musical legacy of Marie Mennessier-Nodier, as well as her place in the musical context in which she lived. Discovering women who earned a visible place in past societies through their contributions is always a step forward towards equality and the construction of new female models for future generations. Finally, based on the results obtained from Mennessier-Nodier, the third objective of this research aims to reflect upon the place of female musicians in microhistory, interlocutors of the musical art who, despite not being part of the 'great history', were nevertheless intrinsic to the artistic life of their context.

3. Methodology and sources

This work has followed a historical methodology of a qualitative nature, also determined by the variety and nature of the sources. We have considered primary literary and musical sources on the figure of Marie Mennessier-Nodier—consisting of letters, as well as the manuscript and printed scores of her musical compositions—in addition to periodicals, principally contemporaneous French newspapers and magazines, such as *Le Figaro* and *Le Gaulois*. The primary sources offer a first-person, unmediated insight into the personal and artistic identity of the protagonist, as well as her place in the society of the time. Furthermore, secondary sources have been examined, consisting of specialised literature on women musicians, on Mennessier-Nodier herself, and on her cultural environment. Following a bibliographical review of secondary sources on women in music, the results are set out below. After the study of primary and secondary literary sources, we will examine the figure of Marie Mennessier-Nodier, a little-known woman absent from the historiography, but one who nevertheless made-up part of the culture of her context. Finally, siting and studying primary musical sources enable us to analyse the characteristics of Marie Mennessier-Nodier's—admittedly sparse—compositional legacy, and to reflect on its societal impact.

4. Literature review of the origins of women in music research

The link between women and music goes back to the very origins of musical art in prehistoric times, as evidenced by the archaeological and plastic remains that have been preserved. There is also evidence of women's active participation in music from ancient times. In fact, it is known that Enheduanna (2285 BC–2250 BC), a high priestess of Ur, is the author of the oldest surviving musical composition (Scholes 1984, 999–1001). Since then, many women have been associated with music, some as acclaimed public figures, and others in the private sphere of the home. However, their names and circumstances have not always been the subject of study due to the prevailing patriarchy in the Western sphere, hence the dearth of women in music historiography.

Fortunately, in the 1960s and 1970s, Feminist Musicology began to assert the artistic place of women. In particular, female musicologists began to demand a fresh look at the discipline of music that would especially dignify the work of women composers in the past. These efforts have borne fruit both in America and in Europe, with pioneering contributions such as *Frau und Musik* (Rieger 1980), the trailblazing article “Women in Music” (Wood 1980, 283–297), *Historical Anthology of Music by*

Women (Briscoe 1987), *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950* (Bowers and Tick 1987), and, later, *Women and Music: A History* (Pendle 2001). These exponents, and others like them, are characterised by offering an early review of the history of music with the intention of incorporating into the discourse women who acquired visibility in the past and who developed a work comparable to that of their male counterparts. Since then, there have been many investigations that have delved into the great women artists both as a compilation and as works specifically focused on cases, such as the Italian singer and composer Barbara Strozzi (1619–1677) (Rosand 1978, 241–281; Glixon 1997, 311–335; Kendrick 2002, 65–98); the German pianist, composer, and teacher Clara Schumann (1819–1896) (Reich 1985; Vries 1996; Borchard 2015; Borchard 2019; Sánchez Rodríguez 2021, 280–404); and the English feminist composer Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) (Marshall 1959; John 1959; Wiley 2004, 388–414; Clements 2005, 51–71; Harris 2011, 421–431; Toole 2020, 253–280), among others abundantly researched.

However, far scarcer are studies in microhistory that focus on female subjects, those women who devoted themselves to music sometimes far from the elite circles, who practiced their craft as performers at intellectual gatherings, or who gave music lessons—especially piano lessons—to well-to-do girls hoping to add the artistic discipline to their collection of adornments, alongside manners and foreign languages. One such example is Marie Mennessier-Nodier, about whom there is little scholarship beyond the occasional look at her literary (Raulet-Marcel 2023) and musical output (Geoffroy 2019; Zaragoza and Geoffroy 2019; Geoffroy 2020; Sánchez Rodríguez 2022, 74), and the recent publication of her correspondence (Mennessier-Nodier 2019; Mennessier-Nodier 2020; Mennessier-Nodier 2021). This paucity of references prompts a closer examination of this figure (presented below), together with her musical legacy, comprised principally of short *Lieder*.

5. Marie Mennessier-Nodier: A figure from early nineteenth-century Parisian microhistory who composed music

Marie Mennessier-Nodier (Fig. 1)—whose name appears neither in *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Grove 1879–1889) nor in *Grove Music Online*—lived throughout nearly the entire nineteenth century (1811–1893). Born into a family of intellectuals, her father was the poet Charles Nodier (1780–1844), an influential leader of the French Romantic movement². He worked as a writer, but also as a librarian; in fact, he was the director of the Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, “one of the most important

² For more on Charles Nodier, see Oliver 1964; Nelson 1972; Barrière 1989; Zaragoza, 1992.

library collections in nineteenth-century Europe” (Loving 2003, 167). Additionally, he was a lover and connoisseur of musical art and it was precisely this union of music and literature that occasionally led Charles Nodier to use his pen as an opera critic.

Since childhood, Marie Mennessier-Nodier (née Nodier) received a carefully cultivated education from her father. Her father’s status and the cultural circles in which she moved opened the privileged gateways into some of the most esteemed *salons* of the day. Assembled and overseen, for the most part, by a hostess, these salons were spaces where attendees gathered and talked. The guests at these events tended to belong to the aristocracy and nobility, although it was also common for intellectuals and artists from different social strata and fields to attend, provided they were exceptional and recognized figures in that moment. Salons had existed in France since the sixteenth century (Mendoza Martín 2021, 161–162), and this practice was further consolidated during the seventeenth century, but its popularity grew immensely in the eighteenth century and, especially, in nineteenth-century Paris. These select assemblies were often helmed by women, the *salonnières*, with the most famous being Madame de Staël (1766–1817) and Madame de Genlis (1746–1830). Alongside their male contemporaries, these social occasions were likewise attended by women, who not only accompanied their husbands or fathers, but often used the opportunity to hone their intellectual interests or artistic talents by singing or playing the piano in front of the small, select audience. Fanny Mendelssohn herself (1805–1847) was not only the sister of the famous composer Felix Mendelssohn, but also became a prominent pianist and hostess of her own salon.



Fig. 1. *Marie Mennessier-Nodier portrait, by Julien Leopold Boilly (Musée Carnavalet Histoire de Paris)*

The organisation of these social meetings was sometimes seen as an instrument of female fulfilment, as women could converse on a variety of subjects and actively participate by exhibiting their artistic skills—an opportunity not always afforded to them in other spaces. In any case, the salons favoured the socialisation of women, later furthered in cultural associations. In these contexts, Marie Mennessier-Nodier was able to keep abreast of the literary and musical culture of the day, something that undoubtedly determined her later production. In fact, even in her youth, she became a regular and important figure in these settings, as observed in an obituary published upon her death: “In her childhood and early youth, she was the grace and joy of the evenings at the Arsenal, where all the illustrious figures of literature and the arts gathered during the Romantic period”³ (*Le Gaulois*, 4 November 1893, 2).

In 1830, at the age of 19, she married Jules Mennessier (1802–1877), a tax collector, with whom she had four children. She lived with her family in the quartier de l’Arsenal in Paris until her father’s death in 1844. Afterwards, she moved with her husband and children to other locales, depending on her husband’s work. But her father remained ever-present in her life, as manifested in her surname: to honour Charles Nodier and ensure his memory’s survival, a royal ordinance of 1844 conferred upon the family the right to bear the name Mennessier-Nodier, one which Marie would carry the rest of her life, as did her husband and children.

Her epistolary legacy is preserved in various Parisian archives (the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Maison de Victor Hugo, and the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris), and was recently published (Mennessier-Nodier 2019; Mennessier-Nodier 2020; Mennessier-Nodier 2021). A review of her letters leads us to affirm that, from an early date, she was in contact with prominent cultural figures, including the novelist Victor Hugo (1802–1885), his wife Adèle (1803–1868), and the writer and poet Alfred de Musset (1810–1857). Mennessier-Nodie was purportedly even a muse for poets: it was popularly held that the dramatist Félix Arvers (1806–1850) dedicated his *Sonnet d’Arvers* to Mennessier-Nodie, although this thesis has recently been disproven. What is certain is that Alfred de Musset did dedicate a poem to her in 1843. Thus, Mennessier-Nodie’s social activity occurred within the principal intellectual circles of where she lived throughout the nineteenth century. She was by no means passive, however; she was also involved in literary and musical creation.

During her lifetime, music and literature remained constant and inextricable, an obvious observation considering she was the daughter of a poet and she had moved freely about an intellectual circle of writers and playwrights since childhood.

³ “En son enfance et en sa première jeunesse, elle fut la grâce et la joie des soirées de l’Arsenal, où se réunissaient toutes les illustrations de la littérature et des arts pendant la période romantique”.

Her literary skills developed while serving as an editor of poetic publications, as the author of her father's biography (Mennessier-Nodier 1867) (Figure 2), and as an editor and writer for periodicals, wherein she covered news items and wrote informational advice for women (Raulet-Marcel 2023). Her informative texts, along with her stories and poems, have recently been reprinted as part of the *Cahiers d'Études Nodieristes* (Geoffroy and Zaragoza 2019; Geoffroy 2020).

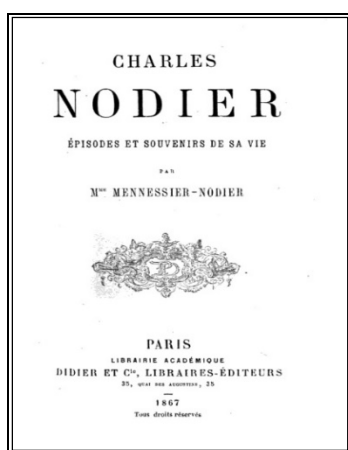


Fig. 2. “Charles Nodier: épisodes et souvenirs de sa vie” (1867), by Marie Mennessier-Nodier, cover.

As to her musical training, her teachers remain unknown. She received an amateur musical education, typical for women of a good social status, from private teachers brought into the home for private lessons. (Geoffroy 2019, 2). As a composer, her work was linked to *chansons*. In particular, many women were linked to chamber music, especially small chamber-music works and songs, “genres considered acceptable for females” (Jezic 1994, 2). Shorter than operas, these pieces enjoyed a greater presence in private spheres, particularly in the aforementioned salons:

The “Lied”, that very special musicoliterary genre that emerged shortly after 1750, attracted female composers, resulting in many fine pieces of music written by women. From its inception the “Lied” constituted a type of chamber music and as such fit comfortably in a domestic environment, a setting in which women had long been accepted as performers, in clear contrast to the public arena, whose large-scale operas, sacred music, and orchestral music were off limits to women (Citron 1987, 224).

Regarding her connection to vocal with piano accompaniment compositions, Mennessier-Nodier is the author of the lyrics of a *chanson* entitled “Dors, ma belle ange”, of some independent songs, and of a set of twelve songs (*Mélodies romantiques*), which we can consider her best work. The precise date of composition of *Mélodies romantiques* remains unknown, though it was prior to 1831, the year an edition was printed by the Paris publisher Eugène-Théodore Troupenas (Figure 3).

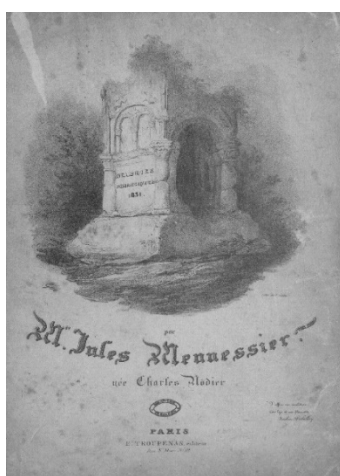


Fig. 3. “*Mélodies romantiques*” printed edition (1831), cover.

The songs themselves likewise lack any apparent dates in the only extant manuscript thus known, conserved in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (Ms-15136) and whose digitisation made possible the discovery of the subject of the present study. Unfortunately, the manuscript does not offer any insights into the creative process; it should rather be read as a personal notebook containing the final version of each song, written neatly and devoid of cross-outs, but ordered differently from that in the printed edition.

The twelve *chansons* are characterised by melody and accompaniment texture: the vocal melody is very simple and is always accompanied by simple piano chords or arpeggios. All the songs exhibit the same structure: a piano introduction that continues with the insertion of the voice (always accompanied by the piano), then alternating the refrain with different verses and different texts in French language. Marie Mennessier-Nodier was inspired by the rhythm of various songs and dances, performed—as was the fashion of the time—in more stylised versions in the salons—waltz and mazurkas—. All the songs are composed for a single voice, except “La berceuse” and “Embarquez-vous”, which are for two voices with accompaniment.

1. "La ville prise" (orientale).
2. "La veille de Noël" (hymne).
3. "La pêcheur" (barcarolle).
4. "Le bal" (élégie).
5. "La berceuse" (tyrolienne à deux voix).
6. "La captive" (orientale).
7. "La mort du bandit" (ballade).
8. "Lazzara" (orientale).
9. "Embarquez-vous" (barcarolle à deux voix).
10. "Le calvaire" (élégie).
11. "Attente" (orientale).
12. "Mélodie".

It must be said that the aesthetic result of the *chansons* is beautiful, yet, from a technical standpoint, numerous parallel movements can be verified in the piano accompaniment, movements that composers eschewed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This can be seen, for example, in the piano accompaniment of some passages of "Le bal" (Figure 4), among others. Thus, although aesthetically pleasing, this conception can be seen as a symbol of archaism, far removed from professional music.

These technical shortcomings did not preclude the work's publication by such a quality publisher as the aforementioned house founded by Eugène-Théodore Troupenas (1799–1850) in 1825. The selection of this printer's mark was a declaration of intent: prior to Marie Mennessier-Nodier's work, this publishing house had already printed the first editions of the last four operas by Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) and would later come to publish the first editions of such emblematic works as the *Ballade* n. 2, Op. 38, by Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849).

Fig. 4. “Le bal”, by Marie Mennessier-Nodier (1831), parallel octaves in the piano accompaniment present in mm. 10–12.

It may come as a surprise that the first significant composition by a young woman—with the aforementioned technical characteristics—even managed to see the light of day, let alone be issued by the presses of such an important music publisher, particularly given the difficulty of publishing music in the nineteenth century (more so for a woman). In answer to this, we can imagine that her father, the literary great Charles Nodier, may have had some sway on the publishing house. In fact, Nodier is directly linked to the printed edition, as Marie Mennessier-Nodier is not recognised as having an individual identity of her own. On the cover (Figure 3), she appears simply as the “wife of” and “daughter of”; her first name is not included, only “Jules Mennessier’s wife” and “Charles Nodier’s daughter”. Thus, while her father might have been the primary interlocutor with the publisher, the inclusion of this celebrity figure’s name was likely a nod to his authority.

The publication of this song collection was well received by Parisian society, as evinced in the contemporary press. While we cannot assess the collection’s true social impact, given the simplicity of the pieces comprising *Mémoires romantiques*, we do imagine that some of these songs were performed by aficionados, either within the solitude of a home or in a salon. It is, however, possible to gauge the collection’s dissemination through the media, as newspapers and magazines—including *Le Mercure de France au dix-neuvième siècle*, *La Mode*, *Revue de Paris*, and

Le Figaro—reported on this novel, charming publication. In the last of these titles, the—anonymous—author of the review comes to recognise problems pertaining to music theory and, specifically, to composition norms, all of which he downplays in favour of the work's originality:

The melodies of the young and spiritual artist are charming; listen to them, then call them romantic, classical, melancholic, diatonic, epic, and all the other “iques” in the world; call them what you will. They are new, graceful, inspired; they are the product of a young imagination that science has not stilted and tortured. I wouldn't want to bet that a composition teacher, armed with a scholastic magnifying glass, would not find in Mme Mennessier's collection some of those superfluous fifths and diminished sevenths that are so well-defended by the Lhomods⁴ of music. I have not seen them, and if they are there, too bad for the teacher⁵ (Le Figaro, 25 December 1830, 1).

In this sense, the technical and artistic results are not comparable to the *Lieder* of Franz Schubert (1797–1828) or Robert Schumann (1810–1856), nor to the songs composed by other female musicians of her time and space, as can be seen in the vocal production of Pauline Viardot-García (albeit somewhat later). Where Marie Mennessier-Nodier does align with the great *Lieder* composers is in her employment of quality poets as sources for her poems: Mennessier-Nodier turns to Victor Hugo and Alfred de Vigny (1797–1863). In addition to this literary value, there is also the commendable plastic component: the musical edition is profusely illustrated with engravings by the French painters Camille Roqueplan (1802–1855), Tony Johannot (1803–1852), and Eugène Devéria (1805–1865), the manifestation of “an extreme case of inter-artistic collaboration” (Glinoyer 2009, p. 42). Combined with this artistic value (Fig. 5) is the sentimental value: each piece comprising the *Mémoires romantiques* is dedicated to those close to the author—her mother, her young

⁴ A reference, inserted as a literary device, to Charles François Lhomond (1727–1794), a priest and prominent French instructor renowned for his pedagogical treatises and his teaching at the Collège du Cardinal-Lemoine and, subsequently, as professor emeritus at the University of Paris.

⁵ “Les mélodies de la jeune et spirituelle artiste sont charmantes; écoutez-les, dites ensuite qu'elles sont romantiques, classiques, mélancoliques, diatoniques, épiques, et tous les iques du monde; appelez-les enfin comme vous voudrez. Elles sont neuves, gracieuses, inspirées; elles sont le produit d'une imagination jeune que la science n'a point guindée et torturée. Je ne voudrais pas parier qu'un professeur de composition, armé de la loupe scholastique, ne trouve dans le recueil de Mme Mennessier quelques-unes de ces quintes superflues, de ces septièmes diminuées qui sont bien défendues par les Lhomod de la musique. Je ne les ai pas aperçues quant à moi et si elles y sont, tant pis pour le professeur.”

nephews, etc.—as well as to figures of high culture from her social circle, including Victor Hugo himself.

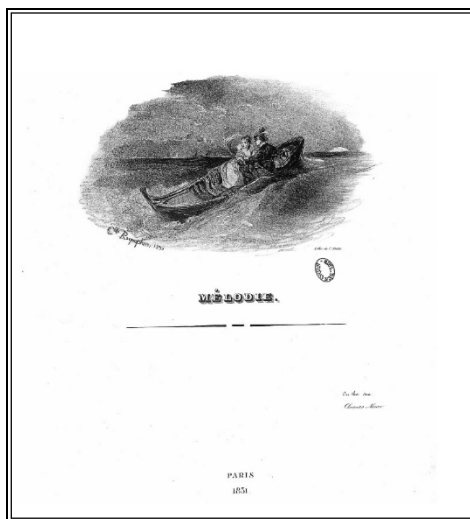


Fig. 5. “Mélodie”, by Marie Mennessier-Nodier (1831).

Despite the fact that her name does not appear in music historiography, and beyond the questionable technical quality of her musical work, it seems clear that Marie Mennessier-Nodier became a recognised woman in her time, as evidenced by her inclusion in the *Biographie des femmes auteurs contemporaines françaises* (1836). It should be said that this biographical entry refers, in addition to her artistic facets, to her physical appearance, one of the inherent deficiencies of the non-professional biographic genre, and one of the issues mentioned when discussing women:

*Happily born, gifted with a rare intelligence, spending her noble life with nobly occupied people, she must have received an early education without being premature. Her beautiful face has that transparency which allows the soul and the imagination to escape in turn, and which gives expression and mobility to her physiognomy*⁶ (Ballanche 1836, 101).

⁶ “Heureusement née, douée d’une rare intelligence, passant sa noble vie avec des personnes noblement occupées, elle a dû recevoir une culture hâtive sans être prématurée. Sa belle figure a cette transparence qui permet à l’âme et à la fantaisie de s’échapper tour à tour., qui fait l’expression et la mobilité de la physiognomie”.

6. Conclusions

Many women musicians of the past have been recovered since the beginnings of Feminist Musicology. However, along with the interest generated by the great figures—about whom numerous and exhaustive works have been written—there were also other female musicians yet to be discovered, who, though not part of the elite, were themselves important figures in microhistory. Marie Mennessier-Nodier, whom we have presented in this work, is one such case.

Based on the results obtained from the review of primary and secondary sources, and following a musical introduction to her legacy, we can affirm that Marie Mennessier-Nodier, who had an exquisite cultural education in Paris at the beginning of the nineteenth century, developed more her literary gifts—through her poems, stories and, especially, her newspaper texts—than her musical ones. She was perhaps following in her father's footsteps. In fact, up to now, the only compositions that have been found are limited to a few individual songs and the cycle *Mémoires romantiques*. Undoubtedly, the fact that she was the daughter of a literary figure allowed her to grow up in a socio-cultural circle that awakened her interests and enabled her to attend social events, write, compose music, and even see her creations published.

As far as her musical output is concerned, we must understand Marie Mennessier-Nodier's legacy as part of women's salon entertainment. To begin with, the artist herself did not receive a thorough musical education imparted by some great master, nor did she attend any formal educational establishment; therefore, the musical notions she received were those usually granted to girls from good families to "finish" their cultural preparation and to perform gracefully in the salons. This is precisely the context in which the songs she composed should be understood, among which the most noteworthy are those making up her set *Mémoires romantiques*

As we have already explained, from a technical point of view, the pieces contained in *Mémoires romantiques* are simple songs, both in terms of texture and harmony, and do not follow some of the basic rules found in treatises on canonical music theory; thus, these songs are a distant cry from the *Lieder* of high culture. Given the absence of newspaper references to any public performance, we must assume that *Mémoires romantiques* did not appear on the programmes of concerts held in prestigious halls; nevertheless, the fact that there is an early edition of the work from 1831 and that the contemporary media took note of it, leads us to surmise that it could surely have been a great success in salon entertainment, either in the leisurely intimacy of the home or as part of a performance during a social gathering. Therefore, the *Lieder* legacy of Marie Mennessier-Nodier presented here should be

valued as an element of artistic creation without intellectual pretensions, but with an obvious sociological value: it is a vestige that may have been highly representative of the history of everyday life in a specific place and time.

At present, there are many women dedicated to music, from academic and popular composition to performance, management, research, and teaching at different educational levels. In the future, most of their names will be relegated to anonymity, whilst only a few—those associated with high culture—will be remembered. However, the work all these women carry out across every field remains admirable, for they contribute to the culture of our time. Let us value these efforts so they do not suffer the contempt that other women, such as Marie Mennessier-Nodier, have experienced for centuries, despite their important contributions to the microhistory of their time.

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