

Women *In* Music

Piano Music Written For One Hand By Women Composers: Part I

By Adrienne E. Wiley, NCTM

In the spring of 2011, I was able to finally enjoy a sabbatical, due in part because I selected a genre I am really interested in: piano music for one hand. Furthermore, I decided everyone knew the standard repertoire by male composers, such as Scriabin and Brahms, to name a few, thus my proposal was to investigate, study and practice works for one hand written by women composers.

The challenges that confronted me during my research were quite interesting. Often times biographical information on composers was either very sketchy or did not exist; acquiring some music scores resulted in dead ends: some publishing houses and companies folded and did not continue their music with another company; many of the pieces I found were permanently out of print; and finally, using my university's interlibrary loan service found scores, however certain universities deemed them permanently unavailable for lending.

With the help of several sources, I found 91 women composers who wrote piano music for the left and/or right hand alone, respectively. In no particular order, these women are from Great Britain, Switzerland, Argentina, Bucharest, Canada, Austria, Germany, Australia, France, Wales and the United States. Also, the majority of the pieces written by

these composers are for the early- to late-intermediate pianist, with some works for the advanced concert pianist.

Before delving into the composers and their music, I would like to share just a few historical comments with respect to women, society and music. Jeannie Poole's book *Women in Music History: A Research Guide* was a valuable reference that explained the long-standing "traditions" of music study and music making by women from the earliest point in history to the present. The first available piece of piano music for one hand, written by a woman, dates from the romantic era, and thus my comments will begin there.

During the romantic era, women were often chastised for studying and composing music seriously—these remarks were made, as Poole pointed out by some of the most famous composers and pianists of the day, such as Chopin, Liszt and Tchaikovsky, to name a few—even though these composers taught quite a few women! Many articles appeared between the 1880s and 1930s that announced the failures of women as musicians and composers, and also questioned whether women really had any rights to being one of these entities. Interestingly, George T. Ladd's article on "Why Women Cannot Compose" (early 1900s) cites numerous reasons women can **not** compose:

1. Lack of ability.
2. Those who tried, didn't do it well.
3. Women composers who are not listed in critically acclaimed research catalogs are obviously not important.
4. Musical talent is inherited only by boys.
5. Men are natural musicians.
6. If anyone is a genius, HE is born with it.

We certainly can laugh a bit about these statements, however at the time, these were common thought and practice.

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While it *is* true is that many women musicians or composers started with the intent of making music their entire profession, they often ended their career in this field when they married and had children, or it became of lesser importance—for example, playing their instrument in their house for family and friends rather than concertizing. Karin Pendel’s book *Women and Music: A History* cites several social and cultural changes that greatly affected women in a positive way, thus affording them the opportunities to be a serious, full-time musician or composer. For example, the advent of urbanization and industrialization allowed women to enter the work forces, thus putting them on nearly “equal” footing with men. Feminist movements in England and the states allowed women to gain access to jobs and education, thus narrowing the divide between the abilities of men versus women. By the 1880s, women could “take charge” of and had access to birth control, thus allowing them more control over the number of children they might have and how that might affect their creative endeavors. The advent of World War I gave women the opportunity to sport shorter hair-styles, shorter skirts (which, by the way, gave them more freedom of movement), plus the chance to try out makeup in a civilized way. At that time, makeup was often “mis-used” and this was noted with respect to the “looser woman.”

While these changes were occurring gradually, it should be noted that at least during the 1880s and for a time thereafter, the typical woman musician/composer came from a middle- to upper-class family. The home environment and family was encouraging for the study and pursuit of education. Some of these women composers continued successfully in the music field, but many also opted for “recreational music making” in the house when the demands of being a wife and/or mother took precedence.

We will remember that, for the most part and for many years, the ideal woman and wife was one who was seen and not heard. She was, however, “heard” by those who would admire her skills as a seamstress, dancer, amateur artist and, of course, a musician—one who could provide music for and in the home, thus becoming the “angel in the house.” That being said, we also will find that in America, especially after the turn of the century, women were demanding better educational opportunities and musical instruction—not just for themselves, but for their children as well.

Returning to the mid-1880s, we find that post-secondary schools, meaning colleges/universities/conservatories, were rapidly becoming established in America. And, even more interesting was that they were open to and accepting women into their programs. The Crane Normal Institute of Music (Potsdam, founded 1886) was the first music school in the country to offer teacher training, especially for female public school teachers. Prior to that, following the Civil War, Oberlin opened in 1865, the New England Conservatory of Music in 1867, the Peabody Institute in 1868, the National Conservatory of New York in 1885—all offering a high caliber of training in music for women.

These conservatories hired in some of the best European teachers to be their staff, and women were admitted into their programs just as if it was the “normal” thing to do. The opportunity was there for women and they were grabbing onto it with zeal. This was only the beginning... It would still take a long while for women to be considered near equals as composers and musicians, but it was a start.

The history and background of women, society and music fills volumes of books, but hopefully this provides enough of a summary of the historical and social values that were in play at a time when many of these women were writing their music. It must also be said that there were many successful women composers and/or performers who juggled family, teaching, performing and composing. The most often-recognized women are Clara Schumann and Fanny Mendelssohn in the mid-19th century, and later, Teresa Carreno and Amy Beach in the early 20th century. These women were able to overcome, to a certain degree, the stereotypes and stigmatism of their day and succeed in their own right as performers and composers.

For the first part of this article, I have selected composers who were born before 1900 and their contributions to the genre. Some of these women’s works were published after 1900, and most often these composers were writing single pieces. From the mid-19th century, to the early 20th century, a lot of sheet music was generated, more often for the amateur pianist. There will be, however, occasional composers who produced small collections. Lastly, there will be several composers whose music is not available. It should be recognized, however, that their musical endeavors were significant at a time when what they were doing was not considered “in sync” with the social norms.

Yvonne Madeline Adair (1870–1990) was a British pianist, composer and teacher. She was a member of and teacher at the Royal Conservatory of Music, London, where she taught rhythmic and aural training to music teachers throughout the London area. In addition to her teaching pieces for piano, she also wrote for voice, percussion and miscellaneous instruments. Her *Three Preludes for the Left Hand Alone* (1930), the first notable collection of teaching pieces, are written for the early-intermediate pianist. These short, but attractive pieces offer the challenges of arpeggio playing and changes of register in the first prelude, balancing melody over the chordal accompaniment in the second prelude, and playing scalar passagework that tucks the thumb under in the melody in the third prelude. These pieces are timeless in style and sound, and are a solid pedagogical work.



Example 1: Prelude Number I.



Example 2: Prelude Number II.



Example 3: Prelude Number III.

Crosby Adams, also known as Juliette Graves (1858–1951) is an important figure in early American music history. Her *Left Hand Studies* are unfortunately out of print, however her stature as an early piano pedagogue is well worth citing. She was born and raised on a farm in New York, where she enjoyed nature. During her early studies, Adams became acquainted with the music of Edward MacDowell, a relationship that would surface later. She began the piano at age 7 and was soon playing for church services as a young lady, and became a resident teacher at Ingham University, New York. Adams would eventually become nationally recognized as a teacher, composer, author and lecturer. She was best known for her pioneering work in piano literature for beginners. Adams believed young pianists needed material specifically designed for their hand size, and she also believed in cultivating the musical tastes of young people. Adams and her husband not only established the Crosby Music School in Chicago (1892), but they also became active in the Montreat College Music Department, North Carolina. Her association with the Sigma Alpha Iota MacDowell Colony afforded her an opportunity to construct a similar environment at Montreat. While at Montreat, she established summer teacher's classes and held open chorus and music rehearsals. In addition to these activities, she held executive positions in Music Teachers National Association and the National Federated Music Clubs. Her contribution to the genre is the *Left Hand Studies, Op. 7* (Clayton/Summy). Two other significant musical contributions survive: *Recent Developments in Teaching Children to Play the Piano* (1923), and *What the Piano Writings of Edward MacDowell Mean to the Piano Student*. Even though her left-hand music does not survive, the attitude toward and mission of her life was to instill good music for children and music making for all.

Louise Alpha le Beau (1850–1927) was born in Germany. Her father was a general in the army of Duchy Baden, but he was also an amateur singer and conductor. It was from him that she learned to sing tunes and was able to recite them back at age 4—before le Beau ever learned to speak.

She received training on the violin, piano, voice and theory in her early years, and her first composition dates from age 15. Interestingly, le Beau was a student of Hans von Buelow, and also, briefly, of Clara Schumann. (In her memoirs le Beau re-counts that the relationship with Schumann was “not a good match.”) She made her debut at age 18 playing the *Emperor Concerto* and Mendelssohn’s *Concerto in D Minor*. During the period of 1874, le Beau began to flourish as a composer, writing works in all genres, but with particular interest in violin and piano. She made extensive tours as a performer meeting up with Brahms, Liszt and Hanslick. Her writing style was strong, well-constructed, and often relied upon and used strict sonata form. Her works embraced most genres, except for symphonic and opera. Only 36 of le Beau’s works have been published, and even though there is no specific citation of a one-handed work, there is reference to that fact that she indeed wrote one. Of particular interest is that in 1910, le Beau published her own memoirs where she spoke to how difficult it was to be a female composer and musician in her day and the obstacles she had to overcome to continue her passion and profession. Even though her music has not survived, le Beau indicated a need for women to champion and push for equal opportunities as composers, musicians and professionals in their field.

Bernice Bentley (1887–1971) was an American pianist and composer. She was born and raised in Oskaloosa, Iowa, and attended Grinnell College. She continued her studies under Mary Wood Chase in Chicago, where she settled down to teach. Her *Four Compositions for the Left Hand: “A Happy Heart,” “Just a-foolin’,” “Prince Fairy Foot”* and “Vagrant Breeze” are published by CF Summy. Sadly these are unavailable today. They mark a brief entry, one of very few, of early teaching pieces written for the lower-elementary student.

Anne Mathilde Bilbro (1870–1958) was an American composer. Born in Alabama, her early training is not known, however she continued her studies in piano and composition at the Women’s College of Alabama, graduating in 1896. She was known as a “children’s musician.” In the December 1939 issue of the *Etude Magazine*, John Thompson stated:

The very name of Bilbro always amounts to the stamp of approval on a piano piece. Miss Bilbro has contributed countless fine things to the piano educational literature, and her grateful admirers among piano teachers are legion. Not only has she a real gift for writing, but one can always be sure that she is in sympathy with the piano teacher and this is reflected in her writing.

She published more than 600 works, primarily in the music education field. In addition, she wrote works for theater, operettas, music for plays, songs and other pieces. Her two works for one hand alone are the *Melody in D-flat Major* (Boston), and the *Two Friends* (G. Schirmer). Both of these pieces are unavailable, however, her stature in the

field of piano and music teaching, as witnessed by Thompson, should not go unnoticed.

Sophie Carmen Eckhardt Grammatte (1899–1974) was born in Russia. Her mother was a student of Anton and Nicholas Rubinstein and was a music instructor at the house of Tolstoy. Grammatte's early life was a bit frantic: her mother married Nicholas de Friedmann, and then separated from him when Sophie was born. She was terrified that her husband would steal Sophie, so she packed her off to England to live with foster-parents for four years. Grammatte returned at age 8 to enter the Paris Conservatoire studying the violin (of which she had no prior study) and piano. Her progress was amazing. At age 11, she premiered as a pianist and violinist, playing the *Kreutzer* sonata (there is no notation as to what she performed on the piano). Grammatte and her family, which included a sister, moved back to Berlin where she supported them by playing in cafes. She was noticed by the daughter-in-law of Joseph Joachim and was invited to receive violin lessons from him. Grammatte gave frequent recitals in the Berlin area. Later, as her travels took her out of Berlin, she became a mentor to Pablo Casals (1924–1926), and during this period, Leopold Stokowski heard of her versatility as a performer on both the piano and violin. After 1930, however, she gave up performing for composing, and she would continue to compose up until her death. Grammatte was married to Ferdinand Eckhardt, and they eventually became naturalized citizens of Canada. Of her 175 compositions, many are quite fiery and exhibit a strong sense of romanticism. Her *Piano Sonata No. 6* (1952) features the first movement for the left hand alone, the second movement for the right hand alone, and the last movement combines both hands. The first movement is highly chromatic, yet it suggests a tonal center to it. It is linear and very etude-like in the passagework. The second movement opens with a theme, stated in one line, which serves as a stark contrast of simplicity prior to the start of the actual piece. The right hand is again, highly linear and moves all across the range of the keyboard. You will not find a direct reference to the aforementioned theme: Grammatte has woven this theme into the fabric of highly serial-based material. The last movement combines both the first and second movement's thematic materials and is written for two hands. This piece is an amazing gem of craftsmanship: highly musical and intense subject matter comprise this work and make it a unique, one-of-a-kind piece. Many of Grammatte's compositions are archived and held in the Canadian Music Centre. Works that date from post-1950 tend to exhibit more 12-tone and serial techniques. She died in a car accident in 1974.

S.C. Eckhardt-Grammatte
Berlin 1928

Restissimo e molto preciso

Moderato. (free improvised.)
(THEME.)

mf non legato
Gay and joyously

1st and 2nd movement overlaid one into the other, together.

Fro assai e marcato

Example 4: *Piano Sonata No. 6.*

Ella Ketterer (1889–1981) was born and raised in Camden, New Jersey. Her father was a musician, but beyond this, there is no documentation regarding where she received her early training, whether from him or another teacher in the area. It is noted, however, that she studied with Constantine von Sternburg, the director of the Sternberg School of Music in New Jersey. Ketterer would write more than 100 compositions and two educational books. Her musical output covered a plethora of genres including piano, voice, orchestra, chamber, organ, sacred, operetta, theatre, multi-media works and arrangements. Her *Adventures in Piano Technique*, *Book of Piano Pieces*, *Share the Fun* (piano, four-hand) and *On a Summer Night* are just a few of the educational piano pieces she wrote. The *Valse Melodique* (for right or left hand), for the early-elementary pianist, was published by Theodore Presser. It is the only work for one hand that she wrote, and unfortunately it is out of print.

Carrie William Krogman (1860–1943) was born and raised in America, and eventually resided in the Boston area. She was a pianist, composer and teacher. Krogman wrote several pieces for one hand, all, regrettably, out of print. There are: *Three Morceaux, Op. 90*: “Viennese Waltz,”

“March Heroique” and “Love Poem”; *Two Waltz Episodes*, Op. 81; and *Berceuse*, Op. 99. Her writing style would be in the late-romantic, somewhat parlor-salon style.

Miss Minnie Reese (yes, that is really her name!) was an American pianist and composer. While there are no birth or death dates, nor place of origins listed for her, her piece *Fantasy on Lily Dale* (1874) is the earliest American composition for one hand. Dedicated to Miss Julia Safford, it features an improvisatory-like opening, unrelated to the actual material to come and then the remainder of the piece is the melody embellished with arpeggiations and jump-bass chords. The actual tune, “Lilly Dale,” was written by H.S. Thompson in 1852. This tune was popular in America during the 1850s and played all over in dance and concert halls. Needless to say, the words and spirit of the piece speak of a once-young, beautiful female, who ultimately meets her fate, and her beauty and spirit will be remembered for years to come. The concluding cadenza features the A-flat major arpeggio, played several times over in different inversions, investing in the entire range of the keyboard.



Example 5: *Fantasy on Lily Dale*.

Anna Renfer (1896–?) was a Swiss composer. There is very little information, if any, about her. Suffice it to say that her *Klavierstudien for the Left Hand* is the only piano work that was published and has survived. This collection is grounded in neo-classical style only for the sake of using “old” forms: it opens with a brief fanfare (one line), followed by a “gallarde,” “rondeau,” “allemande,” “menuet,” “sarabande,” “air” and “gigue.” It is for the advanced pianist and was published sometime mid-20th century. While she draws from the old suite form, this collection is highly dissonant and suggestive of 12-tone. It almost seems as if it was written as an exercise of some kind, but unfortunately I

do not have any documentation to support that. It would be a worthwhile piece to study; however, a “normal” audience would not appreciate its worth.

Grace Vamos (1989–1992) was a native of San Francisco and resided in Berkley for many years. She studied cello and toured with the “Trio Moderne” (harp, flute and cello) for which she arranged much of the music they performed. Her early education is very sketchy, but later it was noted that she obtained a scholarship to study at the Fontainebleau School of Music in France with Damrosch. Later on, Vamos continued her studies with Zoltán Kodály. She received several awards, notably the Sigma Alpha Iota award for her *Suite for Cello and Piano*. She established the Grace Vamos National Cello Competition and the Grace Becker Vamos Scholarship for Promising Students. Her only surviving piece, *A Memory* (1986) is only available from Grace Vamos Publications, which does not seem to exist today.

In closing, it has been a privilege to discover these works. Each composer, in their own right, has made a contribution to the genre, whether big or small, and has, to a certain degree, defied the odds at doing what they were supposed to not do. This music deserves a place on the shelves of libraries, and teaching shelves of piano teachers alike. Part II will follow up with composers born in the 20th century. ♪

Notes

1. Adair. *Three Preludes*. Stainer and Bell. Used by permission of the publisher.
2. Grammatte. *Canadian Music Centre*. Used by permission of the publisher.
3. Reese. *Library of Congress Archives*. Used by kind permission.

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