

Remarkable Music We've Overlooked: A Look at 17th and 18th Century Music by Women  
Composers Featuring Violin  
By Elana Cooper

Historical performance has been a place to play lesser-known or forgotten works in addition to finding new understandings of familiar composers. We can continue to find and play works by lesser-known composers such as women composers in addition to those that are well-known. Compositions by female composers from the baroque and classical eras are often lost, destroyed, or at the very least forgotten. In an article about the 18th century composer and musician, Maddalena Laura Lombardini Sirmen, Marion M. Scott writes "Maddalena's compositions lie in the dust of libraries."<sup>1</sup> Today, the dust is being wiped from Sirmen's works as her music is being played again. I use online resources such as *Donne The Big List* as well as scholarly articles, books, and presentations and research done by music scholars who program and present works by underrepresented composers to create a program of baroque and classical pieces by women composers accompanied by program notes giving context and information about the composers and music. These are pieces that I may not otherwise play in my studies as they are not yet part of the standard violin repertoire. My bibliography will be useful when programming chamber music concerts in the future.

I will explore some of the factors that likely helped women composers have success as composers/performers and have their music published in the late 17th-18th centuries by looking at composers Elizabeth Jacquet de la Guerre, Maddalena Laura Lombardini Sirmen, and Francesca Lebrun. Many women composers came from musical families as is the case of Jacquet

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<sup>1</sup> Marion M Scott, "Maddalena Lombardini, Madame Syrmen," *Music & Letters* 14, no. 2 (1933): 154, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/728914>.

de la Guerre and Lebrun, and/or married into a musical family as is the case of all three of these examples. Lombardini-Sirmen also had a connection to the Mendicanti Ospedali where she studied and later performed and taught.<sup>2</sup> Julie Anne Sadie touches on this in chapter 8 of *Women Making Music “Musiciennes of the Ancien Régime”* writing that “Those who, like Jacquet and Candeille, came from bourgeois musical families stood the best chance of making their way in the musical life of Paris...The absence in the profession of women lacking such family connections can only mean that a middle-class woman, unlike her male counterpart, had no entrée on the grounds of talent alone.”<sup>3</sup>

I will also research the musical styles of the time period and location of each composer and piece and ask if the piece reflects those styles or not. The introduction to *Women Making Music* edited by Jane Bowers and Judith Tick addresses this question, suggesting that women composers often stayed in the old styles because “they were excluded from the professional positions that engendered new developments.”<sup>4</sup> Bowers and Tick also suggest that this lack of initiative towards new styles is one of the reasons women have mostly been ignored.<sup>5</sup> In creating historically informed performances of this music, I will take into consideration the country of composition, where the composer was trained and working, instrumentation, and interpretation possibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Rose-Marie Johnson, compiled, *Violin Music by Women Composers A Bio-Bibliographical Guide* (The University of Michigan: Greenwood Press, 1989), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, ed. *Women Making Music The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, (University of Illinois Press, 1986), 200.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

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