

Quest for Women's Place in Music History: Composer Emilie Mayer (1812-1883)

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Abstract

In this paper, I will explore the identity and biography of Emilie Mayer (1812-1883), one of the successful German composers of the 19th century in the European classical music scene. Despite facing the gender biases prevalent in her time, Mayer achieved significant success in her career. Her music was performed across Western Europe and in the largest and most prestigious halls in Berlin. Critics in Berlin's newspapers stated that 'symphony composer Emilie Mayer was on an equal footing with her male colleagues' (Vossische Zeitung, 1858). Her exceptional career during this period was distinct from that of most other female composers' lives. However, after her death, her name has suddenly disappeared. Today, her place in the context of classical music history is barely visible. The classical music world today still struggles to acknowledge women's contributions. In concert repertoires worldwide, over 87% of compositions were written by white men (Donne, 2022). Through an analysis of her major works and their reception, this paper sheds light on Mayer's contributions to classical music and the obstacles she overcame. Additionally, it examines the broader context of gender disparity in the classical music world, drawing on feminist music research to contextualize Mayer's achievements. The purpose of my research is to highlight the importance of reevaluating historical narratives to include influential women composers who have been marginalized in music history. This paper contributes to the growing body of scholarly work aimed at recognizing and celebrating the achievements of women in classical music, offering new perspectives on 19th-century music history and its enduring legacy.

Keywords: Biographical Research; Female composer; Feminist Music Research; Woman's success; 19th-Century Classical Music History