

Women Composers for the Organ

from 1730 to 1968

This selection of music for the organ by women composers barely scratches the surface of not only what has been written in the past but, hopefully, will draw attention to what is being written by women now. The repertoire is enormous and we deprive ourselves if we fail to explore it. The Society of Women Organists maintain an extremely useful website where there is an exhaustive list of female composers for the organ: <https://www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk/women-composers>

de Gambarini, Elisabetta (1730-1765) UK

Sonata 2 in D major: Grazioso - Allegro moderato
from *Six Sets of Lessons for the Harpsichord* Op. 1 (Pub. London, 1748)

Elisabetta de Gambarini's father was an Italian nobleman and her mother was also of noble birth and from Dalmatia. Elisabetta was well known as a singer (she sang in the first performance of Handel's Judas Maccabaeus), organist and harpsichordist. Her *Six Sets of Lessons* (written whilst she was still a teenager) for the Harpsichord was the first published keyboard composition in England and the list of subscribers included Handel and Geminiani.

Bon, Anna (1739-67) Russia/Italy

Sonata 4 in C major: Allegro/Allegro assai
from *Six Harpsichord Sonatas* Op. 2 (Pub. Norimberga, 1757)

Anna Bon was born in Russia but in 1743, at the age of four, she was admitted to the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice as a tuition-paying pupil. By 1756 she rejoined her parents in Bayreuth where they were in the service of Margrave Friedrich of Brandenburg. The family moved to the court at Esterhazy in 1762 and here she wrote the *Six Harpsichord Sonatas*, dedicated to the Princess of Saxe-Weimar, Ernestina Augusta Sophia. She is believed to have died in 1767.

Cecil, Theophania (1782-1879) UK
Voluntary No. 1 in F minor/major: Largo - Andante
from *Twelve Voluntaries for Organ* (Pub. London, 1810)

Theophania Cecil's father, Richard, was the minister of St. John's Chapel, Bedford Row in London from 1780 until his death in 1810. Theophania was organist of this church for many years, although she was unhappy with the installation in 1821 of a new three-manual organ by Henry Cephas Lincoln, allegedly because of the failure of Lincoln to provide her, as organist, with the then customary 'backhander'. This organ was removed in 1858 to Thaxted Parish Church where it has remained ever since and has been recently completely restored by Goetze and Gwynn. Theophania's *Twelve Voluntaries* are contemporaneous with those of William Russell and feature some of the earliest English pedal parts with some movements being written on three, rather than two, staves. This first voluntary features crossed hands, with solos for bassoon and sequialtera stops

Schumann, Clara (1819-96)

Germany

Prelude and Fugue in D minor

from *Three Preludes and Fugues* Op. 16 (Pub. Leipzig, 1845)

Born Clara Wieck, she made her concert debut as a pianist at the Leipzig Gewandhaus in 1828 at the age of nine and until her final concert appearance in 1891 was considered one of the foremost pianists of her generation. Despite her father's strenuous opposition, she married Robert Schumann at the age of twenty-one. Following his death in 1856 she maintained a close relationship with Johannes Brahms. Her compositions have invariably been overshadowed by those of her husband but in recent years her considerable gifts have begun to be properly recognised. The shadow of Bach looms large in this very fine Prelude and Fugue.

Stirling, Elizabeth (1819-95)

UK

Largo in Ab major

from *Eight Movements and Six Pedal Fugues* (Pub. London, 1857)

Elizabeth Stirling was a remarkably gifted organist, playing all the major organ works of Bach at a time when many organs still had no pedals and, perhaps more to the point, many organists being unable or unwilling to play the pedals even when provided. The surviving programmes of her recitals reveal a musician of impeccable taste and virtuosic technique. She was appointed organist of All Saints Church, Poplar in 1839 and remained here until 1858 when she was the successful competitor for a similar position at St. Andrew Undershaft, where she remained until 1880. Her *Eight Movements and Six Pedal Fugues* are challenging for even accomplished performers to this day.

Mounsey, Elizabeth (1819-1905)

UK

An Old Christmas Carol, varied for the Organ (Pub. London, c. 1860)

Elizabeth Mounsey was appointed organist of St. Peter's, Cornhill in 1834, at the age of fourteen, remaining there until increasing deafness led to her retirement in 1882. Her *Variations on An Old Christmas Carol* (God rest ye merry, gentlemen) are dedicated to James Turle, organist of Westminster Abbey. They show remarkable variety and are notable for the unexpectedly downbeat close of the final variation.

Boulay, Josephine (1869-1925)

France

Prélude (from *Trois Pièces*) (Pub. Paris, c. 1900)

Despite being blind from the age of three Josephine Boulay was the first woman to win the first prize in organ performance at the Paris Conservatoire in 1888, having studied with César Franck and Jules Massenet. She went on to win first prize in the composition class of Gabriel Fauré in 1897. She taught piano, organ, composition and harmony at the National Institution for the Blind for thirty-seven years.

There is a wistful delicacy about the *Prélude* from the *Trois Pièces* which is reminiscent of her teacher César Franck (particularly his *Pastorale*) although it is dedicated to Massenet.

Chaminade, Cécile (1857-1944)

France

Prélude in D minor, Op. 78 (Pub. Paris 1895)

Cécile Chaminade was not only a highly successful pianist, whose performances we can still hear today through the medium of CD transcriptions of the many piano rolls which she made, but also a popular composer. Her fame faded during the second half of the twentieth century although her most celebrated composition, the Flute Concertino of 1902 has kept her name alive. Today there is a revival of interest in her compositions.

She received many honours, including Queen Victoria's Jubilee Medal in 1897 and the *Légion d'honneur*. The *Prélude in D minor* was performed at Victoria's funeral service (at the monarch's request).

Boulanger, Nadia (1887-1979)

France

Petit Canon - Improvisation

from *Trois Improvisations* (Pub. Paris 1912)

Arguably the most significant musical teacher of the twentieth century, it would be easier to list those composers who were *not* taught by Nadia Boulanger, rather than those who were (ranging from Lennox Berkeley and Aaron Copland to Quincy Jones). In addition, she was a fine pianist and a sufficiently brilliant organist to give the first performance of Copland's Symphony for Organ and Orchestra. She wrote little after 1922, concentrating her efforts on teaching and performance. The *Trois Improvisations* are chromatic and show some influence of Debussy, but in many ways, they form a unique corner of the repertoire

Smyth, Ethel (1858-1944)

UK

a) Prelude on *O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid*

b) Choral Prelude: *Erschienen ist der herrlich' Tag*

from *Five Chorale Preludes* (Pub. London, 1913)

Probably best remembered as a committed suffragist, unafraid to take direct action for which she was imprisoned in Holloway, Ethel Smyth's list of compositions is impressive, comprising many orchestral works, a Mass in D and the operas *The Wreckers* and *The Boatswain's Mate*. The *Five Chorale Preludes* owe a deal to her musical education in Leipzig and her admiration for the music of Brahms but in no sense are they mere pastiche: the intensity, craft and seriousness of purpose mark them out as being almost without parallel (along with the slightly later chorale preludes by Parry).

Chrétien, Hedwige (1859-1944)

France

Musette

Marche des Pèlerins

from *Harmonies Religieuses* (Pub. Paris, 1922)

A prize-winning student at the Paris Conservatoire, Hedwige Chrétien was appointed a professor there from 1889. She was a prolific composer of two ballets and two operas as well as a large number of chamber, choral, instrumental and vocal works.

Little is known of her life but, judging from this small selection from her organ and harmonium music, she was a fluent and memorable composer.

Labole, Germaine (1896-1942)

France

Prélude

from: *Symphonie in B minor* (Pub. Paris, 1940)

How I wish that we knew more about Germaine Labole! A pupil of Marcel Dupré, she was organist of St. Martial, Bordeaux and, if her two published works (this *Symphonie* and a *Triptych*, both for organ) are anything to go by, a composer of considerable stature. The *Symphonie* is technically difficult but extremely fine. The four movements (Prélude, Fugue, Aria and Final) are united by the simple theme stated at the opening of the *Prélude*. The music has that indefinable quality which demands attention and, at the same time, manages to be both memorable and very beautiful. Of all the pieces in this programme, Labole's *Symphonie* is the one which really strikes home as a little-known masterpiece worthy of anyone's time. The theme at the start of the *Prélude* glues the whole *Symphonie* together.

Beach, Amy (1867-1944)

America

Prelude on an old folk tune (*The Fair Hills of Eire, O*) (Pub. New York, 1943)

The music of Amy Beach has recently undergone a revival. Her *Gaelic Symphony* of 1896 was the first American symphony by a female composer to be published and performed and her *Piano Concerto in C# minor* of 1898/9 has been recorded as has much of her solo piano and chamber music. The early works are unashamedly romantic but in later life she adopted more modernist tendencies and her interest in folk, Inuit and Native American music becomes increasingly woven into her own compositions. The late *Prelude on an old folk tune* is quite simply lovely and highly individual.

Price, Florence (1887-1953)

America

Adoration (Pub. Dayton, 1951)

Three Little (Negro) Dances: *Hoe Cake, Rabbit Foot, Ticklin' Toes*

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Florence Price was a pioneer in several ways: the first African American woman to be recognised as a major symphonic composer (she wrote four symphonies), it was not until 2009 that a large number of her more than 300 compositions was discovered at her abandoned summer home. After study at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston she returned to Arkansas and taught briefly at Atlanta before being appointed head of music at Clark Atlanta University. Racial tensions in the state led to her and her family moving to Chicago in 1927 where she was able to devote herself to further study and composition. Four years later she divorced her abusive husband and became a single mother of her two daughters.

Florence had a tough life (she and her second husband separated in 1934) but she was acclaimed as an important composer during her lifetime and, after a period of neglect, her music is now starting to receive the attention it deserves. *Adoration* is a late work and has a simple beauty about it. Perhaps more typical of Florence's style are the *Three Little (Negro) Dances* of 1933. Written originally for the piano, they actually work surprisingly well on the organ.

Demessieux, Jeanne (1921-68)

France

- a) *Rorate caeli* (Advent)
- b) *Adeste fideles* (Christmas)
- c) *Attende Domine* (Lent)
- d) *Hosanna Filio David* (Palm Sunday)
- e) *O filii et filiae* (Easter)
- f) *Veni, Creator* (Pentecost)

from: *Twelve Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Themes* (Pub. Santa Monica, 1950)

Arguably the most technically brilliant organist of the twentieth century, Jeanne Demessieux was famed for playing in high heels and has left a rich legacy of superb recordings. A pupil of Marcel Dupré, for reasons which now seem trivial, he fell out spectacularly with his most gifted pupil, much to her great sadness. The Parisian organ world of the early and mid 'twenties was a hotbed of jealousies and rivalries in which Demessieux found herself cast in the role of unfortunate victim. (If you want to understand just how stunning a performer she was, listen to her performance of *Octaves* from her *Six Etudes* Op.5).

Her compositional output was small and most of the organ works are challenging to say the least but the *Twelve Chorale Preludes on Gregorian Themes* are within the capabilities of those of us not blessed with the composer's technical genius. More to the point, the collection is a delightful treasure-trove of deeply profound miniatures which reveal so much of her musical personality. There is wit, subtlety, humour and perfection of craft in each of them. Jeanne Demessieux suffered from poor health for most of her life and died far too soon of throat cancer.

Adrian Self - June 2025