



four brilliant women - four untold stories

EMILIE MAYER

FANNY HENSEL

LILI BOULANGER

MEL BONIS



Women Composers

a cinematic search for their lives
in music by

KYRA STECKEWEH & TIM VAN BEVEREN

featuring: DR. BEATRIX BORCHARD • CHRISTINE GÉLIOT • DR. JÖRG KUHN • MARY ELLEN KITCHENS
LAURENT MARTIN • INGRID MAYER • TOBIAS NIEDERSCHLAG • DR. ALMUT RUNGE-WOLL • SUSANNE
WOSNITZKA • REINHARD WULFHORST Dramaturgy: IVAN SALAJ Camera: NILS LIEBHEIT • TIM VAN BEVEREN
Sound: JONATHAN DRIES • MAX HEILIGER • ALEXANDER NOTTNY Graphics: HARALD SCHRÖDER Editing: KAMIL
GOERLICH • RITA WALLY • TIM VAN BEVEREN Sound-Mix: JONATHAN DRIES Legal Consultant: DR. ANDREAS BEHR
Coproducer: KLARA VIEBAHN - München Executive Producer: TVBMEDIA PRODUCTIONS - Berlin
Producers: KYRA STECKEWEH • TIM VAN BEVEREN

www.women-composers.com

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MEL BONIS
(1858-1937)

EMILIE MAYER
(1812 - 1883)

FANNY HENSEL
(1805 - 1847)

LILI BOULANGER
(1893-1918)

SYNOPSIS

The film **“Women Composers”** highlights the historical and personal circumstances under which these four remarkable women created their works in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Together with Berlin filmmaker **Tim van Beveren**, pianist **Kyra Steckeweh** commences a quest for information, which leads them to France, Italy, Poland, and Germany. During their expert interviews, the film team manages to not only elicit noteworthy aspects of the composers’ lives and works but also discusses to which extent the legacy of the composers has been preserved and why their music is performed so rarely.

When Leipzig pianist Kyra Steckeweh realised that her repertoire almost exclusively consisted of music composed by men, she began searching for pieces written by female composers. Her research in archives, libraries, and publishing houses quickly brought to light a variety of remarkable piano pieces that have been buried in history and rarely performed.

She sees a lot of catching up to do, which is why the focus of her piano recitals has since shifted to the music of women composers. At the beginning of 2016 her album, „En dehors“, with piano works by Mel Bonis and Lili Boulanger, was released and in 2017 she recorded another album with piano works by Fanny Hensel and Emilie Mayer. With these releases she has brought to our attention and delight four very different composers, all of whom left a diverse body of work.

In addition to the in-depth examination of the music, Steckeweh, as a pianist and historian, seeks to look „behind the notes“: How did these women live? What barriers did they have to overcome and how did they manage to cope with the obstacles of their time?

At the piano she skilfully revives the music of Mel Bonis, Lili Boulanger, Fanny Hensel and Emilie Mayer, making the viewer feel almost personally acquainted with these remarkable composers.

Since its release in Summer 2018 the film has been awarded twice as **„best documentary feature“** and **„best film directed by a woman about women“** in the USA.

BACKGROUND

Worldwide, women and men have been on an equal footing for about 70 years - on paper, set forth in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. However, this notion of equality is not reflected in the concert canon of the so-called „serious“ music. The oeuvre of the great male composers is held in such high esteem that women composers appear as marginal notes at most. Steckeweh is convinced that it is time to initiate a change and to apply our present ideal of equal rights to the canon of classical music.

The reasons that made it difficult for women composers of the past to thrive in their profession are apparent: Women were not considered equal to men, neither legally nor socially, and attracted public attention only in exceptional cases. All the more astonishing is the strong will of women like Mel Bonis, Lili Boulanger, Fanny Hensel, and Emilie Mayer to enforce their musical influence and to compose and disseminate their work even under the most challenging circumstances. One can certainly say that, although these women's lives were quite different from one another, all of them were privileged in their own ways.

THE PROTAGONISTS

Mel Bonis was initially allowed to play the piano in order to increase her value on the matrimonial market, and she was quite fortunate when family friends enabled her to attend the Parisian 'Conservatoire'. In addition, her work as a composer was fuelled by the fact that her parents managed to find her an affluent husband. Free from financial hardships, Mel Bonis practiced music as a pleasant pastime, soon producing and disseminating her own compositions. Still, practicing music as a profession was unthinkable for a woman, which eventually led to Mélanie Bonis changing her first name into „Mel“ in an attempt to blur her gender in front of potential publishers.

Fanny Hensel came from the famous Jewish Mendelssohn family. She received the same musical education as her younger brother Felix and was completely equal to him in terms of her musical talent. In their Berlin home the family regularly hosted the semi-public „Sunday Music“ concerts which also granted a podium for Fanny's compositions. However, both father and brother had forbidden her to work professionally as a composer and to publish her works. She was fortunate enough to marry the painter Wilhelm Hensel who encouraged her to compose and appreciated her artistic work.

Emilie Mayer is a true exception of her time. The pharmacist's daughter received musical tuition from early on and decided to become a composer when she was almost 30 years old. She remained unmarried and it seems today as if the then-restrictions on women had no powers to harm her. She received support from well-known colleagues and, during her lifetime, was considered a big name in Berlin's music scene. Her works were also successfully performed in many other cities.

Lili Boulanger was born into a highly musical family. Her mother was a singer, her father a composer, and both promoted their daughter's talent from earliest childhood on. In her short life, which was marked by severe illness, she was the first woman to win the „Prix de Rome“. She became an international celebrity almost overnight and many of her works were published during her lifetime by the publisher 'Ricordi'. After her death at the young age of 24, her sister Nadia successfully campaigned for the distribution of her works.



Today, the works of these four composers are rarely performed and, consequently, widely unknown. The aim of this documentary is to awaken the audience and to spark interest in the lives and work of these outstanding women. Through interviews, travelogues, and musical performances, the audience will discover a world beyond the mainstream of classical music.

The movie will take the audience to the centre of life and activity of the composers, as well as to places dedicated to their commemoration. Even though these women are not the subject of pervasive commemorations such as statues in public squares or faces on T-shirts, some monuments of their legacies can be found and will be explored in this atmospheric cinematic journey.

The interview sequences contain contributions of individuals trying to conserve the musical heritage of the composers, adding noteworthy details about the composers' lives and work. Among others, the list of experts interviewed for the movie includes:

- **Christine Géliot** (great-granddaughter of Mel Bonis and author of a Mel Bonis biography)
- **Ingrid Mayer** („discoverer“ of Mel Bonis and translator of her biography)
- **Susanne Wosnitzka** (musicologist and co-worker of the „Archiv Frau und Musik“)
- **Dr. Almut Runge-Woll** (author of the - at the present time - only book about Emilie Mayer)
- **Dr. Reinhard Wulfhorst** (Music Edition Massonneau)
- **Prof. Dr. Beatrix Borchard** (University of Music and Theater Hamburg).
- **Tobias Niederschlag** (Gewandhaus Leipzig)
- **Dr. Jörg Kuhn** (historian)
- **Laurent Martin** (pianist)
- **Mary Ellen Kitchens** (conductor)

The musical focus lies in significant piano works by the four composers. For this film Steckeweh recorded the cycle **„Femmes de Légende“** by Mel Bonis, Lili Boulanger's greatest work for solo piano **„Thème et variations“**, Fanny Hensel's virtuoso **Sonata in G minor** and the previously unpublished **Sonata in D minor** by Emilie Mayer.

By means of visualisations, these works gain a special status in the context of the documentary and are, in addition to the „background music“, a recurrent theme that puts the piano into the cinematic focus. Music, the creation of sound on the piano, is captured with the camera, granting the audience insights which are normally hidden from the eye.



The film „WOMEN COMPOSERS“

a journey into the European past and a discovery of great lost treasures of music and of impressive women as “role models”

Together we have realized several artistic and musical projects and experimental music videos. In the autumn of 2016, we had the idea to visualize biographical details of Mel Bonis and Lili Boulanger, in short clips for Kyras' concerts. I originally estimated a two-day shoot in Paris for two short, five-minute videos. But, that was just the beginning of a thrilling discovery trip and adventure that took us all over Europe. Our heroines are widely unknown to the public. Soon we were convinced that short clips would be inappropriate, since the stories behind the women and their music, were just too exciting.



By studying the biographies of these four very different women it became clear to us how patriarchal our perception still is to this day.

Despite my great interest in classical music, I actually only knew Clara Schumann as a composer. On the other hand I could not imagine that only men would have written classical music. Female singers are recognized in classical music, some are famous and very big stars, but it seems that women who write classical music for an orchestra, or chamber music are seen from a completely different perspective.

In modern music, such as pop, rock and all experimental forms, this changed decades ago and female composers are, in contrast to classical music, completely accepted. Imagine for a moment that, before producing a new CD, Madonna would have to ask her brother's or ex-husband's permission and financial help, in order to get a record company to publish her music on a CD. Then think, how Fanny Hensel must have felt having to ask her brother to allow her to publish her compositions. It is hard to imagine, is it not?

It was interesting to observe how the contacted program makers of all major German concert halls „ducked low“ when we asked them for an interview for our film. Tobias Niederschlag, the executive program director of the „Leipzig Gewandhaus“, was the only one who had the confidence, I would almost say the courage, to face the camera and answer our questions.

On the other hand, we were stunned by some doors opening completely unexpected. For example we were spontaneously invited to film in Mel Bonis' former residence in Sarcelles, when we wanted to take pictures of her bust standing outside of a small museum near Paris. A few weeks later when we visited Mel Bonis' great-granddaughter Christine Géliot, who showed us a huge metal box in her attic. To our great astonishment the original manuscripts of her great-grandmother came to light - what a treasure!



Of course we also wanted to film Emily Mayer's autograph on the D minor sonata in the Berlin State Library, where her belongings are kept. We were irritated when all our requests were unrelentingly turned down. Only when Barbara Schneider-Kempf the Director intervened personally, Kyra was allowed to see the autograph in her office and I was given permission to capture this scene with the camera.

The research on Emilie Mayer was particularly exciting. We knew that she had been buried in April 1883 at the Trinity Cemetery in Berlin-Kreuzberg, but that her grave was considered lost. However, our historical expert Dr. Jörg Kuhn did not give up, and so thanks to him and his persistence we actually found the grave during our filming work. We believe that this important citizen of our city should be honoured by the setting of a memorial; a new project, which we will propose to the Berlin Senate.



The dealings in Friedland, Emilie Mayer's hometown, were rather disappointing. The city was heavily destroyed by the end of WW II. There is nothing left. It is too bad when nobody is interested in a historical work-up about such an unusual woman! In Berlin's address register, she was listed with the professional title „women composer“. As a single and independent woman in the 19th century, she really was an impressive „role model“!

In social science research, the English term „gender“ defines the socially and culturally determined roles, rights, duties, interests and resources of men and women whose perceptions it aims to achieve. A comparable term is unknown to me in the German language. At the moment, experts, politicians and other interested parties are all arguing about how to correctly portray both (in Scandinavia: three genders); whether with asterisks, lower key or capital letters or quotation marks. It is reassuring that the terms “women composers, women conductors and female pianists” have meanwhile come into use of the German language and that there are women who practice such professions - independently of their brothers, fathers and husbands and their approval.



We realized that this film about these four women composers really only is beginning of a series of documentaries about women composing music. Kyra and I are already working on further episodes, on a series and on individual portraits. In the future these could also be used for music lessons in schools and other educational institutions.

But we do not only think about historical educational work. We also think out inspiring and encouraging the next generation to listen to and appreciate classical music and also, to create it. We are confident that in the coming years we will close many gaps and will meet more great and wonderful women and learn about their fascinating works. And we would like to demonstrate to sceptics that all this can be accomplished in an equitable manner, as we did prove that this works by bringing to you this film.

Kyra Steckeweh & Tim van Beveren



Please contact us directly for access to a screener copy!

Technical specifications:

95 min. (cinema-version), 2 K DCP, 5.1. Dolby stereo, color and b/w, language versions in German, French, English, Spanish (with subtitles).

2 x 52 min. TV version, stereo, XD-CAM full HD, stereo as well as 95 min. TV Version

The soundtrack is also available on CD.

Production & Distribution:

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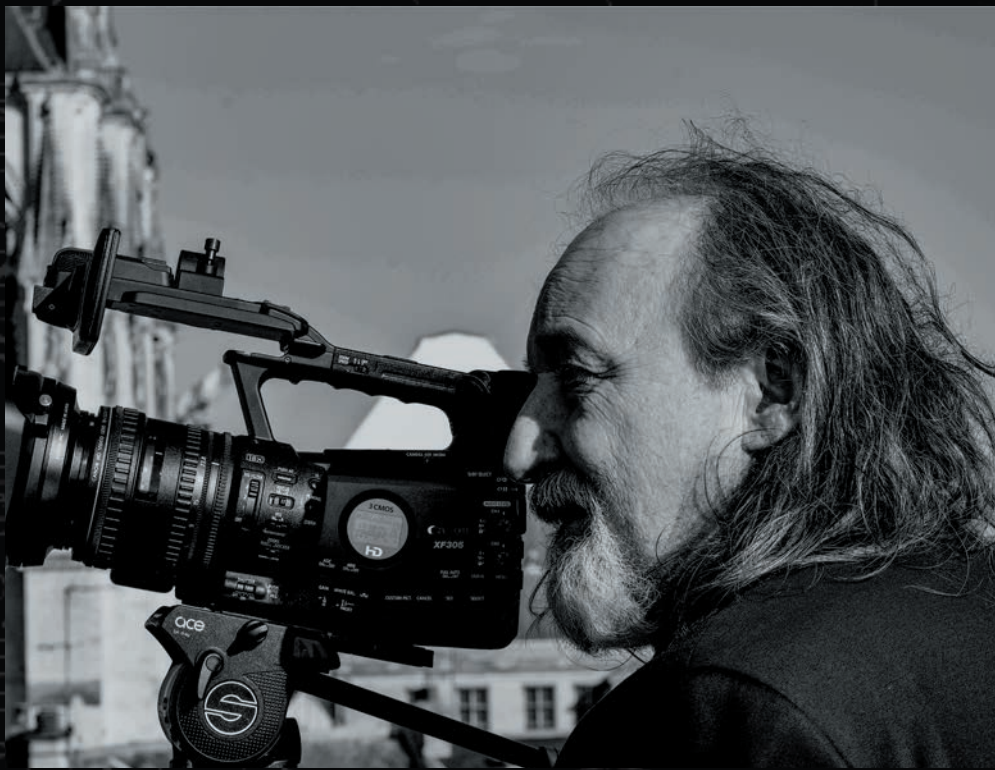


KYRA STECKEWEH - pianist

Kyra Steckeweh studied Piano with Tomoko Ogasawara at the University for Music Freiburg and at the University Mozarteum in Salzburg under the guidance of Prof. George Kern. She also studied Music Education and History in Freiburg.

In 2016 and 2018 she recorded two albums with piano works by Mel Bonis, Lili Boulanger, Emilie Mayer and Fanny Hensel. Since the summer term 2018 Kyra Steckeweh is a lecturer at the University for Music Freiburg and carries on research on music editions for historic-critical publishings of women composers.

Tim van Beveren is a journalist, photographer, cameraman and filmmaker. He studied law in Bonn and art in Italy. He has been working in the media industry for over 30 years and has been involved in creating several award-winning film and television productions as a writer, director and collaborator. From 1998 to 2005 he worked as a correspondent in the USA, since 2008 he lives in Berlin. His production company tvbmedia was founded in the USA in 2001 and has since produced numerous films, videos, reports and magazine contributions for private and public service providers.



TIM VAN BEVEREN - filmmaker